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Soliciting desire: the ad-man as narrative negotiation between art, desire, and consumer capitalism in twentieth-century novels

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SOLICITING DESIRE:
THE AD-MAN AS NARRATIVE NEGOTIATION BETWEEN ART, DESIRE, AND
CONSUMER CAPITALISM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY NOVELS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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in

The Department of English

by
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Abstract

My dissertation identifies ways in which novelists have used an ad-man protagonist as means to investigate the social and psychological implications of advertising in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Soliciting Desire* takes as its primary subjects H.G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, Theodore Dreiser's *The "Genius,"* Frederick Wakeman's *The Hucksters*, Jonathan Dee's *Palladio*, and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* and demonstrates that the ad-man character's particular constellation of traits provides a rich vehicle for fictional explorations of desire and subjectivity as they are formed in relation to ideologies of consumer capitalism and art. Guided by Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin's theories of cultural/ capitalist relations, building upon Jennifer Wicke's work on advertising in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction, and drawing upon studies of intersections between economics and literature such as those conducted by Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, my dissertation goes on to define the integral role of desire in navigating subjectivity amidst the symbolic orders of modern and postmodern consumer capitalism as they are depicted in these "ad-man" novels. Lacanian concepts of subjectivity and desire are central to my study, as are the ways in which these concepts are refined by Mark Bracher, Slavoj Žižek, and Kaja Silverman, all of whom insist that psychoanalysis has valuable applications extending beyond the individual, into the social and cultural realms. My dissertation finds that the ad-man character in its many manifestations actively represents dilemmas of desire and subjectivity common to each of us living in a late capitalist consumer culture in which advertising has grown from a cottage industry into a basic existential paradigm. Furthermore, my study concludes that the novel is an ideal form for exploring individual and collective engagement with consumer capitalism: within the dialectics of narrative, text, reader and context resides the possibility of analytic discourse. In the ad-man

novels specifically, the potential is for discovery of the ways human desire may be constructed, channeled, or compromised by the dominant fictions of the advertising industry and for allowing such knowledge to inform one's own re-construction of desire.

Introduction: From Advertising the Novel to the Novel of Advertising

The past century has celebrated, denigrated, and perhaps most consistently, harbored an intense ambivalence towards advertising, its practitioners, its practices, and its ubiquity. Regardless of its debatable qualities, the simple fact of advertising's tremendous cultural presence – an inescapable presence, according to theorists such as Jean Baudrillard – calls for our attention as literary scholars. Jennifer Wicke contends that, “the centrality of advertisement to modern culture, and its radical reshaping of both literature and ideological production in general, demands complete critical investment: advertising has to be seriously accepted as a formative cultural discourse” (2).

The study undertaken and put forth in the following chapters heeds Wicke's mandate. *Soliciting Desire* will demonstrate that twentieth-century writers have taken a special interest in the figure of the ad-man as a character whose particular constellation of traits provides a rich vehicle for explorations of desire and subjectivity as they are formed in relation to ideologies of consumer capitalism – ideologies largely structured and supported by practices of advertising. With one foot in the realm of art and the other firmly planted in commerce, the prototypical ad-man is well-versed in the symbolic order of consumer capitalism, yet his character is a creative type, as well; as such, he longs for opportunities to express his visions – but without sacrificing his “rights” as a consumer. The prototypical ad-man is also very “manly”; whether manifest as a male or female character, the fictional ad-man is beholden to powerful patriarchal structures that underwrite the symbolic order of capitalism and define relevant forms of desire and subjectivity. The figure of the ad-man is an ideal character through which to explore, critique, and challenge the industry he represents and the inescapable influence it exerts on each of us. To read the

fictional ad-man as an expression of capitalism in the twentieth century is to engage with the ways in which we ourselves are written by advertising.

Addressing discourses of advertising is particularly important for studies of the novel. The histories of advertising and the novel touch one another at many points and their respective genres have been deeply influenced by one another. Wicke goes so far as to insist that the genre of the novel cannot be read without an understanding of its relationship to the history and practices of advertising. As she points out in *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading*, “the intertwining of literature and advertising” is the result of the meshing of “two interdependent discourses”; “neither ... can be fully read without reference to the other” (2).

One compelling reason to insist on reading the novel in its relationship to advertising is that the two genres emerged onto the scene of popular textual discourse literally bound to one another. In her brief history of this relationship, Wicke tells us that, “Post-Gutenberg literature has always had advertisement as a shadow partner,” and in fact it was “the technology of print [that] opened a space for the creation of advertisement, and although advertising was to develop as an independent form within two hundred years, initially it sprang from the emergence of printed literature, and was at home within the book” (3). Thus, “the advertising institution did not arise in isolation, but was concurrent with the establishment of the novel as the literary form achieving predominance in the nineteenth century” (2).

Advertising’s etymological parent is the term “*avertissement*,” which referred to “the note placed in the colophon (back) page of a scribal manuscript to indicate that copying had been done during holy days,” meaning, ironically, that the manuscript “should not be sold.” Both the term and the practice evolved into the basis of what we recognize today as “advertising”: printers

began including their names and emblems in the front pages of books to promote their skills, services, and products (3). The rest, so to speak, is history.

Just as the first mechanically printed books ushered advertising into being, advertising has likewise been essential to the success of the novel as a popular form: the relationship has been, in many ways, symbiotic. Wicke's history explains that, "the advertising exordiums at the front of printed material were focal in allowing books to be seen as intellectual property," whose authors came to be regarded "as celebrity figures"; so, "these two aspects of early advertisement converged in the formation of 'authorship' as a new property category." In this way, advertising was "absolutely central to the formation of 'the author' and to promulgating a reading public outside the religious sphere." This, for Wicke, means that "it is impossible to place modern literature, conceived as a set of great works by individual authors, outside the advertising context which supplied these boundaries" (5).

"Advertising was crucial in making 'literary production' possible," but, as Wicke notes, "advertising had also proved traitorous." Advertising migrated from the prefatory material of printed books into newspapers and pamphlets, and eventually "the nineteenth century witnessed the foundation of an independently organized advertising language, and the twentieth century, its triumph in the marketplace" (7). And indeed, contemporary studies of advertising seem likewise to have lost sight of advertising's literary ancestry. Though analyses of twentieth-century advertising abound from the disciplines of sociology, feminist studies, cultural studies, economics, and even from the moguls and gurus of the advertising industry themselves, studies of advertising's relationship to literary discourse are relatively rare.

Writing from an interdisciplinary approach including both literary criticism and "hard" economics, Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen reinforce Wicke's historical account by linking the rise of the novel more generally with the emergence of a self-conscious modern

capitalism, noting that “the science of political economy emerged concurrently with the rise of that quintessentially bourgeois literary form, the novel” (5). David Kaufman’s work elaborates further on this relationship, suggesting that, “the rapid growth and institutional consolidation of commercial capitalism in the eighteenth century created a demand for new descriptions of and apologias for the economy, the state, morality, and citizenship, a demand that was taken up by ... both the field of political economics and the novel” (quoted in Woodmansee and Osteen 5). This eighteenth-century partnership appears to have worked well for both economics and the novel, as the popularity of the novel exploded and the structures and practices of capitalism grew exponentially in the nineteenth century. As will be discussed at greater length below, this affiliation is again born out by the way in which twentieth-century novels centered on questions of capitalism, advertising, art and citizenship crop up at historical moments of exceptionally robust capitalist expansion.

Despite relatively felicitous connections early on, the position of the novel in relation to advertising in the twentieth century has become more contentious, largely because of the novel’s often tenuous position in the larger arena of art. The cultural theorists of the Frankfurt School are perhaps those best known for debating the nature and quality of culture in terms of a polarization of “high” art – that which is believed to be genuine, independent, disinterested and enlightening, and “low” art – that which appeals to human vulgarity, and which, under the influence of consumerism, is forced to pander to popular tastes in favor of commercial interest, and thus becomes derivative and debased. The genre of the novel has held a precarious position in this regard, wavering between the two poles, toggling between aesthetic ambitions and marketable fictions.

Even though many postmodernist cultural theories now propose a far less binaristic conception of the relationship between art and popular culture, and many contemporary novels

themselves clearly embrace the erasure of such divisions, it is important to consider the suggestion that “in the twentieth century, the dominant literary tradition [has] defined itself in opposition to the market economy” (Woodmansee and Osteen 9). Meanwhile, advertising practices themselves have been vying for cultural validation, attempting, ironically, to define their industry “in opposition to the market economy” as well. Industry leaders have established award-granting organizations, such as the American Advertising Federation’s Addy Awards, whose criteria are based not on sales or profits, but on aesthetic accomplishment and artistic quality. This is yet another dynamic that the novel has in common with advertising: both have struggled with desires for cultural legitimacy and the concomitant conflict with their need for popular appeal. As advertisers sought to establish themselves as “authentic” professionals at the turn into the twentieth century, many sought to distance themselves from the vulgar, “low” shadow of their past incarnations, lingering from the previous century, populated with medicine men and snake-oil salesmen. Novelists, too, have struggled to convince those who hold the keys to “high” culture that they are not authors of literature that is always or only pulp and “popular.” It seems, though, that both the advertisers and the novelists perhaps protest too much: the fervent refusal of genealogy serves to assert its importance.

The twentieth-century novels that comprise the object of this study run the gamut of the “high”/ “low” cultural poles, from Theodor Dreiser’s near-exhaustive compendium of artistic angst in *The Genius*, to Frederick Wakeman’s bestselling exposé, *The Hucksters*, to Jonathan Dee’s popular yet rather academic novel, *Palladio*. Though Dreiser has been welcomed into the literary canon with his well-known works of naturalism, such as *Sister Carrie*, *The Genius* was a scandalous flop. Wakeman’s novel, on the other hand, was a runaway bestseller, though it attracted no scholarly inquiry and few serious reviews. Dee’s *Palladio* occupies a middle ground: the novel is a bit academic, but has not received much, if any, academic attention;

however, it did catch the attention of high-minded popular publications such as the *New York Times*, where it was granted several reviews and lengthy treatment in the weekend book section. The last novel discussed in the chapters that follow, Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, is the best example of a book that has successfully forayed into both popular and academic realms of consideration: a work of cyberpunk fiction, it has been tremendously popular among science fiction fans, and it has garnered a significant degree of mainstream popularity, as well. Furthermore, Gibson has risen to the top of his sub-genre field and, by so doing, has attracted a great deal of academic literary interest, evidenced by the substantial amount of scholarly writing dedicated to his writing. I believe it is consistent with the implications of their shared roots to treat these different novels as works occupying the terrain of popular culture to greater and lesser degrees, and to proceed on the assumption that a best-selling novel written by an ex-advertising executive such as Wakeman's *The Hucksters* has at least as much to tell us about the possibilities for experiencing art and desire in the context of twentieth-century capitalism as does Dreiser's intensely philosophical 900-page clunker, *The Genius*. Furthermore, it is exemplary that the focal point of each of these novels – a protagonist who works in the advertising industry, often by traversing realms of popular and “high” culture – links together such a wide range of works. The analysis that follows will demonstrate that this particular character, the “ad-man,” has served as a powerful fictional tool for novelists of all ranks and files seeking to better understand the capitalist society in which they write and live.

Thus far, Wicke's *Advertising Fictions* is probably the most prominent work of literary-cultural analysis seeking to describe the interdependencies of literature and advertising; her work, however, focuses on late nineteenth century and early twentieth century novels. She has undertaken the project of examining the ways in which the works of Dickens, James, and Joyce depend upon and further the practices of “social reading” shaped by conventions of nineteenth-

century advertising. For the purposes of my project, I want to suggest that not long into the twentieth century, such practices are, for both the reading public and novelists themselves, second nature. In the interest of identifying a dialectic between advertising and literature, Wicke also examines ways in which nineteenth-century advertising negotiated the influence of novelistic strategies on its own practices. She suggests that, upon entering the twentieth century this influence wanes because advertisement has reached “a point of cultural primacy where its universe of discourse comes from the culture of advertisement itself” (173). Here I would like to suggest, as others have, that in addition to having created a potentially self-sustaining “universe of discourse,” by the mid- and latter parts of the twentieth century, advertising, in an age of the image, is much more likely to re-form the dialectical relationship it once had with literature with visual media such as film, television, video games, music videos and internet sites. Though literature certainly continues to draw on the rhetoric and style of contemporary advertising, it is not clear that this is any longer part of a meaningful two-way relationship.

Critical works that have taken the connections between advertising and twentieth century novels as their primary object of inquiry are very few indeed. One relatively recent instance is James Annesley’s *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel* (1998), in which he describes the ways that commercial products set the scenes of late-twentieth-century novels and argues that such settings invite readers to understand our world in an increasingly superficial, commodified manner; however, his work does not take on the advertising industry specifically. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is the single novel that has received perhaps the most critical attention to its engagement with the language and culture of advertising in the early twentieth century. In addition to Jennifer Wicke’s chapter on Joyce, Garry Martin Leonard has devoted a book to the study: *Advertising and Commodity Culture in Joyce*, and Joseph Heininger has discussed the same in his 1994 article, “Molly Bloom’s Ad Language and

Goods Behavior.” In *Just Looking* (1985), Rachel Bowlby has written about the closely related field of consumerism, and shopping more specifically, in her analysis of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. Additionally, in her 1993 book, *Shopping with Freud*, Bowlby has written about both *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* and *Lolita*, again analyzing influences of consumer culture and practices of shopping as they are manifest in these novels. Bowlby consistently takes a psychoanalytic approach to her analyses of consumerism, and, as I will discuss at greater length below, I agree that psychoanalysis offers one of the richest critical lenses through which to view and understand complicated processes of commodification, identification, and subjectivization in capitalist culture.

Especially during an era in which the growth of the advertising industry is no longer a novelty, but rather a fact of life approaching invisibility in its ubiquity, and as long as “the novel is without doubt the most important literary form” of “the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Wicke 14), it is important that we continue to inquire into the ways in which these two influential textual institutions shape and reshape one another, and shape and reshape the ideologies of the world in which their authors and readers live. Such studies are important, for, as Wicke points out, “literature *qua* literature illuminates the outlines of advertisement in an irreplaceable way; there is no sense in which a purely sociological, historical, or economic theory of advertisement can approach unveiling its cultural dynamic” as the novel does (3).

In his pre-history of the novel, J. Paul Hunter describes some of the features of the novel that make it particularly suited to such illumination. He aligns the genre in its early form with the ideology of advertising when he notes its emphasis on individualism and individual subjectivity: “the subjectivity of the novel involves not just a raised status for the individual self, but an intensified consciousness of what selfhood means to each individual” (23). And like advertising’s bold forays into our bedrooms, bathrooms, and closets, the novel has been similarly

unafraid to probe the most private spaces, both physical and psychological (37). I would add that the novel's unique ability to imagine human subjective interaction with cultural phenomena over a sustained period of time gives the genre a place of importance in our efforts to better understand the dynamics between individuals, society and advertising.

A comparison of novelistic treatment of the individual to a traditional economic understanding of the individual reiterates the importance of literary explorations of individuals subject to the conditions of consumer capitalism, and literary criticism thereof. Regenia Gagnier makes the important observation that the concept of "Economic Man" employed by scholars in the field of economics underwent a significant transformation in the nineteenth century: "the second half of the nineteenth century saw a shift from notions of the Economic Man as producer ... to a view of Economic Man as consumer" (2). Clearly this shift indicates a radical change in what professionals in the field regarded as "man's" primary function in the economic sphere, and it seems no coincidence that at roughly the same time that advertising was coming into its own as an independent industry, led by enterprising young men branching out into tiny offices and shoestring operations (Fox 20), the avatar of Economic Man became a shopper rather than a worker. The fictionalized figure of the Ad-Man, whose role includes both the production of consumption and consumption of production, then, can be employed as a mediator between these two definitions of human economic activity. Such a complex role is perhaps best situated in the novel, rather than within textbooks or economic treatises. According to Jack Amariglio and David Ruccio, the academic discipline of economics holds that in the world of Economic Man, whether he is primarily producer or consumer, "culture is a result of individual choices negotiated by rational, self-interested agents" (387). Indeed, many "how-to" books written by advertising industry professionals, as well as treatises written by advertising's detractors, demonstrate an allegiance to this vision of humankind. Ronald Berman's work, *Advertising and*

Social Change, questions the usefulness of such a premise, claiming that, “a good deal of argument condemning advertising ... is based upon the insubstantial assumption that human desires are or should be rational” (62). Novels depicting the complexities of human behavior, desire, and psychology in the figure of the ad-man, in conjunction with psychoanalytic paradigms of interpretation, provide a necessary and compelling challenge to this notion of the rational, economic man – coded specifically “male” – who consistently and knowingly acts in his own best interests.

Hunter contends that a key to the “narrative workings” of many novels concerned with individual subjectivity is an “epistemological tension” that “exist[s] between an ‘I’ perspective and another larger perspective struggling to emerge through the ‘I’ or through comparative perspectives” (46). This constitutes another affinity with conventions of advertising in that the elements of an advertisement geared toward the receptive “I” speak to the desires and aspirations of that individual, while the ad as a whole simultaneously represents a larger social construct that is antithetical to the fulfillment of individual desire – yet (and this is where the ad will always part ways from the novel) the contradiction of the advertisement is presented as a consistency. This potentially troubling dynamic between the individual and society, and between the individual and his or her unconscious identifications, is precisely that which methods of psychoanalytic literary analysis are best equipped to “unpack.”

In my analysis of the relationship between advertising and literature in the twentieth century, rather than concentrating on the intertextuality of literary and advertising discourses, I want to focus on the ways in which writers have used the genre of the novel to address the institutions, conventions, and social implications of advertising directly. H.G. Wells, in 1909; Theodor Dreiser, in 1918; Frederic Wakeman, in 1946; Jonathan Dee in 2002; and William Gibson, in 2004, have all used a particular character type, that of the “Ad-Man,” to explore the

possibilities for autonomous art, responsible consumerism, and the individual's relation to the social order in an advertising-driven consumer capitalist culture. From an historical-economic perspective, the publication date of each novel is significant. Each author was writing either on the cusp of an economic boom, as was the case for Dreiser's *The Genius* and Wakeman's *The Hucksters*, or just following such a boom, as is the case for Wells's *Tono Bungay*, and Dee's *Palladio* – both of which are actually set during the preceding boom: the 1890s for *Tono Bungay*, and the 1990s for *Palladio*. Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* is set immediately post-9/11, and offers a slightly futuristic take on a contemporary global capitalism that promises to create post-“act-of-war” boom economies for a number of different factions. Colin Campbell writes of the boom times of the 1890s, the 1920s, and the 60s that “the naughty nineties, the jazz age, and the swinging sixties all reveal ... essentially the same characteristic features. Each period witnessed a ‘moral revolution’ in which a ‘new spirit of pleasure’ emerged to challenge what was identified as a restrictive Puritanism”; this “intense moral idealism went hand in hand with an unrestrained commercialism” (206), and, though Campbell does not include the 1990s in his survey, the pattern he establishes does indeed apply to this later economic boom. Each of these periods of economic prosperity was accompanied – and indeed, propelled by – ever-intensifying advertising efforts; it is thus understandable that these historic moments may have inspired novelists to interrogate the practices, effects, and possibilities of advertising at the times when its presence was most felt.

Mica Nava contends that “one of the most crucial theoretical issues on the left and in cultural studies has been the relationship of the symbolic to the material and economic order” (34). Study of this particular group of novels enables us to pursue these issues, not just with regards to their explorations of subjective possibilities amidst fictionalized versions of capitalist society, but because these novels, especially those that have been popular, are part of the

ideological context in which real subjects are constituted in capitalist society. Each of the abovementioned novels is important in its narrative of the difficulty of living in relation to the symbolic order of consumer capitalism at a given historical moment. Taken as a whole, this thread of novels is important in that as it depicts some of the changing shapes and ways of capitalism over the past one hundred years. It also suggests that the potential for an actively formulated subjectivity may have changed shape, but not quality: the desires thwarted and the frustrations felt among the ad-men protagonists of these novels remain largely the same, in that they experience great difficulty recognizing themselves and articulating their desire in relation to representations of a symbolic order governed by consumer capitalism.

Mark Bracher's description and deployment of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a useful paradigm for textual analysis aimed at social progress will be key to my own approach to this particular thread of novels. Bracher agrees with Nava, Berman, Frank and others that, in efforts to understand human behavior, a "focus on epistemology is ... misleading," because "it ignores important elements of subjectivity (ideals, values, fantasy, desire, drives, and *jouissance*) that are just as essential in determining a subject position as knowledge is" (9). It is clear in each of these novels that it is not for a lack of factual knowledge that the characters suffer; each character is – sooner or later, at least – well aware of the pitfalls and injustices concomitant with involvement in the consumer capitalist marketplace. Bracher's method goes beyond an investigation of "knowledge" as consciously acquired information and draws upon the tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis to develop "a theory of subjectivity that can explain how cultural artifacts affect people." Bracher cites Terry Eagleton's contention that the methods of psychoanalysis are indeed up to the task: "psychoanalysis is a science committed to the emancipation of human beings from what frustrates their fulfillment and well-being," and thus

“is a theory at the service of a transformative practice, and to that extent has parallels with radical politics” (11).

Anticipating the objection that psychoanalysis is better suited to exploration of the uniquely constituted individual than to a social relation such as that of a character to his class and cultural context, Bracher reminds us that, “Lacan ... accords great emphasis to the social, collective aspects of subjectivity, to the point that the individual and the social cannot be separated”; in fact, “Lacan’s understanding of the role played by what he calls the Other in the formation of the subject makes the Lacanian subject social in its very foundations” (13). Kaja Silverman’s observation that, “the images within which the subject ‘finds’ itself always come to it from the outside,” reiterates the social nature of psychological development and also points toward the tremendous impact of advertising on the development of subjectivity in environments where individuals are exposed to a near-constant stream of advertising images (6). Furthermore, although “unconscious inscriptions are often highly individual and idiosyncratic, ... there are elements of the unconscious that are shared by groups of subjects ... because of similar formative experiences attributable to inhabiting the same culture and discourses” (Bracher 48); Bracher’s observation certainly applies to a group of characters who are all engaged with the profession of advertising, and whose narratives are set amidst contexts of consumer capitalism.

Bracher’s psychoanalytic approach allows us to consider the ad-man characters as desiring subjects rather than purely rational, calculating individuals by considering the following formative circumstances and processes: individuals want to be able to recognize themselves as coherent, continuous beings by having others recognize them as such. Such identity formation occurs through the process of interpellation, a concept initially introduced by Louis Althusser, which suggests that within a given society there are a (limited) number of subjective positions

that “call out” to individuals, inviting them to recognize themselves in this or that future identity role.

These positions appeal to individuals on the level of desire: one of Bracher’s foundational concepts is that, “insofar as a cultural phenomenon succeeds in interpellating subjects – that is, summoning them to assume a certain subjective (dis)position – it does so by evoking some form of desire or promising satisfaction of some desire” (19). Bracher uses Lacan’s definition of desire, which he recounts as “an effort to attain the missing part of one’s own being or *jouissance* either through possessing ... the object *a*, a precious object or substance associated with the Real body, or through being oneself the object *a* that the Other wants to have” (41). He adds that, “in discourse, anything that functions for an audience as an object of desire ... has assumed, in some manner and in some degree, the role of the object *a*, the fundamental cause of desire” (43). Bracher points out that some of the most common things in U.S. culture that occupy the role of the object *a* are “money, which promises to fill all lack, and many of the products that are represented in advertising” (44) – precisely the pursuits with which the ad man characters are involved, as desirers, objects of desire and creators of desire. As will be seen below, money and consumer products are objects of desire that are specifically sanctioned by the ideologies of consumer capitalism; what the ad-man novels seek are objects of desire that represent the will of the subject rather than the will of the socioeconomic order. The object or direction of desire is crucial to the formation or re-formation of subjectivity in that it is around desire that subjectivity is constructed.

The most significant way in which subjectivity is formed and re-formed is by identification with (or opposition to) “master signifiers,” a term Lacan introduced to describe words and groups of related words that carry a particularly powerful ideological weight. Master signifiers facilitate interpellation by promising to provide a vehicle for the recognition and

subsequent satisfaction of an individual's desire. However, it is important to note that although master signifiers promise to satisfy desire, complete, "final" satisfaction by these means is in fact impossible: "the object *a* figures in discourse as the return of the being or *jouissance* that is excluded by the master signifiers" (41). An individual may discover this once he or she has come into possession of, or become the object *a*: at this point in the desiring process, one may be forced to confront what Lacan termed "the Other's lack" – that is, the desired object's "failure to provide ultimate meaning" or complete satisfaction (45). This is a process that is played out repeatedly among the ad-man characters depicted in this group of novels: they move in and out of their identities as bohemian artists, advertising gurus, urbanites, dedicated husbands, Park Avenue aesthetes, casual lovers, and middle-class laborers, only to discover over and over again that the promises of each lifestyle, hinging on this or that object *a*, fail to deliver the "ultimate" satisfaction for which they were looking. The challenge then, with which this series of novels collectively engages, is finding a lack one can live with.

A key feature of words and phrases that act as master signifiers is that "they are simply accepted as having a value or validity that goes without saying" (Bracher 23). Thus language, in the form of master signifiers, plays a central role in "forming the foundational, structural identities that constitute the basis of our ... identifications with characters or positions in discourse ... that can prompt us to feel or act in certain ways and that can also re-form or alter our foundational, structural identifications and thus change our subjectivity and our behavior as well" (22). Bracher's use of the Lacanian idea of master signifiers works well with Kaja Silverman's use of Jacques Rancière's term, "dominant fiction," which she explains as that which serves as "a society's ideological 'reality.'" The dominant fiction consists of "the privileged mode of representation by which the image of the social consensus is offered to members of a social formation and within which they are asked to identify themselves"

(Silverman 30). It makes sense to suggest that a given dominant fiction is comprised of series of related and mutually supportive master signifiers, which implies that in order to gain recognition and validation in a given socioeconomic context, one must identify oneself to some degree within limits of pre-scribed subjectivities, and once one incorporates into one's psyche a basic identification, such as "male," "female," "businessman," or "housewife," it is almost inevitable that one will be led along a chain of "if-then" identifications (for example, if "male," then "masculine"; if "masculine," then "heterosexual"; if "heterosexual," then "producer," etc.) – a result of the fact that the group of master signifiers forming the dominant fiction are largely inextricable from one another. Silverman suggests something similar when she writes, "Because of the interarticulation of the core elements of the dominant fiction with elements drawn from the ideologies of class, race, ethnicity, and gender, the dominant fiction might be said to negotiate between the symbolic order and the mode of production – to be that which permits two very different forms of determination to be lived simultaneously" (42).

Silverman notes that, "the dominant fiction consists of the images and stories through which a society figures consensus; images and stories which cinema, fiction, popular culture, and other forms of mass representation presumably both draw upon and help to shape" (30). In this respect, the notion of the dominant fiction will be useful in discussion of the "ad-man" novels on a number of levels. Because these novels feature protagonists who are very much defined by their contributions to "forms of mass representation" in their roles as advertisers and artists, the idea of a dominant fiction offers a way to examine these characters in terms of their collaboration (conscious or otherwise) with and challenges to the interests of the particular dominant fiction under which they are working. However, amidst the ongoing processes of interpellation and identity formation, these characters are also receivers of the ideologies perpetuated by dominant fictions which, in these novels, often leave them at odds with the status quo. Michèle Barrett

notes the importance of this dual nature of subjectivity, emphasizing that the play of meaning is significant in the ambiguity between “the subject as powerful agent (as opposed to object or other) and the meaning of subject as subjection” (91). And furthermore, the novels themselves (some of them best-sellers) are narrative explorations of capitalist subjectivities that in turn contribute to a dominant fiction. In the chapters that follow I will argue that, while their protagonists fail almost uniformly to defy or de-form dominant fictions, the novels themselves, both through their failures of imagination and their moments of illumination, offer valuable glimpses into the cracks inherent in any systematic assertion of a particular dominant fiction, tiny rays of light suggesting the possibility that the dominant fiction of a consumer capitalist society is a construction, not necessarily a permanent fixture; malleable, not impermeable.

A portion of Bracher’s theoretical paradigm that is particularly relevant to my analysis of the ad-man characters is his assertion that, “when an identification becomes established as our identity, it functions to repress all desires that are incongruent with this identity” (22). He insists that, “it is also essential to take into account the connections and conflicts that occur among different desires and hence, among the interpellative forces underwritten by those desires,” and he proposes two possible relationships: “desires (including identifications) can either support and reinforce each other, or they can oppose and subvert each other in various ways” (46). This dynamic is played out as each one of the characters discussed below struggles to maintain or discover a coherent, if not consistent, identity that allows for both participation in a capitalist marketplace and critique of as well as resistance to that market.

Bracher details the way in which it is possible to lose faith in a set of master signifiers: “The first major way that culture operates on our Symbolic-order desire is by either allowing or preventing us from enjoying the passive narcissistic gratification of dwelling within circuits of discourse controlled by our master signifiers ... what we seek is repeated dominance of those

signifiers that represent us. Discourses that fail to provide a reassuring encounter with our representatives tend, in contrast, to evoke feelings of alienation and anxiety and responses of aggression – including rejection of the discourse, or indifference toward it” (26). This is the case for nearly all of the ad-man characters: for various reasons they have each reached a point in their relationship with the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism where they no longer recognize themselves in that fiction; the master signifiers upon which the dominant fiction depends no longer serve to facilitate their desire. The lack inherent in the promises of the dominant fiction threatens to subsume the pleasures of identification.

On the other hand, there are “discourses that get us to change our position” by convincing “us to give up some of our representatives and/ or embrace new ones” (Bracher 28). This re-alignment of identification can be achieved, according to Bracher, through the “discourse of the analyst,” which requires that “the subject is in a position to assume its own alienation and desire,” and then, “on the basis of that assumption, separate from the given master signifiers and produce its own new master signifiers” – that is, “ideas and values less inimical to its fundamental fantasy and the desire embodied by that fantasy.” Bracher goes on to contend that the discourse of the analyst is “the most effective means of achieving social change by countering the psychological and social tyranny exercised through language” (68). Throughout the thread of ad-man novels, this discourse is most often and most effectively manifest as engagement with autonomous art. Bracher suggests that literature “often uses the evocation of desire as a means of interpellating the audience to embrace a particular master signifier or set of such signifiers and thus to exclude truly revolutionary or disruptive desire” (65). I want to argue that, for this collection of ad-man novels, precisely the opposite is true: these narratives work to evoke desire surrounding master signifiers of autonomous art as part of (not unconflicted) attempts to *create* “revolutionary or disruptive desire.”

The notion of autonomous art is not concrete and is never absolute, but I will outline some basic features of the concept as they inform my treatment of the subject. Theodor Adorno cites autonomous art as something that attempts “as an expression of suffering and contradiction, to maintain a grasp on the idea of the good life” (“Culture Industry Reconsidered” 16). Furthermore, “culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honoring them” (13). It is naïve to insist on artistic production that is entirely removed from commerce; art has in nearly every instance had some approximation of exchange value assigned to it, directly or indirectly, and Adorno’s definitions are useful in that they recognize the fact that in the era of late capitalism, art has almost nowhere else from which to emerge. Adorno aptly describes the complicated and indeterminate relation of autonomous art to the market, writing that, “the autonomy of works of art ... rarely predominated in an entirely pure form,” being as it was “always permeated by a constellation of effects.” Adorno also makes an important distinction between works that “sought after profit only indirectly, over and above their autonomous essence,” and what he identifies as a phenomenon that is “new on the part of the culture industry” in which “the direct and undisguised primacy of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy” to profit transforms art into mere products (13). This distinction is especially relevant – and greatly complicated – as it applies to instances of artistic production within the context of the advertising industries depicted in the ad-man novels. In my readings of the ad-man novels, it is the instance in which some particular assemblage of an artistic “constellation” raises a “protest against petrified relations” by articulating a vision or hope for a new social order that is regarded as autonomous art. I contend that, within the thread of ad-man novels, autonomous art is portrayed as that which can function as a vehicle for real desire –

desire that is otherwise diminished, derailed, and compromised by the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism and the commodities it holds forth as ideal objects of desire.

Acknowledging that a complex process of identity formation is bound up in our beliefs and aspirations goes a long way toward explaining why individuals do not, and indeed cannot, simply change their ways because they “know better.” Slavoj Žižek uses the example of anti-Semitism to illustrate this point: he insists that, “it is not enough to say that we must liberate ourselves” from “our so-called ‘anti-Semitic prejudices’ and learn to see Jews as they really are”; rather, we must “confront ourselves with how the ideological figure of the ‘Jew’ is invested with our unconscious desire” (*Sublime Object* 49). It is also important to accept that “no discourse can operate without master signifiers” (Bracher 68). As Žižek explains, engaging critically with the dominant fiction “is not just a question of seeing things (that is social reality) as they ‘really are,’ of throwing away the distorting spectacles of ideology”; rather, “the main point is to see how the reality itself cannot reproduce itself without this so-called ideological mystification.” More simply, “the mask is not simply hiding the real state of things; the ideological distortion is written into its very essence” (*Sublime Object* 28). But ideally individuals can engage in the discourse of the analyst, recognize the particular nature of their mystification, “separate from the given master signifiers” and “produce [their] own new master signifiers” that are “less inimical to [their] fundamental fantasy and the desire embodied by that fantasy” (Bracher 68). Thus “the more fully” the master signifiers that “underlie and constitute” the truth of tyrannical discourse are “exposed, the less capable they are of exercising their mesmerizing power” (59). This in particular is one way in which the novels are successful, even when their protagonists are not: though the main characters may not achieve a full understanding of their alienation from the dominant fiction, the readers are invited to engage in a sort of discourse of the analyst in relation

to the text, during which they have the opportunity to interrogate their own relation to the dominant fiction via their imaginative engagement with the narrative.

The ad-man characters cast as the protagonists of these novels have a very specific set of traits in common that influence their relationships to the dominant fictions of consumer capitalism: each makes a significant move from the country to the city; each suffers a disconnect from family roots and history, often symbolized by a missing father; each has a deeply conflicted relationship with advertising and art; each is very self-conscious in his role as a consumer; each has a troubling or troubled relationship with acts of violence; with the sole exception of Gibson's ambiguously female protagonist, each is male; each is unambiguously Caucasian, and each character's narrative trajectory ends in either a humiliating defeat or an unsatisfying compromise. In the chapters that follow, I argue that each of these features represents a different aspect of the ad-man characters' attempts to re-negotiate their lived relationship to the symbolic order in general and to the master signifiers of consumer capitalism by which they are governed, in particular.

In efforts to negotiate their relation to the capitalist order, the ad man characters discussed below depart, in one fashion or another, from what Pierre Bourdieu might describe as their expected social trajectory. These departures often lead the characters to adopt or fall into subject positions that exemplify Bourdieu's notion of the "cultural intermediary." Bourdieu uses this term to describe individuals whose class trajectory is threatened or uncertain, and who, "if they possibly can," move "into the most indeterminate of the older professions," such as that of the artist, or "into the sectors where the new professions are ... the most ill-defined and ... unstructured." Bourdieu tells us that such positions are to be found in "the newest sectors of cultural and artistic production, such as the big public and private enterprises engaged in cultural production," which includes "radio, TV, marketing, [and] advertising" (151). Bourdieu goes on

to explain that the appeal of such positions for those uncertain of their opportunities for recognition by the existing dominant fiction “lies in the fact that, being vague and ill-defined, uncertainly located in social space,” and often depending upon “none of the material or symbolic criteria – promotion, benefits, increments – whereby social time, and also social hierarchies are experienced and measured, they leave aspirations considerable room for manouevre.”

Furthermore, “the indeterminate future which they offer, a privilege hitherto reserved for artists and intellectuals, makes it possible to treat the present as a sort of endlessly renewed provisional status” (155). Cultural intermediary positions such as the ad man offer a relatively flexible relationship to the dominant fiction, and thereby model a useful character type with which novelists, who themselves occupy cultural intermediary positions to greater and lesser degrees, can explore, test, and re-imagine subjective relations to a given dominant fiction. Bourdieu’s description of the qualities of such professional positions accounts for at least part of the appeal of the ad-man as a fictional vehicle through which to explore the uncertainties of consumer capitalism in the twentieth century. By allowing the latitude to identify with a set of vaguely-stated master signifiers, cultural intermediary positions such as the ad-man offer an exploratory limbo, a subjective space in which one may manage to avoid pledging allegiance to a capitalist order that appears inimical to one’s desire, without abandoning entirely one’s anchor points embedded in the familiar comforts of capitalist luxury. Much like the “bourgeois bohemians” David Brooks analyzes (and celebrates) in his book, *Bobos in Paradise*, the ad-man characters discussed in this study often negotiate the indeterminacy of these spaces via patterns of consumption that answer simultaneously to fantasies of wealth and luxury *and* fantasies of anti-consumerist righteousness and activism.

Mike Featherstone connects the emergence of this particular subject position to an overall “increase in the production and dissemination of symbolic goods,” to which the advertising

industry has been a primary contributor: “Given conditions of an increasing supply of symbolic goods, demand grows for cultural specialists and intermediaries who have the capacity to ransack various traditions and cultures in order to produce new symbolic goods” (19). In such roles, one who is uncertain of his or her cultural and class affiliations would be an asset, but while this indeterminacy provides flexibility and mobility, it also invites contradiction and confusion: “Their habitus, dispositions, and lifestyle preferences are such that they identify with artists and intellectuals, yet under conditions of the de-monopolization of artistic and intellectual commodity enclaves, they have the apparent contradictory interests of sustaining the prestige and cultural capital of these enclaves, while at the same time popularizing and making them more accessible to wider audiences” (Featherstone 19). The discovery that informs many of the ad-man novels discussed in the chapters that follow is that the contradiction inherent in a marriage between commodity culture and autonomous art may be temporarily palliated by consumer patterns that signify continuity, but ultimately is unsustainable.

One aspect of the cultural intermediary positions occupied by the ad-man characters in these novels goes unaddressed by both Bourdieu and Featherstone: gender. It is important at this point to reiterate the central place of patriarchal value systems in the development and maintenance of capitalist economies. Much of what is to be found in the ad-man novels demonstrates the degree to which dominant fictions of consumer capitalism, in all their various incarnations throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, depend upon patriarchal ideology and practice. The inextricability of the master signifiers of patriarchy from those belonging to capitalism results in a dominant fiction that fails almost uniformly to facilitate the formation of female desire.

Until Gibson introduces his female protagonist, Cayce Pollard, in 2003, the fictional ad-man is precisely that: decidedly male. However, the ways in which these characters occupy their

masculine subjectivities are, in some regards, unconventional. In her book, *Male Subjectivities at the Margin*, Kaja Silverman interrogates the fundamentally patriarchal nature of the capitalist dominant fiction by employing concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis to describe instances of male subjectivity that are “deviant,” consisting of “masculinities whose defining desires and identifications are ‘perverse’ with respect not so much to a moral as to a phallic standard” (1). Both the male and female ad-man characters discussed below embody desires that deviate from what Silverman terms the “phallic standard,” particularly in their habits of consumption and dress.

Silverman suggests that behind such deviation is “a historical moment at which the equation of the male sexual organ with the phallus could no longer be sustained,” and that the result is a “collective loss of belief in the whole of the dominant fiction” (2). The ad-man characters depicted in these novels are all interpellated into rigid structures of gender difference determined by the patriarchal capitalist context in which they exist, especially in regards to their roles as producers. When lived experience suggests both the characters’ inadequacies as producers in the roles set out for them and the inadequacies of those roles to serve as vehicles for their own desire, these characters look to less rigidly defined roles, those that resemble the cultural intermediary. The failure of most of these characters to find just such a subjective space, even in their more flexible roles as cultural intermediaries, suggests the inadequacies of the dominant fiction held forth by the advertising industries and capitalism in general, both for the characters and the novels as a whole. These inadequacies culminate in several of the novels as a crisis of homelessness: the protagonists’ subjective investment in the dominant fiction has faltered, but they are yet rendered incapable of imagining or forging viable alternatives.

Another significant aspect of the imperfect process of identity-formation that is illustrated by the ad-man characters is the drive to violence that may emerge as a result of unsustainable

subjectivities. Indeed, one of the most important elements of my argument is that the violence which forms the backdrop to each of these novels, increasingly as we move closer to the twenty-first century, is crucial to our understanding of the ad-man characters' relationships to capitalist society. Frederic Jameson suggests that, "throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror" (5). It is true that the poor all over the globe have been starved and abused, popular governments have been forcibly removed, wars have been fought, entire peoples have been brought to the brink of extinction, and natural resources have been decimated repeatedly in order to support the consumer fantasies put forth and celebrated by advertising institutions in the United States and other Western capitalist nations.

Kaja Silverman suggests that, historically, when individuals have come into contact with the traumatic violence that is the "underside" of consumer capitalist culture, which in these novels ranges from colonial violence to suicide to world wars and the terrorist attacks of September 11th, the experience has been such a powerful confrontation with lack that it has led to a loss of faith in the dominant fiction (51). I argue that, for the characters in these novels, the relation is often the reverse, but similarly significant. Those recovering from exposure to intense violence seek to re-immense themselves in the ideologies of the dominant fiction: consumerism, capitalism, traditional masculinity; and those who are immersed in these ideologies from the beginning of their narratives seek out encounters with violence when they are faced with the inadequacy of the dominant fiction. The characters' various experiences with violence illustrate the inability of the conflicted subjectivities they've developed under the conditions of consumer capitalism to channel or sublimate the psychological excess that cannot be contained in their relationship to the symbolic order. Furthermore, these narrative structures suggest that the alternative to a livable dominant fiction is the death drive, an active pursuit of violence and annihilation. This aspect of the project is especially relevant as we in the United States continue

to live with a dominant fiction whose logical trajectory is, indeed, violence. The analysis these novels may prompt is precisely the kind of critical inquiry that, in the traumatized wake of 9/11, our government and other supporters of the dominant fiction don't want to admit into the realm of possible discourses.

The conclusions of each of these novels tend toward despair, either confirming the status quo, or lamenting the impossibility of escaping it. But I will argue that it is the lure of violence, the presence of violence, and the memory of violence that haunts each one of these characters and the novels to which they belong that constitutes the “tear,” offering readers a glimpse into the real of capitalist society. The ad-man novels discussed in this study illustrate Adorno's claim that, “the sole avenue of intellectual communication between the subjective system and the objective system is the explosion which tears both apart and momentarily illuminates in its glare the figure they form together,” can be understood both literally and metaphorically, and thus suggests that, while violence may be an ugly and inevitable dimension of capitalism, it is also an effective means for seeing the truth of capitalism (*Prisms* 90). Though Slavoj Žižek does not assume the value of this “truth,” like Adorno, he also suggests that “authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression” and that “the Real in its extreme violence” is the “price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (*Welcome* 6).

Berman aptly suggests that “we all want through the mode of consumption to keep death at a distance” (68), yet what these novels imply is that engagement in consumer culture cultivates rather than sublimates subjective, and eventually physical violence. Theodor Adorno claims the following: “The phrase, the world wants to be deceived, has become truer than had ever been intended. People are not only ... falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them ... They sense that their lives would be completely intolerable as soon as they no longer clung to

satisfactions which are none at all” (“Culture Industry Reconsidered” 16). What this thread of novels suggests is that the “swindle” is not good enough; it’s not providing these characters gratification, fleeting or otherwise, and they are indeed finding their lives intolerable in the absence of both convincing swindles and alternative ways of being. What results from the absence of a livable subjectivity is a tendency toward violence: “In the midst of well-being, we are haunted by nightmarish visions of catastrophes” (Žižek, *Welcome* 17).

As mentioned above, Terry Eagleton suggests that the purpose of literary criticism is to seek “the emancipation of human beings from what frustrates their fulfillment and well-being.” The vision of freedom offered by psychoanalysis is particularly appealing because, in its examinations of dreams, fantasies, nightmares and wishes, it is, of all things, realistic. Psychoanalytic discourse acknowledges that there is no inherent “I” to set free of all bonds; it is the “bonds,” rather, that make the “I.” Analysis in these terms give us the chance to understand the bonds – our ideological allegiances, our fundamental desires and identifications – to which we are beholden, which is a first step toward exchanging those which we were given for those which we may choose.

None of the novels discussed in the chapters that follow unveil “the revolutionary potential of the capitalist economy” Marx cites in the *Manifesto*, nor do they offer prescription for revolutionary action that will enable individuals to become fully liberated subjects, or invite the reader into a voyeuristic experience of a full-on psychoanalytic breakthrough, swiftly enabling productive critique and desire. Hope for such a treatise is probably naïve. However, we may take heart at Žižek’s contention that, “we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it” (19). Jameson adds the following: “the false problem may have become the only place of truth, so that reflection on the impossible matter of the nature of a political art in conditions that exclude it by

definition may not be the worst way of marking time. Indeed ... 'postmodern political art' might turn out to be just that – not art in any older sense, but an interminable conjecture on how it could be possible in the first place” (65). It seems that this is, in fact, the manner in which these novels exist as valuable “illuminations” of the possibilities for liberating desire amidst consumer capitalist culture.

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Chapter 1: The Ad-Man's Tonic Youth: The (Brief) Commensurability of Desire and Subjectivity in H.G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay*

H.G. Wells was a popular writer and well-known figure whose novels, short stories, and political treatises constituted a noteworthy current in the popular discourse of his time. Though his works enjoyed a great deal of popularity, there has been much disagreement about the quality of those works, and how – if at all – Wells fits into literary studies. Regardless of how Wells is ranked among the great Moderns, upon consideration of Wells's oeuvre, nearly all critics agree that *Tono-Bungay* (1909) is his masterpiece. Though Wells is perhaps best remembered for his fictional forays into the future, his crowning achievement as a novelist looks back at a (then) recent past. Set in Edwardian England, spanning the years 1871 to 1906 (Hammond 132), *Tono-Bungay* offers a portrait of the ad-man and capitalist society that is both a farewell to a waning era of unbridled Barnum-esque advertising and a prescient forecast of the shape of things to come.

In this chapter, I will argue that Wells' novel can be read as a critical inquiry and psychological exploration of the capitalist forces that have catalyzed the cultural changes documented by *Tono-Bungay*. Mark Bracher has suggested that one factor causing academic cultural criticism to be less effective than it might be is that "its aim has been displaced by the formalist habit, which takes as its primary object of scrutiny the cultural icon per se rather than the process of reception of the artifact by human subjects" (4). With this in mind, I contend that one of the reasons the criticism *Tono-Bungay* puts forth is effective is that the novel's primary narrative concern is *not* the artifact – the commodity after which the novel is named: Tono-Bungay. Rather, the narrative focus is on the ways in which the characters' lives are affected by their investments in, desires for, production and reception of the artifact, as well as a larger investigation into what it means for individuals to live in a society that aggrandizes such a

commodity. In this way, *Tono-Bungay* can be read as a work of cultural criticism that performs the function Bracher insists is so important: creating a “theory of subjectivity” that seeks to explain “how cultural artifacts affect people” (11).

Indeed, I will argue that the central problem Wells sets out for his main characters is that of identity-formation – of successful adoption of master signifiers that enable livable desire – in a world dramatically changed by the accelerated growth of consumer capitalism. That Wells’s novel explores issues of identity-formation under capitalism and a milieu of scientific advances is no surprise, given that “the formative years of his life coincided with the breakup of the old order in science and philosophy and the beginnings of modern psychology and sociology.” Furthermore, “the years of his literary apprenticeship, 1886-1895, saw the discovery of X-rays, the publication of the first works on psychoanalysis, [and] the first English edition of Marx’s *Capital*” (Hammond 152). Wells’s particular interest in the ways in which psychoanalytic investigations of identity formation depend upon locating and interrogating the fictions in which an individual has invested him or herself is evident, as “he submitted a thesis to the University of London for the Doctorate of Science,” titled “The quality of illusion in the continuity of individual life in the higher Metazoa, with particular reference to the species *homo sapiens*” (79).

Unlike later novels discussed in this study in which dominant discourses of art, capitalism, and technology are entwined to such a degree that they are taken on by a single ad-man protagonist, *Tono-Bungay* treats these discourses as so fundamentally distinct from one another that they are represented by separate characters – Edward Ponderevo, who is the ad-man figure, and his nephew, George, who acts as both his co-conspirator and his foil. The two interact meaningfully with one another, but their characters and their respective ideologies remain separate and unreconciled throughout the narrative. What the characters have in common is their generational emergence from a socioeconomic order governed by the landed gentry to

whom all the farmers and villagers over-pay homage, taxes and rent – a late form of feudalism. And though there is a general awareness and a certain excitement that the old order is passing and a new order is up and coming, this transitory time also generates a great deal of confusion and uncertainty about what kinds of lives can be led, what subjectivities can be formed, what desires will be fomented or forbidden. And, as the narrator points out, the change will not be a sudden disconnect, but rather a morphing in which the new form will retain features of the old for some time to come: “The new order may have gone far towards shaping itself, but just as in that sort of lantern show that used to be known in the village as the ‘Dissolving Views,’ the scene that is going remains upon the mind, traceable and evident, and the newer picture is yet enigmatical long after the lines that are to replace those former ones have grown bright and strong so that the new England ... is still a riddle to me” (15). It is this overlap, the lingering past that so deeply influences the reception of the future that creates uncertainty, anxiety, and conflicting desires in *Tono-Bungay*. Those who are emerging from the past are, George suggests, “perpetually seeking after lost orientations.” Though he claims “we have never broken with our tradition, never even symbolically hewed it to pieces, as the French did ... in the Terror,” nonetheless an era is passing, and “all the organizing ideas have slackened, the old habitual bonds have relaxed or altogether come undone” (20). It is a time of tremendous possibility, but also a time of great trepidation.

In its attempts to outline more definitely the shape of the new order, *Tono-Bungay* portrays the emerging form of capitalism in terms of two different systems of signification: the language and ideology of imperialism, and the language and ideology of disease. From the characters’ points-of-view, capitalism described in terms of imperialism – in terms of expansion, progress, civilization, beneficence – acquires a positive profile. The terms of disease, then, form a counter-narrative of capitalism that is suggestive of its capacity for malignant growth,

corruptive influence, degeneration, and even death. By the conclusion of *Tono-Bungay*, it is clear that these two systems of signification are not mutually exclusive modes of apprehension, but rather are two sides of one insidious coin.

Tono-Bungay is Wells's comment on late nineteenth-century England which suggests that consumer capitalism has in fact taken the symbolic stage as the most compelling dominant fiction, and that, though its method of interpellation is successful in recruiting subjects, as a mode of desiring, it is disastrous – for both the individual and the world in which he lives. Art, on the other hand, as it exists in *Tono-Bungay* can at least hint at livable modes of desire, and is capable of presenting a critique of the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, but is entirely incompatible with and grossly “outdone” by that dominant fiction. Like Ewart, the character who stands in as its meager representative, art is ultimately written out of the narrative of *Tono-Bungay*. However, this gesture is to some degree countered by the novel itself: though *Tono-Bungay* ends with George, the narrator, pledging his life to science and technology, it is, after all, in the form of the novel that he chose to tell his tale, to describe his disappointments as an inductee into the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism. Similarly, Wells was a man of science who nonetheless chose a career in literature and journalism as that which was most fulfilling.

In his historical account of the intersections between early modernism and commercial culture, Jackson Lears identifies a “celebration of machine civilization” that co-existed alongside a “countercurrent of resistance” which held the “culture of advanced capitalism” facilitated by technological advances (among other things) in contempt (345). Lears contends that the simultaneous forces of these conflicting sentiments resulted in a society of individuals who were themselves conflicted accordingly, and who shared a common feeling that was a “yearning for a more intense and palpable experience of the world than was available in commodity

civilization.” Lears goes on to suggest that “those sentiments ... resonated with the unmasking tendency at the heart of much modernist thought” (346). These features of modernist culture can serve as coordinates for the characters Wells develops in *Tono-Bungay* to express to his own understanding of the era.

Edward Ponderevo is the creator of the patent medicine for which the novel is named, and is – without reservation – wholly identified with the emerging structures and practices of consumer capitalism. His character is modeled on a long and infamous line of nineteenth-century entrepreneurs who concocted and sold all manner of potions, pectorals, nostrums, tonics, extracts, elixirs, serums, and syrups for record profits. Throughout *Tono-Bungay*, Ponderevo heralds trade for the sake of trade, and profit for profit’s sake, and though he is selling bunk, his showmanship, charisma, and his genuine faith in his profession and the society that supports it contribute to his great success. Precisely because of these characteristics, Ponderevo is perhaps the more compelling and sympathetic of the two main characters in the novel, but Wells does not entrust this character with the telling of the tale.

Instead, the narrator who introduces himself at the beginning of *Tono-Bungay* is George Ponderevo – Edward’s nephew, and the character which Wells modeled upon himself. George is, to greater and lesser degrees at different stages of his life, dedicated to scientific knowledge, technical innovations, and the pursuit of objectivity. George lends his technological know-how to his uncle’s commercial endeavors, but is deeply ambivalent about the worthiness of their business or the validity of their successes. Though it may be difficult for the contemporary reader to *like* George – his character is pompous, self-aggrandizing, and condescending, among other things – he is the character who is most aware and self-reflective about the processes and difficulties of identity formation and desire. His introductory sentences identify people as “character actors,” and he goes on to explain that, while some individuals live out their roles

without question or interruption, there are those whose roles are uncertain, disjointed, causing one to “live crosswise,” implying that the formation, adoption, recognition, acceptance, rejection, and re-formation of “roles” is a central focus of the narrative (9). His comment implies an understanding of individual identity as contingent and constructed, rather than essential and contiguous – a concept that is foundational to a psychoanalytic approach. George’s character is also self-reflective about the difficulties of desire: he tells his readers, “All my life has been at bottom, *seeking*, disbelieving always with the thing seen and the thing believed, seeking something in toil, in force, in danger, something whose name and nature I do not clearly understand, something beautiful, worshipful, enduring, mine profoundly and fundamentally and the utter redemption of myself – something I have ever failed to find” (204). Throughout this ongoing search, his character is invested in the process of “unmasking” to which Lears refers. George is driven by a belief that there is always a greater truth to found behind surface appearances, whether they be geographic, scientific, or psychological. Though he does not use psychoanalytic terms, George’s character is seeking to uncover and recover the Real – the excess created by entry into the symbolic order in which nothing is lacking, but which escapes symbolic representation (Bracher 40). George is not as smart about these challenges as he imagines he is, but he does demonstrate an interest and willingness to seriously engage in a form of analytic discourse as he looks back on his life.

Ewart is George’s boyhood friend who, as an adult, lives a bohemian life in London as a starving artist and armchair philosopher. His character receives much less narrative attention than either Edward or George himself, but his brief appearances are crucial because Ewart’s ideas and his art serve as one of the “countercurrent[s] of resistance” in *Tono-Bungay*, challenging the capitalist order in which George and his uncle are so heavily implicated. Ewart’s

character probes the difficulties of what Althusser calls interpellation in modern capitalist London, and prompts George to do the same.

Another significant element of resistance is present in the character of Susan, Teddy's wife. Because she is a woman, her experience of the "consumer capitalist dream" is significantly less enchanting than that of her husband, and certainly less liberating than George's experience. She finds the "roles" she is offered as the wife of a wealthy capitalist entirely unsatisfactory. Though she is able to do very little else, she does keep up an ongoing criticism of the relatively new system and the new ways of life it entails. What all these characters have in common is an ongoing effort to find their place, to find a livable subjectivity, a viable mode of desire and existence in a world whose shapes and forms are changing dramatically.

Tono-Bungay's depiction of these four characters demonstrates several of the ways the novelistic form can act as an important inquiry into socioeconomic systems by depicting different forms of subjectivity and desire as they develop, struggle, and/ or thrive in a given socioeconomic situation. Bracher suggests that such a "taxonomy of desire" is valuable "not in its capacity to serve as a totalizing system for describing and categorizing the various elements of discourse," but "rather in its demonstration of the multifariousness and complexity of desire and in its function as a kind of checklist prompting us to search a given text or discourse for interpellative forces that might not be immediately evident. Such identification," Bracher contends, "is itself a primary means for promoting social change" (52). *Tono-Bungay* is both the text and the checklist; as a work of fiction that is part of popular discourse, it exerts its own interpellative force. Moreover, the content of the novel interrogates both the interpellative forces at work in its own pages, and those to which its readers are subject.

Furthermore, with its interest in subjectivity and unconscious desire as motivating forces, *Tono-Bungay* presents a clear challenge to the "hard economics" definition of "rational man" as

the average individual who will consistently act in his own best interests. Edward Ponderevo's character is, from the start, drawn to schemes and shenanigans, hocus pocus promises of prosperity, and it is clear that he is not ignorant, but rather chooses to delude himself with these fantastical promises of wealth. And even George, who pledges his allegiance to science and objectivity is muddled in repressed desires, denials, and fantasies of uncovering absolute truths. Most importantly, Wells has created characters that come across as *human* – this is what humanity looks like; this is how people seek and do and live – and rationality has only a small part to play.

The novel itself, as narrated by George, undergoes a process that parallels the characters' psychic "role-seeking," as it attempts to navigate genre and style. Several critics have pointed out, with greater and lesser degrees of appreciation, that fact that *Tono-Bungay* is varied and perhaps haphazard in its generic modes and methods. Mark Schorer's oft-cited comment that "the novelist flounders through a series of literary imitations – from an early Dickensian episode, through a kind of Shavian interlude, through a Conradian episode, to a Jules Verne vision at the end" (17) accords the novel less credit than does Lucille Herbert when she suggests that:

To represent the experiences that induced his quest for salvation, [George] Ponderevo borrows some ready-made forms and languages, including those of the 'Condition of England' novel, religious confession, and fictional autobiography. But the 'spirit of truth-telling' in which he writes requires that the controlling perspective of this book should be that of his renovated consciousness, and this in turn requires a new language and a new form for which he can find no models. Thus the essential and unifying form of *Tono-Bungay* becomes that of a search for expression which inheres in the process of composition itself (142).

Like the characters it contains, the novel itself is seeking a mode of representation and identification that is workable amidst a new set of circumstances, an altered set of social relations. Indeed, Wells himself would probably not have been offended by Schorer's criticism. When the Academic Committee of the Royal Society of Literature invited him to join the ranks of established literary greats such as Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and Bernard Shaw, Wells

declined, responding with his “insurmountable objection to Literary or Artistic Academies as such, to any hierarchies, any suggestion of controls or fixed standards in these things” because “the creative and representative work we do,” stated Wells, “is, I am convinced, best anarchic” (Hammond 53).

To this end, readers find that the narrator’s character is trying his hand at the novel for the first time, and, though George “has read an average share of novels and made some starts before this beginning,” he finds “the restraints and rules of the art (as [he’s] made them out) impossible” (12). He acknowledges that the ideas he wants to represent in his narrative do not fit neatly into pre-existing forms: “It isn’t a constructed tale I have to tell, but unmanageable realities” (13). George’s attempt at the novel seems to be motivated by an effort to recognize his own life, to organize the morass of “unmanageable realities” into a coherent narrative that demonstrates a livable relation to a clearly-defined dominant fiction, to demonstrate that his search – his development from boy to man – has culminated in a meaningful identity. This search is taxing: existing models are insufficient, and new models are difficult to form. The result is a novel that, like its narrator, “lives crosswise ... and in a succession of samples” (Wells 9). George does not conclude with many answers, but *Tono-Bungay* does, amidst the generic chaos, work to chip away at existing forms and point toward the necessity of new ones. However, having attempted to rescue *Tono-Bungay* from its harshest critics, Herbert adds this caveat: “to suggest that *Tono-Bungay* is in this sense a modern novel is not, however, to imply that it is better than its critics have thought – only more original and perhaps historically more important” (153).

The ad-man that Wells has created and whose rise and fall constitutes the central action of *Tono-Bungay* is Edward Pondereveo. The historical medicine men after whom Ponderevo’s character was fashioned have strong ties to early advertising practices; for many of them,

production of an effective remedy for existing health ailments was a priority far secondary to creating promotions and sales on a scale and in a style previously unknown – and this is certainly the case for the fictional Ponderevo. Along with other historians, E.S. Turner suggests that the very successful Victorian pill-maker Thomas Holloway may actually be credited as “the first world-wide advertiser” (87), and Ponderevo’s fictional career achieves comparable success, both in his innovations to advertising practices and in his ability to disseminate his publicity and his product on a near-global scale. His name and his tonic are known from England to India to Africa, and his wealth is so great it becomes literally incomprehensible. Ponderevo’s character is one of the last advertising men of his kind, in fiction and reality, profiting as he did from characteristics such as showmanship, charisma, an entrepreneurial drive, and a genuine faith in the capitalist socioeconomic order – characteristics from which subsequent generations of ad-men – both fictional and actual – would vehemently seek to distance themselves. But although Ponderevo’s character arrives late in the era of the medicine man’s good fortunes, his enterprise, his understanding of the modern commodity, and his advertising strategies point towards shifts in the culture of capitalism that have had deep and lasting effects throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

The reader meets Wells’s odd, but lovable ad-man-to-be when he is a small-time chemist working in a small town where he feels stifled and misunderstood. As is true for each ad-man character discussed in subsequent chapters, the geographical trajectory of Ponderevo’s tale includes a departure from rural or small-town life in favor of an urban center; for Ponderevo’s character, this urban center is London. A country-to-city exodus is a key feature of the ad-man’s attempt to negotiate his subjective lived relation to the dominant fiction, and it is one dimension of the multifaceted manner in which the economic order depicted in these novels has a direct bearing on the characters’ processes of identity formation. In Ponderevo’s case, the

aristocratic estate governing the small village in which he lives represents and maintains an economic order that has become unbearable – Ponderevo is unable to find a subjective position within this system that enables him to live out his desire. Pierre Bourdieu notes in *Distinction* that this is a typical predicament, prompted by changes in a given economic order that render a younger generation incapable of or unlikely to live out the class trajectories for which they were socialized, educated, and taught to invest their egos and desires.

Ponderevo's training as a chemist and his work at the Wimblehurst pharmacy offer no channel for the sense of himself he has developed having grown up on the fringes of an emerging capitalist ideology – a sense of himself as an innovator, a financier and a showman. He complains that, in Wimblehurst, the locals “just come along a buy pills when they want ‘em ... they’ve got to be ill before there’s a prescription. That sort they are. You can’t get ‘em to launch out, you can’t get ‘em to take up anything new” (59). When Ponderevo attempts innovative marketing ploys, other villagers mock him openly, in the streets and in public-houses. Mark Bracher's explanation that “forbidden modes of jouissance are inscribed in the subject in the form of fantasy,” and that furthermore, “fantasy thus not only promises ultimate jouissance for desire, it also protects the subject from being engulfed in the abyss of nonmeaning at the basis of human existence” (43) would seem to apply here: Ponderevo's fantasy of capitalist enterprise has been created *and* forbidden by the economic structure implemented by the landed gentry and then socially enforced by his fellow villagers. In this situation, capitalism – as he sees it from a distance – emerges as that which is missing, that which, once possessed, or once he has been possessed by it, will complete him. While Ponderevo's shop struggles to stay afloat in Wimblehurst, he dreams of being a part of a new economic order, one that appreciates change, novelty, and buying for the sake of buying, and this new economic order has a very specific location: London.

One of the core dimensions of Edward Ponderevo's capitalist vision is urbanity: the countryside and rural villages, as they are dominated by Bladesover-like estates and their ruling aristocracies, are impossible sites for the rise of capitalism. Ponderevo complains to his nephew, "This place ... isn't of course quite the place I ought to be in. It gives me no Scope ... It's dead-alive. Nothing happens ... there's no Development – no Growth" (59). In addition to being a literary convention of the time, Wells's use of capitalized words in Ponderevo's dialogue stakes out those terms that constitute the "big ideas" with which his character seeks to align himself – master signifiers he is seeking, but cannot find within the confines of a small town still loyal to the symbolic order of the past. Uncle Ponderevo goes on to lament the stagnant conditions to which he is subject in Wimblehurst claiming, "It's Cold Mutton Fat! That's what Wimblehurst is! Cold Mutton Fat! – dead and stiff! ... What can one *do* here? How can one grow? While we're sleepin' here with our Capital oozing away – into Lord Eastry's pockets for rent – men are up there," and "he indicated London ... as a scene of great activity by a whirl of the hand and a wink" (68). Ponderevo's character in this scene appears to be suffering from what Kaja Silverman terms "ideological fatigue" – a result of a confrontation with the lack of the dominant fiction that may lead to "a loss of belief not only in the adequacy of the male subject, but in the family and small-town life" (54).

As it turns out in *Tono-Bungay*, Ponderevo was right to imagine that London would be the place where he can break out of established traditions and economic roles. In Wimblehurst, when Ponderevo attempts commodity development and sales promotions consistent with the methodologies of consumer capitalism, he is boycotted, ridiculed, and socially disciplined by the small community. George speculates that "he had spread his effect of bounding ideas and enterprise rather too aggressively; and Wimblehurst, after a temporary subjugation, had rebelled and done its best to make a butt of him" (77). But the urban context of London not only already

houses capitalism in its most modern forms and is thus amenable to Ponderevo's capitalist ambitions, it also provides him the anonymity he requires to re-invent and re-identify himself, and the vast, diverse masses he requires as an audience for his public presence and his new products.

Ponderevo's character is committed to capitalism as he imagines it from afar, and once he reaches London and is embroiled in the heart of capitalist culture, he is not disappointed.

Silverman defines "successful interpellation" as "taking as the reality of the self what is in fact a discursive construction ... claiming as ontology what is only a point of address" (21).

Ponderevo's character exemplifies successful interpellation, as he is the very embodiment of the fictions of consumer capitalism: they are synonymous with his notion of himself. Perhaps one factor facilitating this complete identification is that, as were many creators of patent medicines, Ponderevo's character is involved in nearly every aspect of his capitalist enterprise. He conceives, creates, and produces his product; he establishes venues for production and distribution; he leads ongoing research and development efforts; he manages all accounting and financial matters; and, of course, he is the one and only advertising man for the Tono-Bungay enterprise.

This is certainly one of the ways in which his character is the last of its kind; twentieth-century consumer capitalism would soon develop a division of labor that separated many of these components. Advertising would not for long be one of several duties assumed by the average businessman: the advertising agency would soon emerge, housing cadres of specialists who do nothing else.¹ Perhaps it is his intense involvement with every level of the Tono-Bungay

¹ Taking a long view, it is interesting to note that by the end of the twentieth century, advertising practices have engaged the capitalist process in reverse: rather than manufacturers seeking out ad-men to help them sell their products, we now see advertising agencies creating campaigns for which they then retroactively seek a product and a manufacturer – the advertisement itself has become the primary commodity; production of an object is secondary, at best.

enterprise that enables Ponderevo to be fully identified with his profession and with the social order in which it exists. Unlike later ad-men (both actual and fictional) who consistently harbor attitudes of cynicism towards capitalism, condescension towards the manufacturers of the products they advertise, and a sense that they are “selling out” by creating advertisements at all, Ponderevo maintains complete allegiance to his endeavors and derives genuine satisfaction from his role in the capitalist order. He tells his nephew, “It’s a great world, nowadays, with a fair chance for everyone who lays hold of things ... It’s a great world and a growing world and I’m glad we’re in it” (260). George describes his uncle as “on the whole, a very happy man throughout all that wildly enterprising time ... He was constantly in violent motion, constantly stimulated mentally and physically and rarely tired”; George doubts “if he had any dissatisfaction with himself at all until the crash came down” (219). It is important to add that, although Ponderevo was saddened by the demise of Tono-Bungay, it is not clear that this sadness is accompanied by a loss of belief in the dominant fiction of capitalism. When his bluff is called, when his ongoing dealings in the imaginary are finally taken to task by very real demands for payments and dividends that he cannot supply, Ponderevo does not regret his career or rethink his commitments; the failure of Tono-Bungay does not prompt him to an epiphanic critique of the system in which it flourished, or of himself as a perpetuator of such a system. Žižek speaks to this when he writes, “the Lacanian definition of a fool is somebody who is not capable of a dialectically mediated distance towards himself” (*Sublime Ideology* 46). From his position of complete alliance with the capitalist system, Ponderevo sees his failure as incidental, a function of chance, but not a negative reflection of the worthiness of the game or a clue as to ways in which his subjective investment in the dominant fiction of capitalism might be problematic. Upon his deathbed, Ponderevo’s mind and murmurings “ran rather upon his career ... with a note of satisfaction and approval” (360).

Ponderevo's character makes explicit the degree to which identifications with master signifiers and dominant fictions are acts of faith, driven by desire, rather than rationally devised calculations based on consciously-held knowledge. His character also serves as an example of how powerful and seamless these identifications can be, especially in a system as comprehensive as that of modern capitalism. For example, in a pre-Tono-Bungay incident in which he loses most of his money in a stock-market scam, Ponderevo explains the nature of the system to his nephew as follows: "You calculate you're going to do this or that, but at the bottom who knows at all *what* he's doing? When you most think you're doing things, they're being done right over your head. *You're* being done – in a sense. ... You're being Led" (82). What may seem admirable about Ponderevo's character is that he is not discouraged by this knowledge; he does not abandon his belief in capitalism when his "stock market meterology" fails to produce the results he had dreamed of (78) – he embraces his fantasy of capitalism, despite his knowledge that the system is not fair or figurable, and that his chances of becoming a wealthy capitalist are very remote indeed. Ponderevo prefers the fictions of capitalism to the weakened illusions of the landed gentry; he can eke out a meaningful life for himself through the fantasies and fictions of capitalism in a way that was impossible for him stuck among the "Cold Mutton Fat" of country estates and the villages they govern. Ponderevo gets along well with his fantasy – though it seems less of a conscious choice and more an instance of being fully satisfied with what he's been given.

Despite the fact that Ponderevo's character seems to find the fictions of capitalism quite amenable to the satisfaction of his own desires, from a perspective which takes social responsibility into account, his willingness to embrace the capitalist order is not a purely personal, subjective act, but an act that infringes on the possibility of a viable relation to the dominant fiction for others. We see the way in which he "edits" his fantasy in order to crop out

those signifiers that would intrude upon his idealization of capitalism when Ponderevo tours London. He sees only a very limited version of London that represents his fantasy of capitalism: from the very start when he arrives relatively poor and humble, Ponderevo speaks of and frequents only the most exclusive neighborhoods and the most upscale commercial districts, despite the fact that his own working-class neighborhood undoubtedly contradicts this depiction (91). Ponderevo has thus facilitated the interpellative forces of capitalism, which include fantasies he will eventually proffer to George. According to Bracher, “in gauging the interpellative force of a given text or discourse, one must take account not only of the different objects and positions offered to an audience’s desire, but also of the ... repression of the Other’s lack” (46). George’s description of his uncle’s relationship to London provides a counter-narrative in which he observes his uncle’s dwelling and other city sights independently and more objectively, making it impossible for him to fully share Ponderevo’s fantasy of London. When Ponderevo guides George to his first home in London, George is struck by the “back streets” they travel, the “drab-colored passage that was ... narrow and dirty,” and “desolatingly empty,” leading to “the blistered front door” that opens to his uncle’s lodgings – one in “a long series of blistered front doors.” His aunt and uncle “occupied what is called the dining-room floor of a small house”; “they had the use of a little inconvenient kitchen in the basement that had once been a scullery ... there was ... no bathroom or anything of that sort available, and there was no water supply except to the kitchen below” (88). George notes that “their *ménage* was one of a very common type in London,” and sees it, in the clarity of hindsight, as a symptom of the difficult socioeconomic transition: “None of these classes have ideas of what they ought to be, or fit in any legitimate way into the Bladesover theory that dominates our minds. It was nobody’s concern to see them housed under civilized conditions, and the beautiful laws of supply and demand had free play” (89). He ends his first day musing that “it is a foolish community that can

house whole classes, useful and helpful, honest and loyal classes, in such squalidly unsuitable dwellings” (90).

In his lone travails through London, George sees “interlacing railway lines” bordered by “dingy grass” and “big factories, gasometers, and wide reeking swamps of dingy little homes, more of them and more and more.” He notices that “the number of these and their dinginess and poverty increased, and here rose a great public house and here ... a gaunt factory,” and “inexplicable people who ... do not ‘exist’” (86, 102). His narrative voice begins to sound overwhelmed, even though he is recalling sights from twenty years ago: “the congestion of houses intensified and pile up presently into tenements; I marveled more and more at this boundless world of dingy people; whiffs of industrial smell, of leather, of brewing ... tall warehouses, grey water, barges crowded, broad banks of inscrutable mud” (86). This is George’s first experience of London, and his fantasy of London as a magnificent adventure amidst a free-play of possibilities is seriously disrupted by the empirical evidence he encounters that suggests the contrary. He had imagined London as “a large, free, welcoming, adventurous place,” that would be an “escape from the slumber of Wimblehurst,” but finds upon actual entry into the city that this vision “had vanished from his dreams” (94). His first visit is an “epoch-making disappointment” – the reality of capitalist London contradicts the fantasy his uncle had helped him construct too powerfully for George to maintain the kind of faith to which his uncle clings.

However, once George is fully engaged in the wealth and power of the successful Tono-Bungay enterprise, we find that he is much less affected by similar sights: “we looked out of the windows upon a procession of the London unemployed. It was like looking down a well into some momentarily revealed nether world. Some thousands of needy ineffectual men had been raked together to trail their spiritless misery through the West End with an appeal that was also

in its way a weak and insubstantial threat ... they carried wet, dirty banners, they rattled boxes for pence, ... a shambling, shameful stream they made, oozing along the street, the gutter waste of civilization. And we stood high out of it all ... godlike from another world.” This chilling tableaux demonstrates a remarkable shift in George’s perspective; his metaphor of the “momentarily revealed nether world” and his use of passive tense when describing the protestor’s actions indicate that he, like his uncle, has willingly and gladly dissociated such scenes from his vision of consumer capitalism. Wells, however, by including this scene in George’s narrative, and by depicting George’s callousness and Ponderevo’s oblivion, hopes to make just the opposite point: this, too, is what capitalism looks like: masses of weary unemployed workers are treated with apathy by those in a position to help. Thus, from George’s perspective readers are privy to many elements that are not written into Ponderevo’s fiction of capitalism: the working poor, the ideologically disenfranchised, the cruelties of capitalism, and a general sense of “dingyness.” The malignant negligence of Ponderevo’s illusions is especially apparent when the reader understands that these invisible elements are precisely those upon which the success of Tono-Bungay is entirely dependent. Without these miserable masses seeking to escape the drudgery of their “dingy” lives by buying millions of bottles of bunk, Ponderevo’s capitalist dream, his vision of himself as entrepreneurial hero, would be impossible.

It is both significant and not surprising that, within the context of *Tono Bungay*, it is Ewart, the artist, who makes this connection most explicitly and compellingly, who “writes” into the fiction of *Tono-Bungay* that which has been excluded from Ponderevo’s fiction of capitalism, and even from George’s initial murky observations. “If it had not been for Ewart,” George recalls, “I don’t think I should have had an inkling of the wonderfulness of this development of my fortunes; I should have grown accustomed to it, fallen in with all its delusions as completely as my uncle ... did” (156). Though George’s character does not remain as untainted as he

imagines, Ewart does illuminate for his friend the way in which a commodity such as Tono-Bungay mediates between fantasy and the consumer, and he entreats George to “think of the people to whom your bottles of footle go! ... Think of the little clerks and jaded women and overworked people. People overstrained with wanting to do, people overstrained with wanting to be ... The real trouble in life, Ponderevo, isn’t that we exist – that’s a vulgar error; the real trouble is that we *don’t* really exist and we want to. That’s what this – in the highest sense – muck stands for! The hunger to be – for once – really alive – to the fingertips!” (157). Ewart’s references to a generalized “wanting to be,” a sensation that individuals are somehow separated from a more genuine existence, a more completely satisfying reality, exemplifies the Lacanian idea of lack, which contends that entry into a symbolic order forces one to repress aspects of the self that exceed, do not coincide with, or translate into that symbolic order. Those aspects of the self are always missed by the individual, always sought after in some way, in some attempt at recovery, an attempt to return to wholeness. The commodity, then, acts as – proposes itself to be – what Lacan terms the *object a*, “the ultimate object around which drive turns and upon which fantasy is constructed”; the object that promises to return the “being or jouissance that is excluded by master signifiers” (Bracher 41). Of course, it is crucial to the perpetuation of modern consumer capitalism that the commodity consistently fall short of this promise, that its fantasy is quickly revealed as a fraud, so that the consumer goes back and buys again, and again. It is a testament to the power of the desires and fantasies stimulated by modern consumer commodities that the moment of romance, the opportunity to just contemplate fulfillment of a fantasy during an initial encounter with a commodity, is enough to lure consumers into a purchase – despite their overt knowledge that this, too, will eventually disappoint.

On a couple of occasions, George does press his uncle to admit that Tono-Bungay (and by implication the capitalist system that permits it) is a sham being perpetrated upon the

consuming public; Ponderevo refuses to seriously contend with this allegation, asking instead, “How do we know it mayn’t be the quintessence to them so far as they’re concerned? There’s Faith. You put Faith in ‘em” (135). He grudgingly concedes that the tonic may not be *proven* useful by doctor’s standards, but insists that Tono-Bungay is valuable, nonetheless, as he speaks to a key feature of consumer culture – the public’s desire to believe in advertising. Ponderevo passionately declares, “We mint Faith, George ... that’s what we do. And by Jove we got to keep minting! We been making human confidence ever since I drove the first cork of Tono-Bungay!” (221).

When George persists, and asks if the world would be any worse off if every bottle of Tono-Bungay were emptied down the drain, Ponderevo invokes two of the anchor-terms which shore up his allegiance to the dominant fiction of capitalism: “Trade” and “Romance.” He explains to George that, “mong other things, all our people would be out of work. Unemployed! I grant you Tono-Bungay *may* be not *quite* so good a find for the world as Peruvian bark, but the point is, George – *it makes trade!* And the world lives on trade. Commerce!” George objects, suggesting an alternative model of commerce, in which there are “businesses [that] are straight and quiet,” and “supply a sound article that is really needed,” and “don’t shout advertisements.” Ponderevo is quick to correct him: “No, George. There you’re behind the times. The last of that sort was sold up ‘bout five years ago.” George tries once again to identify a professional role that is outside the practices in which his uncle is involved, and mentions scientific research as an alternative, but Ponderevo again insists on the inescapability of consumer capitalism, rebuffing George with, “And who pays for that?” – “Hang it, George! We’ve got to do these things! There’s no way unless you do ...” (136, 135). Ponderevo also challenges George’s characterization of the production and sale of Tono-Bungay as a “swindle” by substituting the term “romance”: “A romantic exchange of commodities and property. Romance. ‘Magination.

See?” He instructs his nephew, “You must look at these things in a broad light” (135). Both of these terms are central to the form capitalism was taking, on a much larger scale than before, by the end of the nineteenth century. Ponderevo’s insistence on using some terms rather than others to describe this economic order exemplifies Lacan’s claim that oftentimes signifiers have greater purchase on human desire, belief, and behavior than that which is signified. In these terms, Ponderevo is able to celebrate a socioeconomic order that has turned a traditional relationship between means and ends on its head. According to his character, capitalist trade is commendable not because it produces and distributes useful goods, but because it generates more capitalist trade – the commodity is only secondary. This dynamic highlights a second feature of the relationship between signifier and signified: the influence of the signifier has great capacity to change the actual quality of that which is signified. Thus, this inverted relationship dramatically changes the nature of the commodity. A commodity designed to serve trade, to inspire buying for the sake of buying, is necessarily of a different ilk than a commodity which is served *by* trade because of its evident, practical qualities.

And this is where romance and imagination come in. Having gained some perspective since the Tono-Bungay empire crashed, George is able to observe that “it was all a monstrous payment for a courageous fiction, a gratuity in return for the one reality of human life – illusion ... The whole of this modern mercantile investing civilization is indeed such stuff as dreams are made of” (221). In the absence of any obvious use-value, commodities must appeal powerfully to consumer’s fantasies and desires. And because so many human desires are centered in our bodies – our desire for bodily integrity, our desire to look and be perceived a certain way, it makes perfect sense that patent medicines similar to the fictional Tono-Bungay emerged as the

forerunners of a consumer capitalist order driven by commodities promising to fulfill fantasies of good health, strong bodies, beauty and life.²

Edward Ponderevo makes his fortune by convincing others to consume vast quantities of his tonic, and this fortune enables him to become an avid consumer of luxury. His uncritical identification with the ideologies of consumer capitalism is expressed in his consumer behaviors. As George reminisces about his uncle's newfound capacity for spending, he writes, "I seem to remember my uncle taking to shopping quite suddenly." In earlier, less wealthy times, "he bothered very little about his personal surroundings and possessions," but once Ponderevo got started, "he began to shop violently. He began buying pictures, and then, oddly enough, old clocks ... after that he bought furniture"; "towards the climax, he was a furious spender; he shopped with large, unexpected purchases, he shopped like a mind seeking expression, he shopped to astonish and dismay ..." (246). Ponderevo's shopping is depicted in a manner that is stereotypically reserved for females; firstly, his spending is specifically and pointedly termed shopping – spending to spend, and secondly, he is portrayed as wild, out of control, almost maniacal in his desire to consume.

George, Edward, and Susan all recognize themselves as members of the nouveau riche, and they are well aware of the stigma attached to new money: "So it was we recognized our new needs as fresh invaders of the upper levels of the social system and set ourselves quite consciously to the acquisition of Style," writes George, "We became part of what is nowadays quite an important element in the confusion of our world, that multitude of economically

² Edward Mendelson cites convincing evidence that Tono-Bungay was in fact modeled off of the production of Coca-Cola (xxiii), which continues to be one of the most widely advertised and widely consumed commodities across the globe. Žižek uses the example of Coke's claims to be "the real thing" or the unspecific "it" as a "paradigmatic instance" of the way in which commodities are advertised as access to the real, "promising to fill all lack" (Bracher 44).

ascendant people who are learning how to spend money” (245). Having achieved the spending power to satisfy nearly every material desire is not enough; Ponderevo wants desperately to be desired, to be recognized by those with whom he hopes to assimilate. Thus follows an elaborate effort to re-create himself as an object of desire for the old-money upper classes. George narrates one of his uncle’s first attempts at donning a monied style, when he appears in an “Esquimaux costume,” wearing also “a sort of brown rubber proboscis and surmounted by a tableland of motoring cap” – a perfectly ridiculous spectacle, suggestive of the fruitlessness of his endeavor.

Of the nouveau riche crowd in general, George observes that “with an immense astonished zest they begin *shopping*, begin a systematic adaptation to a new life crowded and brilliant with things shopped,” and “in a brief year or so they are connoisseurs. They join in the plunder of the eighteenth century, buy rare old books, fine old pictures, good old furniture. Their first crude conception of dazzling suites of the newly perfect is replaced almost from the outset by a jackdaw dream of accumulating costly, discrepant old things ...” (245,246). Edward Ponderevo is especially sensitive to the notion that wealth alone does not gain one entry into the upper echelons of the social classes, and takes on quite seriously the role of “old-style” autodidact as Bourdieu describes it: one who uses “a deeply orthodox self-teaching as a way of continuing a brutally foreshortened trajectory by their own initiative” (84). He tells his family, “We got to do it better ... we aren’t keeping pace with our own progress ... we’re bumping against new people and they set up to be gentlefolks – etiquette dinners and all the rest of it. They give themselves airs and expect us to be fish-out-of-water. We aren’t going to be.” Ponderevo goes on to propose that “We got to learn all the rotten little game first. F’rinstance, we got to get samples of all the blessed wines there are – and learn ‘em up. ... We got to get used to wearing evening dress ... got to get the hang of etiquette ... horses, even. Practice

everything. Dine every night in evening dress ... learn up golf and tennis and things.”

Additionally, Ponderevo is aware that class signifiers are not just a matter of wine names and sartorial sophistication, but they include a much more subtle range of verbal and physical mannerisms. He includes in the family syllabus for the acquisition of Style “tips about eating; tips about drinking. ... How to hold yourself, and not say ‘jes the few little things they know for certain are wrong” (241).

The climax of Ponderevo’s spending establishes a trend that remains consistent among nearly all the ad-man characters discussed in this study. Beyond the ostentatious clothes, the new cars, paintings, antiques and so forth, the final frontier of Edward Ponderevo’s spending is real estate. George’s character notices this trend as it exists among the nouveau riche in *Tono Bungay*, remarking that, “it is curious how many of these modern financiers of chance and bluff have ended their careers by building,” and he hypothesizes that they are attempting “to bring their luck to the test of realization,” trying to “make their fluid opulence coagulate out as bricks and mortar, bring moonshine into relations with a weekly wages-sheet. Then the whole fabric of confidence and imagination totters – and down they come ...” – and thus it was with Ponderevo, as well. I will add to George’s observations that, in addition to being an effort to translate abstract and imaginary wealth into a permanent, concrete form, home-building ventures such as the one Ponderevo undertakes are expressions of an imperialist undercurrent intrinsic to the capitalist drive. By appropriating a large swath of land, by changing the horizon, lording over crews of workmen and creating a structure that is a monument to one’s wealth, dominating, overshadowing pre-existing structures, building of this nature functions as a domestic parallel to capitalism’s need for continued expansion and illustrates most explicitly the inextricability of the home and the marketplace.

Ponderevo's particular version of the home ambition is named Crest Hill; George tells us that, "at one time he had working in that place ... upwards of three thousand men," "disturbing the economic balance of the whole countryside by their presence." Furthermore, Ponderevo "seemed to think himself, at last, released from any ... limitation. He moved quite a considerable hill, and nearly sixty mature trees were moved with it to open his prospect eastward, ... and to crown it all he commenced a great wall to hold all his dominions together, free from invasion of common men" (272). George describes his uncle as a symbolic figure, standing with the nearly-completed house as a backdrop: "The man of luck and advertisement, the current master of the world," standing "upon the great outward sweep of the terrace before the huge main entrance," Ponderevo was "a little figure, ridiculously disproportionate to that forty-foot arch, with the granite ball behind him – the astronomical ball, brass-coopered, that represented the world ..." (271). Though George includes in his narrative frequent observations of the way in which the feudal order is reproducing many aspects of its social relation in the emerging form of capitalism, at no point does Ponderevo's character recognize the resemblance between his own domineering home-building ambitions and the estates of the landed gentry he resented so fiercely as a struggling chemist in Wimblesbury. It does seem to be the case, however, that Ponderevo's great big house is a symbolic expression of his ego, an indomitable cry for all to hear: "I am now in possession of the phallus!"

Crest Hill is the apex of Ponderevo's spending; it is the symbol of his excesses and his ego; it is Ponderevo's attempt to materialize his abstract wealth. Pressing his fantasies of capitalist grandeur to enter more fully into the physical world causes a break – it is more than the fictions can withstand, and thus is the beginning of the end for Ponderevo's career. Because his character is synonymous with capitalism in *Tono-Bungay*, it seems only appropriate that once Ponderevo can no longer be a capitalist, he can no longer be at all – the end of the Tono-Bungay

enterprise is the end of Ponderevo's life, as well. Though he remained loyal and fully invested in his dominant fiction throughout his life, *Tono-Bungay* reveals the destructive tendency of such a libidinal investment with Ponderevo's death. His death is paralleled by the murder of the Mordet Island native: the native is murdered on his homeland because he does not believe in capitalism; Ponderevo dies in exile because he believes in nothing else.

The end is written into the beginning, as George notices from the very early days of Tono-Bungay a progressive deterioration of his uncle's physical well-being; this series of observations begins the day that Ponderevo invites his nephew to join the business. George notes that "he had shrunken very much in size since the Wimblehurst days," and "the cannon ball he had swallowed was rather more evident and shameless than it had been, his skin less fresh," and his "nose ... much redder," and "he seemed much laxer in his muscles and not quite as alertly quick in his movements" (134). Such signs of deterioration become increasingly pronounced as Ponderevo continues to rise through the ranks of capitalist success.

Ponderevo's physical decline is an example both of another trend exhibited by fictional ad men and of a common criticism leveled at consumer capitalism by its detractors. Beginning in the nineteenth century, critics of consumer culture often couched their complaints in terms of illness, favoring ailments of the stomach and digestive system for their obvious metaphorical relevance (Stearns 63); fat, over-fed bellies were also familiar capitalist caricatures. Indeed, George notices that "the little man plumped up very considerably during the creation of the Tono-Bungay property, but with the increasing excitements that followed that first flotation came dyspepsia and a certain flabbiness and falling away ..." (209). The "cannon ball" to which George refers grows bigger and bigger as Ponderevo's scope as both a capitalist and a spender increases, and by the time his empire has reached its breaking point, so has Ponderevo's body – he is looking "yellow" and complaining wearily that his "stomach isn't what it was." Readers

may suspect, as does George, that his character is both literally and figuratively getting a taste of his own medicine as he takes a dose of one of the many pharmaceuticals he has gathered around him; George notices “an elusively familiar odor” as Ponderevo swallows the syrup (342).

As John Allett notes, one of the structuring metaphors of *Tono-Bungay* is a comparison of newly emerging forms of capitalism to potentially fatal diseases such as tuberculosis and cancer. Through the process of mapping a set of terms associated with a particular subject onto a completely different subject, metaphor is one of the ways in which language is used to shape dominant fictions. Wells’s comparison of capitalism to disease is not unique, but his insistence on extending the metaphor throughout the length of the novel invites readers to begin thinking about capitalism seriously in these terms.

Allett suggests that tuberculosis is the prevailing comparison in the novel – both because of Wells’s personal experience with the disease and its coincidence with the initials of Ponderevo’s product (368), but for my purposes, it is the dialectic between the two diseases that is most significant. While cancer is characterized by uncontrolled growth, tuberculosis is a wasting disease; the plot of *Tono-Bungay* seeks to demonstrate that the uncontrolled growth of consumer capitalism produces destruction and waste – waste of labor, waste of resources, and a disintegrating effect on human character, as well. George describes the effects of the socioeconomic developments he witnesses in London as an “unorganized, abundant substance of some tumorous growth process,” and he wonders, “will those masses ever become structural, will they indeed shape into anything new whatever, or is that cancerous image their true ... diagnosis?” (102). As a representative of the system Wells’s novel criticizes, Ponderevo suffers symptoms of both diseases. A vision of the uncontrolled growth associated with cancer appears as Ponderevo grows fatter and fatter as his wealth increases; the wasting associated with tuberculosis takes place as Ponderevo’s stomach fails him and he finds that, despite his appetites,

he can no longer eat as he used to. Similarly, the construction of Crest Hill is massive and intrusive, yet the entire project is eventually abandoned, unfinished, unused – a complete waste.

The idea of capitalism as disease is most dramatically deployed in the Mordet Island episode of *Tono-Bungay*. George's character follows the symbolic trajectory of diseases that spread far and wide, and waste what they touch when he embarks upon a journey to an African island where he intends to pillage a forbidden territory of a natural resource he and his uncle believe to be valuable. The material is called "quap," and its resonance with "crap" is fitting. A radioactive substance, this potentially lucrative commodity is surrounded by a ring of death on the island: "a desolation of mud and bleached refuse and dead trees, free from crocodiles or water birds or sight or sound of any living thing" (325). Consumer capitalism is here again linked symbolically and explicitly to disease. As his behavior towards his crew becomes increasingly cruel, George suggests that "the malaria of the quap was already in my blood" (328). Nearly oblivious to his own implication in the matter, George theorizes that "there is something ... *cancerous* ... about the whole of quap, something that creeps and lives as a disease lives by destroying." He goes on, "To my mind radioactivity is a real disease of matter ... it is a contagious disease. It spreads. You bring those debased and crumbling atoms near others and those too presently catch the trick of swinging themselves out of coherent existence. It is in matter exactly what the decay of our old culture is in society, a loss of traditions and distinctions and assured reactions" (329). George's comment here suggests that for him, the troublesome aspect of the socioeconomic transition taking place in *Tono-Bungay* is not so much that the order implemented by capitalism does not appear to offer more freedom than the order maintained by the landed gentry, but rather it is the subjective displacement, the lack of clearly established modes of being that he finds most difficult. Immersed in the quap, in his capitalist fantasies gone awry, George now sees the emerging form of capitalism as similar to the unpredictable and

uncontrollable growth of cancer – it is not governed by consistent master signifiers which he can identify and with which he can consistently identify. Consumer capitalism no longer makes sense to him as it does to his uncle; Ponderevo is invigorated by it, while George feels afflicted.

Indeed, it is this contrast in perspective that structures a large part of the critique of capitalism *Tono-Bungay* puts forth. Edward Ponderevo's intemperance, exuberance, and unqualified devotion to the capitalist order amount to what is essentially a case-study for his nephew, whose character narrates the rise and fall of Tono-Bungay from his own perspective – which he is at pains from the very beginning to distinguish from that of his uncle. George's first words to his readers are as follows: "Most people in this world seem to live 'in character'; they have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the three are congruous one with another and true to the rules of their type"; George, on the other hand, has led "another kind of life," one that has enabled him to see "life at very different levels," and thus to not be limited by one role, but have the benefit of knowing much about all roles and the nature of roles in general. So it is from this superior position of knowledge that George tells his readers, "I've got ... to a time of life when things begin to take shapes that have an air of reality" (9). In the morass of illusion that is the world of advertising, patent medicines, and high finance, George claims to have access to reality; readers can trust him to tell what *really* happened.

As narrator not just of Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, but also of his own novel, George is, ironically, very self-conscious about his specific role. In an effort to be accepted in this role by the reader, his character makes another rhetorical move intended to distance himself from contrivance and align himself with objectivity and reality: he declares himself a non-artist. He humbly confesses that this is his first novel and his only novel, for he is by craft and by temperament, a scientist. In the guise of an apologia for a lack of novelistic artistry, George constructs his reliability as narrator by "confessing" that his untutored idea of a novel is

“comprehensive rather than austere,” and promises not an artfully woven story, but a leaping panorama of strangers, friends, lovers, nobility, romance, science, medicine, machines, and whatever else might occur to him along the way. And by so doing, George promises to “render ... nothing more than Life” (12). Paradoxically, George’s claims as narrator suggest that his particular use of language will provide access to the real – a dimension of experience that is both created by and isolated from linguistic apprehension.

George’s initial claims of narrative objectivity constitute an important clue to the drives that motivate his character throughout *Tono-Bungay*: he is first and foremost concerned with certainty and know-ability, with discovering a truth behind every appearance. To this end, despite the fact his character does not engage with the ostensible topic of the novel – Tono-Bungay – until he is a young adult, his narration “renders Life” from very near its beginning. In efforts to examine processes of identity-formation and socialization, psychoanalytic methods attach particular importance to early experiences and attachments; *Tono-Bungay*, as well as other of the “ad-man” novels discussed in subsequent chapters, facilitates this inquiry by its generic affinity with the *bildungsroman*, describing the narrator’s past and upbringing in great detail and establishing its relevance to the protagonist’s adult life. Kaja Silverman’s work highlights the usefulness of a thorough character history when she suggests that an individual’s initial entry into the symbolic order as a gendered subject is crucial to the ways in which that same subject will negotiate his or her relation to the dominant fictions of a particular economic order. She writes that the “positive Oedipus complex [is] the primary vehicle” by which one is inserted into “the ideological reality through which we ‘ideally’ live both the symbolic order and the mode of production as the ‘dominant fiction’” (2). In George’s case, and regardless of his claims to the

contrary, this chronologically comprehensive narration is his attempt to assemble the raw material of his experiences into a causal sequence culminating in a coherent life story.³

George's narration of his early years introduces another major trend that is evident when the ad-man novels are assessed as a group: a past narrated as an idyllic time that is geographically, chronologically, and ideologically outside the reaches of modern capitalism, during which relations with society, nature, and self were most felicitous. In each of the novels discussed in this study, this idealized vision of the past is consistently accompanied by a second feature of feeling, which is that the ways and means of the past, though remembered fondly, are not suited for contemporary circumstances, and are thus beyond recovery. For these characters, there is no going back – modern capitalism is ubiquitous and must be taken head-on. It is perhaps the impossibility of a return that prompts these characters' and their authors' narratives to linger in the past, and gives them the freedom to idealize that past.

Kaja Silverman notes the importance of place in psychological formation, claiming that “the mnemonic traces of his childhood command belief because they constitute the narrator's psychic reality; they provide the ‘deepest level’ of his ‘mental soil,’ the ‘firm ground’ on which he ‘still stands’” (19). At first glance, George Ponderevo's past doesn't seem so ideal, but the importance of his physical surroundings to his recollection of his past is evident in the extensive description he lavishes upon the house and grounds where he spend his boyhood. He grew up the son of a servant belonging to a large country estate, Bladesover House: “The park is the second-largest in Kent”; “the house was built in the eighteenth century ... in the style of a French Chateau.” The area is “finely wooded with well-placed beeches, many elms and some sweet

³ If the Bladesover portion of the narrative seems disproportionately large compared to other sections of the novel, it is perhaps because a similar form loomed large in Wells's imagination, as well. Wells was raised, the son of a servant, in Uppark – a country house upon which the fictional Bladesover was closely modeled. As John Hammond points out, “it would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of Uppark on Wells's imagination, indeed it would not be too much to say that it was the greatest single influence on his early life” (25).

chestnuts, abounding in little valleys and hollows of bracken, with springs and a stream and three fine ponds and multitudes of fallow deer” (13). George looks back upon his youth at Bladesover and credits it with providing him “elements of a liberal education”: “there was mystery, there was matter for the imagination. It was still a park of deer. I ... heard the belling of stags, came upon young fawns among the bracken, found bones, skulls, and antlers in lonely places. There were corners that gave a gleam of meaning to the word forest, glimpses of unstudied natural splendour” (26). In addition to establishing a history of idyllic living with which to contrast a future vexed by the dirt and chaos of capitalism, this idealized memory of nature, both tamed by the protective presence of the Bladesover House and made provocative by the luxury of expansiveness and the untrammelled corners therein, foreshadows the importance of the unknown for George. His desire to penetrate and immerse himself in unknown places, people, and ideas, matched only by his concomitant desire to bring the unknown to light, to know it for certain, to discover and take as his own its Truth – emerges in his descriptions of his Bladesover youth and only increases in prevalence as he grows older.

George’s pursuit of the unknown is accompanied by, even at a young age, a form of proto-imperialism and a tendency toward violence – two traits that will figure heavily into his engagement with capitalism as an adult. George revels in recollections of the “free, imaginative afternoons” of boyhood camaraderie when “all streams came from the then undiscovered sources of the Nile ... all thickets were Indian jungles.” One of these afternoons led to their “young minds” being “infected to the pitch of buying pistols, by the legend of the Wild West.” A friend “blew a molehill at twenty paces into a dust cloud, burnt his fingers and scorched his face.” Though once the weapon revealed “this strange disposition to flame upon the shooter,” the young circle of friends abandon it (30), later events indicate that this childhood lesson does not accompany George into adulthood.

Other youthful episodes of penetrating and pillaging took place as George educated himself in the Bladesover library. Sneaking into the library that was forbidden both by his mother – a houseservant, and the Bladesover gentry, George “became familiar with much of Hogarth in a big portfolio, with ... a great book of engravings from the stanzas of Raphael in the Vatican – and with most of the capitals of Europe ... by means of several iron-moulded books of views.” He adds that there was also “a broad eighteenth-century atlas with huge wandering maps that instructed me mightily ... there were *Terrae Incognitae* in every continent then ... and many a voyage I made with a blunted pin around that large, incorrect and dignified world” (26).

George is not banned from these tools and tales of imperialism because of the subject matter; it is rather a matter of class – the “master signifiers” of active imperialism are meant for the ruling classes who will, as the feudal system becomes untenable, continue to maintain their consolidated power by imperialist pursuits abroad. George’s invasion of the imperialist discourse threatens those class distinctions. This sentiment is enforced from both above and below – his mother is as committed to class divisions as are the gentry of Bladesover. In addition to taking upon herself the task of monitoring ranks and titles among both the servants and the Bladesover gentry, and ensuring that all are given or denied their proportionate levels of respect, she warns her own son, “You must be a good boy, George ... You mustn’t set yourself up against those who are above you and better than you ... or envy them” (58).

Despite his mother’s efforts to keep him in the servants’ quarters, George was an apt student of the Bladesover collection, and was able to put the theory of imperialism into practice at a young age. He prides himself on having initiated a game of invasion, taming, and conquering that was popular among his boyhood friends: “We found a wood where ‘Trespassing’ was forbidden, and did the ‘Retreat of the Ten Thousand’ through it from end to end, cutting our way bravely through a host of nettle beds that barred our path ...” (31). George

makes the connection between his Bladesover education and his formulation of the game explicit, claiming that he “got it out of the Bladesover saloon,” which is suggestive of a claim that George repeats throughout his narrative: the way of living and the power structure represented by the elite of Bladesover is irrecoverable, but it has not disappeared altogether; rather it is being reproduced in new and more modern forms.

George’s wish to pursue the unknown, unearth it, and make it his own is indeed consistent with the imperialist fervor of Edwardian England; however, I will also suggest that the national discourse of imperialism provides George’s character opportunities to act out personal desires borne of the family dynamic to which he was subject as a young boy. George recalls his mother as “my mother who did not love me because I grew liker my father every day – and who knew with inflexible decision her place and the place of everyone in the world – except the place that concealed my father.” As he recounts his youth, George reflects that the figure of his disdainful mother is “dominating all these memories,” and subsequent revelations suggest that his father’s absolute absence is an equally powerful presence in his psyche (19). George knows nothing of his father; his mother refused to tell him anything, and had destroyed all evidence of her husband’s identity and existence. A clue to the connection between George’s attraction to imperialist thought and action and his unarticulated desire to recover his father is found in his recollection that, “the word ‘colonies’ always upset her [his mother]. She was afraid, I think, that if she turned her mind in that direction, my errant father might suddenly and shockingly be discovered, no doubt conspicuously bigamic and altogether offensive and revolutionary. She did not want to rediscover my father at all” (24). George’s ego ideal is firmly entrenched in this early circumstance. His father is a mystery, the knowledge of which was fiercely withheld by his mother; as an adult, George imagines himself as one who embraces the unknown, who uncovers mystery, who can seek, find, and identify ultimate and objective truths.

Though this dimension of George's ego is an expression of resentment toward his mother, his attachment to his mother and her evasiveness is also apparent in his particular mode of desire for other women. George is intensely attracted to women who seem mysterious, who seem to contain some unknowable element. Once his lovers reveal themselves to be perfectly explicable, transparent in their ways and modes of desire, he can no longer maintain his own desire, his own investment in the fantasy of the other. This fetishistic cycle of desire, mystery, revelation, and disenchantment is in accord with the governing ideology of consumer capitalism depicted by *Tono-Bungay*, but it is also what makes productive desire impossible for George. The following will suggest that the ideologies of modern consumer capitalism prove themselves to be insufficient for George, his uncle Ponderevo, and Ewart as they attempt to formulate and live desire in relationships mediated by the dominant fictions of such a social order. Though even the character most closely aligned with art cannot commit to it (and neither can the novel), and George's love of science brings with it serious forebodings of violence, *Tono-Bungay*, perhaps despite itself, suggests that the ideologies of both art and science are better suited to foster and maintain desire than the fictions of consumer capitalism.

It is George's uncle Ponderevo who introduces him to the capitalist dream, and alerts George to the possibility of an alternative to the dominant fiction perpetuated by Bladesover and the ruling aristocracy in general. George notes the shifting of the "firm grounds" of his past as a momentous event: "My uncle was the first real breach I found in the great front of Bladesover the world had presented me ... my uncle had no respect for Bladesover ... none whatever. He did not believe in them. He was blind even to what they were. He propounded strange phrases ... he exfoliated and wagged about novel and incredible ideas" (68). Just as Ponderevo's desire to become an enterprising capitalist was born of the laws forbidding it – laws maintained by

Bladesover and the landed gentry of England, George also enters into similar forms of desire built upon a series of similar prohibitions. George's aforementioned fascination with the knowledge contained in the Bladesover library forms one example; furthermore, recall that George's mother (a representative of the Bladesover law with particular sway, as his mother) also admonished him against class ambition, warning him that "you mustn't set yourself up against those who are above you and better than you" (62). His sexual desires were likewise founded: he complains that "all I knew of law or convention in the matter had the form of threatenings and prohibitions" (163). Separating from his mother, the embodiment of the law-of-the-father, ended many certainties for George, but created opportunities, as well. Becoming acquainted with his uncle is the first in a series of epiphanies that lead George to discover new forms of desire.

Previous to this encounter, George had been entirely imbued in the ideology of Bladesover; he testifies that "when I was a little boy I took the place with the entirest faith as a complete authentic microcosm. I believed that the Bladesover system was a little working model ... of the whole world" (13). He explains that his deep impression was prompted by "the unavoidable suggestion of that wide park and that fair large house, dominating church, village, and the countryside ... that they represented the thing that mattered supremely in the world, and that all other things had significance only in relation to them. They represented the Gentry, the Quality, by and through and for whom the rest of the world, the farming folk and the laboring folk, the tradespeople ... and the upper servants and the lower servants ... breathed and lived and were permitted." Upon retrospect, George marvels that "the Quality did it so quietly and thoroughly, the great house mingled so solidly and effectually with earth and sky" (14). However nefarious, this certainty, this complete identification with a dominant fiction that has effectively structured social relations at every level, is part of what constitutes George's nostalgia

for the past. For whatever injustices he was subject to as a servant's son living on the Bladesover estate, his subjective position was clear, his social trajectory unambiguous, and furthermore, the obfuscation of competing ideologies enabled an absence of resentment or sense of suffering on George's part. These are the days he remembers most fondly when, as a young adult, he is plunged into an urban setting harboring a number of newly-formed, and oftentimes ill-formed ideologies, all in competition with and in contradiction to one another. The subjective confusion created by this chaos of ideology, George's struggle to find his "calling" amidst urban modernity where the dominant fiction is undergoing shifts, changes, and transformations, is both liberating and terrifying, and he frequently looks back on his Bladesover childhood as an anchor to a time and place where existence was coherent and predictable.

As mentioned above, one of the features of the past as it is depicted in ad-man novels is its irrecoverability. George's adult character cannot return to the past he remembers so fondly not only because the landed gentry's grasp of social power is slowly waning, but because, in a very abrupt manner, George was kicked out. His character is expelled from the innocence of his Bladesover childhood both literally and symbolically when, just as he is on the cusp of adulthood, he transgresses the class boundaries which define the Bladesover "system." And unlike his "book-borrowing raids," George is caught in this trespass, and is punished severely. It is his first romantic pursuit, at the age of fourteen, which ends in the "great crisis of [his] boyhood" (35). He was enchanted with Beatrice, the niece of a neighbor of "Quality," who visited Bladesover occasionally with her nurse. George claims, "I am certain I knew quite a lot about love at fourteen, and that I was quite as much in love with Beatrice then as any impassioned adult could be, and that Beatrice was, in her way, in love with me" (36). Beatrice, however, makes it clear that her love is contingent upon class considerations to which her romantic affections are wholly subservient: "You'll never be a servant – ever!" she commands.

George knows that even her proposal that he become a military officer is beyond the scope of his class position, but, “as became a male of spirit,” he “took it upon myself to brag and lie my way out of this trouble” (37).

Beatrice’s half-brother, Archie, put an end to George’s charade and fantasy of class transgression. The three were playing pretend: George “was to be a Spanish nobleman,” Beatrice was to be his wife, and Archie “was to be a tribe of Indians trying to carry her off” (39). Archie interrupts this game to lay down the law of Bladesover: he tells George, “You can’t be a gentleman, because you aren’t. And you can’t play Beatrice is your wife. It’s – impertinent.” Archie adds that, in fact, “We don’t want you to play with us at all.” The reason Archie gives is a class-marker he finds distasteful: he complains that George “drops his aitches like anything” (39). Having been told that his language is insufficient, George resorts to his physical abilities and initiates a fistfight. The altercation ends in an easy victory over Archie, but ultimately Archie’s law is enforced – George is exiled from Bladesover, not the least because Beatrice also turned out to be loyal to her class above all else: “She and her half-brother lied in perfect concord, and I was presented as a wanton assailant of my social betters” (42). George learned swiftly and harshly the consequences of challenging the dominant fiction governing the Bladesover world, and was sent to find his place in another.

It is after his exile from Bladesover that George ends up in the care of his Uncle Ponderevo in the small village of Wimblehurst. As if to punish him for his brother’s sins, George’s mother insists that Ponderevo take on the responsibility of housing and educating young George. Ponderevo good-naturedly agrees to have George stay, apprentice in his chemist’s shop, and study Latin, chemistry, and science in general. George arrives just as his uncle’s impatience with the small village and its old-fashioned ways is reaching a boiling point. Ponderevo’s dissatisfaction with the village status quo and frequent articulations of his dreams

are key to the development of George's own desire to seek out something beyond the horizons of what he had known thus far. George recalls: "I remember him now as talking, always talking, in those days. Predominantly and constantly he talked of getting on, of enterprises, of inventions and great fortunes, of Rothschilds, silver kings, Vanderbilts, Goulds, flotations, realizations and the marvelous ways of Chance with men" (75). At this formative juncture in George's life, having been expelled from the past he has known and forced to confront an uncertain future, the master signifiers being introduced by the father figure in his life, the new Law, are those of capitalism, speculation, and high finance.

Ponderevo's enthusiasm for the city – London, in particular – is inextricable from his fantasies of capitalist adventure. The preference Ponderevo expresses for city life, which he passes on to George, is closely associated with the trend of idealizing an impossible past discussed above. In *Tono-Bungay*, and in the ad-man novels that follow, the ways in which past and present are envisioned are directly linked to a conception of the geographical locations of capitalism and advertising. Ponderevo's character clearly believes that development of consumer capitalism in general and advertising in particular constitute the direction the present is taking toward the future, and, in *Tono-Bungay*, this can only happen in the city. So it is London that Ponderevo heralds as the promised land of up-and-coming capitalists. Before either of them has gone, Ponderevo tells George, "It's a great place. Immense. The richest town in the world, the biggest port, the greatest manufacturing town, the Imperial city – the center of civilization, the heart of the world!" (90). Ponderevo's unqualified allegiance (of which both George and the novel are highly critical) to the emerging capitalist order renders his character more future-oriented – he never looks back in time, and the reader is not privy to any of Ponderevo's history previous to the action of the novel. George, on the other hand, is only newly acquainted with capitalist fantasies, and is uncertain of his relationship to the fictions constituting the capitalist

order; thus his character continues to reference the past as a baseline against which to compare future developments. Silverman's work identifies such orientations toward time as predictable symptoms of a given socioeconomic situation's interface with desire: "the imaginary relation to the economic real which is promoted by a given ideology functions to position the subject in a libidinal relation either to a past, present or future mode of production" (22).

Despite George's conflicted attachment to his Bladesover past, Ponderevo's enthusiasm for the future of capitalism is contagious; George reflects that, "among my educational influences my uncle ... played a leading part, and ... gave my discontent with Wimblehurst, my desire to get away from that clean and picturesque emptiness, a form and expression that helped to emphasize it" – Ponderevo has prompted George to discover an object of his desire: "Presently, I shall get to London," George declares (75). George expresses more generalized sentiments that urban life is more conducive to modern sensibilities – and more civilized, in fact – than the rural life. He complains that, "In the English countryside there are no books at all, no songs, no drama, no valiant sin," and therefore, "I'm no believer in the English countryside under the Bladesover system as a breeding-ground for honourable men. One hears a frightful lot of nonsense about the Rural Exodus and the degeneration wrought by town life upon our population. To my mind," he asserts, "the English townsman even in the slums is infinitely better spiritually, more courageous, more imaginative, and cleaner, than his agricultural cousin" (72). George's conviction as to the superiority of urban culture increases in proportion to the capitalist successes he eventually enjoys with his uncle in London; this conviction becomes especially evident when, as Tono-Bungay becomes profitable, George engages imperialist language and action to ensure continued profitability of the enterprise. By this time, George, like his uncle, is fully entrenched in the notion of London as the center of culture and civilization.

George's eventual entry into London constitutes another interruption in what he had again come to believe was a solid and coherent subjective relation to society. Due to what he cites as a lack of serious alternatives, the process of interpellation was smooth and effective for George in Wimblehurst – a village still governed by a Bladesover-type estate. "In Wimblehurst I felt I stood for Science," George explains, "nobody there seemed to have so much as I and to have so fully and completely ... One was marked as 'clever,' one played up to the part, and one's little accomplishment stood out finely in one's private reckoning against the sunlit small ignorance of that agreeable place" (105). Once he is in London, there is no longer such an obvious identity in which George can recognize himself, largely because no one in London knows or recognizes him, either. Surrounded by thousands, George is no longer a part of a society: "In London I walked ignorant in an immensity," he observes, "I became invisible" (105). Bracher maintains that, "we seek repeated dominance of the signifiers that represent us" (26), and this is what is missing for George in London. But it is not just that Londoners do not recognize George as a Man of Science; George does not recognize himself. Once he is exposed to the myriad of "types" that constitute an urban center, he is no longer sure of the one he has chosen for himself: "Wimblehurst to a youngster in my position offered no temptations worth counting, no interests to conflict with study, no vices – such vices as it offered were coarsely stripped of any imaginative glamour"; "Directly I came into the London atmosphere, tasting freedom, tasting irresponsibility and the pull of new forces altogether, my discipline fell from me like a garment" (105). "Discipline" may be read here as both the discipline of Science to which he was devoted and the ways that George has disciplined himself in order to maintain an identity that fit into the social structure in which he was living.

Feeling overwhelmed by the multitudes of London, the "complex laws, intricate social necessities, disturbing insatiable suggestions," George confronts the problem of interpellation; he

understands that, among this chaos, he must find an identity for himself through which he can simultaneously live out his desires and be recognized by society: “Such was the world into which I had come, into which I had in some way to thrust myself and fit my problems, my temptations, my efforts, my patriotic instinct, all my moral instincts, my physical appetites, my dreams and my vanity” (103). As John Allett points out, George’s character “is not, as may first appear, a born rebel protesting the dead traditions of Bladesover Society; rather he is a conformist who, for reasons beyond his control” – namely the shifting socioeconomic structures in England – “is prevented from conforming, and consequently loses his bearings” (471). At first he clings to his Wimblehurst identity as a student of science: “I settled down and went to and fro to my lectures and laboratory; in the beginning I worked hard,” but George soon realizes “just how small and weak I could still upon occasion feel. In this world, I felt, an Honours Medal in Electricity and Magnetism counted for nothing at all” (86). The identifications that provided George an entry into subjectivity are no longer recognized or validated in the London environment, so he must engage in a search for a new “calling,” a new way to fit in: “the curiosity ... presently possessed me to know more of this huge urban province ... the desire to find something beyond mechanism that I could serve, some use other than learning” – “With this was a growing sense of loneliness, a desire for adventure and intercourse” (106).

In London, as George seeks out “something he could serve” in a place of countless alternatives, and countless others, his boyhood inclination to imperialist thought re-emerges, a subtle undercurrent of his consistent drive to “unmask” and methodically make the unknown his own by dismantling its mysteries. George begins his search where he left off in Bladesover, with maps: “I found myself in the evenings poring over a map of London I had bought, instead of copying lecture notes – and on Sundays I made explorations, taking omnibus rides east and west and north and south, and so enlarging and broadening the sense of great swarming hinterlands of

humanity with whom I had no dealings, of whom I knew nothing ...” (106). Secure in his omnibus, armed with his map, George is embarking upon the project of making London his, an object of his comprehensive knowledge, and his telling use of the term “swarming” (and later, “teemed”) suggests that he sees it precisely in these racialized terms of power. This expanse of otherness, this wide field upon which George can employ his scientific method, incites desire of which he has not been conscious before: “The whole illimitable place teemed with suggestions of indefinite and sometimes outrageous possibility, of hidden but magnificent meanings ... It wasn’t simply that I received a vast impression of space and multitude and opportunity; intimate things also were suddenly dragged from neglected, veiled, and darkened corners into an acute vividness of perception” (106). The presence of multitudes of unknowns coupled with George’s assumption of a position of power titillates his longings – George is able to entertain fantasies of sex, atheism, and socialism as he sees “Extraordinarily, life unveiled.”

London prompts George’s great awakening not only to multiple existential possibilities, but to the possibilities of challenging existing dominant fictions. In London he finds that “one bought pamphlets full of strange and daring ideas transcending one’s boldest; in the parks one heard men discussing the very existence of God, denying the rights of property, debating a hundred things that one dared not think about in Wimblehurst.” It is in the urban context of unknown multitudes, far beyond the narrow certainties of Bladesover and Wimblehurst, where desire can finally emerge for George. Unlike either Bladesover or Wimblehurst, London is a place where desire can be articulated, recognized, and acted upon in any number of ways.

While *Tono-Bungay*’s critique of the social order takes form primarily as a comparison between two different modes of subjective identification with capitalism, the novel offers additional critique by means of a juxtaposition of art and capitalism that positions art as an

alternative vehicle for human desire. Though by the end, George's narration has dropped the character who is the voice of artistic pursuit, the novel taken as a whole points toward the idea that, despite being marginalized by new forms of commerce, art – in some form more ideal than that which is depicted – is more capable of channeling human desire in productive and livable ways than the burgeoning system of consumer capitalism.⁴

One might assume that just as the Bladesover system was not conducive to Edward Ponderevo's capitalist dreams, it was equally insufficient as a vehicle for Ewart's artistic ambitions, and this is why George finds his boyhood friend also in London. As George's narrative reaches the apex of his exhilarating and somewhat overwhelming orientation to London, Ewart appears as a beacon in the chaos: "Then on the remote hill of this boundless city-world," George remembers, "I found Ewart" (108). Ewart's symbolic location "on a remote hill" is indicative of his ability to offer George some perspective on the London experience and the ideologies of consumer capitalism that inform that experience. When George visits his old friend, the series of conversations that follows serves as another benchmark in George's understanding of his own identity quest. Ewart presents the problem of desire explicitly: he ruminates to George, "I'm beginning to find life a most extraordinary queer set-out; the things that pull one, the things that don't. The wants – this business of sex ... no end to it, no way out of it, no sense in it. And why does Nature make a man so infernally ready for drinks? There's no sense in that anyhow ... And why has she given me a most violent desire toward sculpture and an equally violent desire to leave off work directly I begin it eh? ... these things puzzle me, Ponderevo. They dishearten me. They keep me in bed ... I don't see my game, nor why I was

⁴ This reading would probably be contested by Wells himself, who was well-known to believe that science, rather than art, was the pursuit most likely to create and preserve a livable human future. Despite his stated beliefs, the narrative that Wells delivers in *Tono-Bungay* does not successfully illustrate the potential of science as a life-saving force; rather, in the final image of the high-tech destroyer, readers leave *Tono-Bungay* with the sense that technology may be the means of a violent Armageddon, in which the world is punished for its capitalist decadence.

invited.” Ewart is essentially echoing Mark Bracher’s fundamental point that desire frequently, if not usually, defies logical explanation.

Ewart goes on to marvel at those for whom interpellation has (apparently) been simple, obvious, and consistent with their desire, remarking that, “You find chaps keeping grocers’ shops – why the *devil* Ponderevo, do they keep grocers’ shops? They all do it very carefully, very steadily, very meanly. You find people running about and doing the most remarkable things – being policemen, for example, and burglars. They go about these businesses quite gravely and earnestly. I – somehow – can’t go about mine. Is there any sense in it at all – anywhere?” He continues, “We’re young – yes. But one must inquire. The grocer’s a grocer because, I suppose, he sees he comes in there. Feels on the whole it amounts to a call ... but the bother is I don’t see where I come in at all. Do you?” (111). Though delivered as rather offhand existential angst, perhaps a little stereotypical of the artist type, Ewart’s frustration and his line of questioning contribute a great deal to questions that are central to *Tono-Bungay*. First, he notes the importance of the inquiry in the first place – the importance of analyzing one’s desires and one’s relation to interpellative “calls” generated by a given dominant fiction. Furthermore, the professions Ewart notes – grocer, police, and burglar – though obviously not equally sanctioned by mainstream society – are all centrally involved in the sale, unequal distribution, and protection of private property that are key features of a capitalist order, and these are the sorts of callings in particular with which Ewart cannot identify himself.

George concedes to Ewart’s observations when he adds that he, too, “doesn’t see where I come in”; he only knows vaguely that, “I want to do some good in the world – something ... effectual ... I have a sort of idea of my scientific work – I don’t know.” However, Ewart is quick to point out the inadequacy of such a sentiment: “Yes, and I’ve got a sort of idea about my sculpture, – but *how* it is to come in and *why* – I’ve no idea at all” (111). Ewart, it seems, has

been thinking about these issues for some time, and, for George, their talk solidifies what he had been on the brink of understanding ever since he reached London. “It was a most memorable talk,” George recalls, “because it opened out quite new horizons of thought.” Ewart had “made me feel clearly ... the absence of definite objects, of any concerted purpose in the lives that were going on all around us. He made me feel, too, how ready I was to take up commonplace assumptions.” George describes one of the most important of these assumptions that Ewart’s insights lead him to dismantle: “Just as I had always imagined that somewhere in social arrangements there was certainly a headmaster who would intervene if one went too far, so I had always had a sort of complicit belief that in our England there was somewhere people who understood what we were all, as a nation, about” (112). George’s character is well on his way to understanding that one’s identification within a social class is not immanent, is not written in somewhere, waiting to be found, but rather is a relationship, a dialectic between tradition and individuals, in which power is not evenly distributed, but in which the individual is by no means powerless to act in the construction of his own subjectivity, and perchance alter the traditions to which he is subject, as well.

However, for the reader of *Tono-Bungay*, this conversation also highlights the incommensurability of art and modern capitalism as it is depicted in the novel. In contrast to Edward Ponderevo’s position as an aspiring capitalist, from Ewart’s perspective as an aspiring artist, the dominant fiction of capitalism is already firmly entrenched, welcoming grocers, policemen, and burglars – but not artists. Even though London may grant him the intellectual freedom he requires to pursue his projects, the reigning capitalist order does not afford him the financial freedom he requires to support himself and his art. Ewart explains, “I give myself three days a week as an art student, and the rest of the time – I’ve a sort of trade that keeps me ... I’ve been pottering round doing odd jobs for stonemasons, and trying to get sculpture” (109). Ewart

shows George a kitschy sculpture of an upward-pointing hand: “that’s what I do for a living – when I’m not thinking, or drinking, or prowling, or making love, or pretending I’m trying to be a sculptor without either the money or the morals for a model ... I do these hearts afire and those pensive angel guardians with the palm of peace. Damned well I do ‘em and damned cheap! I’m a sweated victim, Ponderevo ...” (112). Even though Ewart, in his capacity as an artist, is not successfully recruited by the capitalist order, it is the only system in working order, so to speak – so Ewart must participate in some small way, just in order to live. This participation, however, impinges on Ewart’s ability to achieve any real success as an artist. Not only does the necessity of doing stonemason work limit the amount of time he can devote to his art, but that he must produce it for profit in a capitalist marketplace degrades the quality of the art he does create.

It is possible to read Ewart’s character as a poseur, a lazy cad who feigns the life of an artist because he hasn’t sufficient ambition or ability to take up a “regular” trade. This may be a valid reading, but Ewart’s lack of success as either an artist or an employee of capitalism is significant to a degree that exceeds his individual character traits. Because within the confines of *Tono-Bungay* there is not a space carved out for the autonomous artist in the dominant fiction (except perhaps as a token, and thereby ineffectual, objector), and because art, as it is represented by Ewart, has not successfully created an alternative of its own, we find that Ewart’s character, and the realm of art for which he stands, defines itself exclusively in negative terms. Ewart’s character is adamant about what art (and the artist) is *not*, what it rejects, and under what conditions it cannot be created, but he is unable to define art in positive terms –what it *is* rather than isn’t, and under what circumstances it *is* possible.

The works that Ewart does bring to fruition within the narrative scope of *Tono-Bungay* reiterate this negative definition. His best-selling kitschy “hearts afire” and “guardian angels” are self-consciously not-art; as such, they are a parody of art in a capitalist system, drawing the

reader's attention to what it is not, and what it cannot be. Similarly, when Edward Ponderevo commissions Ewart to create works of art for the Tono-Bungay enterprise, the result is little more than slapstick caricature – such work is not recognized as “real” art within the cosmos of *Tono-Bungay*. In the first instance, Ewart is asked to do a poster advertising the Tono-Bungay tonic. In response, Ewart produces what George describes as “a picture of two Beavers with a subtle likeness ... to myself and my uncle – the likeness to my uncle certainly wasn't half bad – and they were bottling rows and rows of Tono-Bungay, with the legend ‘Modern Commerce.’” This, George laments, “wouldn't have sold a case,” and neither would the supplemental poster Ewart threw in the deal: “a shocking study of my uncle, excessively and needlessly nude ... engaged in feats of strength of a Gargantuan type before an audience of deboshed and shattered ladies. The legend ‘Health, Beauty, Strength’ below gave a needed point to his parody” (161). Ewart's satirical advertisement highlights the role masculinity plays in the fictions of capitalism; as Silverman writes, “our dominant fiction calls upon the male subject to see himself, and the female subject to recognize and desire him, only through the mediation of images of an unimpaired masculinity” (43). Ewart's works reveals not just how advertising asks the public to see men through an imaginary lens of idealized masculinity, but also how the fictions of consumer capitalism have allowed Ponderevo to see himself this way doubly so: as producer and consumer of the images of advertising.

Ewart's illustration suggests further that consumer capitalism as it is manifest is the production and sale of products such as Tono-Bungay renders both its producers and consumers fools: mechanical workers, gullible women made ugly in their desperate search for beauty tricks, and a pathetic man deluded by a myth of masculinity. The circumstances Ewart depicts are those in which humans are degraded and autonomous art is not possible. Ewart's artistic critique is enabled by his ideological location on the fringes of the capitalist order, but he is not far enough

removed to expand the explicit critique of the type he levels at Ponderevo to the creation of something positive that would serve as a critique of consumer capitalism in a different way, in its absolute alterity to it.

Though imploring the artist to create an actual advertisement did not work, Ponderevo's next offer ostensibly gives Ewart much more artistic liberty: Ewart is hired to sculpt a chalice that Ponderevo will then give as a gift to a church. From the start, it looks promising, though perhaps a little more secular than anticipated: "Ewart had produced ... an admirable sketch for the sacred vessel surrounded by a sort of wreath of Millies [Millie is his model and lover, and it is insinuated that she is a prostitute] with open arms and wings." However, as the deadline draws near, there "came a series of vexatious delays. The chalice became less and less of a commercial man's chalice," and "acquired more and more the elusive quality of the Holy Grail," and, alas, the chalice was never completed (259). Again the circumstances of production – Ponderevo's commercial interests, combined in this instance with the religious ideology that must be heeded – render the work of art impossible.

Though Ewart's character has rejected the set of master signifiers offered to him by the dominant fiction of late nineteenth-century capitalism, he struggles – with little success – to find or formulate a set of master signifiers of his own choosing, a constellation of master signifiers that would provide a venue for him to engage in autonomous art. For Ewart, such production remains in the realm of the imaginary. For instance, he is able to share with George an idea for a work of his own: "A series. Like the busts of the Caesars. Only not heads, you know. We don't see the people who do things to us nowadays ... Hands! A series of hands! The hands of the Twentieth Century. I'll do it. Someday someone will discover it ... see what I have done, and what is meant by it" (177). But Ewart doesn't do it; and he doesn't do it because he can't do it. The piece that would be his own, an autonomous creation, is not written into the dominant fiction

of *Tono-Bungay's* London – it cannot be made, it would not be understood. The best Ewart can do is imagine such a creation, and imagine that some future audience would experience it as his contemporaries can not.

Throughout George's entire narrative, the men who constitute the two major influences of his adult life, are only engaged in a single conversation – a meeting of art and commerce. It is relatively brief, and while Ewart understands consumer capitalism well enough to tease George, George misunderstands the artistic perspective so completely that he doesn't even know he's being made fun of. Ewart pretends to recognize the man he had only recently depicted as a large rodent as a fellow artist, and tells Ponderevo, "You and I, sir, can talk, if you will permit me, as one artist to another. Advertisement has revolutionized trade and industry; it is going to revolutionize the world. The old merchant used to tote about commodities; the new one creates values. ... He takes something that isn't particularly worth anything, and he makes it worth something ... It's just like an artist; he takes a lump of white marble ... he chips it about, he makes – he makes a monument to himself and others ... Your modern commerce is no more buying and selling than – sculpture. It's mercy – it's salvation" (158, 160). Though Ewart intends his characterization of Ponderevo's profession as satirical, Ponderevo responds with serious gratitude, and in fact, Ewart is more right than he wishes. Ewart's character insists on the incommensurability of art and advertising, and *Tono-Bungay* itself maintains this separation rather adamantly, but if Ewart's parody of the interchange between the worlds of art and consumer capitalism is not yet true for late nineteenth-century England, it is a pretty accurate portrait of the relationship between the two in the twentieth century and in the twentieth-century novels that go on to engage similar issues and characters.

One alternative to consumer capitalism that George and Ewart explore together is socialism. This is another feature of *Tono-Bungay* that emerges as an ongoing trend in

twentieth-century ad-man novels. Socialism is consistently introduced as an idealistic alternative to a degrading consumer capitalist order, but, as is the case in *Tono-Bungay*, neither the characters nor the novels entertain the possibilities of socialism seriously. Rather, it is introduced as a gesture, and quickly passed off as an impractical, undesirable impossibility – despite the fact, in the case of *Tono-Bungay*, that Wells himself was an active member of the socialist Fabian Society for many years (Hammond 48). Of the characters in *Tono-Bungay*, Ewart is better-versed in the ideas of socialism, but George takes them on with much more enthusiasm: “Ewart gave me all my first conceptions of socialism” he explains, and “in a little while I was an enthusiastic socialist.” George insists that the two should “do things ... go and speak at the street corners,” and spread the word; Ewart replies to George’s incitement to action by musing, “I wonder why one doesn’t want to ...” (113). George discovers that Ewart “quite seriously meant to do nothing in the world at all towards reforming the evils he laid bare in so easy and dextrous a manner” (114). This episode provides another good example of the disconnect between rational thought, desire, and action. Ewart and George can both see clearly the injustices wrought by capitalism; Ewart has suffered many of them first-hand. They can agree that it makes sense to advocate for change, to seek out a new economic order, but for Ewart in particular, he just doesn’t want to – the discourse of socialism does not appeal to his individual modes of desiring.

Just to be sure, Ewart agrees to accompany George on his mission to “join on to other socialists,” though he insists that they “go and look at ‘em first” (115). Ewart’s character demonstrates a savvy that George still lacks when it comes to navigating self-identity and identification with others; he wants to see and hear these group members to see if he “recognizes” them, and to see if he can recognize himself in them, to find out if can he imaginatively insert himself into this group. He knows that the matter depends on much more

than a common interest in socialism. As it turns out, Ewart and George, in fact, cannot see themselves as part of this group; it takes only a short visit for them to agree that, “three quarters of the speakers seemed under some jocular obsession which took the form of pretending to be conceited. It was sort of a family joke, and as strangers to the family we did not like it” (115). George’s use of the family metaphor suggests, albeit unintentionally, the importance of family relations to the inception of such preferences and recognitions in the larger social sphere. In fact, it is likely that George’s character is already more attached to his uncle’s fantasies of capitalism than he knows. Bracher explains that “when an identification becomes established as our identity, it functions to repress all desires that are incongruent with this identity” (22). Clearly a serious commitment to socialism would require George to relinquish any aspirations toward wealth and recognition in association with his uncle’s commercial endeavors.

And indeed, their inability to identify with the socialist mission throws both Ewart and George back into the arms of capitalism: as the two return from the meeting hall to the city streets, “Ewart twisted his arm into a queerly eloquent gesture that gathered up all the tall facades of the banks, the business places, the projecting clock and towers of the Law Courts, the advertisements, the luminous signs, into one social immensity, into a capitalist system gigantic and invincible” (115). This moment is a begrudging celebration of capitalist grandeur and success, a reluctant acknowledgement that it is, or seems to be, a closed, complete, and looming system.

As a man of artistic ambition, Ewart’s character offers George some insight into the workings of the dominant fictions of consumer capitalism. George’s narrative also credits Ewart and his artistic perspective as having a hand in revealing his desires; after spending so much time with Ewart, George found that “more and more acutely and unmistakably did my perception of

beauty in form and sound, my desire for adventure, my desire for intercourse” become the “commanding business of the individual life” (116). Actual objects of art, housed in London museums and galleries also play an important role in George’s search for identity. His experiences wandering through art exhibits of various sorts connect George with his desire, and catalyze his pursuit of an object for that desire. When he first enters a London art museum, George comes into contact with previously repressed or unknown desires: “Close at hand ... I came for the first time upon the beauty of nudity, which I had hitherto held to be a shameful secret, flaunted and gloried in; I was made aware of beauty as not only permissible but desirable and frequent, and of a thousand hitherto unsuspected rich aspects of life” (106).

His desire is at first generalized, and objects of desire are indistinguishable, and their mere excess of what he had expected – which was nothing – constitutes a *jouissance* that he will not recapture once he attempts to enter into an actual relationship. George recalls, “I began to fall in love faintly with girls I passed in the street, with women who sat before me in trains, with girl fellow students, with ladies in passing carriages, with loiterers at the corners, with neat-handed waitresses in shops and tea-rooms, with pictures even of girls and women” (116). The next stage in George’s discovery of desire is his wish to narrow his focus, to find the One: “I had a stronger and stronger sense that among these glancing, passing multitudes, there was somewhere one who was for me.” George coached himself, encouraging himself to “Stop! Look at this one! Think of her! Won’t she do? This signifies – this before all things signifies! Stop! Why are you hurrying by? This may be the predestined person – before all others.” When he does meet the woman he eventually marries, George is still attached to the notion that there is a “one” – the *object a* – who will satisfy all of his desires; the process of his disillusionment is a painful one that ends in divorce and is repeated in subsequent sexual relationships.

In his retrospective, George also credits literary arts as seminal to the formation of his desire; his admiration for romantic poets in particular may have contributed to his initial expectations that his lover and wife would bring him complete satisfaction. In addition to the *Bladesover* texts that whetted his appetite for uncovering exotic and unknown terrains as a boy, he claims that later in life, he garnered noble notions of love from literature: “It was evident to me that the world regarded Shelley ... as a very heroic as well as beautiful person; and that to defy convention and succumb magnificently to passion was the proper thing to do to gain the respect and affection of all decent people” (163). George is recalling this aspect of his development as part of a comparison of himself to Marion – the woman he marries. He describes her as an “impossible” lover, and suggests that her insufficiencies (as he sees them) have derived from “bad” literature and female working-class conversation: “the sort of fiction she got from the Public Library” and “the workroom talk at Smithie’s” (the garment shop where she is employed). And when their relationship begins to fail them both, George finds that “every love romance I read seemed to mock our dull intercourse, every poem, every beautiful picture reflected upon the uneventful succession of grey hours we had together,” and he concludes, “I think that our real difference was one of aesthetic sensibility” (184). In *Tono-Bungay*, then, it seems that art is capable of begetting desire, but in order for that desire not to be “impossible” – it must be *good* art, unadulterated by market concerns. Of course the irony of George’s self-righteous prioritization is that the highly romanticized plots and characters of the “good” literature he has read have helped to render him equally incapable of engaging in a workable relationship. Furthermore, as what follows will suggest, this division is highly gendered – female characters in *Tono-Bungay* don’t have access to the types of artistic experience in which George revels as his character discovers his desire. When George resents Marion for her “low” aesthetic taste and her ultra-conservatism in the bedroom, he is reacting to an effect of a

patriarchal system that gives him the power to enjoy the opposite at her expense. However, the one advantage that both George and Ewart's characters seem to demonstrate is their rough understanding of the processes of desire-formation in the first place, and their recognition that living these desires within the given symbolic order is a challenge that requires some negotiation and pursuit of self-knowledge.

George actually finds his object of desire – Marion – in an art museum. He had seen her several times; one day, he finally corners her: literally he “came upon her in an odd corner of the Sheepshanks gallery.” George explains, “I had just been in the gallery of casts from the antique, my mind was alive with my newly awakened sense of line, and there she stood with face upturned, her body drooping from the hips just a little – memorably graceful – feminine” (117). Art appreciation has enabled George to pursue his desire for women, and, as the above quotation demonstrates, an important aspect of what George's relationship with art has given him is an empowered, dominating, objectifying gaze. He sees Marion as one of so many lovely objects in the museum; he appreciates her with the same gaze he bestows upon the sculptures and paintings, and – most importantly – his gaze assumes that Marion is available to him in the same way as are these objects of art. Though the visual technologies are very different, George's objectifying manner of looking is a perfect example of the masculine gaze Laura Mulvey describes in her seminal article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” – a way of looking characterized by “a determining male gaze” that “projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (451). One might infer that, though it predates the modern forms of cinema that Mulvey examines, the development of George's masculine gaze was also inspired to some degree by his experience of theatre, where he, “always became exalted and found the actresses and even the spectators about me mysterious, attractive, creatures of deep interest and desire,” which leads to a “stronger and stronger sense that ... there was somewhere one who was

for me” (116). The dynamic which suggested that the actresses on stage were available for George’s objectification and possession seems to prompt him to adopt this attitude toward the general public as well.

Ewart reinforces this position; his paid model, Millie, facilitates his artistic efforts and is also the woman with whom he has sex – and little else. Shortly after one of her visits, he asks George, “Are women property – or are they fellow creatures?” (172). Though Ewart’s later ruminations lean toward the “fellow creatures” answer, the fact that he posed the question in the first place is certainly suggestive, and once he proposes a walled-in city of women who are available for non-binding sexual relationships, the reader may feel rather certain that Ewart is only attempting, unsuccessfully, to convince himself that women are indeed fellow creatures. The masculinized, objectifying gaze which George seems to develop as part of his budding relationship with the arts is hinted at in his earlier voyeuristic tours of London, and, despite the fact that art and capitalism are largely polarized in *Tono-Bungay*, their ability to incite, harbor, and employ an objectifying, colonizing gaze is one of the points at which their ideologies and practices intersect.

In the early stages of their relationship, when George is most under the influence of Ewart and least under the influence of his uncle, George seems capable of building a relationship with Marion in a way that recognizes her as half of a partnership, in which each partner acts as a vehicle for, a permanent location for the desire of the other – rather than the final satisfaction of desire altogether. From the beginning of their relationship, George sees clearly that Marion was not his fantasy woman, but rather the woman who could shuttle his fantasies of Woman. George readily acknowledges that “she wasn’t indeed beautiful to many people ... she had manifest defects of form and feature ... her complexion was bad,” and he reflects that, “from the outset I appreciated and did not for a moment resent that hers was a commonplace mind,” because “she

was the unconscious custodian of something that had gripped my most intimate instinct, that she embodied the hope of a possibility, was the careless proprietor of a physical quality that had turned my head like strong wine” (119). Yet it is a precarious balance; George is distraught on several occasions when the everyday reality of Marion intrudes upon his fantasy of who she is. He finds their actual acquaintance “flat,” but “saw her in dreams released, as it were, from herself, beautiful, worshipful, glowing. And sometimes when we were together, we would come silences through sheer lack of matter, and then my eyes would feast on her and the silence seemed like the drawing back of a curtain – her superficial self” (119). George understands that, “I had let myself come to want her, my imagination endowed her with infinite possibilities. I wanted her and wanted her, stupidly and instinctively ...” (124).

While George’s capacities for fantasy are hard at work establishing and maintaining Marion as his object *a*, he also seeks the passive pleasure of being the object of Marion’s desire. When she criticizes George’s collars and sends him “after gentlemanly neckwear,” he also “had a morning coat made and ... bought a silk hat, and had my reward in the first glance of admiration she ever gave me” (120). George found that, “more and more of my time did I give to this passion that possessed me. I began to think chiefly of ways of pleasing Marion, of acts of devotion, of treats, of sumptuous presents for her, of appeals she would understand,” and finally, “I was ... abandoning all my beliefs – all my conventions ... I was forgetting myself – immensely. And there was a conscious shame in it all” (120). At least one of the “conventions” George forgets as he becomes increasingly enamored with Marion is his science: he “fell dreadfully away” from his studies. Though George does not offer any other details as to what beliefs and conventions he abandoned for the sake of Marion’s affection, we do understand that his desire for her and his desire to be desired by her have changed his understanding of who he is

and what he stands for, and that such evidence of this instability of identity, the capacity to be changed by desire, is a source of shame for George.

The beginning of the end for George and Marion can be pinpointed to the moment at which George quits equivocating, gives in to his uncle, and commits himself to the Tono-Bungay enterprise. Though the structure of the novel strives to suggest that the two have little to do with one another, George's embrace of consumer capitalism has a direct effect on his marriage. Indeed, as Mendelson suggests, a noteworthy aspect of George's narrative strategy is his careful separation of his romantic life and his professional endeavors into alternate chapters. This separation seems to indicate that George is unable (or as I will suggest, unwilling) to see his domestic life and his romantic relationships as related to or contiguous with his professional pursuits in the realm of commerce. George tells his readers, "As I look back on those days in which we built up the great Tono-Bungay property ... I see my life as it were arranged in two parallel columns of unequal width, a wider, more diffused, eventful and various one which continually broadens out, the business side of my life, and a narrow, darker, and darkling one shot ever and again with a gleam of happiness, my home life with Marion" (162). Creation and maintenance of rigid ideological distinctions between the public and private realms is a well-documented facet of the rise of capitalism, and Wells's narration of George's narration fits into this pattern especially well.

While George's sense of this separation is apparently so strong that he cannot even treat the two realms in the same chapter, once he becomes part of Tono-Bungay, this structural separation is challenged by the content of each of the chapters. The language George uses to describe his relationship with Marion is explicitly commercial, and the commercial endeavors in which he is involved are heavily influenced by an interest in entering into and reforming domestic space. For instance, when George and Marion decide to be married – an agreement

facilitated by George's financial gains in the Tono-Bungay enterprise – George explains, “she had raised her price two hundred pounds a year and ... I had bought her at that.” Nonetheless, George is horrified when she insists that their wedding be a public event, because he sees it as an “indecent advertisement that I had been passionately in love with Marion” (179), and on the big day, he felt, “I looked like a special color supplement to *Men's Wear* or *The Tailor and Cutter*, Full Dress for Ceremonial Occasions” (179).⁵

On the other hand, the very premise of Tono-Bungay is an invasion of the commercial into the private sphere, as the commodity invites itself into one's medicine cabinet, and ultimately into one's stomach, veins, brains, bowels and reproductive organs with promises to improve individual health and vitality. Furthermore, as George and his uncle consider future innovations, they continue to focus on domestic interiors, proposing the kind of aestheticization of home-living that continues to propel massive amounts of consumerism today. Ponderevo declares, “We've got to bring the Home Up to Date ... We got to make a civilized d'mestic machine out of these relics of barbarism ... Then, after conveniences – beauty! All these new things ought to be made fit to look at ... Beautiful jam pots! Housemaid's boxes it'll be a pleasure to fall over ... All the polishes and such things in such tins ... you'll want to cuddle 'em!” (214). One way of reading of this narrative complexity is to understand George's separation of domesticity and commerce into alternating chapters as an attempt to use narrative structure to enforce a distinction that he desires, but which his inability to narrate the content of

⁵ George's feeling is not unrelated to the country-city dynamic in *Tono-Bungay*, in which the city is the location of capitalism, and because capitalism is such a pervasive force in the public sphere, domestic relations must be preserved and protected in a separate, private sphere. The countryside of *Tono-Bungay*, in the absence of a powerful capitalist order, allows public and private spheres to co-mingle. As he laments his city wedding which is mis-placed in the public sphere, George points out that it would have been different if they had been married in the country: “There the church is to a large extent the gathering-place of the community, and your going to be married a thing of importance to everyone you pass on the road. It is a change of status that quite legitimately interests the whole neighborhood. But in London there are no neighbors, nobody knows, nobody cares” (181).

either the “home” chapters or the “business” chapters without intermingling the language of domesticity and commerce reveals to be futile.

Mulvey’s ideas about the role of women in cinematic narrative offer an additional dimension to this reading, one which focuses more specifically on gender. She suggests that “the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative” (452) – this is clearly what George, as narrator, struggles with, and though he is narrating a novel rather than a film, the ways that Marion stalls his narrative are similar. The chapters in which he discusses his courtship of and marriage to Marion are essentially “contemplations”; these chapters are not organized primarily around plot sequences, but rather by lengthy descriptions of desire that are incited by Marion’s physical attributes, desire incited by George’s fantasies of what capacities for passion lie beneath those physical attributes, and finally, by George’s disillusionment with the spectacle of Marion.

George is unable to integrate his desire for Marion into the larger narrative of his commercial activities, perhaps because his desire for her is couched in a wish for an alternative to the capitalist order which drives the other chapters. These periods of intense desiring and imagining focused on the image of Marion give rise to fantasies that are antithetical to those elicited by the commodity fetishism of Tono-Bungay. In one “Marion chapter,” George relays an actual dream he had in “the small hours” in which Marion “saved” him from capitalism by agreeing to marry him while he was poor and his prospects were uncertain. He dreamed of himself proposing to “give one’s self over to the capitalist system,” to which Marion responded, “No! That wouldn’t be right!” – “then suddenly she would become a goddess.” He dreamed, “She would turn upon me frankly and nobly, with shining eyes, with arms held out, ‘No,’ she

would say, ‘we love one another. Nothing ignoble shall ever touch us ... What does it matter that we are poor and may keep poor?’” (141). Two such conflicting and powerful desiring drives cannot long coexist; something has to give. Thus when George gives himself to his uncle and Tono-Bungay, he must repress and reject his desire for Marion.

George’s narrative separation of his romantic and domestic affairs also highlights another important facet of *Tono-Bungay’s* depiction of the capitalist order. The active subjective positions available to women are extremely limited: the dominant fiction of capitalism – as well as the fiction of *Tono-Bungay* – relegates women to passive spheres of existence. Women have no role to play as capitalists, their roles as artists are drastically diminished, and even in the home we find that women do not have agency as home economists or mothers. John Hammond contends that Wells was a feminist (18); a feminist perspective does not, I believe, emerge as a predominant facet of *Tono-Bungay’s* thematic content, but Wells (if not his narrator) does seem sensitive to some of the frustrations inherent to being a woman in late nineteenth-century England. Perhaps Wells is simply being true-to-life when he writes George’s masculinized narration as one that objectifies, romanticizes, and dismisses women.

However, despite George’s shortcomings as a feminist observer, Wells manages to write Susan’s character as one who maintains a consistent line of critique throughout the entire novel. And though her character has little bearing on the thoughts and actions of the male characters with whom she interacts, she does offer the reader a compellingly gendered critique of capitalism. Ponderevo, whose character has by this point become synonymous with advertising and consumer capitalism, treats women in general and Susan in particular in such a way that George is prompted to observe that, “to him, women were an incident” (266). And indeed, upon examining the way in which Susan’s character develops alongside the Tono-Bungay empire, it becomes clear that consumer capitalism as it is depicted in *Tono-Bungay* does not include

women in its fictions. Susan's character demonstrates a keen awareness of this when she tells George, "No woman ever has respected the law – ever. It's too silly ... the things it lets you do!" (351). Susan recognizes the law – the laws of capitalism as well as civil laws – as masculine constructions that do not take women or female desire into account. As such, she does not see herself as subject to them, and throughout *Tono-Bungay* she is critical of her husband's seduction by the dominant fictions supported by these laws as well as the ways in which she is marginalized by these laws.

Even in the earlier days of Wimblehurst, Susan is already skeptical of Ponderevo's capitalist ambitions. Noting the aggrandizing names her husband has assigned to humble, everyday products, she comments, "I'd like to put an old label on to *him* round the middle like his bottles are, with 'Old Pondo' on it. That's Latin for Imposter – *must* be. He'd look lovely with a stopper" (76). Once they are settled in London, poised to make it big, Susan delivers a wry parody of Ponderevo's belief in a capitalist fantasy of quick money and luxurious living: "We're going to make outs – suddenly – So *he* old says ... he won't tell me when ... But it's coming. Going to ride in our carriage and have a garden ... Grey horses in the carriage ... and dinners in restaurants often and often ... and money and money and money." Ponderevo reminds her that the realm of capitalism has no place for women when he responds to her comment by talking to George: "A woman doesn't understand how long it takes to build up a position ..." (92).

Once Ponderevo has become successful, Susan is far less exuberant than her husband. She tells George, "It's been a time ... The flapping about! Me sidding [sic] doing nothing and him on the go like a rocket" (145). In the Wimblehurst chemist shop, Susan had been included at least to a small degree in the business as a helpmate; in the capitalist world of London, there is no place for her except to be relegated to boredom in the home. Susan expresses her frustration

to George, “‘I wish I could help,’ she said, ‘but I’ve never helped him much ... his way of doing things was never mine. And since ... he began to get so rich, he’s kept things from me. In the old days – it was different.’” (344). Susan again laments this loss of agency when Ponderevo has literally dressed her up in the manner he has deemed appropriate to his new status as a successful capitalist. Looking at herself in her first dinner gown, Susan remarks, “A ham ... must feel just like this. Just a necklace” (243). In *Tono-Bungay*, Susan’s character is not even given agency as a consumer in the capitalist marketplace – as George puts it, “My aunt did not shine as a purchaser.” As he observes her detachment from the consumer spectacle, the “glittering world,” he thinks, “No one ... would sit so apart if she hadn’t dreams – and what are her dreams?” – George’s next thought reveals that the dominant fictions of consumer capitalism do not account for female desire as it might be formulated *by* a woman, rather than *for* her: he marvels at his question regarding Susan’s dreams, because it is his first. Previously (and subsequently), he’d “never thought” (247).

But as is the case for Ewart’s character, Susan’s ability to formulate a critique of the dominant fictions of capitalism is not enough to enable her to enact any sort of change; her resistance is ultimately impotent. After Ponderevo’s death, Susan ruminates that “Men shouldn’t be so tempted with business and things ... It’s true he wasn’t a husband much for me at the last. But he was my child and all my children, my silly child, and life has knocked him about for me, and I’ve never had a say in the matter; never a say; it’s puffed him up and smashed him – like an old bag – under my eyes. I was clever enough to see it, and not clever enough to prevent it, and all I could do was jeer” (368). The idea that Ponderevo was both lover and child to Susan points to another feature of *Tono-Bungay*’s critique of capitalism that links this novel to later ad-man novels. Advertising men and the systems of consumer capitalism they represent are, in these fictional portrayals, childless. This is one way, perhaps, that Susan’s character resists passively –

she does not carry Ponderevo's child, her character does not provide the next generation of ambition or labor required to perpetuate the system. Wells's vision (influenced by Marx) of the trajectory of capitalism is reiterated in the fictional Ponderevo family: just as capitalist expansion is projected to outstrip its resources and markets and fall in upon itself, Edward Ponderevo is too consumed by his commitment to capitalism to raise a family. As Silverman suggests, it is "the family [that] provides the dominant fiction with its primary image of unity, ... and hegemony can only be achieved by those ideologies which successfully articulate themselves in relation to it," thus "it is within the family that capitalism reproduces its relations of production" (75, 49).

George's character comes to be like a son to Edward and Susan, especially once he is taken in by the Tono-Bungay business, and this family dynamic is conflicted as well. George had been in love with his aunt since the days of Wimblehurst ("If I fell in love with anyone in Wimblehurst, it was with my aunt. She treated me with a kindliness that was only half maternal ..." (74)), and this love complicates his already troubled marriage to Marion: "It did much to widen our estrangement that Marion and my aunt failed to make friends," George explains (186). I have already noted that his marriage begins to fail concurrently with his investment in Tono-Bungay, and, like Edward and Susan, the couple remains childless. What has been born of Ponderevo's capitalist ambitions is an incestuous confusion of lover, mother, and child – the law of the father has failed.

While Susan's character demonstrates that, in *Tono-Bungay*, capitalism does not offer active subjective possibilities for upper and middle-class women, George's descriptions of the labor upon which they depend to make Tono-Bungay profitable demonstrates the ways in which lower-class women are conscripted into capitalist labor that also offers them very little subjective agency. George's big contribution to the Tono-Bungay enterprise is his "revolutionary" labor strategy: "Our girls ... packed with corrugated paper and matchbox-wood partitions when

everybody else was using expensive young men to pack through the top with straw.” George’s proto-Taylorist “scientific method” of labor requires division of the production process into small discrete (stultifying) parts: at one end of the production line, “a girl held [the bottles] up to the light, put aside any that were imperfect, and placed the others in the trough – the filling was automatic,” and “at the other end a girl slipped in the cork and drove it home with a little mallet ... another girl stood ready with my machine to label the corked bottles and hand them to the three packers ...” The problem of the subjective relationship to the capitalist order is not just that the “girls” are paid low wages; it is that they are not even recognized by or written into the discourse of the dominant fiction. In *Tono-Bungay* not one working class woman has a name or a voice. As employees, the women are completely disregarded; they are rendered invisible, merely a part of the machine – George boasts that “Our cases packed themselves” (156).

Even though discourses and ambitions of art are portrayed as a compromised mode of subjectivity for Ewart, when we examine the relationship of the female characters to the world of art, it is evident that the life of autonomous art is an even more remote possibility for women than it is for men. While Ewart and George actively appropriate works of art in London galleries for their own pleasure, the female characters are relegated to a much more derivative position. Susan’s access to “art” is limited to gardening when she is faced with the complete domestic boredom that is a side-effect of Ponderevo’s capitalist success. Marion also “began to dabble with the minor arts,” such as “poker-work and a Kodak and hyacinths in glasses” (185). *Tono-Bungay*’s depiction of Marion’s presence in an art gallery also reveals a dramatically different relationship between her character and the works of art by which she is surrounded than that which the male characters enjoy. Marion is not wandering and looking and becoming enlightened; she is copying patterns for stitchwork – “gaily embroidered yoke[s]” that she makes and sells.

As described above, during George's first several months in London, he had been spending time with Ewart, struggling with his studies, and falling in love with Marion, but he had not been in regular contact with his uncle Ponderevo. George had not quite forgiven him for having lost the money that was to go to his schooling, and he was rather put off by what he considered the shabbiness of Edward and Susan's London lodgings. It is implied that this is a period of darkness when Book II, Chapter 2, titled "The Dawn Comes and my Uncle Appears in a New Silk Hat," introduces a narrative turning point. In it, George receives a telegram from his uncle, summoning him to "Come to me at once you are wanted three hundred a year certain tono-bungay" (127).

George is immediately swept away – his uncle's advertising tactics work as well on George as on any of their future customers. George guesses right away that Tono-Bungay is the name of a patent medicine his uncle had created, and he soon "found myself repeating the word ... it roused one's attention like the sound of distant guns. 'Tono' – what's that? And deep, rich, unhurrying – '*Bun-gay!*'" (127). The total nonsense of this name, its complete lack of referentiality, makes it a perfect signifier for stimulating fantasy and desire. Because it signifies nothing, except perhaps mysteriousness, "Tono-Bungay" can signify absolutely anything; it can be whatever one wants it to be.

Thus, George's imagination is already titillated when he goes in response to the telegram to meet his uncle. In contrast to the mysterious Tono-Bungay, Edward Ponderevo's appearance signifies clearly: money and success. George recalls with enthusiasm, "I discovered my uncle in a wonderfully new silk hat – oh, a splendid hat!" (128). Ponderevo's home, too, signifies the success of one who has found his calling. Even though during the same period he describes Ewart's "brown walls," "dusty plaster casts," "cheap lay figure of a horse," and "a table ...

partially covered with a cloth” as “commendable shabbiness” (107), and says nothing about Ewart having to “chuck a cockroach out of his butter pot,” George had had nothing but utter distaste for the “dinginess” of his uncle’s first meager lodgings in London – perhaps because Ponderevo’s unexceptional dwelling did not live up to the grandiose fantasies of capitalist luxury about which he had pontificated in Wimbleshurst. Having been invited to witness and share in his uncle’s success, George is gratified to find material evidence of that success. “I appreciated the change in outlook that the achievement of Tono-Bungay had made,” George writes, “The furniture of the room struck upon my eye as almost stately. The chairs and sofa were covered with chintz which gave it a dim remote flavour of Bladesover; the mantel, the cornice, the gas pendant were larger and finer than the sort of thing I had grown accustomed to in London.” He lingers on additional details, such as a “large, paper-decorated fireplace,” “a three-tiered cake-stand displaying assorted cakes, and a tray with the tea equipage” (144). And, the icing on the cake, so to speak, George “was shown in by a real housemaid with real tails to her cap” (143). George’s character enjoys these material reference points not only as symbols of financial status, but also as an allusion to his past at Bladesover, where he was surrounded by material comfort and secure in his subjective place – he recognizes this scene as one to which he belongs.

Edward Ponderevo acts as an individual agent of interpellation when he invites George to join him in his enterprise and pledge allegiance to capitalism. Ponderevo makes quite a dramatic appeal to his nephew: “I know a bit about character – trust me. You’ve got ...’ He clenched his hands and thrust them out suddenly, and at the same time said, with explosive violence, ‘Whoosh! Yes, you have! ... Who-oo-oo-osh! Your science and all that! Who-oo-oo-osh! ... I can create this business, but I can’t make it go. I’m too voluminous – I’m a boiler-over, not a simmering stick-at-it. *You keep on hotting up and hotting up.* That’s you, steady and long and piling up, -- then, who-oo-oo-osh. ... There you are! That’s what I’m after. You! Nobody

believes you're more than a boy. Come right in with me and be a man. Eh, George? Think of the fun of it – a thing on the go – a Real Live Thing! Whooshing it up! Making it buzz and spin! ... Eh?" (133). Ponderevo, now speaking from a position of capitalist power, encourages George to see himself as a part of his enterprise, as one who is needed and will contribute to the success of the venture. Ponderevo holds out a specific vision of George ("You, you you!") that highlights particular character traits that he believes best suit his nephew to the capitalist enterprise to which he is being called. And perhaps the most powerful element of the appeal is to masculinity: George can be a Man if he will be a Capitalist. This literalized process of interpellation is a good example of the ways in which master signifiers are linked to one another to create an overarching dominant fiction that in turn influences the constitution of an individual ego ideal. In this case, clearly, capitalism is linked closely to masculinity – if George wants to identify himself with the latter, he must accept the former, as well. And because George's identity as a man is so basic and primary to his subjectivity, "Man" is an incredibly powerful link in an associative chain such as the above.

With this in mind, the brand, "Tono-Bungay" can be heard as a masculine expanse of morphemes, containing only open, "large" vowels, and with the exception of the "u," the vowels are all long. The packaging of Tono-Bungay follows suit, featuring, on blue paper, "a coruscating figure of a genially nude giant," a "strong man all set about with lightning flashes" (129). The language of George's retrospective suggests that his uncle's invocation of Man as Capitalist was effective; George describes his working relationship with his uncle in stark phallic terms: "I was," George tells his readers, "the stick of his rocket" (11).

As part of his campaign, Ponderevo takes George out in London, to demonstrate how he is now recognized by others. He steps onto the street and “hail[s] a passing cab superbly,”⁶ and George does not fail to notice that “the cabman was infinitely respectful.” Ponderevo is recognized by the public, and furthermore, acknowledged as a recognizable *type* to which most others will accord respect. George feels the effects of this recognition powerfully, and physically: “I will confess I felt a magic change in our relative proportions as the two colossal, pale-blue and red-liveried porters ... held open the inner doors for us with a salutation that in some manner they seemed to confine wholly to my uncle. Instead of being about four inches taller, I felt ... the same size as he, and very much slenderer.” George’s response is a perfect example of Silverman’s contention that “when the male subject is brought into a traumatic encounter with lack ... he often experiences it as the impairment of his anatomical masculinity.” In this scene, George’s character is confronted with lack as it is present in his aimless life as a student, as well as his mediocre relationship with Marion; George literally feels this lack as a loss of self when he is forced to compare himself with his uncle. Silverman goes on to say that, “what is really at issue ... is a *psychic* disintegrations of a bound and armored ego, predicated upon the illusion of coherence and control” (62). Being suddenly immersed in his uncle’s success, George is much less sure of his commitment to student life and his previous conviction that Ponderevo is a con-man. Once they are inside the restaurant, Ponderevo “nodded to several of the waiters. ‘They know me, George, already,’ he said. ‘Point me out. Live place! Eye for coming men!’” (131).

George is clearly impressed with his uncle’s success, and is affected by the role that Ponderevo is holding out for him. But when his uncle finally asks him, “Well! What do you think of it all?” George’s response is, “In the first place – it’s a damned swindle!” (135).

⁶ Ponderevo’s action of hailing a cab in his efforts to call George into his role as co-capitalist is almost uncanny in its echo of Althusser’s famous “hailing” explanation of the process of interpellation.

George's lingering skepticism reflects Wells's own belief that consumer capitalism was not a positive direction for England's socioeconomic order. George explains that, "A thing that I will confess deterred me from the outset far more than the sense of dishonesty in this affair, was the supreme silliness of the whole concern. I still clung to the idea that the world of men was or should be a sane and just organization" (137). However, George's idealism does not keep him away from the promise of wealth, power, and recognition for long. He is intensely occupied by the role his uncle is holding out for him: "Running through all my thoughts, surging out like a refrain, was my uncle's master-stroke, his admirable touch or praise; 'Make it all slick – and then make it Whoosh. I know you can! Oh, I *know* you can!" Bracher points out that "identifications ... function as both causes and effects of desire," and that "their role as the cause of desire can be seen in the way subjects strive to fully actualize the qualities they have been identified with" (22). Ponderevo's call to his nephew certainly works in this way – it promises George things he already desires, but it also prompts George to embrace new desires, represented by new master signifiers. So, after thinking it over for just a couple of days, George suddenly decides that, "Ewart as a moral influence was unsatisfactory," and he entertains the idea that "perhaps after all this socialism to which I had been drawn was only a foolish dream" (139) – his character has begun to reject desires that are incompatible with the new desiring role that is being held out for him. His uncle Ponderevo, on the other hand, now begins to make sense to him. George notes "a curious persuasion he had a knack of inspiring – a persuasion not so much of his integrity and capacity as of the reciprocal and yielding foolishness of the world. One felt that he was silly and wild, but in some way silly and wild after the fashion of the universe. After all, one must live somehow" (138). Edward Ponderevo's character is modeled off of the first avatars of a new order, one in which the dominant fiction is no longer enforced by genealogical charts and laws of inheritance, but rather sold by practices of advertising. When George finally makes his

purchase, he tells his uncle, “I’ve had false ideas about the world,” but “they don’t matter now! Yes, I’ll come, I’ll take my chance with you, I won’t hesitate again” (146).

It is only after George’s character has enjoyed a great deal of success and accumulated a great deal of wealth – and when it looks uncertain that he will be able to continue in this manner – that he begins to doubt again. In the meantime, he revels in the fact that, “We made Tono-Bungay hum! It brought us wealth, influence, respect, the confidence of endless people.” In fact, George tells us, “All that my uncle promised me proved truth and understatement; Tono-Bungay carried me to freedoms and powers that no life of scientific research, no passionate service of humanity could ever have given me” (147). Exaltations such as these go a long way toward explaining why George couldn’t really find himself in the socialist movement, and why he ultimately regarded Ewart as a social novelty; despite the ugliness of confrontation with the social injustices perpetuated by capitalism, he was not willing to abandon his dream of capitalist power and luxury for himself.

George’s psychic investment in the capitalist system only begins to wane when its fictions begin to falter. Wondering if perhaps “in the midst of such boasting and confidence,” there was “some rottenness he had concealed from me” (307), George finally presses his uncle to articulate what he has, on some level, known for quite some time – that Tono-Bungay was created and maintained only by a series of financial sleights of hand. George had approached his uncle “through a dense fog,” and after “ten minutes,” he “felt like a man who has just awakened in a bleak inhospitable room out of a grandiose dream” (307). George is forced to confront the failure of the dominant fiction that had promised him so much, and he begins to realize what this investment had cost him: “It seems to me as if in those days of disgust and abandoned aims I discovered myself for the first time. Before that I had seen only the world and things in it, had followed them self-forgetful of all but my impulse. Now I found myself *grouped*, with a system

of appetites and satisfactions, with much work to do – and no desire, it seemed, left in me ...

There were moments when I thought of suicide” (201). The dominant fiction of capitalism has not satisfied or channeled George’s desire – it killed it; without desire, there is only death to strive for.

Faced with the almost certain failure of Tono-Bungay, George at first makes an effort to get out. He tells his uncle, “I’m sick of all this damned rascality.” However, rather than leaving the Tono-Bungay empire, he throws himself headlong into the ugliest episode of capitalist greed he can find. George’s venture to Mordet Island, discussed briefly above, is the culmination of the failures of capitalism as a dominant fiction and a morbid illustration of Anne McClintock’s basic contention that “race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience,” but rather, they “come into existence *in and through* relation to each other,” especially amidst the dynamics of colonialism (5). George’s determined deployment of English economic power is both an exertion of his Western masculine privilege, and his desperate attempt to reclaim it. His brief stopover in Beatrice’s placid domestic space invigorates the contrast and highlights the way in which his access to her and the civilized tranquility of the home are dependent upon his invasion of Africa. His journey is an effort to save the capitalist enterprise of Tono-Bungay via imperialist plunder, and simultaneously to extricate himself from the failure of capitalism by subjecting himself to, as well as enacting, violent acts. The violence he imagines perpetrating against himself is exteriorized, and he discards the notion of suicide in favor of violence against others, executed as he embarks upon what will be the apex of all his earlier imperialist tendencies and pursuits.

One of the reasons the journey appeals to George is because as he imagines this exotic adventure, it simultaneously seems “so real and intimate” that it was “like something seen and forgotten and now again remembered” (226). Indeed, George’s description of his journey to

Mordet Island is highly suggestive of a psychic journey; he describes it as “an expedition into the realms of undisciplined nature out of the world that is ruled by men, my first bout with that hot side of our mother that gives you the jungle.” In the jungle, he finds that “the darkness brought a thousand swampy things to life and out of the forest came screamings and howlings” (325). And when he finally comes to the clearing, and discovers the highly-anticipated gold mine of “quap” that is supposed to save both the Tono-Bungay enterprise and his subjective harmony with capitalism, what George finds dashes his hopes to say the least: the “quap” is crap; Tono-Bungay will not be saved, and George’s character has been deeply degraded.

The importance of the Mordet island episode is highlighted by the pains to which George, as narrator of his own life, goes to insist that it is of little significance, despite every indication to the contrary. George claims that “the expedition to Mordet Island stands apart from all the rest of my life, detached, a piece by itself with an atmosphere of its own,” and that “so far as this novel of mine goes, it is merely an episode, a contributory experience, and I mean to keep it at that” (320). Readers may perhaps sympathize with George’s efforts at repression, because what he discovers, and in particular, what he discovers about himself, during this journey is perfectly horrifying. In his desperation to collect the quap, regardless of its obviously dangerous quality, George embraces the role of “the sweater, the harsh employer, the nigger-driver” in opposition to his crew, and was “resolved to overcome their oppositions and bend and use them” for his purpose. George confesses, “I hated then men. But I hated all humanity during the time the quap was near me” (332).

George’s inhumane treatment of his crew during the day is complemented by haunting nightmares while he sleeps: “for three nights running ... I dreamt of my uncle’s face, only that it was ghastly white like a clown’s and the throat was cut from ear to ear” (332). The appearance of this macabre image amidst the wild jungle setting is suggestive in a number of ways.

Recalling George's quarrel with his mother's refusal to disclose his father's identity, we may read this scene on one level as George having figuratively forced himself on his mother; as he penetrates "that hot side of our mother that gives you the jungle," he has forced his mother to give up the knowledge he has sought for so many years. His literal discovery of the quap leads to his psychic discovery of his father and the true nature of capitalism. This knowledge takes the form of a multi-faceted father: his biological father whose identity as an absence has been conflated with the image of Ponderevo, who has been in many ways the only father George has known in a positive sense. This image is additionally complicated by Ponderevo's role as a manifestation of the symbolic father – the law that enforces the symbolic order, the law that has sanctioned and imposed the dominant fiction of capitalist in late nineteenth century England. Thus the image contains multiple levels of resentment for George: his biological father, who abandoned him; his surrogate father who betrayed him by persuading him to believe in an insufficient fiction; and the dominant fiction of capitalism, which has revealed itself as a nefarious sham. It is no wonder that this image, so laden with father-issues, appears to George with a viciously slit throat.

Having dreamt of eradicating the malicious influences of the various incarnations of "father" with which he has had to contend, George becomes murderous by the light of day, as well. The native man George encounters is the epitome of racial and cultural "Otherness" – "He was very black and naked"; "His forehead was low, his nose very flat ... his hair, short and fuzzy." George sees himself as entirely "opposed to him," "a little soiled, perhaps, but still a rather elaborately civilized human being"; he is also "tensely excited by the encounter," for he is aware of the other as "a teeming vivid brain," but "quite unaware of the other's mental content or of what to do with him" (333). Though in his narration George tells us that he shot the native man in fear that he might interfere with his efforts to take the quap, it seems that the more

powerful force at work in this scene is George's simultaneous recognition of the other as fully human *and* as completely unknowable. Being unable to read the Other perhaps prompts George's character to feel his own indecipherability as well; discourse and desire are short-circuited in the absence of an other who can receive and reflect George's subjectivity. In the context of *Tono-Bungay*, this short circuit that essentially annuls George's existence is created by his investment in capitalism: saving his capitalist empire is his reason for being on Mordet Island, and his endeavor to steal from native peoples is what positions George so entirely against the man he encounters. Bracher contends that the Lacanian Other "can be either the subject or the object of desire," and "either the image of another person in the Imaginary register, or the code constituting the Symbolic order" (20). I want to suggest that all these definitions of the Other converge in this scene, as George is lashing out against his father, whom he wishes would desire him; the native man, whose desire terrifies George, and capitalism as the symbolic order, represented by his uncle, which has thwarted George's own desire. This reading is further supported by the way in which George reacts to the aftermath of the murder: "The black body which I saw now damaged and partly buried, but which, nevertheless, I no longer felt was dead but acutely alive and perceiving, I mixed up with the ochreous slash under my uncle's face" (335). George's murder of this man illustrates the complexity of psychological subjection to a capitalist order. George's character has witnessed the cruelty and ugliness to which he has been driven by his allegiance to capitalism; he has hated the father-symbols to whom he attributes this dominant fiction; yet he chooses to take a man's life in order to protect his subjective investments in that same fiction.

George returns to London without his anticipated cargo and finds that his uncle is already ruined; he had not been able to keep his creditors at bay. Surmising the Crest Hill estate,

George reflects, “It was as idiotic as the pyramids ... It struck me suddenly as the compactest image and sample of all that passes for Progress, of all the advertisement-inflated spending, the aimless building up and pulling down, the enterprise and promise of my age. This was our fruit, this was what we had done, I and my uncle, in the fashion of our time” (347) – “It came to me like a revelation, at once incredible and indisputable of the abysmal folly of our being” (348). Despite George’s claims to contrary, his character begins to disentangle himself from the capitalist pursuit not because he has discovered its fictions, but because its fictions have failed him. Bracher refers to “the Symbolic Other’s lack” – its failure to provide “ultimate meaning,” which George is confronting in this scene. Having discovered that the fantasy of capitalism that his uncle helped him form and eventually realize did not in the end provide the existential bliss that he had anticipated, George is left with a sense of the “folly of ... being.” George’s despair exemplifies the Lacanian contention that such a confrontation with the Other’s lack produces “a form of sadness or emptiness,” which is “the aftereffect of jouissance resulting from drive gratification” (45).

Having been personally disillusioned, George is astonished by “the consideration with which the world treated me. For now it was open and manifest that I and my uncle were no more than specimens of a modern species of brigand, wasting the savings of the public our of the sheer wantonness of enterprise ... No one believed I was not an arch plotter in his financing. Yet they favoured me” (369). Such is testament to the power of consumer capitalism as a master signifier. Bracher makes an important distinction relevant to the definition of master signifiers: “whereas other terms and the values and assumptions they bear may be challenged ... master signifiers are simply accepted as having a value or validity that goes without saying.” So it seems that George being a man of “dash and enterprise” is enough – the unequivocal evidence of his greed and treachery cannot broach the sanctity of a notion revered without question among the masses of

Tono-Bungay. Had George's character been a representative of the old feudal order – an order, George reiterates again and again, that perpetuated many of the same dismal consequences on the working classes – one doubts he would have been embraced so warmly by the public. Though Bracher suggests that one step toward dismantling tyrannical discourse is to “expose the master signifiers that underlie and constitute its truth” (59) the imperviousness of deeply imposed dominant fictions is evident when both the fictional public of *Tono-Bungay* and our own contemporaries prove untouched by repeated proof contradicting the claims of master signifiers. Bracher goes on to say that “master signifiers are able to exert such force in messages because of the role they play in structuring the subject” (25); the implication here is that firstly, George's apparent extrication from the grasp of capitalist discourse may not be nearly so complete as he describes, and secondly, that while he may at least be questioning his relationship to capitalism, the members of the masses who continue to herald his character as a cultural icon who are structured by identification with this master signifier will also continue to be subject to such treacheries, with little chance of also becoming agents of its elusive benefits. Indeed, George and his uncle's trajectories from subjects oppressed by the rule of the landed gentry to agents of consumer capitalist dominance exemplify Lacan's contention that “revolutionary desire” can easily lead to “a discourse of the master” (Bracher 58).

The final phase of George's search for subjectivity depicted in *Tono-Bungay* leads him to science. After the failure of *Tono-Bungay*, George was left with “a sense of inexorable need, of distress and insufficiency that was unendurable” – his character is again searching for an ideology with which he can identify himself, which can channel his drives and desires. “In the end of this particular crisis,” George tells us, “I idealized Science. I decided that in power and knowledge lay the salvation of my life, the secret that would fill my need; that to these things I would give myself” (202). George makes this transfer of desire explicit when he writes, “I took

to these [scientific] experiments after I had sought something that Marion in some indefinable way had seemed to promise.” Ultimately, George is unable to express his desire in relation to a human other, unable to contend with the desire of an other; instead, he constructs a fantasy other, an *object a* in the form of an anthropomorphized academic discipline: “Science, with her order, her inhuman distance, her steely certainties, saved me from despair,” he tells us. Science offers George those prospects which have consistently attracted his character: mystery, the possibility of discovery, and perhaps most importantly, mastery. He gushes, “Scientific truth is the remotest of mistresses, she hides in strange places, she is attained by torturous and laborious roads, but *she is always there!*” George also attributes to science a certainty, a dependability he is seeking: “She is reality, the one reality I have found in this strange disorder of existence ... You cannot change her by advertisement or clamour, nor stifle her in vulgarities ... things grow under your hands when you serve her, things that are permanent as nothing else is permanent in the whole life of man” (277). Even as his character has gone through the process of rejecting one set of fictions for the next and the next, the one thing George cannot seem to relinquish is his attachment to a discourse of mastery; his is unable to embrace “castration, alterity, and specularly” – subjective versions of masculinity that Silverman contends enable individuals to confront and negotiate lack in healthier ways. This incapacity is also the way in which George’s character ultimately fails as an analysand, whose success, according to Bracher, lies in the assumption of a position from which the subject can “produce a new master signifier, which amounts to an alteration of the ego ideal,” – this entails an altered sense of identity ... as well as new meanings and different values” (72). Though George has engaged in the analysis, he is not yet ready to leave the couch.

In fact, George’s “rejection” of consumer capitalism actually depends on the values upon which it is founded. Though George adopts science as if it is contingent upon, or a result of his

rejection of the “bunk” values of consumer capitalism, he – perhaps inadvertently – admits that he could not embrace the ideals of science as he has if it hadn’t been for Tono-Bungay in the first place. As Silverman notes, such a dramatic shift in identity and mode of desiring is unlikely, only because it is extremely difficult: “although the constitutive features of subjectivity are never entirely ‘fixed,’ neither are they in a state of absolute flux or ‘free play’; on the contrary, they are synonymous with the compulsion to repeat certain images and positionalities, which are relinquished only with difficulty” (6). George notes a “peculiar satisfaction that lies in a sustained research when one is not hampered by want of money ... You are free from the exasperating conflict with your fellow creatures altogether” (276). George’s participation in the highly profitable manipulation of the masses’ desires has enabled him to isolate himself from the intrusions of those desires altogether.

Thus it is fitting that George describes the battleship he builds as “stark and swift, irrelevant to most human interests” (394). George sees his creation as the antithesis of the “fatty degeneration” he’s leaving behind him in London as he sails out to sea to meet a squadron of war ships. On his way out, he criticizes consumerist London for its thousands who “use and do not replace,” then is oblivious enough to say in the same breath that his new ambition for building destroyers “has been an oddly complementary alternation of occupations” (388). The endeavor is perhaps more perfectly contiguous than complementary, as his character reveals that his interest is not solely in pure Science when he refers to a sale of the destroyer that did go through: he continues to contribute to the destruction of land, life, and resources on an even grander scale in pursuit of personal and national economic goals.

Silverman suggests that a turn to violence is often an instance of “the male subject – and,” she insists, “he is manifestly a *male* subject – renegotiates his relation to an event by shifting from passive to an active position” (57). This makes sense in George’s case when one

considers that the discourses and subjectivities of which he thought he had possession – which he thought he had mastered, all turned out to confound him: Wimblehurst betrayed him when he acted on his desire for Beatrice; Ewart revealed himself to be a bit of a fraud; Marion disappointed him by not being the One; and the Tono-Bungay enterprise took away almost all it had given him at the eleventh hour. George's narration depicts his character as one who has been acted upon, in many respects, so his worship of science and his subsequent investment in the creation of war machines offers him fictions that seem more loyal, more submissive to his will – a will that now seeks a more dramatic method by which to break through what has seemed like an impenetrable series of fictions. Similarly, Lears has noted that an “aura of violence sometimes clung to the quest for authenticity” (346), and Žižek likewise has suggested that “truth” “resides in the act of violent transgression,” and that the Real is characterized by “extreme violence” (6). Perhaps this sheds light on George's motivations; his chillingly conspicuous omission of any regard for the practical applications of his “purely” scientific work might lead one to believe that if the whole mess of London were to be obliterated by one of his destroyers, George would feel revitalized, as if he had finally come in contact with the Real.

The ambiguity of *Tono-Bungay's* final scene may be illuminated to some degree by an understanding of Wells's own ambivalence about violence. Others of his writings indicate that Wells sometimes viewed violence optimistically, embracing “the notion that war was a chastening opportunity to make a fresh start and recast international relations on saner lines,” and other times felt that such violence was “the inevitable resurgence of man's animality, a bestial outbreak of hatred and violence which could never be contained” (Hammond 57). Perhaps he envisioned George's exit in the destroyer as a suggestion that while consumer capitalism tends increasingly towards violence, this violence will at least have the potential to renew and reshape socioeconomic conditions.

Hammond observes that “the abiding impression of Wells’s fiction is of its ambivalence ... it would be difficult to name any of his novels which ends on a note of resolution. The characteristic ending of a Wells novel is a questioning, a deliberate ambiguity that is at once stimulating and disturbing” (162). This ambivalence maintains a presence in the ad-man novels that follow Wells’s *Tono-Bungay*. Even into the twenty-first century, literary inquiries into capitalism, advertising, art, and man’s place therein are equally, if not more, pressing; concrete answers are just as elusive, yet as the following chapters demonstrate, novelists from all walks of life have continued engage these questions time and time again.

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Chapter 2: The Ad-Man's Art, Lost in Advertising: Dreiser's Tortured "Genius"

E. S. Turner titles his chapter covering the period between 1890-1914 "America Takes the Lead," and indeed, though it was in Britain that advertising took many important first steps, advertising in the United States soon outpaced its British counterpart, taking the lead in innovation, magnitude, and professionalization. America as a site of uninhibited capitalist entrepreneurship had also taken hold of the British imagination, as evidenced by H.G. Wells's character, Edward Ponderevo, who frequently suggests that, if only he were in America, he would not have to struggle against repressive traditions that attempted to subdue his enterprising spirit. Complaining about his small English village whose residents have no interest in his capitalist ventures, Ponderevo proclaims, "I'd like to let a dozen young Americans loose into it – Then we'd see" (68).

Across the Atlantic, Theodore Dreiser offers one vision of the American ad man in his 1915 novel, *The "Genius."* The flourishing advertising scene which is the protagonist's eventual milieu is exemplary of the early twentieth-century transition in which individuals and merchants increasingly turned the task of publicity over to outside advertising agencies in the United States. Advertising agencies themselves, in the U.S. and abroad, were undergoing dramatic change: no longer merely scouting space in newspapers and magazines on behalf of merchants and manufacturers, "they were boasting now of their knowledge of world markets, and of the slogans and campaigns they had put across for delighted clients" (Turner 171). Accordingly, advertising had become a clearly defined profession in its own right. By the turn of the century, there were, in the U.S., schools devoted to teaching students how to write advertisements, professional organizations and societies of advertisers, as well as several trade journals dedicated exclusively to issues and innovations affecting the practice of advertising (172).

Amidst this process during which advertising splintered off into an independent commercial entity, Dreiser's *The "Genius"* traces the development of a character who embodies a troubled merger between spheres that remain distinct in *Tono Bungay* – the sphere of the artist and the sphere of the ad man. This merging is indicative of a trend that will follow literary portrayals of the ad man throughout the rest of the century, a trend that highlights and explores an apparent paradox: while the practice of advertising is central to maintaining a consumer capitalist order, many of its most essential practitioners linger on the very fringes of that order, waffling between resistance and complicity. Of course, not all – not even most – people who have worked (or are working) in advertising fit this description, but it is certainly significant that this is the specific figure of advertising that has intrigued so many literary imaginations. As is evident in the case of Dreiser and his successors, some twentieth-century novelists have felt an affinity with or at least an interest in the position of the ad man: oftentimes an artist seeking an avenue that will enable him to practice his craft and pay his bills in the same lifetime, an avenue that frequently requires tricky negotiations between persistent commercial demands and a desire for freedom to create one's own autonomous works of art.

F. O. Matthiessen states without reservation that *The "Genius"* "is Dreiser's poorest novel" (159). He pans the novel further, claiming that, "as a whole," it "contains unquestionably some of Dreiser's worst writing" (164). Though I will argue that *The "Genius"* has more merit than Matthiessen is willing to grant, few critics would be inclined to disagree with his evaluation of the novel¹ – though it perhaps adds some perspective to Matthiessen's comment to consider

¹ Though most critics agree that *The "Genius"* does indeed include some of Dreiser's clumsiest writing, Richard B. Hovey and Ruth S. Ralph praise it for "the quantity and quality of emotion it holds, the breadth and depth of experience pressed into it, and the comprehensiveness of its criticism of life" (169); Jackson Lears credits the novel for its "powerful witness to want" (*Cambridge Companion* 63); Miriam Gogol describes his novels as "moving and powerful human documents" (95), and Thomas Riggio accords it a "central place in Dreiser's work."

that, of Dreiser's many novels, *The "Genius"* is the only one to which Matthiessen dedicates an entire chapter.

One of the reasons that, despite its lack of artistry, *The "Genius"* holds so much interest for Matthiessen – as Dreiser's biographer – is that it is an intensely autobiographical novel. As such, it is also especially relevant for the project at hand because it is a fictionalization of the struggles that Dreiser himself encountered in his attempts to develop and express himself as an artist in a socioeconomic environment that, in his eyes, deferred to the demands of the capitalist market almost without exception. And Dreiser was certainly not immune to the calls of capitalist ambition and luxurious living – in fact, this contributed a great deal to his suffering. Miles Orvell cites commonly made historical distinctions in order to suggest that American culture in the early twentieth century was noticeably more divided between “the high arts and popular culture, between spiritual values and materialistic ambitions, between the world of art and the world of business,” and claims that “few modern writers lived as deeply in *both* realms as Theodore Dreiser.” Indeed, Dreiser was himself an artist and “intimately connected with the art scene in New York City” as a connoisseur and a journalist, and yet, when his career as a novelist could no longer sustain him, Dreiser “worked with great success in the publishing business, rising eventually to direct three popular women's magazines for the Butterick Publishing Company” (127). In order to explore the role of the artist in an American marketplace in his fiction, Dreiser aligns his literary doppelgänger more closely with the advertising industry than he was in his own life: as a figure that embodies both the confluence and conflict between creativity and capitalism, the transposition from editor to ad man makes a lot of sense.

Colin Campbell argues that this seeming paradox – an identity conflict that emerges in the character of the ad man – does make sense, and is in fact the logical product of the very forces that set modern consumer capitalism in motion. Campbell suggests that, in the United

States, the romanticism so frequently associated with the artistic “type,” who tends to reject tradition and established social and commercial conventions in favor of a bohemian lifestyle, is not simply an antithesis to a more mainstream Puritan ethic that supports capitalist production, but is in fact a secularized evolution of and complement to the older Puritan ethic. This revision of the relationship between the two existential ideologies explains what Campbell describes as “one of the central conundrums of cultural history” – the fact that the consumer revolution of eighteenth-century England was propelled by the same middle-class population whose devotion to Puritan ideals would seemingly condemn gratuitous indulgence in luxury consumption (31). As such, romanticism serves many of the same capitalistic ends as does the Puritan ethic (though like the Puritan ethic outlined by Weber, such service to capitalism was certainly never a stated intent of its advocates or adherents). Thus the two – as they are manifest in popular culture and ways of being – may seem opposed in ideology, but work together in the social construction of individuals to perpetuate “the spirit of modern consumerism” which is so central to late capitalism in general. Thomas Frank and David Brooks make similar points as they both describe the ways in which since the 1960s, ambition-driven capitalist culture has embraced and incorporated into its practices the romantic ideologies of rebellion, nature, eccentricity, and creativity. While Wells had depicted these tendencies as manifest in separate characters ideologically at odds with one another to represent a socioeconomic milieu in which art and commerce remained incommensurate, Dreiser’s protagonist in *The “Genius”* is both an artist and an advertiser, a marriage indicative of cultural shifts supporting a dominant fiction – “the ideological reality through which [individuals] ‘ideally’ live both the symbolic order and the mode of production” (Silverman 2) – that works to reconcile art and advertising, largely by subsuming the former into the latter.

Dreiser was no stranger to the ideological conflict between art and the capitalist marketplace, and both his real-life struggles and his oeuvre demonstrate that what Campbell describes on paper as a relatively harmonious coexistence between the drive to work and earn money within a system of capitalist production and the desire to pursue daydreams and artistic inclinations can in real life be devastatingly painful and tumultuous. Throughout his youth and periodically throughout his adult life, Dreiser had firsthand experience of genuine want – food, clothing, and shelter were oftentimes difficult or impossible for his family to procure. He was continually plagued by a desire for a comfortable life, displaying what Lears describes as a “lifelong obsession with money and material comfort” that was “rooted in the wretched poverty of his boyhood” in the Midwest.

Dreiser’s older brother Paul was the only member of the family to escape poverty, and his path to prosperity reminds us that, though advertising was evolving into a modern industry, the ways of the 19th-century medicine man were still employed by some enterprising individuals. When Dreiser was seven years old, Paul found his fortune by joining “the medicine show troupe of the Lightning Liniment Company” (Lears 274, Mathiessen 11). Dreiser grew up in awe and envy of the airs and accoutrements of luxury that surrounded his brother and wanted the same for himself; however, Dreiser chose to pursue his fortune by different means, as a journalist, novelist, editor, and publisher. When his now canonical *Sister Carrie* failed, Dreiser fell into financial and emotional despondency until he was revitalized – and dramatically changed – by his initiation to and rise in the world of publishing. When he returned to literature, Dreiser’s struggles as an artist, a media man, and a lover emerged in *The “Genius,”* the novel in which he turns from the naïve shopper’s hollow rise to fame and fortune in *Sister Carrie* to the much more tumultuous ascendancy of Eugene Witla – an artist, whose passion is painting and whose fortune is found in advertising.

Like Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, *The "Genius"* narrates the development of its protagonist from an early age in great detail. As Shawn St. Jean points out, "as a *bildungsroman* the novel deals with growth and education, and thereby must spend considerable energy dramatizing Witla's shortcomings. Thus the 'novel of education' functions in the double sense: while exhibiting the developing career of its own lead character, it schools the reader in the ideals and limitations of the code followed by that character" (42). I will add that, because *The "Genius"* does not conclude with the protagonist having overcome or even improved upon his shortcomings, this novel gives more emphasis to the "limitations of the code" – the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism in which Eugene struggles – than to the ability of the individual to negotiate within those limitations successfully.

Because Dreiser's novel seeks to explain the development of *artistic* ability amidst a culture of capitalism, his work also falls into a more specific category of *bildungsroman*, the *künstlerroman*. In keeping with the characteristics of this sub-genre, *The "Genius"* follows the protagonist "through several stages of spiritual, social, and psychological development" and depicts his confrontations with "a series of opposing forces, conflicts of existing values, and ambiguities of ideals and reality" as he seeks to "define" and "express" a particular artistic individuality (Seret 1). However, the trajectory of Eugene Witla's artistic development departs from the *künstlerroman* model in a couple of significant ways. Priscilla Perkins goes so far as to contend that "*The 'Genius'* is a *Künstlerroman* with very little *Kunst*" (16), and it is true that, though Eugene does reject "external influences such as family, religion, and country," as is typical of the genre, it is unclear that in *The "Genius"* that these rejections are replaced by a "conscious commitment to art" as is the case in other *künstlerromans* (Seret 1). Rather, readers will find that Eugene's character rejects the older traditions of family and religion for art *only* insofar as it is consistent with the larger ideologies of modern consumer capitalism. In this

sense, Eugene is not the socially rebellious hero of the typical *künstlerroman*; rather, as Seret suggests, he is a conformist (131), testing commercial art as a mode of conformity.

Eugene's character is defined and motivated in many ways by the simultaneous impulses to capitalistic ascension and dreamy artistic ambitions that Campbell describes. And though Eugene's exploits illustrate the assertions Campbell makes about the ways in which the romantic impulse feeds the consumer capitalist drive, they also demonstrate that, while romanticism may serve the ends of consumer capitalism, the latter makes the former next to impossible. The purely selfish and transient modes of desiring that Eugene develops as a subject of a modern, urban capitalist order render him incapable of focusing or maintaining his desire. As the following will demonstrate, his character is unable to recognize or reciprocate the desire of any Other, and as a result, he is incapable of engaging in human relationships and equally incapable of sublimating his desire in order to propel his artistic ambitions.

Though scholars such as Robert Forrey, Miriam Gogol and Leonard Cassuto have approached *The "Genius"* from psychoanalytic perspectives, all have focused exclusively on the ways in which methods of psychoanalysis illuminate Eugene's relationships with men, women, and his own ego; however, none have examined the ways in which the problems of desire, sublimation and subjectivity depicted by Eugene's character are symptomatic of his engagement in those relationships within the specific context of consumer capitalism. Richard Hovey complains that "the chief structural flaws of *The 'Genius'* ... are errors of proportion"; when "Dreiser entangles his hero in office politics, entrepreneurial personalities, corporate manipulations, and what-not," Hovey feels that these are "matters which are not all of them tightly relevant to the tale" (179). But I would strongly disagree: the crucial and often contradictory tendencies of Eugene's adult life as an artist, a lover, a dreamer, and an advertiser are inextricable from one another and their mutual subjection to the ideologies of consumer

capitalism. Dreiser suffered because of his own desires; those he had formed amidst a family dynamic shaped by a tyrannical father who had failed in his entrepreneurial efforts and a convention-shunning mother who did not usher him easily into an adult world organized around ideals of patriarchy and capitalism. He wrote, “I was born to want too much, and to long too much” (Gogol 100), and for both Dreiser and his protagonist in *The “Genius”* this struggle to form and act on desire within the particular cultural context of modern capitalism is an identity-forming and altering ongoing process. Kaja Silverman makes this point when she writes that, “Since a crucial part of learning how to desire is the assumption of a desiring position, fantasy would also seem to involve the insertion of the subject into a particular syntax or tableau, and so to play an important part within the formation of identity” (6). Similarly, as Leonard Cassuto rightly points out, “desire has many faces in the work of Dreiser,” and “ultimately, it is responsible for identity, the way that characters see themselves, and the way that we see them” (112).

The beginnings of Eugene’s troubled desires are at least partially present in Dreiser’s narration of his youth. Because *The “Genius”* pays special attention to Eugene’s early years, and also because the novel is largely autobiographical, the narrative lends itself well to a psychoanalytic approach. But in using this method, one must take into account the complicated relationship between Dreiser’s own history, his fictionalization of his life, and the cultural contexts – real and fictionalized – in which these lives have been lived and imagined. Seret notes that it is typical of the *künstlerroman* to contain great quantities of autobiographical material, and she describes the dialectic that often emerges as follows: “as the artist-protagonist travels through various experiences, the artist-author voyages simultaneously alongside him, but does so in the opposite direction; the artist-author travels from present to past, instead of past to present, and in doing so revisits his youth.” She goes on to suggest that, “similar to a patient

recumbent on a psychiatrist's couch, the author of the *Künstlerroman* attempts to analyze his youth" (4). And indeed, while the narration of Eugene Witla's exploits may be read as a testament to the difficulty of desire under the dominant fictions of consumer capitalism, *The "Genius"* also marks the point of Dreiser's own entry into a process of self-analysis, as he went on to spend almost a decade writing various autobiographical pieces (Riggio 133).

Kaja Silverman uses the term "fantasmatic" to describe "an unconscious fantasy or group of related fantasies which underlies a subject's dreams, symptoms, repetitive behavior, and daydreams," and suggests that it is also "the best point of entry into authorial subjectivity" (161). With this in mind, an examination of the aspects of his own upbringing that Dreiser chose to fictionalize is very revealing. In this autobiographical novel, Dreiser is unafraid to portray some of the least flattering episodes of his life with little or no costuming, and such unflinching honesty throws the fictionalization of his youth into even greater relief. One of the most dramatic diversions Dreiser took from the facts of his own life occurs in the family history he constructs for his protagonist. Rather than the controlling, puritanical German immigrant father and the circumstances of dire poverty that Dreiser contended with as a youth, Eugene Witla enjoys a comfortable Anglicized childhood. Eugene's father's name bears no trace of disparaged ethnic origins, and Thomas Jefferson Witla, though not wealthy, earned "nearly two thousand a year" as a successful sewing machine sales and repairman (9).

Thomas Riggio rightfully notes that these particular fictionalizations "suggest intense repressions" (121); given the ways in which Dreiser suffered so intensely under his father's tyrannical moralizing and how shamed and burdened he was by near-constant poverty, his recasting of the facts of his family life and early material circumstances can be read as a wish-fulfillment in narrative form. Robert Forrey suggests that Dreiser's negative experiences with his father stunted his ability to move from the childish oral phase to the "phallic phase in which

the boy begins to assume the characteristics associated with the father” (343). As his father was emotionally and oftentimes physically unavailable to young Dreiser, Dreiser committed a cardinal sin against a dominant fiction underwritten by faith in the penis as phallus: “instead of positively identifying with his father, Dreiser rejected him as a weakling and a failure” (343), and continues to do so in his fiction as he re-writes the father figure as a successful small-town business man. Additionally, Riggio contends that “Dreiser found it necessary to reverse the patterns of his family life by evoking a solid American heritage for his artist” because he “simply could not conceive of the American artist-hero sharing the guilt-filled ethnic background he himself knew” (121): the dominant fiction with which Dreiser is grappling relies heavily on ideals of a very particular version of masculinity: wealthy, white and Anglo.

Dreiser’s conception of his protagonist and his family is suggestive of a dominant fiction that, in addition to vindicating art and artists only in limited, commercialized forms, also – or especially – does not include immigrants or poverty in its images of capitalist success and consumer citizenship. Having been so painfully privy to failures of masculinity under these circumstances, Dreiser revisits this trauma in his fiction, but in an understandably conflicted way: he seems to want to re-write his own life as a story of one who, as an outsider-artist, challenges the dominant fiction that had refused success to both him and his father, but at the same time, *The “Genius”* narrates the protagonist’s rise to capitalist grandeur as an advertising man who complies perfectly and gladly with that dominant fiction. This subjective conflict may be a fictional but accurate reflection of the formative influences of Dreiser’s own life in which his father coincided with phallic Law as a perfect patriarchal tyrant, but could not sustain his equation with that law as an agent of capitalism. In his novel, Dreiser simultaneously rejects and glorifies the dominant fiction of patriarchal capitalism: his hero wants to prove that he can be successful within the system, but he also wants to reject the system. Eugene’s struggles as a split

subject seeking to recover that part of his desire which is repressed by the dominant fiction shape the rest of the novel.

One literary effect of Dreiser's fictionalization of his family history is that the reader is left without a plausible subjective foundation for the adult Eugene Witla becomes. Riggio explains, "Unlike the Dreiser of the autobiographies whose wayward family exposed him to moral ambiguities and uncertainties, Witla's virtuous middle-class beginnings offer no psychological basis for his intense desires or promiscuous behavior. Nor is Witla's poverty complex [or] his fear of failure convincing against the background Dreiser gives him" (121). With all trepidation in regards to the dangers of biographical fallacy, I contend that full comprehension of Eugene's character requires the reader to step outside the text of the novel, into the facts of Dreiser's biography.

One of the things that Eugene's character does actually have in common with his creator as well as other fictional ad-man characters is his small town beginning and his subsequent flight to the city. And, as was eventually the case with Wells's Ponderevo, and as will be even more emphatically so among subsequent fictional ad-men, the movement from country to city is, for Eugene, permanent and irreversible. Once these characters enter into urban complexes of capitalism and desire, there is no going back. Jackson Lears credits Dreiser's depiction of Eugene's archetypal move from the country to the city for being so sensitive to the crucial category of desire. He writes that, "Dreiser implicitly recognized the emotional dimension long missing from textbook accounts of 'the rise of the city' – the dimension of desire: for sensuous pleasure and luxury, for the intense experience that seemed lacking in everyday life, or at least some fleeting facsimile of ecstasy" (63). Indeed, for Dreiser, cities offered approbation of desire and access to objects of desire that were denied him by his father and the poverty he endured with his family. Eugene's fictionalized case is less severe, but his parents and rural Alexandria

in general are governed by a Puritan ethic of hard work, practicality, and simple living that does not allow much for desires in excess of need. It is only in the city that Eugene's character can pursue his non-utilitarian career in art, where he can become sexually promiscuous, and where he can see and surround himself with luxury consumer goods.

Once he is indoctrinated into urban living, having been given the opportunity to formulate and act on a series of ambitious desires, Eugene's rural youth becomes an idealized past at best, and his brief visits to his hometown reveal that rural living is now an impossibility for him. As Priscilla Perkins notes (and as was the case for George Ponderevo once he established himself in London), Eugene "constantly locates his own social and evolutionary value in the present or the future, rather than in any relation to the past" (18). Upon his first visit home, after only having been in Chicago for a few months, Eugene already feels removed from this once familiar milieu: "as Eugene stood in the kitchen watching his mother fry a big steak and make biscuits and gravy in honor of his coming, he felt that he did not belong to this world any more. It was smaller, narrower than he had ever thought. The town had seemed smaller as he had come through its streets, the houses, too; and yet it was nice. The yards were sweet and simple, but countrified. His father, running a sewing machine business, seemed tremendously limited" (58-9). Though Eugene is still able to recognize some of the quaint charms of country living, he does so condescendingly, and feels that, in regards to both style of living and manner of thinking, his rural hometown and others like it are too small to contain his intellect, tastes, and ambition. His character is cast as an outsider looking in, a tourist or a foreigner who "attracted considerable attention by strolling about, his tall, spare, graceful figure and forceful profile being an unusual sight to the natives" (115). This passage points towards Dreiser's fantasies of assimilation with an Anglo ideal as he invokes images of Anglo-European colonization, Eugene clearly fitting the role of the finely-sculpted civilizer among rough-hewn barbarians, who he

imagines are amazed by his physical difference and assumed superiority – a perspective George Ponderevo also adopted once he had left village life and become acclimated to urban dwelling. Eugene eventually makes the comment that, “After London and Paris, Chicago and New York, the quiet streets of his old hometown were a joke” (270).

Dreiser lays the groundwork for Eugene’s metropolitan proclivities in his depiction of Eugene’s youth. Just as the small village of Wimblehurst cannot sustain Ponderevo’s overflow of entrepreneurial spirit, the slow-paced, conservative town of Alexandria, Illinois does not suit Eugene Witla’s dreamy, ambitious nature – both men are cast as driven by desires too great to be contained by small towns and conventional ways. The reader may guess from the start that Eugene’s destiny lies not in the rural, laboring town of Alexandria, when, as a youth, he is described as having a “shapely but not aggressive chin,” “a curious delicacy when he smiled,” and “a weak stomach and semi-anaemic condition” – a young man hardly cut out for vigorous rural living. Furthermore, “he was not very strong,” but “moody” – “he had emotion, fire, longings, that were concealed behind a wall of reserve”; “he was shy, proud, sensitive, and very uncertain of himself” (11). Eugene demonstrates little interest in his schoolwork, has few friends, and no hobbies; he occasionally draws, but he complains that he has no real talent for it and thus it does not hold his attention. He is a dreamer, a romantic, and a lollygagger. “A soaring buzzard poised in speculative flight” or “the wonder of a snowy cloud” may capture his attention indefinitely, but the menial, the useful, and the necessary escape his concern altogether: “practical matters were generally without significance to him” (12). Clearly Eugene is not predisposed, nor has he felt called upon, to take up farming or an artisanal trade; it seems quite unlikely that he could or would take over his father’s work selling and repairing sewing machines or any other such traditional small-town occupation, and in fact, it is not long before

Eugene, feeling cramped and bored in Alexandria, takes his meager nine dollars of savings and follows the “wonder of the city, which drew him like a magnet” to Chicago (34).

Clearly, Eugene’s character is drawn as a romantic “type” rather than a romantic intellectual in the tradition of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and indeed, Campbell makes an important distinction between romanticism as it was outlined and theorized by a small intellectual elite, and romanticism as it was (and to some degree still is) practiced more widely as “a general cultural movement” (180) that is not so much a stated philosophy as “a mode of feeling that does not lend itself easily to systemization” (181). It is this conception of popular romanticism that is most useful in understanding Eugene’s character, for though he embodies romantic behavior and aspires to some romantic ideals, to correlate his behavior or aspirations to any systematic ideology or coherent ethic is a doomed endeavor – this is precisely why he suffers. Nonetheless, Dreiser’s depiction of Eugene’s boyhood does establish Eugene as a character with romantic inclinations, one in whom “imagination predominates over reason,” one who “tends toward ... individualism, revolt, escape, melancholy, and fantasy,” and, as we will see, a deep-seated belief in his own “unique and personalized ... ‘genius’” (Campbell 181-82). However, Eugene’s character resists neat categorization as a classic romantic, at least partially because, while still a youth living in Alexandria, his whimsical flights of fancy are disrupted by a mandate to acquaint himself with the pragmatic tasks of earning money and learning a trade.

At his father’s insistence, Eugene gets a job – an experience much opposed to his preference for loafing and daydreaming, but which eventually catalyzes his desire to move beyond his small home town. Just as advertising itself largely got its start in newspapers, Eugene – ad-man-to-be – begins here as well. He apprentices as a typesetter for a local Alexandria paper, which, typical of the time, featured local news, fiction, and medicine ads (24). Eugene quickly determines that he does “not want to be a typesetter or a reporter, or indeed anything

much in connection with a country newspaper,” and, in fact, according to his supervisor, the skills required for reporting and interviewing seem beyond his grasp. But it does happen that “the theory of advertising began to dawn on him,” and Eugene soon develops a rudely critical eye. He laments that the newspaper ads are dull and unchanging, and without illustration; “Eugene had seen and in a way studied the ads in the magazines. They seemed much more fascinating to him. Why couldn’t newspaper ads be different?” he wondered (26). His apt observation of advertising strategy will figure into his eventual success in the advertising industry, but much more importantly, this scene depicts the social order of consumer capitalism and the desires it sanctions, condensed into the microcosm of print ads, beckoning Eugene in a way that the small town paper and the small town it speaks for cannot.

Not only is advertising the only facet of the newspaper business that piques Eugene’s interest as a possible profession, advertising – functioning to sell a complete socioeconomic ideology as well as individual products – also incites in him a more generalized longing for wealth and a future beyond the city limits of Alexandria. Eugene’s capacity for and tendency to imaginative speculation (a capacity that Campbell argues was actually nurtured by popular romanticism and constitutes yet another way in which the ideology of romanticism inadvertently buttressed consumer capitalism) allows him to imaginatively invest himself into these advertisements and internalize them as fodder for ambitious fabrications: while working on the paper, “he read ... local advertisements as he set them up, and dreamed of what the world might have in store for him” (26). Because an important part of the fantasy of capitalism that the ads put forth is access to wealth, it is no surprise that his daydream transitions immediately to an expression of materialistic envy: from the newspaper office, Eugene could see “George Anderson ... going up the street with the air of someone who would never need to work ... he thought it must be nice to be rich. So he dreamed” (26). In this scene, we see that Eugene’s

romantic imagination is spurred on by the ads that are so effective in prompting desire and longing. Though here it is a relatively generalized longing for participation in a specific dominant fiction rather than desire for a particular product, such longing is certainly a cornerstone for the perpetuation of the consumer culture supported by that dominant fiction – one in which generalized desire is repeatedly redirected to specific consumer objects which promise, at least temporarily, to satisfy that desire.

When Eugene moves to Chicago, he takes with him vague notions of art along with his aspirations to wealth, but he does not go anticipating sexual experience. However, sex is one of the first things he encounters upon his arrival, and solicitation and acquisition in this arena are the first skills he hones in the city. Looking back, we can see that what turns out to be Eugene's long and, for the reader, tedious, career as a consumer of alluring women also has its beginning in his Alexandria youth. At a relatively young age "he admired girls, – was mad about them, – but only those who were truly beautiful" (12). Then at the age of seventeen Eugene meets Stella, who, cool and aloof, is also "very fair ... with very blue eyes and a slender sylph-like body" (13) – despite his supposed indifference to much convention, for Eugene the "truly beautiful" falls squarely within the mainstream Anglo ideal. He is captivated by every nuance of her physical appearance and his attentions border on obsession. One evening he and Stella sit next to one another at dinner, and "if her lips moved he noted just how. When her teeth showed he thought they were lovely. A little ringlet on her forehead beckoned him like a golden finger" (17). They engage in a brief, immature romance; her attention is soon diverted by another boy, and Eugene is devastated. Though once he leaves Alexandria, he moves on to many other conquests, Eugene never quite overcomes the bitterness he felt at this initial slight. Coupled with Dreiser's deep love of the first woman in his life, his mother, whom he admired for her sensuality and indifference to conventions, and whose desires and despair affected him deeply (Matthiessen 7),

rejection from the first young woman to whom his fictional counterpart sought to transfer those feelings may be understood as having catalyzed Eugene's subsequent inability, as we will see, to entertain the desire of the Other in any degree of seriousness. This inability was perhaps generated during Eugene's early experiences of women and desire, but this fearful selfishness is only encouraged and intensified by his entry into urbanity, where capitalist ideology reigns without question.

Once Eugene has established himself in Chicago, and later, New York, his youthful inclinations to romance, advertising, and art evolve, merge, and conflict in a number of interesting ways. Eugene's stint as an ad man is a relatively short part of his lengthy narrative, but his behavior and desires throughout the entire novel continually embody in one way or another either the aims, effects, or strategies of advertising in general. Every aspect of his life – as an artist, as an executive, as a lover, and as a non-introspective individual – is an expression of his subjective allegiance to the master signifiers of consumer capitalism. For instance, the way in which his artistic coming-of-age hinges on his experiences of urban capitalism actually works perfectly to groom Eugene for his later occupation as an advertising artist and corporate executive. On the other hand, Eugene's romantic exploits are narratively structured as mutually exclusive to his commercial successes as an advertiser and publicist. When he is embroiled in ardent pursuit of a woman, his romantic endeavor feeds his creativity and his art, but not his wallet. When romantic pursuits are unavailable to him, or he has reached stasis with a particular woman, Eugene is incapable of painting, but is suddenly ambitious, driven, and successful in the realm of commerce – advertising in particular. His character seems unable to produce and consume simultaneously; his desires alternately drive and devour him, and he seems to have no control, no ability to regulate the tension between desire, satisfaction, and sublimation such that he could enjoy a life more moderately paced. Though the two – romance and commerce – are

polarized in the plot of the novel, the romanticism and aestheticism that determine Eugene's art and the relationships with the women he pursues seem to translate well from the realm of the romantic to the industry of advertising, and his vacillations between the two suggest that the drives to both feed off of one another.

Long before Eugene enjoys success as an artist, a writer, or an advertiser, he masters the language, words, and behaviors of the romantic lover, albeit in a most adolescent fashion. When he moves to Chicago, Eugene's appreciation for the female form increases both in scope and sensuality, and he discovers that, in general, "he love[s] women," and specifically, "the beauty of the curves of their bodies" (44). Though his discovery is largely a sexual awakening, his declaration resonates with his boyhood fascination with the purely aesthetic beauties of girls and women. Before long, Eugene meets his first adult girlfriend, Margaret Duff, a young woman who works for the laundry company for which he is a driver. She is also the first woman with whom he has a sexual relationship, and he finds himself to be not just an enthusiastic amateur, but actually traumatized by over-intense desire: "growing by what it fed on, his sex appetite became powerful. In a few weeks it had almost mastered him"; it was "disrupting and disorganizing" (44). Yet after only a few more weeks, Eugene's feelings have changed dramatically. He is no longer in awe of Margaret's feminine charms, but rather, "He knew that this girl he was trifling with could not hold him. She had lured him, but once lured, he was master ... He was beginning to feel that he could get along without her, – that he could find someone better" (44). And thus begins a pattern that Eugene's character will play out over and over throughout the novel. A beautiful woman incites Eugene's desire; he is overwrought with this desire until, one way or another, he convinces the woman to engage in a sexual relationship with him, after which disillusionment quickly sets in. The narrator recognizes this pattern, and also the fact that Eugene will remain blind to it and its implications: "had he been soundly

introspective, he would have seen that he was an idealist by temperament, in love with the aesthetic, in love with love, and that there was no permanent faith in him for anybody – except the impossible she” (105). As narrator of this passage, Dreiser is romanticizing an existential crisis. Like consumer desire for commodities which are designed to thrill with an initial burst of novelty then quickly become dull and disposable, the first blush of lust and affection quickly fades, and Eugene finds himself dissatisfied with one woman and in search of another, and, though he feels passionately about each pursuit of someone *new*, not once does he consider pursuing something *different*. And like Wells’s George Ponderevo, Eugene is seeking the *objet a* that he imagines will satisfy and exceed his desires, but lacks the insight to ask himself why he has been confronted with a series of failures in this pursuit.

As discussed earlier, Edward Ponderevo’s ability to relate to his wife and maintain a successful marriage declines in direct proportion to the increase in his success as a patent medicine mogul; Eugene Witla’s character, however, tends to view women as objects from the very start, perhaps indicating that the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism is even more firmly entrenched than in the days of *Tono-Bungay*, and this inability to engage in a human relationship that differs discernibly from a consumer/ commodity relation will be a key characteristic of fictional ad men that follow, as well. Modern consumer capitalism hinges on privileging male desire, and this dynamic is certainly reflected in Eugene’s relationships with women. Much like the emotions involved in commodity lust, and the appeals advertisers frequently use to incite such lust, Eugene’s attraction to his various lovers has little to do with who they are as individuals and what ideas, personalities, or sensibilities they might contribute to a relationship, and much to do with novelty, aesthetics, and imagination. The sheer number of women he pursues and the speed with which he becomes bored and disenchanted demonstrate Eugene’s taste for novelty.

However, there is an important distinction to be made by considering the way in which commodity lust is subject to gender: though it is of course not applicable to every instance of desire, I contend that modern consumer capitalism generates a masculine relationship to commodity desire that differs from a feminized relationship to commodity desire. For instance, the youth and beauty of the young women Eugene pursues are valuable to him primarily as vehicles to feed his imagination and enable him to idealize himself: “One of his weaknesses was that he was inclined to see much more in those he admired than was really there. He endowed them with the romance of his own moods” (356). Where women are concerned, Eugene sees beauty only in imagined perfections, shiny surfaces, and favorable reflections: “He worshipped beauty as beauty,” and wants nothing else besides constant affirmation of himself as deserving of that beauty: “He sought in women, besides beauty, good nature and sympathy; he shunned criticism and coldness, and was never apt to select as a sweetheart anyone who could outshine him either in emotion or rapidity or distinction of ideas” (75). Just as George Ponderevo loved Beatrice because “she made me not simply interested in her, but in myself” and he appreciated her because “she became an audience” (295), Eugene loves women *only* insofar as they are reflections of himself. Eugene’s ineptness at entering into the desire of the Other is symptomatic of a capitalist order that depends so heavily upon a patriarchal phallic ideal. While the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism badgers women with constant suggestions as to what they should be buying in order to *be* desired (to maintain male desire, that is), that same fiction reminds men time and time again that they *are desired*, and thus entitled to satisfaction and affirmation of all their desires. This dynamic, taken to an extreme as it is in Eugene’s character, makes love impossible. Leonard Cassuto paraphrases Freud’s explanation of the relationship between ego and love: “love counteracts narcissism. A person who loves (... one who makes another the object of one’s own libidinal energy) forfeits part of his narcissism, and is therefore humbled.

To restore the balance of ego-energy, a lover needs to be loved in return.” We might then reasonably conclude that a refusal to forfeit narcissism results in an incapacity for love, and indeed, Cassuto remarks of Dreiser’s protagonists generally that they “consistently direct their libidinal energy away from other people, with the result that it can only be satisfied from within” (119) – Eugene’s character is only capable of self-love.

The influence of a consumer capitalist order that privileges selfishness and the male ego also helps to explain Eugene’s habit of maintaining an aesthetic distance from all pathos that is not his own – Eugene is incapable of feeling sorry for anyone other than himself. One of the most poignant examples of such egoism in occurs when Angela’s sister writes Eugene a letter begging him to come back and marry Angela rather than let her wallow in suicidal depression. Upon receiving the letter, Eugene finds that “the tragedy of this situation appealed to him perhaps as much from the dramatic as from the personal point of view” (171). As he stands by a lakeside, he finds that “it was romantic to think that in such a lake, if he were unkind, would Angela be found. By such a dark as was now descending would all her bright dreams be submerged. It would be beautiful as a romance. He could imagine a great artist like Daudet or Balzac making a great story out of it” (185). Eugene can imagine a man being admired for his artistic rendition of the situation, but he cannot for a moment imagine Angela’s suffering. And when Eugene is bored with one woman and ready to pursue another, he aestheticizes the entire relationship, removing the human element almost altogether. He glosses over Ruby’s despair at being abandoned, remarking that “he cared for her as one might care for a girl in a play or a book ... she – her life, her surroundings, her misfortune in loving him, constituted an artistic composition. He thought he might be able to write a poem about it some time” (136), but what he is not able to do is confront Ruby, end their relationship face-to-face, or express any sympathy – much less empathy – for her sadness.

Given Eugene's narcissism as a courtier and a beau, one might expect – or even hope – that he would encounter some difficulty finding women who agree to worship him on his terms, but luckily for him, Eugene has little trouble finding beautiful young women who are thoroughly inculcated by a dominant fiction designating women as objects bearing shiny, reflective surfaces, and so are as devoted to superficial beauty as he is. For instance, Eugene appreciates Margaret Duff because she “told him many pretty things about himself. She had complimented his looks, his total appearance, his taste in the selection of particular things” (46). He is deeply flattered by, and eventually married to Angela, because “hers was a loving disposition and Eugene was the be all and end all of her love.” To Angela, Eugene is a “figure of heroic proportions ... His talent was divine fire.” She is convinced that “no one could know as much as Eugene,” and “no one could be as artistic ... he was a man of genius” (199). For Eugene, the beauty of these women lies in their capacity and willingness to reinforce his own belief in his imaginary self – his “genius.” What appeared in *Tono-Bungay* as a parody of capitalism is, less than ten years later, depicted in all seriousness: modern consumer capitalism not only privileges male desire, but invokes a fantasy of ridiculously inflated male prowess and desirability to stake out the place of male desiring subject.

Though Eugene's character often delights in pursuing his every whim amidst a cultural milieu that encourages him to do so, his selfish impulses do face a challenge: that of the superego. Richard Hovey suggests that Eugene's character is in fact largely defined by repeated attempts to “gain acceptance by a matriarchal superego,” and goes on to contend that in “*The Genius*,” the superego is “regularly ... objectified and dramatized in an authoritative mother figure” (171). Hovey's reading is apt, and it seems clear that this dynamic was borne out of Dreiser's own life: Dreiser's failure to identify positively with his father led to an especially deep attachment to his mother: “by his own admission,” Dreiser “became a ‘mother's boy’”

(Forrey 343). Dreiser maintained at least some allegiance to a matriarchal ideal, as evidenced by his comment on Queen Victoria's reign. He said "Wherever the motherly quality has predominated in a ruler the result has been beneficial. That quality seems to be as conducive to growth and development when placed over a nation as it is when placed in control of a home" (345). In two previous novels, Dreiser had identified with a female protagonist: Carrie Meeber and then Jennie Gerhardt; Forrey speculates that, "Dreiser's first two novels must have made him aware at some level of the serious psychological disadvantages of identifying with women in a world in which, politically as well as psychologically, commercially as well as sexually, men come first" (348). This may well be the case, because, though *The "Genius"* features a male protagonist, he is still searching for a matriarchal figure that will subject him to a Law that acts as an alternative to the patriarchal norm. Forrey concurs, though Eugene's pursuit of this figure is not uncomplicated: "in marrying Angela Blue, Eugene reveals the Oedipal aim behind his relationships with women. Eugene had married [her] partly because she had behaved prior to the marriage like a sexually tabooed object, i.e. like the sexually unavailable mother." Hovey also points out that in each of Eugene's romantic relationships "there are three, rather than two, characters: the boy, the girl, and the authority," and that in six of the affairs, that authority is a mother (172). Furthermore, in the end, it is Suzanne's mother who is the agent of Eugene's downfall (181). Forrey characterizes this pattern as a "fateful act of regression" because Eugene "had unknowingly put himself in a situation which reinforces the castration anxiety that he had frantically been trying to escape from in his endless pursuit of other women" (352), but I want to suggest that Eugene's attraction to relationships that include a powerful mother figure results from an unconscious drive to release himself from frustrating patterns of consumerist, patriarchal desire by subjecting himself to a matriarchal law that, perhaps for Dreiser much more than for Eugene, recalls the deep affection and subversive rule of his mother. As we will see later in the

chapter, although Suzanne's mother does indeed precipitate the destruction of Eugene's romance with her eighteen-year-old daughter as well as of his lucrative position in publishing, she is also the one who is most effective at freeing him from the bonds under which he suffered and giving him a chance to re-formulate himself, to reconsider his life, and create allegiances with new master signifiers.

In the meantime, Eugene's character riots in the masculine privilege granted by the dominant fiction, and despite the many ways in which he is an explicit conformist, he imagines himself as a radical subject who, by virtue of his artistic intellect and talent, cannot be held to conventional codes of behavior. In the few instances in which Eugene feels a twinge of guilt or doubt, he reassures himself by resorting to the romantic trope of individual exceptionalism: contemplating "love of public respect, private honor, and morality," Eugene decides that "he was glad to see them, believed they had a place in society, but was uncertain whether they bore any fixed or important relationship to him" (118). On another occasion, he thinks to himself, "artists were different from the rank and file of mankind," and consequently, "with Eugene convention meant nothing at all ... his sense of evil and good was something which the ordinary person would not have comprehended" (65), thus absolving himself from his own fleeting feelings of guilt and adopting what he believes is a superior philosophical position from which he can dismiss the provincial morality of those who frown upon his behavior. Contemplating the future of his career as an artist, Eugene maintains – despite all evidence to the contrary – that, "I'm not an ordinary man and I'm not going to live an ordinary life" (572). Dreiser seems to have shared this fantasy with his protagonist, as he believed "the conflict in American history (as in his own biography) was the struggle between the custodians of a conventional moral code and the rebels whose yearnings destabilized it" (Lears 64). But, far from establishing himself as a brave rebel challenging the status quo, Eugene's character more effectively expresses the discontents and the

concomitant incapacity to alter them bred by the dominant fiction underwriting that status quo. His ineffectiveness is a result of another of the ways in which tenets of romanticism coincide with paradigms of consumer capitalism: both celebrate individualism and exceptionalism. However, as many have observed, capitalism harnesses the ideology of the unique individual to consuming practices that promise to express that uniqueness, but which much more effectively engineer an individual's conformity to consumer culture and the behaviors and subjectivities that must be maintained in order to guarantee participation in that culture. Eugene's character, despite what he believes, is no exception: his career choices and consuming habits indicate that his artistic ambitions are wholly subservient to a more powerful desire to meet the benchmarks of the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism.

As the above indicates, Eugene's relationships with women fit into this paradigm as well, as they are largely based on a process of objectification. *The "Genius"* makes this explicit on several occasions: regarding his friend Miriam, Eugene reflects that, "He almost felt as if he owned her room and herself, as if all that she was – her ideas, her friends, her experiences – belonged to him" (153). Similarly, when he is sure of Margaret Duff's devotion to him, and thus is decidedly ready to move on, the narrator notes that Eugene now "had felt what it was to own a woman." Interestingly, Eugene's immediately subsequent sentiment is "sudden dissatisfaction with his job ... for ten dollars a week was no sum wherewith any self-respecting youth could maintain himself" (46). As long as Margaret Duff is the best Eugene can afford to "own" on his current salary as a laundry driver, he is motivated to seek more lucrative employment, so that he may upgrade the caliber of women available to him. And indeed, when it comes to pass that Eugene can count himself as one of New York City's wealthy socialites, he easily attracts the beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter of a wealthy widow. Entirely obsessed with young Suzanne, Eugene worships her not as a paragon of human beauty, humor, and intelligence –

though she embodies those things, but rather “she was somewhat like a delightful toy to him and he held her as reverently in awe as though she were a priceless vase” (555). “Toy” is an apt comparison on several levels; not only does Eugene regard Suzanne as an object to be played with for his own pleasure, but when he meets resistance in his pursuit, his lingering immaturity and powerful sense of entitlement are obvious as he reacts like a small child who is jealous of his plaything. When Susan’s mother asks Eugene to end the adulterous affair, he will not for a moment consider relinquishing the object of his affection. To Mrs. Dale, he replies, “You are asking me something that is utterly impossible ... I must have her and I will. She’s mine! She’s mine! She’s mine!” he yells, and the tantrum is not over: “His thin, lean hands clenched and he clicked his teeth. ‘Mine, mine, mine!’ he muttered” (621). In the cosmos of consumer capitalism, male desire is not to be thwarted or denied.

During a rare moment of critical commentary regarding his protagonist, the narrator suggests that Eugene is incapable of recognizing the traits that heavily determine his character. One such trait is that Eugene is in love with packaging – “he was easily touched by exterior conditions,” the narrator tells us (102), and this is not only the case with women, but this also characterizes his appreciation of architecture, industry, street crowds, home décor, art, and even job prospects. Lears notes this as a feature of Dreiser’s protagonists in general: “From *Sister Carrie* forward, surfaces reveal almost everything about Dreiser’s characters” (74). For Eugene, all these surfaces contain nothing but the reflection of his highly individualistic dreams and the promises that they will come true, which in turn provokes Eugene to pursue people, opportunities, and material things as if they were all of a kind. In fact, and perhaps most importantly, what Eugene seems to desire is to enter into a genuine mode of desire, but he fails at this repeatedly, longing for, rather than possessing, an object that sparks him. Once he possesses

the desired woman or car or apartment, it quickly loses its appeal – there is little or no satisfaction in actual possession; for Eugene and so many other consumers, the bittersweet sensation of wanting stands in as the next-best thing, the only available alternative to productive desire.

Eugene's inability to recognize – or reluctance to alter – the quick-paced pattern of desire and disillusionment in which he is trapped is illustrated by his absolute certainty that each new job and every woman he meets is the one that will make him happy forever. Never the hardened womanizer in this respect, Eugene enters into each and every new pursuit genuinely and absolutely convinced that this particular woman is the unique and final answer to all of his wishes and desires. As he falls in love with Angela, he says to himself in all seriousness, "Nothing more lovely will ever come again" (133). While he is engaged to Angela, he falls in love with a beautiful singer, Christina, and during the time they spend together, "Eugene reached a curious exaltation of spirit different from anything he had experienced before" (159), and "he concluded that she was the most wonderful being he had ever known" (161). After he is married to Angela, he meets young Frieda who prompts him to reflect that "the fact that he was married to Angela was a horrible disaster" (282) because "Frieda's face was ever before him, a haunting lure to love and desire" (284). Eugene subsequently has an affair with his landlady's daughter, Carlotta; when she "threw herself on him, kissed him sensuously scores of times, and whispered her desire and affection," Eugene realizes that it is in fact at this point that "he had never seen anything more lovely" (342). He later becomes infatuated with Suzanne, and Eugene attributes to her his feeling that "Life has opened anew for me. You are the solvent of my whole being ... I feel as though I had never lived until now" (540). Though the reader may wince at the triteness of Eugene's proclamations, there is no doubt that he is absolutely sincere in each of his testaments. Matthiessen condemns these passages of overwrought romance as those that

contribute most to the “badness” of *The “Genius.”* He contends that “the worst banalities are in the language of love” (164) and that the female characters are “abstract monsters of unrealities, ... stereotyped ideals with no more living differentiation than they would have had in the cheapest magazines” (166). Such two-dimensionality may not invite the reader to become particularly engaged with these characters, but the shallow caricatures seem most appropriate as an expression of Eugene’s commodified understanding of women. Given his habit of oftentimes facile aestheticization and the ongoing complaints (from both the narrator and Eugene’s character) lamenting his inability to see through to the substance of things, these pasteboard women, whether Dreiser intended it or not, are perfectly cast as so many shiny, beautiful objects, merely reflections of Eugene’s shallow desires.

Despite the fact that finding new objects of desire so frequently is exciting (for Eugene, that is – the reader is likely to find it utterly exhausting), it is also symptomatic of a short circuit in the desiring process. Eugene’s character is incapable of investing his desire in the desire of an Other, perhaps because he is unable to recognize the true nature of his own desire. Mark Bracher suggests that identifying this lost or repressed source of desire is the first step towards breaking alliances with existing master signifiers that block the expression of these desires in order to then create new master signifiers that better enable desire. Perhaps it is yet another symptom of his interpellation into the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, one that privileges surfaces in a number of contexts, that Eugene’s character so thoroughly lacks the capacity for introspection required to facilitate his engagement in “discourse of the analyst” (68).

Dreiser’s own history also provides some insight into Eugene’s seeming antipathy to introspection. Though he had repeatedly complained about his father’s puritanical tyranny, and though by the 1930s he had developed a keen interest in politics (Matthiessen 216), for much of his life Dreiser was not inclined to inquire into the relationship between his personal suffering

and the cultural circumstances that had facilitated those struggles. Eugene's character is representative of this period in Dreiser's life in that Eugene, like Dreiser, does not engage in any form of inquiry that even roughly resembles the discourse of the analyst. In common parlance, Leonard Cassuto describes him as a "notably nonintrospective personality" (120). And indeed though during the course of Eugene's movements in and out of the worlds of art, manual labor, and advertising, and the concurrent fluctuations of wealth, he ekes out a cursory understanding of the basic mechanisms of capitalism – enough to have a good working notion of what it takes to succeed and how easily one may fail or suffer under such a system – his understanding of the system's deleterious effects on his own happiness is deeply compromised by his constant desire for success within the system, an unwavering loyalty which limits his capacity for insight. When Eugene is struggling or dissatisfied with his position or income, he is frustrated with the capitalism; when the system is working in his favor, he readily accepts its terms and glories in its benefits without question. Although the conflicts that define his very existence, subjecting him to dramatic and often traumatic fluctuations in fortune and love, are direct effects of living in the economic context of consumer capitalism, and even though he is alternatively surrounded by bohemian socialists and hard-nosed capitalists, neither Eugene's character nor the narrator ever attempt to theorize these particular economic circumstances or venture speculations as to the effects of capitalism on a nation or on the individual. However, though Eugene cannot even begin this process of inquiry himself, his character's explicit foolishness, overwrought anguish, and repeated failures in *The "Genius"* offer readers ample opportunity to ask themselves questions about the possibility of desire amidst modern capitalism.

One facet of the desires generated by modern consumer capitalism is a fascination with novelty, which is as central to Eugene's love life as it is to advertising strategy, and this

fascination is manifest not only in Eugene's inability to maintain interest in anything or anyone for a sustained period of time, but also in his obsession with youth – a beautiful eighteen year old woman that he has only just met is Eugene's ideal. However, Eugene's interest in novelty does *not* translate into a desire for a new generation, a renewal of himself – a child. Marx predicted that the logic of capitalism would eventually lead to its own demise by depleting sources of raw materials, saturating its markets, alienating its workers and leaving nothing by which to reproduce itself. Interestingly, this seems to be the case for fictional representations of the town criers of capitalism, as well. Dreiser remained childless throughout his life (Forrey 344), and, though his reasons are not known, his fictional doppelganger is highly ambivalent about his desire to be a father. Eugene “had no yearnings for parenthood, that normal desire which gives visions of a home and the proper social conditions for raising a family” (124), and furthermore, “He did not feel the obligation which attached to children ... a child was a kind of nuisance. Marriage was a trick of Nature's by which you were compelled to carry out her scheme of race continuance. He did not think he owed anything to nature, or to this race spirit ... He had not been treated as generously as he might have since he arrived. Why should he do what nature bid?” (198). Marxist feminists argue that childrearing within traditional Western family structures works to reproduce the capitalist order as parents model the domestic arrangement that best suits capitalism and raise children who are equally suited to labor and consume in the marketplace. Eugene's sentiments illustrate these claims in that he is so immersed in the ideology of commercial exchange that even the natural and biological act of sexual reproduction is subject to its terms – and these terms only. In an equation whose logic is questionable at best, Eugene attributes his career struggles to Nature's malpractice, and in return refuses to pay her back, so to speak. Dreiser's use of the term “normal,” and his allusion to “proper social conditions” that do not match Eugene's own social conditions or aspirations suggests that

something is indeed awry, with both Eugene and the socioeconomic cosmos that have prompted him to these opinions.

On one hand, Eugene's character has contributed, perhaps much more than his share, to the reproduction of the capitalist order by working in advertising and providing the curriculum, so to speak, for other parents to employ as they raise their children. It seems that for Eugene, as is the case with other advertising characters, advertising is his offspring. Such a reading suggests that advertising men *are* capable of reproduction, only on a much grander scale and more abstract fashion than the average parents – reproduction of the social order as a whole. On the other hand, in keeping with Marx's prediction, I think it's important to recognize an alternate, concurrent reading which implies that immersion in capitalist culture eventually stunts, inhibits or prevents reproduction: it is a self-absorbed, self-consuming mode of being. To this end, Priscilla Perkins observes that, "though he favors eighteen-year-olds, he [doesn't] look at such women in terms of their childbearing potential. Just like him, they are perfect human specimens, evolutionary end-points" (21). Furthermore, Perkins adds that, "what matters to Eugene is his genius' *right* to mate with any woman who highlights his own social value" (22) ... "He needs a woman who can enable the textual, not sexual reproduction of his name and image" (25). Perkins may have been thinking of this passage, in which Eugene's character rhapsodizes, "The beauty of youth; the beauty of eighteen! To him life without it was a joke, ... a work-horse job, with only silly material details like furniture and houses and steel cars and stores all involved in a struggle for what? To make a habitation for more shabby humanity? Never! To make a habitation for beauty? Certainly! What beauty? The beauty of old age? How silly! The beauty of middle age? Nonsense! The beauty of maturity? No! The beauty of youth? Yes. The beauty of eighteen. No more and no less" (296). Eugene is attracted to ideas of luxury, pleasure, and self-aggrandizement, but not the nuclear family. And though Eugene's wife wants a child badly,

her reasons are more consistent with Eugene's position than is initially obvious: she views her potential offspring as a bartering tool, believing that she will be able to buy back Eugene's long-absent affection and attention if she bears his child. Angela conceives secretly, but finds that she had miscalculated: the newborn is not enough to revive her husband's affection; she dies in childbirth, and he is glad. Nonetheless, in keeping with the suspiciously happy ending of *The "Genius,"* Eugene does love the "child who he came speedily to delight in" (725), though his rejection of traditional family structures goes unchanged, as he gives over the primary parental duties to other relatives.

In his love of novelty and refusal of long-term commitment to either lover or child, Eugene's passions are in keeping with much romantic ideology. In his discussion of the advent of modern consumerism, Campbell suggests that romantic emphasis on newness and an ability to imagine novelty is crucial to modern advertising and modern consumerism. Campbell notes that in pre-consumer revolution patterns of pleasure-seeking, individuals sought repetitions of familiar experiences that were known to be pleasing; the later influence of the romantic movement emphasized originality, defiance of tradition, and intense use of the imagination in pursuit of as-yet-experienced ideals – an influence that, according to Campbell, contributed mightily to the dramatic increase in luxury and novelty consumption in eighteenth-century England, and one that continues to fuel modern consumption throughout the west to this day. What the smart, modern ad man knows and uses to his advantage is that, "if a product is capable of being represented as possessing unknown characteristics, then it is open to the pleasure-seeker to imagine the nature of its gratifications and it thus becomes an occasion for day-dreaming," which may then, of course, turn into an occasion for a purchase (Campbell 85). While this dynamic does well to perpetuate consumerism, taken to its extreme as it is in Eugene's character, it can work to undermine the social structures that are also required to support consumerism.

Though the ideology of transient novelty discourages Eugene's desire to be a family man, as we will see, it does augment his ability to perpetuate the capitalist order as an advertiser: Eugene's capacity for romantic depiction of exotic pleasures on a very short timeline is key to his success as an ad man.

The figure of the ad-man is the example *par excellence* of the concurrent drives to romantic individualism and creativity, and capitalist wealth and ambition described by Campbell, Brooks, and Frank; the struggle to make the relationship between art and commerce felicitous is, in most of the novelistic representations here considered, crucial to the character of the adman. However, *The Genius* puts forth such a confused vision of Eugene as an artist that this relationship is difficult, if not impossible, to untangle in a straightforward way.

It is appropriate to the exploration of the relationship between art and modern capitalism that Eugene's childish and intermittent inclinations are catalyzed into a more focused artistic ambition by the scenes of capitalist industry he witnesses when he moves to the city as a young man. Much of what impresses Eugene about Chicago, and much of what inspires him artistically – even before he has the capability to execute his visions – are the auspices of labor and production: “engines clanging, trains moving, ... wagon drivers, street car drivers, drays of beer, trucks of coal, brick, stone, sand ... he had never before seen a crowd of foreigners – working men ... he had never seen a really large factory plant ... steel works, potteries, soap factories” – “His imagination was fired by this” (37). Eugene's drive to make his mark as an artist is inspired by such urban-industrial scenes, and it seems he is as much inspired by his fear of being yoked to such sites for his own survival as he is by their magnificence. The cosmopolitan fantasy presented to him in the magazine ads that inspired his wanderlust did not include images of the laboring poor, the unacknowledged but essential Others of the dominant fiction.

Henceforth, Eugene's artistic eye is fixated almost exclusively on scenes of working-class toil and industrial production, yet it is important to note that he simultaneously distances himself from these scenes by viewing them in a purely aesthetic fashion. He romanticizes such scenes (just as he romanticizes and aestheticizes the suffering of his discarded lovers), putting them on par with the sublime as he imagines them on canvas: "He saw scenes that he felt sure he could, when he had learned to draw a little better, make great things of – dark, towering factory-sites, great stretches of railroad yards laid out like a puzzle in the rain, snow, or bright sunlight; great smoke-stacks throwing their black heights athwart morning or evening skies" (49). Romantic sensibility and industrial capitalism converge in more of Eugene's ruminations as evidenced by the narrator's observation that, "One of his chief joys was the Chicago river, its black, mucky water churned by puffing tugs and its banks lined by great red grain elevators and black coal chutes and yellow lumber yards. Here was real color and life – the thing to draw" (49). These scenes and many that are similar prompt Eugene to enthusiastic exaltations – "What a great country America was! What a great thing to be an artist here!" (100). However, when Eugene "met shabby men, sunken-eyed, gloomy, haggard, who looked at him apparently out of deep despair," he speculates that "these creatures seemed to be brought where they were by difficult circumstances," but this only registers with Eugene as concern for himself: "You could fail so easily. You could really starve if you didn't look sharp – the city quickly taught him that" (43). Eugene reads these scenes of human suffering merely as warnings, a morality tale and lesson for himself, without ever actually entering into an empathetic contemplation of their plight or a more visionary contemplation of the socioeconomic structures of capitalism that create such situations – the suffering of vagrants only speaks to Eugene of the possibility of his own suffering, not as material for an art that depicts the truth of those who are already suffering.

Clare Virginia Eby observes the contradictions inherent in Eugene's sources of inspiration, writing that "For an artist whose work depicts largely the material and even industrial basis of America to be out of touch with practical matters clearly presents a problem. The realist is out of touch with the foundation of his art" (12). Eugene feels he has stumbled upon the "real" – that which will give meaning to his work and his life, but that this "real" directly contradicts his fantasy of riches points to subjective confusion, perhaps best explained by a simultaneous desire to incorporate and repress the oftentimes unpalatable facts of industrial labor. Eugene does both by sublimating what he would repress, exalting the working classes through his art, but refusing to engage with their humanity on a personal level. In fact, this human element is noticeably absent from the industrial scenes Eugene identifies as "life" in these scenes; neither the creators, the operators, or beneficiaries of the objects and technologies of industry he finds so inspiring manage to capture his imagination or appear on his canvases. And in fact, during an encounter with a fellow artist who is also a socialist activist, the narrator confesses on Eugene's behalf that he "was so keenly interested in life as a spectacle that he hadn't had as much time to sympathize as he thought he ought to have," (144) and it is worth adding that at no point in his story – not amidst the heady glee of riches, nor in the slough of impoverished despondency – does Eugene find such time. Eugene's ability to immerse himself artistically in both the muck and magnificence of capitalist production without ever suffering a pang of empathy, guilt, concern or consternation makes him an ideal candidate for a position which will require him to harness his artistic talents to the controlling interests behind these scenes, no questions asked.

In a telling contrast to his detached artistic vision of working-class scenes of industry, we find that Eugene is decidedly *not* prompted to aesthetic reverie when he encounters spectacles of luxury and wealth that appear to be beyond his reach. He sees beauty and magnificence here as

well, but these scenes evoke in his character deeply-felt envy and a heart-felt recognition of the inequalities inherent to a system that favors only a few (Eugene is, after all, perfectly capable of feeling sorry for *himself*). In Chicago, Eugene is awed by “the splendid houses,” and “astonished at the magnificence of their appointments, the beauty of the lawns, the show of the windows, the distinction of the equipages ... for the first time he saw liveried footmen,” and “it made his see what the world really had to offer – or rather what it showered on some at the top.” Eugene’s artistic appreciation of the urban scene seems noticeably dampened in the presence of such extravagance: “It subdued and saddened him a little. Life was unfair” (43). And when Eugene arrives in New York City, he realizes that, though “he had marveled at the luxury in Chicago,” “here it took his breath away ... It curled him up like a frozen leaf, dulled his very soul, and gave him clear sense of his position on the social scale” (103). Confronted with images of splendor and display of the rare fruits of capitalism, Eugene does not want to render their likenesses artistically; he wants “to tear wealth and fame from the bosom of the world.” He feels adamantly that, as a producer, he wants no part of the coke ovens, grain mills, or cart driving, but that “Life must give him his share” of luxury and wealth. Even though he is able to acknowledge the inevitability and vastness of the inequities of capitalism, Eugene feels singularly entitled to what he, ironically, sees as his *fair* “share” -- his belief in the dominant fiction perpetuated by the advertisements that influenced him at such an early age does not falter: in the face of cold, hard facts, he clings to an entirely irrational sense that he is destined to live the fantasy of consumer capitalism. It is a convenience of fiction that his character does in fact taste the fantasy, and his illogical ambition void of all scruples is yet another feature of his character that particularly suits him to the profession of advertising, as he makes his way to the industry that promised him “his fair share” in the first place.

If the sources of Eugene's artistic ambitions seem contradictory, the degree to which he actually possesses or gains artistic ability is equally equivocal. In some instances, Dreiser portrays his character as "the real thing," having natural talent and subject to intense moments of inspiration, in true romantic fashion. The friends Eugene makes among artists and intellectuals all express appreciation and admiration for his work; however, there is little evidence that they are anything more than starving amateurs themselves, and furthermore, each of these characters is so enamored with Eugene as a handsome, sensitive, young artist *type*, it is difficult to take any of their praises for his actual art very seriously. In keeping with a culture that privileges surface and packaging, several other characters also appreciate Eugene primarily as a type rather than an actual creator of art: they recognize Eugene as an artist based solely on a first impression of his outward appearance. Just like an advertisement, Eugene's character functions as a novel, superficial image that inspires dreams and desires in others. Never having seen any of his paintings, one art dealer, within moments of their introduction, makes the following assessment of Eugene: "One glance told him that Eugene was an artist, very likely of ability" (227). When Eugene and Angela rent an apartment in Paris, the landlady "says she can tell by looking" that Eugene is "a great artist" (248). And when Eugene meets Carlotta, before he announces his profession, "she understood at a glance that he was an artist, in all probability a good one" (337).

On the other hand, there is Monsieur Charles, a sophisticated European gallery owner working out of New York whose character is introduced as one who is knowledgeable and savvy. He is very appreciative of and enthusiastic about Eugene's actual artwork, and even waives his standard fee to facilitate a big show for Eugene at just the right moment in the New York City social season. Though Monsieur Charles is cast in *The "Genius"* as an art expert, he is more specifically an expert at identifying art that will *sell*. It is important to note here that Monsieur Charles represents the only culturally-sanctioned outlet for art in *The "Genius,"* and it

is thoroughly commercial, firmly ensconced in the market place of buyers, sellers, and commission-takers.

The show is deemed a success: Eugene's paintings sell well, and the show receives media attention. According to the narrator, "Eugene's exhibition of pictures was an astonishing thing to most of those who saw it" – "Eugene's pictures stood forth in all their rawness and reality, almost as vigorous as life itself" (235). The critics, though, are perfectly polarized: one expresses admiration for Eugene's fresh style and subject matter and predicts he will become an increasingly prominent figure on the national art scene; another chastises Eugene for his use of "ash cans and engines and broken-down bus-horses" as subject matter. Another, perhaps not incidentally a foreign critic of undisclosed origin, demotes Eugene to the ranks of mere "illustrator," complaining that his artwork misses "that sense of the universe in miniature which we find in the canvases of so many of the great Europeans. They are better illustrators than artists over here – why, I don't know" (226) – a critique which not only foreshadows Eugene's position as an advertising illustrator, but also suggests that American art in general has been degraded by the already overwhelming presence of advertising culture. Eugene's own assessment of the show, with which the narrator seems to concur, is that "He was a great artist now – recognized as such by the eminent critics who knew; and as such, from now on, would be expected to do the work of a great artist" (240).

Though the portrayal of Eugene's struggles as a youth and a young man seems intended to build toward this high point in his career as an artist, and his subsequent struggles seem geared toward recreating or recapturing this brief moment of glory, little of what *The "Genius"* offers regarding Eugene's development as an artist supports an understanding of his character as a man of actual talent, and in fact, the troubled tale of his coming of age really fails to predict or explain his great success at the gallery exhibition. As Matthiessen notes, "In a way that the novelist did

not realize, Witla seems impossible as an artist” (161). It is not that Eugene’s estimates of himself as an artist are unconvincing, but that the narrator, who for the most part takes a critical and knowing – if sympathetic – stance toward his protagonist, colludes with Eugene in his egotistical delusions.

When Eugene encounters scenes in Chicago that appeal to his artistic ambitions, for example, he feels sure that, eventually, he can “make great things” of these sights, but as it stands, “he could not do them. He could only think them” (48). When Eugene visits a gallery to view a work by a much esteemed Russian painter, he is awed by the “magnificence” of the painting, “the wonder of color, the truth of character” and the painter’s “virility and insight, ... imagination and temperament.” Though he is able to appreciate the quality of the work, he is ultimately mystified by this artistic accomplishment: “Eugene stood and stared, wondering how such things could be done” (51). Once he has the opportunity to enroll in drawing classes, he is slow to improve and he receives a great deal of criticism from his instructors. Eugene’s unspectacular development as an artist might be best exemplified by the fact that, as he is sketching a nude model, his instructor has to point out to him that the woman’s breasts are round, rather than square (69). Eugene eventually does make improvements under the tutelage of his art instructors, but even then, his skills seem merely technical. Comparing himself to the artists who are featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Eugene notices that “these men seemed to have something which he did not have ... a greater breadth of technique, a finer comprehension of color and character, a feeling for subtleties at the back of life which somehow showed through what they did ... Larger experience, larger vision, larger feeling – these things seemed imminent in the great pictures exhibited here,” and beyond the reach of Eugene’s capabilities (223-4).

This brings us to another element of Eugene’s artistic persona that appears to be confused throughout the novel: his actual passion for art – his own and that of others. At times, it seems

that he is quite driven by a love of art and a deep desire to create his own. At others, it seems that what Eugene is really seeking is a particular lifestyle that he assumes comes along with the profession of artist – at such moments, the creation of art is clearly of secondary importance. It is difficult to discern whether Eugene wants to be an artist in hopes of becoming rich, or whether he wants to be wealthy just so he can pursue his art uninterrupted – it seems that, at different moments in his life, Eugene’s character desires either or both, though he enjoys neither for any extended period of time. Eugene clearly aspires to be a man of talent; he wishes to be admired, coddled, and paid handsomely, but his development as an artist is depicted more as a realization of his ego ideal rather than a cultivation of remarkable talent. Given the terms of a dominant fiction governed by ideals of consumer capitalism as depicted in *The “Genius,”* it is much easier for Eugene to express his artistic ambitions in terms of material lifestyle and attitude than it is for him to articulate or even formulate a desire for autonomous art. He has quite a specific notion of the artistic lifestyle: he wants “to get out the ranks of the commonplace, to assume the character and the habiliments of the artistic temperament as they were then supposed to be; to have a refined, semi-languorous, semi-indifferent manner; to live in a studio; to have a certain freedom in morals and temperament not accorded to the ordinary person – these were the great things to do and be.” Near the end of his reverie, Eugene remembers, “of course art composition was a part of this. You were supposed ultimately to paint great pictures or do noble sculptures, but in the meanwhile you could and should live the life of the artist” (51). Likewise, it is not surprising that Eugene struggles to find – or be found by – an interpellative calling to autonomous art: as the fiction is written, there is no such thing as art that is independent from the influence of capital: one may have the leisure to become an artist having achieved capitalist success in other fields, or one creates art that is profitable in the capitalist marketplace. Eugene’s understanding

of art as a means to an end – a vehicle that will deliver him at the doorstep of the bohemian, hedonistic life which he desires, makes him the ideal advertising man.

Eugene eventually discovers that his fantasies of life as an artist were badly informed. Although at the apex of his popularity he is earning a comfortable income as an artist in New York, when he “watched the handsomely dressed crowds,” witnessed the “carriages on Fifth Avenue,” and read “the constant talk of society functions in the newspapers,” Eugene “came to the conclusion that he was not living at all, but existing.” “The prices he heard that tailors demanded – that dressmakers commanded, the display of jewels and expensive garments at the opera, make the poor little income of the artist look like nothing at all.” Though the images of capitalist society Eugene encountered in magazine ads seemed to promise success for all who work and consume within the system, he discovers that mere material comfort does not satisfy as “success” within this system. Eugene’s plight illustrates the claims of economists such as Richard Layard who contends that for most individuals the unhappiness created by observing disparities in wealth easily outweighs the happiness one might feel upon achieving a moderately comfortable standard of living. The reality of the artist’s life – or income, more specifically – falls far short of Eugene’s expectations: “as he had first dreamed of it, art had seemed not only a road to distinction, but also to affluence. Now, as he studied those about him, he found that it was not so.” The reader may feel that Eugene is truly the last to know when he discovers that “Artists were never tremendously rich” (148).

Wandering around the city streets, ruing his disillusionment, Eugene encounters an acquaintance, to whom he complains, “A grocer with one delivery wagon has the best artist that ever lived backed right off the board for financial results.” The friend attempts to console Eugene by pointing out that the artist, while perhaps not obscenely wealthy, “has something

which a tradesman can never have ... His point of view is worth something. He lives in a different world spiritually ... You have what the tradesman cannot possibly attain – distinction” (396). Though Eugene has expressed an ardent drive to live the life of intellectual and social “distinction” that he has associated with artists, the prospect of such cultural capital alone does not satisfy him in the least. His character cannot envision success outside the model put forth by capitalist culture. For Eugene, popular and critical respect for his artistic talents must be accompanied by extravagant wealth; his discovery that the two are unlikely to come hand in hand precipitates a turning point in the novel.

Now that Eugene has become acquainted with the hard financial facts regarding an artist’s income, his attention is, after a long hiatus, turned again toward advertising. He remembers a friend, Hudson Dula, “owning a lithographic business and living in Gramercy Place. Could any artist he knew do that? Scarcely.” Eugene decides “he would see about his. He would think this art business over. Maybe he could be an art director or a lithographer or something” (399). Eugene’s syntax is significant – he has attempted art as art, and has been deeply disappointed with the results; now he wants to look into art as business, in hopes that the angle will be lucrative. Though, aside from the fact that his existential ambitions have been guided by the aims and practices of the industry, there is no evidence for over three hundred pages that the following is true, at this point in his character’s career, Eugene suggests that “since the days in which he worked on the *Alexandria Appeal* he had been interested in ads,” and now “the thought of ad creation took his fancy.” His renewed interest is another in a series of alluring novelties that lead Eugene throughout the narrative: “It was newer than anything else he had encountered recently,” and as “he had been hearing for some time from one source and another of the development of art in advertising,” and “he had seen ... curious and sometimes beautiful series of ads ... He had always fancied in looking at these things that he could get up a notable

series on almost any subject,” he decides to look into it for himself and find out “who handled these things” (402). The dreammakers had failed to make good on their promises, so Eugene seeks out the source: if the fantasy of capitalist success perpetuated by advertising is untrue for the individual looking in at the materials disseminated by the industry, then perhaps Eugene would realize the fantasies contained therein by entering the field himself, having a hand in the creation of those fantasies.

Eugene’s first forays into the advertising market are discouraging. He does not present the image of “unimpaired masculinity” upon which the dominant fiction depends; his desperate appearance challenges the cultural compulsion to “deny all knowledge of male castration by believing in the commensurability of penis and phallus” (Silverman 43), and is therefore perceived as a threat to the capitalist corporations at which he is applying. Theodor Adorno is getting at a similar point when he writes, “anyone who goes cold and hungry, even if his prospects were once good, is branded. He is an outsider; and, apart from certain capital crimes, the most mortal of sins is to be an outsider” (150). When Eugene applies at agencies for the position of art director, management complains that he is too inexperienced, but, more importantly, “his present appearance indicated that this was a refuge in ill health which he was seeking, not a vigorous, constructive position, so they would have none of him” (306). The terms of these rejections imply the bitter adage that a man must look as if he already has money before he can expect anyone (especially a capitalist employer) to give him any. Evidence of frailty or dire need is alarming to an employer, whose ideal employee has been served well enough by the capitalist system in the past to make him want to serve that same system unquestioningly in the future. Furthermore, if one looks at actual print advertisements for food and toiletries during this period, the concern regarding Eugene’s appearance of poor health proves to be very much in line with then-contemporary appeals to national standards of vigor,

strength, robustness, and virility – trademarks of the successful male worker, which could be achieved and maintained by consuming the right canned vegetables and buying the right toothpaste. According to the logic of this advertising, being a good consumer – having money and spending it on consumer goods – enables a man to be a good producer. Eugene, with empty pockets and fragile health, is falling woefully short of the glorified image of masculine prowess upon which capitalism depends.

M. Charles is the first to note Eugene's physical decline, and his hopes for Eugene's output as an artist consequently wane. M. Charles thinks to himself, "Why this man may possibly be done for artistically," to which the narrator adds, "Like all other capable, successful men in the commercial world, M. Charles was for strong men – men in the heyday of their success, the zenith of their ability. Failures of any kind were dangerous things to countenance. One must not have anything to do with them. They were very unprofitable" (298). M. Charles's words clearly indicate that not only is vigorous health essential to commercial success, but that art and commerce are in agreement on this point. Likewise, the advertising executives interviewing Eugene for illustrating and art directing positions can see that, for whatever reason, he is not firmly enough ensconced in this consumer ethic to qualify him as a promising ad man.

After this series of rejections, Eugene temporarily abandons his efforts to become an art director. He desperately needs work, but as he considers joining the long employment lines bustling with rugged-looking men, Eugene wonders, "How could he, with his appearance, his reputation, his tastes and refinement, hobnob with conductors, drygoods clerks, railroad hands and drivers"? He concludes that, "it wasn't possible," and decides not to join the line (305). Though he is convinced that he is culturally over-qualified for such work, had Eugene condescended to join the line, certainly his lack of strength and training would have quickly revealed him to be vastly under-qualified. In a moment of actual ingenuity, Eugene contrives a

way to use what little cultural capital he has left from his brief success as an artist to get a job doing manual labor: he schedules a meeting with the president of a railroad company, presents himself as an artist who would like a temporary assignment working out of doors in order to calm a nervous disorder, and is granted a position in a small construction shop in a relatively rustic area of upper Manhattan. Eugene has learned his lesson well: by shedding the auspices of financial need, translating his poor health into an artistic nervous condition, and bringing all his cultural capital to the table, he is welcomed by a corporate executive, and handed a job for which he is utterly unqualified: “As a laborer he was nothing; as an artist he could get a position as a laborer – After all, his ability as an artist was worth something” (311). Eugene’s scheme is a perfect example of the process Bourdieu observes in *Distinction*: one who is trained in an outmoded form of expertise learns to profit by transforming an older form of capital into a newer, more marketable form of capital – one that is sanctioned and supported by the dominant fiction in its current form.

Eugene has only been at the wood shop for a few days when he feels that he has “obtained insight into the workaday world such as he had not previously had,” and his insight consists of the following: “here, where he saw ... ignorant, almost animal intelligence, being directed by greater, shrewder, and at times it seemed to him possibly malicious intelligences ... who were so strong that the weaker ones must obey them, he began to imagine that in a rough way life might possibly be ordered to the best advantage, even under this system” (326). As he is surrounded by men who are the epitome of physical strength and muscular capability, who he characterizes as the “weak,” we can assume that the “strength” Eugene attributes to those who he believes are “greater” is financial and intellectual strength – the power of capital. And so we can further infer that the “system” he is working out from this model is one in which those with access to and control of money force those who do not to provide labor in the service of capital,

for minimum compensation: Eugene has discovered capitalism. It is odd that Eugene ventures such eager approval of this system, since it is not at all clear where he fits in. He obviously does not identify on any level – not emotionally, not intellectually, and not even economically with the carpenters, but he is also aware that he has no access to the capital that would grant him power and freedom; he laments, “to think that he, of all men, should be working here with Deegan and the *guineas!* He longed ... for a luxurious, artistic life. It seemed life had wronged him terribly, and yet he could do nothing about it. He had no money-making capacity” (390). This scene reveals the persuasive power of the dominant fiction to interpellate subjects even when it seems clearly contrary to their own best interests. Eugene’s “epiphany” at the woodshop is particularly interesting when contrasted to his reaction to the rank and file employees at the advertising agencies, as will be seen in the following.

Many months later, when his financial situation is stable and his health has improved somewhat, Eugene returns to the city and is able to procure a position as an illustrator for a mid-sized newspaper, the *World*. Compared to what he had been living on previously, his salary is very comfortable, and continues to increase, but he claims to resent the artistic compromises the work requires him to make: “he grew more and more restless, and ... he felt as if he could not stand that for another minute. He had been raised to thirty-five dollars, and then fifty, but it was a terrific grind of exaggerated and to him thoroughly meretricious art. The only valuable results in connection with it were that for the first time in his life he was drawing a moderately secure living salary” (401). Though Eugene claims that it is the dire prospects for his art that bother him about this job, Eugene’s next career move is not in the direction of greater artistic freedom, but rather toward a much larger salary. In fact, the more money Eugene makes, the more he wants to make, the less he cares about opportunities to create autonomous art, and the more he is willing to pimp out his artistic talents in search of ever-greater profits.

Before long Eugene gets his second big break – not a gallery show, but still an opportunity to showcase his art in a commercial setting: Eugene lands an interview for an art director opening in one of New York’s most prestigious advertising agencies. He is hired without delay by the owner, Mr. Summerfield, and Dreiser offers the reader a brief moment of hope that Eugene’s sense of artistic integrity will prove to be a challenge to Summerfield’s mercenary way of doing business. Summerfield is momentarily perplexed by Eugene: he “could not fathom Eugene so readily, for he had never met anyone of his kind” (423). However, Summerfield quickly regains his composure and indicates clearly that Eugene will be required to make a departure from his previous tendencies to romantic sentiment, self-pity, and other unorthodoxies. Summerfield’s character stands in as a wholesale quasher of the romantic ethic: he operates on the principle that “mercy was a joke to be eliminated from business. Sentiment was silly twaddle,” and his method is to “hire men as cheaply as possible, to drive them as vigorously as possible, and to dispose of them quickly when they showed signs of weakening under the strain” (407) – an ethic that corresponds neatly with the system of “animals” driven by “men” Eugene had observed at the woodshop.

Dreiser’s depiction of Summerfield’s well-respected and successful agency provides an unflattering glimpse of capitalism working smoothly: in addition to frequently forcing his staff to work “until all hours of the night,” Summerfield has no respect for the abilities, personalities, or needs of anyone who works for him. They are all “more or less machines in his estimation,” (423). Eugene agrees, and turns out to be an apt pupil of Summerfield’s ideology and methodology; he leaves his interview thinking, “Those who did anything, who were out in the front row of effort, were fighters such as this man was ... ruthless, superior, indifferent.” Eugene wonders, “If only he could be that way ... If he could be strong, defiant, commanding ... not to wince, not to quail, but to stand up firm, square to the world and make people obey,” and in

contemplating adoption of this revised ego ideal, Eugene finds that “a splendid vision of empire was here before him” (418). Before Eugene even begins work at his new job, he has in fact “caught by contact with Summerfield some of that eager personage’s ruthlessness and began to manifest it in his own attitude” – a textbook example of “successful interpellation” which is, according to Silverman, “taking as the reality of the self” and “claiming as an ontology what is only a point of address” (21). This interpellation is crucial in ensuring Eugene’s loyalty to the operation. And it is evident at this moment that it is not Eugene’s desire to have a profitable way to pursue his art, but rather a purely financial incentive that pushes him to pursue this “empire” in such a mercenary manner: “He was most impressionable to things advantageous to himself, and this chance to rise to a higher level out of the clough of poverty in which he had so greatly suffered nerved him to the utmost effort” (420). Despite the unflattering depiction of heartless profit-mongering, Dreiser’s portrayal of Summerfield and his agency demonstrates the effectiveness with which it interpellates subjects: within moments of meeting Summerfield, Eugene had wholly identified himself with the entire concern, imaginatively reforming his “romantic” ways, and re-envisioning himself as an up-and-coming Summerfield-esque executive. Nowhere within the text of *The “Genius”* do we find an analogous “call” from scions or practices of autonomous art.

At the Summerfield agency, several of the myriad ways in which a potentially subversive cultural element can be absorbed by and made subservient to the dominant fiction are seen in action. Eugene’s character is the most obvious example – for one who is supposed to be a passionate and devoted artist, it is surprising that, though he is somewhat stunned by Summerfield’s tactics at first, he admires, envies, and emulates them almost immediately. With no concern for the consequences to himself as an artist, or the implications for art in general, Eugene accepts Summerfield’s terms without question and molds himself in Summerfield’s

image without hesitation. After working at the Summerfield agency for several months, Eugene does express a degree of disillusionment, complaining that, “after all, his was the artistic temperament, not that of a commercial or financial genius ... he was ... embittered by the continual travesty on justice, truth, beauty, sympathy which he saw enacted before his eyes” (430). However, it is not a pursuit of higher ideals that leads Eugene away from the Summerfield agency, but rather the promise of a more lucrative position. When Mr. Calvin, president of a rival agency, offers \$8,000 a year, Eugene is ecstatic and easily casts all artistic ideals and aspirations aside: “What artist’s career could compare to this? Why should he worry about being an artist? Did they ever get anywhere? Would the approval of posterity let him ride in an automobile now? He wanted to live now – not in the approval of posterity” (440). Thoroughly imbued in agency culture, Eugene’s very definition of “living” now hinges exclusively upon possession of extravagant financial resources.

Summerfield begins this process of inculcation during his first meeting with Eugene, contending that, “the man who should sit in the seat of authority in this art department should be one of real force and talent – a genius if possible”; however, the ultimate aim of this genius is most certainly *not* great art, but rather what Summerfield refers to as his “golden harvest” – his clients’ money. Summerfield explains that some clients are “open to suggestions as to modifications and improvements,” and some few are even “willing to leave the entire theory of procedure to the Summerfield Advertising Company,” but most “have very definite ideas as to what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it” (407), and it will be up to Eugene to cater to these demands. Even in cases where Eugene is not circumscribed by clients’ specific visions, his artistic product must work to sell his clients’ products, so if it is not the client himself, then it is at least the market at large that will govern Eugene’s artistic output.

Another aspect of Eugene's work at the Summerfield agency that is counterintuitive to the idea of autonomous art, and constitutes a comment on art in "American life," is the way in which artistic creations must be forced into economic categories of time and money. In order to monitor productivity, Summerfield requires that the artists' "output was regulated by a tabulated record system which kept account of just how much they succeeded in accomplishing in a week and how much it was worth to the concern" (409) – a seemingly impossible translation to perform.²

And finally, though Mr. Kalvin is a kinder, gentler capitalist than the brash Summerfield, he also conveys to Eugene that he has specific expectations that do not lend themselves to the development and free expression of an artistic mind. He warns Eugene to "be careful of the kind of people you get in with. Stick to the conservative element. It may be hard for you, but it's best, materially speaking" (444). At this late date in Eugene's advertising career, Mr. Kalvin needed not waste his breath; upon starting with the Summerfield agency, Eugene cut his ties with his artist friends: "As for the old art crowd, socialists and radicals included, Eugene attempted to avoid them as much as possible." Though Eugene believes that he can be both independent artist *and* businessman, he is unable to reconcile the two in his social life.

Despite all of these constraints, and in direct contradiction to all of the injunctions Summerfield has just made, he goes on to tell Eugene that "in most cases," the advertising campaigns will require "something radically new" (409). Therefore Eugene will be valuable so long as he can consistently and repeatedly produce original ideas and illustrations under the aforementioned conditions of strictly managed corporate and client parameters. Summerfield sums up his expectations thusly: "It's a question of how much novelty, simplicity, and force we can put in the smallest possible space" (417). Recalling the earlier descriptions of his artwork,

² To the present day, there is an astonishing lack of evidence to demonstrate that the billions of dollars spent annually on advertising actually works to increase sales or brand recognition of any given product or service.

we see that Eugene's style and his particular talents are perfectly suited for these commercial demands. Though he is criticized for lacking mastery of traditional technique and depth of feeling or understanding, Eugene is lauded for the "force" of his compositions – his work "fairly shouted its facts ... Bang! Smash! Crack! Came the facts one after another." M. Charles testifies to the novelty the paintings, for "he recalled nothing exactly like it" (231). However, M. Charles also recognizes that, even though it is compelling in its way, "Eugene's art was that of merely seizing upon the obviously dramatic," and in an observation that may bring to mind associations with the patent medicine vendors of the previous century, M. Charles contends that "it wasn't so much the art of color composition and life analysis as it was stage craft" (228). More specifically, M. Charles finds that Eugene's subject matter consists of "much that did not appear dramatic until he touched it" (232) – a skill perfectly suited for conveying – or contriving – the "astonishing" qualities of mundane and redundant products. Eugene's brief foray into writing reveals similar proclivities: "He was able to write rather charming verse" and "he had the knack of saying things in a simple way and with feeling – making you see a picture. The trouble with his verse was that it lacked ... any real nobility of thought" (136) – a set of literary skills perfectly suited for the quick composition of catchy jingles and memorable slogans. Eugene's artistic talents and style embody the qualities of sensationalism, suggestiveness, and superficiality essential to effective advertising, which attempts to elevate everyday consumer products to the position of the *petit objet a*, but I think it is important to ask whether it is only the case that Eugene's character is one hack artist who finds his rightful niche in the advertising industry, or whether it may also be the case that *The "Genius"* suggests that in a consumer culture so saturated with the values of advertising, it is impossible for an artistically inclined individual to become anything other than a hack. With this in mind, it is both apt and ironic that Eugene suggests that his artwork reveals "a growing understanding of American life" (225).

Eugene's career as an actual advertising man may well be superfluous to the critique of capitalism put forth by *The "Genius"*; it is not just that Eugene is an artist who "sells out" to corporate consumer culture and undermines his artistic ambitions and potential. Intentionally or otherwise, the very particular way in which Dreiser depicts Eugene's development and the artistic milieu which are available to him suggests that within the general context of modern consumer capitalism, an artist's – any artist's – talents and ambitions will inevitably be hobbled; genuinely autonomous art is simply out of the question. Within the socioeconomic universe of *The "Genius,"* Eugene's advertising career is not an interruption or an ending of his artistic career, but the logical culmination of his development as an artist in a consumer society. Compared to the plight of the artist in *Tono-Bungay*, Dreiser's protagonist suggests that ideological spaces for production of autonomous art beyond capitalism have diminished: in *Tono-Bungay* Ewart's character at least implies the possibility of a separation as he maintains his artistic aspirations while refusing capitalist ambition. By the time of *The "Genius,"* Dreiser does not imagine such a character – the only artist is the commercial artist.

The narrator foreshadows Eugene's transformation from an upstart, idealist artist on the fringe to an adman dedicated to corporate culture and consumerism, making the general observation that, at the Summerfield agency, "the art director, whoever he was, having been by degrees initiated into the brutalities of the situation, and having – by reason of the time he had been employed and the privileges he had permitted himself on account of his comfortable and probably never before experienced salary – sold himself into bondage to his now fancied necessities, was usually humble and tractable under the most galling fire" (410). This observation serves to put Eugene's rise – or decline, depending on one's perspective – in a larger socioeconomic context by suggesting that *any* individual who is subjected to the mechanics of a

corporate advertising agency, surrounded by the glorification of superfluous consumption, and is then given the means to participate in such consumption – is very likely to do so, regardless of his or her previous convictions or practices. The narrator’s comment highlights the potentially coercive nature of a firmly entrenched dominant fiction, one that does not just “call out” to subjects, but grabs them against their will and holds them captive.

Thus far I have focused primarily on Eugene’s professional drives as they have formed under the influence of modern capitalism, but his character’s consumer habits shed additional light on the struggles he faces as a desiring subject. Though as a consumer Eugene starts small, his desires multiply rapidly in both number and expense. Dreiser’s own spending habits did not quite compare to those of his protagonist, but he certainly seemed to sympathize with Eugene’s desire for luxury and leisure. Dreiser claimed that “his father condemned anything pleasurable – candy, parties, good clothes, dancing” (Gogol 99), and felt that because of these early denials (and perhaps especially because these denials were concurrent with denials of other forms of parental affection), his desires for such pleasures grew out of proportion. Though he does not share Dreiser’s history of denial, Eugene’s consumer desires become similarly outrageous: they are transient, shallow, and insatiable.

Eugene’s adult consumer habits can be roughly broken down into three phases: his period as a laborer, his time as an independent artist, and his stint as an advertising man. Not surprisingly, his modes of consumption are almost entirely dependent on the modes of production in which he is involved, and the more money he makes, the more deeply implicated Eugene’s character becomes in the practice of conspicuous consumption. Clare Virginia Eby suggests that Eugene “is influenced by and responds to the lure of material objects without understanding how fully their qualities will become his own,” and indeed the narrator concurs that, amidst what eventually becomes a frenzy of conspicuous consumption, in the consumer-

commodity relationship fomented by capitalist consumerism, the object has the upper hand. The narrator remarks that “the material details with which we are able to surround ourselves seem at times to remake our point of view ... So little do we have that interior peace which no material conditions can truly affect or disturb” (203). Accordingly, rather than possessing a distinct sense of self based on non-material qualities which he can then “express” by way of the objects he chooses to surround himself with, from the moment he notices and promptly imitates his art teacher’s stylized mode of dress, Eugene’s character is shaped by his introduction and subsequent access to different realms of commodities. Eugene’s character cannot engage with or subject his desire to that of another person, but he does subject his desire to the mandates of capitalism, desiring consumer objects insofar as they facilitate his egotistical desire for himself.

When Eugene first moves to Chicago, he quickly abandons his initial hopes of easing into a newspaper job and is glad for any work that will provide enough income for food and shelter, and his expectations regarding the latter two are modest. His first job has him brushing rust off of second-hand stoves for six dollars a week, and when he moves on to a second job “post[ing] up the ‘For Rent’ signs in windows” for eight dollars a week, Eugene feels he has improved his lot, and is perfectly content with this occupation and its prospects: “Eugene might have stayed there indefinitely” had the real estate company not failed (42). His consumer desires are similarly modest and utilitarian; he wants nothing other than one suit of clothes, a winter coat, and a single room. Though Eugene is awestruck by the ostentatious spectacles of luxury he first witnesses in Chicago, at this point he seems to have no notion that similar practices of conspicuous and superfluous consumption could ever be his own.

Significantly, it is not a slow climb up the workaday labor ladder but rather Eugene’s foray into art school that alerts him to the possibilities of non-essential consumption. This intersection reminds us of an important commonality: the two pursuits – art and conspicuous

consumption – are both dedicated to aesthetics and are both, to a large degree, dependent on the absence of real economic need – circumstances crucial to the success of advertising, as well. As Eugene learns the basic lines and strokes of sketching, he is simultaneously alerted to the aesthetics of clothing and deportment, and subsequently adopts the dress and mannerisms of his art instructor: “He had taken to a loose, flowing tie and a soft round hat which became him. He turned his hair back loosely and emulated the independent swing” of his teacher (73).

When he begins hobnobbing with other local artists, Eugene catches on to their bohemian style of living and is nearly overwhelmed with the purchasing possibilities to which their company introduces him: “New York gets me dizzy. It’s so wonderful! ... It’s so compact of wonderful things. I saw a shop the other day full of old jewelry and ornaments and quaint stones and clothes, and O Heaven! I don’t know what all – more things than I had ever seen in my whole life before” (139). Admiring Miriam’s collection of intriguing books, odd sheet music, bronzes and clay pieces strewn about her modest studio, Eugene is impressed with her – via her possessions – as someone with “a better intelligence, a keener selective judgment, a finer artistic impulse ... someone who ignored popular taste” and was “in advance of it” (141). Miriam, who is a few years older than Eugene and very much his intellectual senior, does not register on Eugene’s sexual radar, but he clings to her and others of her circle as instructors in the art of bohemian living, which, in the world of *The “Genius,”* is heavily dependent upon the art of buying.

Yet unlike the romanticized vision of bohemianism as a lifestyle that refuses the capitalist status quo, for Eugene, adopting bohemian style is a means of taking the only available step closer to the luxury he craves. With some cultural capital as an artist but very little financial capital, bohemianism allows Eugene to “pursue originality at the lowest economic cost” by going in for “exoticism” (185). In this way, Eugene can enjoy the luxury of rarity and exclusivity on a

much smaller budget, but this lifestyle constitutes a substitute for, not an alternative to extravagant living funded by capitalist wealth. As Pierre Bourdieu suggests, particular lifestyles work to “transform necessities into strategies, constraints into preferences ... it is a virtue made of necessity which continuously transforms necessity into virtue” (175). When Eugene begins searching for lodgings for himself and his new wife, “his idea of a studio was some such one as that now occupied by Miriam Finch or Norma Whitmore. There ought to be furniture of a period – old Flemish or Colonial, Heppelwhite or Chippendale or Sheraton, such as he saw occasionally knocking about in curio shops and second hand stores. There ought to be rugs, hangings of tapestry, bits of brass, pewter, copper, old silver ...” (188). These period pieces are modern commodities par excellence, for despite the fact that their historical origins are foregrounded as the basis of their value, Eugene – a truly modern consumer – is oblivious. In a socioeconomic context in which consumer capitalist ideology is at least approaching what Adorno describes as “ruthless unity,” “marked differentiation such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape” (123). And it is thus for Eugene’s character – he is simply buying at his current level until he can move up to a higher level, but all the levels belong to the same building. The furniture names are merely brands to him that signify a particular “artsy” style of contemporary living that he wishes to buy into – a style that pretends to refuse the dominant ethic of consumerism, but which – as we will see – actually serves to groom those who are not economically powerful for roles as super-consumers when finances permit.

As the above suggests, the manner in which Eugene emulates and adopts Miriam’s bohemian lifestyle is superficial and derivative – it is about packaging and social climbing. He dons the exterior trappings of eclectic dress and décor and alludes to the radical names and ideas

he overhears, but he is profoundly uninterested in the content behind these allusions. Eugene's character is the epitome of what Bourdieu terms the "autodidact" – invariably one from a lower class attempting to teach himself the manners and mannerisms of a higher class, and however apt a student, always inevitably betraying the fact that his behaviors are learned rather than inherited. The learned (and consumerist) nature of Eugene's artistic lifestyle is explicit: "Miriam Finch with her subtle eclecticism continued her education of Eugene. She was as good as a school. He would sit and listen to her descriptions of plays, her appreciation of books, her summing up of current philosophies, and would almost feel himself growing ... he almost felt as if he owned her room and herself, as if all that she was – her ideas, her friends, her experiences – belonged to him" (153). Clearly the emphasis is on ownership and appearances, rather than grappling with ideas or displaying objects that signify convictions, and the dynamic is fitting: Eugene's exposure to and consumption of Miriam's intellect and artistry parallels the use of art in advertising. The basic effects of line and style may be conveyed, and may successfully allude to its source, but the significance of the whole, that which goes beyond surface and appearance – is missing. A reader of an ad is blocked (by the immanent pitch) from getting beyond such superficialities, and so is Eugene as he consumes his "education" in abbreviated, truncated form. It eventually becomes apparent that he is attracted to the bohemian lifestyle that Miriam represents not because it implies some form of refusal of mainstream capitalism, but because it consoles him in his disappointment in not having yet succeeded in the capitalist system he actually holds quite dear. Eugene's initiation into bohemian living seems at first to be an opportunity to develop his artistic subjectivity among a sympathetic and supportive coterie; however, if Miriam and the others living like her do in fact constitute an artistic coterie, Eugene's character, having been so strongly inculcated with a particular image of success, cannot see them or engage with them as such.

The process of learning to consume under the dominant fiction of capitalism to which Eugene is subjected throughout the different phases of his life is not unlike the tutorials offered by advertisements, which, among other appeals, seek to teach people how to live, what to desire in order to be desired, and what to buy to achieve that lifestyle. Eugene is an eager student of consumerism and, in his next occupational phase, he continues to learn new and socially sanctioned ways of consuming. Furthermore, as a successful advertising man, he is himself contributing to the fictions of capitalism that will affect the masses who read and view his work. As Eugene is beginning to find his way to financial success as an advertising man, he is tutored in matters of consumption by his boss. When Mr. Summerfield sees Eugene's modest apartment in an unfashionable district, he says, "You know I believe in spending money, everybody spending money. Nobody gets anywhere by saving anything. Pay out! Pay out – that's the idea ... You better move when you get a chance soon and surround yourself with clever people" (427). Eugene responds to this near-threat promptly; he begins looking for a new apartment and also buys new clothing that he thinks better suits his position and his aspirations: "The soft hat had long since been discarded for a stiff derby, and Eugene's clothes were of the most practical business type he could find"; they were "clothes of the latest cut," which he accessorized with "a ring of oriental design on his middle finger, and pins and ties which reflected the prevailing modes." He now "looked more like a young merchant than an artist" (428, 433). Likewise, when Eugene finds a more upscale flat, his home interior purchases depart from his earlier attempts at bohemian eclecticism, aiming now for the kind of ostentatious luxury touted by mainstream fantasies of wealth. The result is glaringly nouveaux riche: "He had the apartment redecorated in white and deft-blue and dark blue, getting a set of library and dining-room furniture in imitation rosewood ... He set a cut-class bowl in the ceiling where formerly the commonplace chandelier had been ... Attractive sets of bedroom furniture in bird's-eye maple

and white enamel were secured ... a piano was purchased outright, ... and the whole apartment gave a very cosy and tasteful appearance” (495).

After a few more years in the advertising business, Eugene has had the time to accumulate both a fortune and a more refined knowledge of upper-crust consumerism. Another boss, Mr. Colfax, continues to “teach” him consumer habits proper to his new station in life. Colfax would “feel the latest suit Eugene might be wearing, or comment on some pin or tie he had on, or tell him that his shoes were not as good as he could really get, if he wanted to be perfect in dress.” Furthermore, “he was always telling Eugene little details of social life, the right things to do, the right places to be seen, the right places to go, as though Eugene knew little or nothing” (486). Eugene pays close attention to these bits of advice and takes them quite seriously: he invests in a plot of land outside the city, becomes a member of the Baltusrol Golf Club, the Yere Tennis Club, and the Philadelphia Country Club respectively, *and* purchases an automobile. He and Angela move onto Riverside Drive into an apartment consisting of “nine rooms and two baths, chambers [that] were beautifully finished in old English oak carved and stained after a very pleasing fifteenth-century model,” and “green-brown tapestries representing old Rhine Castles for his studio” (475). Mentors such as Summerfield and Colfax appear as harbingers of the capitalist dominant fiction, facilitating Eugene’s smooth interpellation into his role as a producer and consumer in the upper echelons of the system. Contrasted with the friends Eugene made who supported his artistic ambitions, the power these men wield as individual examples of great success fully backed by mainstream culture prompts a desire to be recognized by them and recognize himself in their image that is – for Eugene, at least – irresistible.

The protracted telling of Eugene’s professional and personal development rushes to heady heights of daring and scandal in Book III – ironically titled “Revolt.” As Roberta Seret

points out, unlike protagonists of more traditional *kunstlerromans*, Eugene's character does not "revolt against bourgeois values" (131); rather, he "accepts and conforms to the American value of tangible achievement" (129). Eugene is now working for a publishing company, the United Magazines Corporation. He is head of the advertising, literature, and art divisions, and the concomitant salary ensures that Eugene is firmly ensconced in the very tip top of the capitalist wealth pyramid. And, not surprisingly, even though it was not so long ago that Eugene had mused wistfully, "If only he were rich – how peacefully he would paint!" (230), when Angela reminds him of his artistic passions and his original intent to return to his art as soon as he had the barest means to do so, Eugene replies, "Art doesn't appeal to me so much as it did once ... I've lived too well" (462). Eugene's visions of empire, on the other hand, first inspired by Summerfield's brutal executions of capitalist discipline, have become more powerful. Finally having the means by which extend his "empire" beyond the boundaries of the United Magazines Corporation, Eugene follows Ponderevo's lead, establishes his place in another trend among fictional ad men, and branches out into real estate. He hopes to plan, develop, and market an enormously ambitious seaside resort – an endeavor that will require millions in investments, the transformation of marshlands to solid beach, and a very effective sales pitch.

Significantly, at this clearly dangerous apex of financial success, for the first time in the novel Eugene's capitalistic and romantic aspirations run parallel, rather than counter, to one another. While he is making money at breakneck speed with Universal Magazines and risking it all on wild real estate speculation on the side, he simultaneously embarks on a romantic venture that threatens to undo his marriage, his social standing with the New York elite, and his position at Universal Magazines. Eugene's pursuit of young Suzanne Dale is his boldest: she is in the same city as his wife; she is nearly twenty years his junior; she is the daughter of an influential friend of the Universal Magazine Corporation; and he pursues her openly, with neither

trepidation nor discretion. Dreiser's holograph of *The "Genius"* releases the tension of this narrative build-up by having Eugene write to Suzanne "to explain his altered view of life, his recognition of his selfishness, and his realization that desire is not everything" (Oldani 241). Though Eby among others cites *The "Genius"* as no exception to Dreiser's "notoriously poor epilogues" (14), it is much to his credit that Dreiser revised his draft, which included Eugene's reconciliation with and eventual happy marriage to Suzanne (Oldani 235). The failure of their romance along with Eugene's failure as an advertising man is crucial to an ending that prompts critical inquiry by refusing to redeem the dominant fiction that has contributed to such a problematic subjectivity as we find in the character of Eugene Witla.

In this regard, Eugene's failures can be read as at least partial successes as he pushes himself beyond the limits of consumer capitalism; he pursues the logic of the dominant fiction to its extreme, testing it until it collapses beneath him, its limits and frailties exposed. Despite his apparent allegiance to the dominant fictions that have carried him to this high point, Eugene is behaving in an excessively reckless manner, as though daring these fictions to crumble. He is pushing the envelope of their validity, perhaps unconsciously wishing to be rescued from the restrictions of consumer capitalism by complete failure within the system, by destroying what he has gained along the way, hoping that this failure will open another path, another way for him to follow. Leonard Cassuto identifies this as a manifestation of the death drive, "which expresses the contradictions and alienations of being" – in a self-destructive manner – because "this self-destructive energy comes not from the id, but from a tightly convoluted ego whose energy does not benefit from the self-knowledge which might defuse or redirect it" (122). Because Eugene lacks the introspective skills required to engage in the discourse of the analyst, he must incite catastrophe to release him from his bonds. Though St. Jean attributes Eugene's pursuit of this dangerous precipice to simple "vaingloriousness" rather than an unconscious drive to break

allegiance with nefarious master signifiers, he does note the necessity of trauma to facilitate change. Comparing Eugene's plot trajectory to that of Odysseus, St. Jean claims that "initially unadulterated goals become lost in the journey, and only through a violent *agon* does anything like a return become possible" (45).

Eugene's character has, of course, gotten too close to the sun, and all quickly begins to melt away. He loses his position at the Universal Magazine Corporation because of the scandal elicited by his romance with Suzanne. Eugene has almost no financial recourse, since all of his assets are tied up in the quickly-failing seaside resort. And finally, Suzanne loses interest in Eugene as soon as the novelty of her disobedience wears off, and returns to her mother. Eugene sees that he is "in danger of complete social and commercial extinction" (669). His real wish is coming true.

In a conclusion that is typical of the ad-man novel, though Eugene's character has made a dramatic attempt to sever himself from the master signifiers of consumer capitalism, once this freedom seems within reach, he does not know how to grasp it. Despite Dreiser's fruitful revision of the last stages of Eugene's relationship with Suzanne, the ending of the novel still does not convey the sense that Eugene's final circumstances are the culmination of nearly a thousand pages of life experiences, learning, loving, and suffering. The last pages depict a hollow and unconvincing resolution of events that in no way constitutes revolt, revolution, or even a dawning of consciousness on Eugene's part. Nominally, Eugene questions the substance of the aspirations that have guided most of his adult life: "His shimmering world of dreams was beginning to fade like an evening sky. It might be that he had been chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, after all," (667) and he ultimately describes Suzanne as "a mirage dissolved into its native nothingness" (678). Additionally, the narrator credits Eugene for finally seeing "through to something that was not material at all, but spiritual, or say immaterial, of which all material

things were a shadow” (681). Such observations suggest that Eugene finally realizes that there is much to be had – learned, experienced, created, felt – beyond the chimeras of modern consumer culture, and that he will now be able to see, desire, and devote himself to elements of life that cannot be laid out in a glossy two-page spread or encapsulated in a couple lines of sing-song rhyme.

Yet the events that follow reveal that these lofty transformations are as superficial as the illusions they pretend to reject. Eugene carries on with his dehumanizing aestheticization, which is particularly shocking in his treatment of his pregnant wife. He leaves her on her own in a maternity hospital, and muses to himself: “The condition of Angela had given him pause, for it was an interesting question what would become of her” (701) – he then articulates his wish for Angela to die for his convenience. The dangerous childbirth Angela subsequently endures prompts Eugene to apologize and swear to be a better husband to her, but even as he is making this promise, “he was wondering ... whether he would or no” (724), and as it turns out, Eugene gets his wish; Angela dies, and he never has to be tested by his word.

Eugene’s sister, in sincere efforts to alleviate his grief (over losing his job and his mistress, not over Angela’s death), suggests that he visit a Christian Science practitioner – someone well-suited to introduce Eugene to spiritual and immaterial aspects of life. Eugene responds childishly, stubbornly clinging to the desires that have brought him so little satisfaction and such a great deal of frustration and failure: “Could this pain of longing be made to cease? Did he want it to cease? No; certainly not!” (703). However, his sister eventually convinces him to go, and Eugene’s distinct *inability* – despite his supposed transformation – to “see through to the spirit of things” is much apparent as he offers his condescending, materialistic critique of the healer and her home. He objects to her “chromos and etchings of Christ and Bible scenes on the walls,” her “cheap red carpet,” and her “inartistic ... chairs,” and complains that “people were

such hacks when it came to the art of living. How could they pretend to a sense of Divinity who knew nothing of life?" (704). Here we see that even after all Eugene has been through, "life" is still equated with objects, and more specifically, to know life is to have the taste and the resources to desire and own the *right* objects.

Given that the epiphanies that supposedly rise out of the ashes of Eugene's social and commercial demise are essentially empty platitudes, his resurgence as an artist is striking in its unlikelihood. In his parting breath, the narrator describes Eugene's renewed fervor: he gets back into painting "swiftly, feverishly, brilliantly," and before long his paintings are selling very well, even one for "a record price" of eighteen thousand dollars. Certainly, after having spent so many pages with Eugene and his narrator, it is no surprise that despite an ostensible return to the creation of autonomous art, money and commerce have the last word. Silverman contends that though the "constitutive features of subjectivity are never entirely 'fixed,' neither are they in a state of absolute flux or 'free play'; on the contrary, they are synonymous with the compulsion to repeat certain images and positionalities, which are relinquished only with difficulty" (6). And indeed we find that despite his violent fall from capitalist heights, Eugene has not been able to turn away from his attachment: the last thing we learn about Eugene's future as an artist is that "M. Charles had suggested to a great bank director that his new bank in the financial district be decorated by Eugene alone" (732).

It is unlikely that any contemporary reader will finish *The "Genius"* with a strong sense that Eugene Witla is indeed a genius, and the textual history of the novel suggests that Dreiser was also ambivalent about his protagonist's gifts. Dreiser wrote to H. L. Mencken that the quotation marks were inserted to create a distinction between his own work and an other book of the same title published by another author, and also "to convey the exact question which I mean

to imply” (Oldani 238), though it seems that Dreiser himself was unclear as to precisely what question he intended. When asked on another occasion, Dreiser had only this to say regarding the punctuation: “I haven’t committed myself at all. I merely put it up to the public” (Matthiessen 161). Eugene’s character would certainly object to use of the quotation marks – though Eugene goes through many periods of uncertainty and despair, the one thing that remains constant is his romantic conviction of his own genius. But what the novel suggests is that the only genius possible under the socioeconomic circumstances Dreiser describes is a genius in scare quotes – a genius that is compromised, circumscribed, and corporatized; a genius that, regardless of his own convictions, is a travesty. The dominant fiction of consumer capitalism surrounds and subverts genius, just as the quotation marks do.

In the best reading *The “Genius”* offers what Shoshana Felman describes as an opportunity “not necessarily to recognize a *known*, to find an answer, but also, and perhaps more challengingly, to locate an *unknown*, to find a question” (quoted in Cassuto 115). The literary unsatisfactoriness of *The “Genius”*’s ending may be its greatest strength as a work of fiction that enables social critique by revealing social truths. Lacan suggests that “to bring the subject to recognize and name his desire ... is the nature of the efficacious action of analysis” (126), but Eugene, immersed and overwhelmed as his character is by the conflicted ideologies of art and capitalism, doesn’t quite get around to asking this key question; he does not locate the true source of his longings, and he certainly cannot articulate them. If he didn’t desire what he thought he desired, what exactly does he want? Though Eugene leaves this question both unasked and unanswered, after having completed *The “Genius”* and after having had such prolonged exposure to the travesty of Eugene’s desire, the reader is perhaps in a very good position to ask these questions of him or herself.

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Chapter 3: Buying In to Selling Out: Frederick Wakeman's Artless Ad-Man in *The Hucksters*

H.G. Wells came to write a novel about advertising after a history of endeavors including scientific study, non-fiction essays, and science fiction writing. Theodore Dreiser arrived at a similar point with a background in journalism, editing and fiction writing. Frederic Wakeman, on the other hand, came to write his novel of the advertising man having himself come from the industry. And, though Wakeman expressed disgust with many aspects of the consumer culture in which he worked, unlike either Wells or Dreiser, he was in no way disenfranchised by the system; quite the contrary – he came out on top, so to speak, having been successfully and amply rewarded for each of his efforts at advertising, war waging, and writing. “Nothing succeeds like young Mr. Wakeman,” George Mayberry wrote in the *New Republic*” (Rothe 613), referring to Wakeman’s career as an advertising account executive, his naval service, and the success of his popular first novel, *Shore Leave*.

Wakeman wrote his second novel, *The Hucksters*, in 1946, only a few years before the start of a decade that would be famous for Madison Avenue yes-men, “ulcer-gulch,” and advertising at its most terrifyingly “organized.” *The Hucksters* puts forth a scathing satire of advertising practices moving in this direction, along with a parallel critique of its dulling effects on mass audiences. The critique was timely: though Madison Avenue agencies would continue to seek even greater degrees of control, hierarchy, and organization, Wakeman’s satire was very well received by newspaper critics and mass audiences. Reviewer Russell Maloney dubbed it “a story that should be read by every literate adult who has ever suffered through a radio ‘commercial announcement,’” and favors Wakeman’s work of social satire with a comparison to Dickens (Rothe 614). Reviewers were nearly unanimous in their praise for the novel, and *The Hucksters* became a bestseller.

The conflict between protagonist Victor Norman's professional duties as an advertising executive and his desire for the kinds of family relationships he remembers from his youth shapes the plot of *The Hucksters* and parallels an actual trend in advertising that emerged, according to Roland Marchand, in the 1920s, and continued into the 40s. Marchand explains that as modernization – quick advances in technology, a conscious sense of a faster pace of life, the availability of thousands of previously unimagined conveniences – became a consumer issue, many of the print ads that were designed to promote consumer behaviors that would finance the forward march of “Progress” and modernization simultaneously made nostalgic appeals to simpler times. “The ‘modernity’ of advertisements ... often found expression in styles and appeals that catered to yearnings unfulfilled by efficient, rationalized mass production and distribution,” writes Marchand (9).

This same contradictory tension is present in Vic's character who so aptly embodies the modern dilemma. Despite the fact that *The Hucksters* is clearly a critique of advertising and consumer capitalism, there is an undeniable pleasure for the reader as he or she becomes engaged in Vic's edgy deal-making, transcontinental travel, suave cynicism, and ability to skillfully influence thousands of people on behalf of Beautee soap, and this gratifying image of success is certainly dependent on ideals of modernization and modern commerce, such as the teletype, transcontinental super-trains, and an unabashed profit motive. And at the same time, the reader knows, perhaps before Vic does, that this is not enough, that intimate relationships, those which seem to be native to a simpler, kinder past, will, on some level, be missed. While advertisements attempted to address this lack with idealized images of yesteryear and appeals to longstanding tradition, Vic's character attempts to fill the void with one night stands and antique furniture. What the advertising trend and Vic's character have in common is that they both try to replace real drives toward experiences of human relations with images and objects – in print, or in

furniture, both of which hearken to days gone by in an attempt to recover something unnamable from the past. Fictions of an idealized past stand in for the lost object of desire that is beyond articulation. What is revealed by the end of *The Hucksters* is that the switch is not sufficient – it is not an even exchange.

Though Wakeman and his oeuvre have been almost entirely beneath the notice of literary scholars, *The Hucksters* introduces an important new element to the dynamics of capitalism, art, and desire as they are laid out by earlier ad-man novels: the position of the cynic. The cynicism that emerges in the narrative of *The Hucksters* will become a central feature of work in the advertising industry in post-60s America, as well as of the fictional advertising men created in later novels. Wakeman's protagonist, advertising man Vic Norman, struggles against the stultifying conformity the industry demands by adopting a deliberately distant and condescending attitude of cynicism toward his lucrative position as an advertising man. His character is an apt illustration of Slavoj Žižek's contention that "cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to ... subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask" (29). Cynicism as a subjective disposition serves as a buffer between desire and the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism: it shortcuts disappointment by claiming to expect nothing other than disappointment; it enables participation in nefarious practices by claiming that it is wise to the nefariousness, and thus somehow exempt from its effects on the self and culpability for its effects on others. As Žižek contends, it is a position that ostensibly expresses critique, but ultimately serves to sustain the dominant fiction.

Such cynicism employs the same ruse of individuality as does consumer capitalism: Vic proudly claims that his cynicism is what makes him different from the average yes-man (130). By being wise to the system, he believes he is both superior to those with whom he works and

immune to the pitfalls of the industry. What we find by the end of *The Hucksters* is that cynicism as mediation between desire and capitalism is a superficial fix – a product of the dominant fiction rather than a genuine reconciliation of the subject split by that dominant fiction. As Adorno notes, “while it [the culture industry] claims to lead the perplexed, it deludes them with false conflicts which they are to exchange for their own. It solves conflicts for them only in appearance, in a way that they can hardly be solved in their real lives” (17). Vic emerges as the hero of *The Hucksters* because ultimately he rejects this false conflict and its ready-made reconciliation and embarks on a search for the real conflicts that compromise (and comprise) his desire.

In the beginning, however, Vic insists that his wallet is the only concern he has as an advertising man, and he frequently mocks the “sincerity” that is a cornerstone of yes-man compliance such as that depicted in Sloane Wilson’s 1955 novel, *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. Herein lies a key difference between Vic Norman and the ad-man characters that preceded him: though George and Edward Ponderevo, as well as Eugene Witla all struggle, albeit oftentimes unsuccessfully, to act on their desire, each of their characters embraces the search for satisfaction, seeking drives that will connect them with objects of desire. Vic, on the other hand, consistently contends that he is beyond desire. Yet his desire for desire, so to speak, seeps through the cracks of his denials. When he is not posturing for his colleagues and associates, but instead is in the company of a woman, he confesses, “I guess all I really know is what I don’t like. I don’t have the vaguest notion what I do like” (131), and at another point, when he is alone, Vic ruminates, “I wish I could have a more profound feeling for my country, my people, and myself” (139). Furthermore, Vic is plagued by questions of time that are really questions about desire, such as, “How in this brief life that had been gadgeted and gimmicked half to death, could a man use time? Where could he hunt and savor time eagerly with zest and purpose?”

(99). As the following will demonstrate, though Vic adopts cynicism as a protective shell to guard against the disappointments and contradictions inherent in consumer capitalism, his narrative eventually reveals that it is not enough: attempting to pre-empt desire by claiming not to be seeking it in the first place is an ineffective ruse. Vic's initial willingness to accept the shallow and superficial milieu of the advertising industry, the dominant fiction it supports, and the subjects it fosters quickly reaches a crisis point at which he is prompted to seek out other existential options, an alternative relationship with the dominant fiction that has ruled him with such a heavy hand.

From the start, Vic's character makes a point to remind himself and others that he is in no way enamored with either city life or the advertising industry; he frequently reiterates that his motives are purely mercenary. Because of his pre-war successes in the industry, he is already well-respected among advertising executives, but Vic regards his "talent" without enthusiasm, pride or passion. Once he is hired at Kimberly and Maag, Vic immediately establishes himself as a bold cynic, the very antithesis of the terrified yes-men by whom he is surrounded. He arrives late for work, admonishes his secretary for working too hard, and encourages his fellow executives to "relax" and come down from the "hysterical state" in which they work (17). Vic sees himself as the exception to the average advertising executive and insists on this difference throughout the novel: "I'm different ... I don't get any kick out of success. Somehow or other I have a disdain for the kind of cheap, sensational mass advertising appeals it takes to sell goods" (130). During his interview with Mr. Kimberly, the head of the agency for which Vic hopes to work, he is forthright, to say the least, about his ambitions: "I don't like to work, so I work for one reason. To make money. I'm not mixed up about what it takes to make money in this business. Certainly not more than average brains ..." (11). Coupled with his occasional theatrics, such as throwing money out the window, much to the astonishment of his co-workers,

the underlying message Vic is seeking to communicate about himself to himself and to his peers is that none of this matters – not the work, not the people, not the products, and really, at bottom, not even the money.

However, Vic's rhetoric belies his strong allegiance to the master signifiers of capitalism. When one of the agency partners, in an effort to push Vic to climb the agency ladder, says "You're a big man, and you can be a hell of a lot bigger. You've got the stuff, son. You've got what it takes" (170), Vic responds promptly to this interpellative call, not by just imagining himself in the position of capitalist-patriarchal power Maag is setting before him, but by imagining himself going a step further, knocking Maag off the ladder completely, and thereby securing sole ownership of the agency for himself. Similarly, when Vic complains to a lover that he hates his job, she asks him why he took it and he replies, "I guess I took it because I'd rather be a winner than a loser." He goes on to explain that "I've felt this way about all my jobs. The men you have to serve. The things you have to do. It makes my flesh creep" (42). Though Vic is physically repulsed by the circumstances of his job, his investment in being recognized as a "winner," which within the dominant fiction of capitalism means breadwinning businessman, is far more powerful than his distaste for the work. His character has been successfully interpellated into the capitalist system: he has been encouraged to recognize himself or strive toward being a "winner," and "winner" in this socioeconomic context means something very specific, with very narrow boundaries.

Pursuing the popular ideal of success comes at great psychological cost, but Vic's character wants to pay as little as possible – hence, he approaches the ideal of success from the position of the cynic. Vic is quickly put off by the behavior he witnesses at his first agency-client meeting. Mr. Kimberly prefaces Vic's introduction to his sole client with the caution that, "nobody ever disagrees with Mr. Evans ... you just don't tell him he's wrong. Nobody ever has

and I guess nobody ever will,” (18), but it is not long before Vic has the gall to do just that, fearing no consequences. During the meeting, when Evans seeks confirmation of his assertions, he says “Right?”, to which all secretaries, account representatives, and executive assistants respond in obedient unison: “Right!” After Evans reminds everyone that they must never forget to “eat, drink, and yes, by God, dream soap,” he prompts the attendees with “Check?” – to which they all automatically and with solid enthusiasm respond, “Check!” – all except Vic, that is, who remains defiantly silent and astonished by his peers’ compliance. Evans singles out Vic, who is deliberately slumping in his chair, and explains his company policy in no uncertain terms: “Once the compass points north and we know where we’re going, we stay on the beam. And we don’t want anybody associated with us who’s off the beam. I ain’t interested in ideas that are off the beam and I ain’t interested in people that are off the beam. Check!” (23). One may rightfully infer that it is a very narrow beam indeed to which Mr. Evans refers, and Vic makes it his first order of business to make clear that he will not be taking the “beam” too seriously.

Another way in which Vic’s character expresses his cynicism is in his descriptions of his bosses and the work they do. As does the novel’s title, these descriptions deploy the imagery of early ad men in their pre-professional, unregulated, traveling medicine show days in order to denigrate the validity of the current work being done in advertising. More than once, Vic reminds himself and others working in the advertising industry that what they do is not so different from “the hucksters who used to shout their vegetables in the street” (45). As he is preparing to pitch a new radio spot to the soap manufacturing mogul, Vic refers to himself self-deprecatingly as “Old Doc Norman” and his script as the “little wonder commercial” (17) – phrases that might have been more at home painted on the side of a 19th-century medicine man’s wooden wagon. He characterizes his ad man contemporaries as “high class huckster[s] who [have] a station wagon instead of a pushcart” (45). Mr. Evans, the creator of Beautee Soap and

the archetypal capitalist in the novel, is cast as one who has not evolved far beyond the kind of flamboyant medicine man we saw in Edward Ponderevo's character shortly after the turn of the century. Vic describes Mr. Evans's operation to a girlfriend in terms that seem closely allied to Ponderevo's way of doing business and also downplays both the glamour of commodity production and the degree of skill and expertise a professional advertising man is expected to offer his clients: "A man cooks up some fat and presses it into a bar of soap. He perfumes it. Wraps it up fancy. Then he needs a barker to sell this miraculous combination of herbs, roots, and berries. So he calls me in to bark for him" (43).

Wells's Ponderevo is perhaps overzealous and unscrupulous, but his character's capacity for passionate showmanship in service of his products is endearing – sincere. As the above suggests, by the time of *The Hucksters*, these traits constitute liabilities: liabilities because the ad man's sincere ambitions may well be disappointed, and liabilities because the modern era of advertising demand that the ad man demonstrate a rigid professionalism not employed by his nineteenth-century predecessors. *The Hucksters* highlights Evan's affinities with the old-fashioned showman in order to demonize the unpredictable shock-and-awe tactics he uses to intimidate and control his underlings. Indeed, despite his cynicism, Vic is every bit the awed spectator when he first notices Mr. Evans's clothing: "He wore a black alpaca coat, a white linen vest, and a bandanna kerchief tied around his neck. Yes, a bandanna. Under it was a starched collar with a gleaming gold collar button, but no tie. He carried a fine white handkerchief in his sleeve. And he wore an old straw field hat, indoors and out, winter and summer. . . . His clothes suggested more than mere eccentricity. No doubt about it, he was a showman" (21). Evans's behavior is at least as attention-getting as his apparel. He opens a meeting by spitting a wad of phlegm onto the boardroom table; during that same meeting, Evans "reached in his mouth, jerked out a bridge of teeth and stuck them under Vic's nose – 'I can see you've already got your teeth

in our problem,” he says (26). At a later meeting, Evans dumps a full carafe of water onto the meeting table and ultimately into the laps of all attending in order to make a point. Evans’s brand of showmanship is certainly vulgar, founded on shock value rather than charm, and it quickly becomes clear that Evans’s odd dress and unconventional mannerisms are not intended to amuse and persuade potential buyers; it is only Evans who seems amused as he uses his eccentricities to bewilder and terrify those that work under him. Though Evans’s character is a formidable and pervasive presence throughout the narrative, the eccentric showman – having turned ruthless exploiter -- is no longer protagonist material. The reader’s affections are instead directed toward Victor Norman -- the industry-savvy cynic, middle-aged bachelor, and war veteran who is suave with the ladies, congenial to all, and equal parts sneaky and charming.

While Wells and Dreiser introduce their protagonists in their early youth, the reader meets Victor Norman at a more mature moment in his life: he has worked in advertising before, he has just recently served in the military as – not insignificantly – a developer of overseas war propaganda, and having finished his tour and returned to the U.S., Vic finds himself quite simply in desperate need of money, and he knows exactly where and how he can make it. Like the fictional ad-men who came before him and those who would follow, Victor Norman came to the city – New York – in search of gainful employment. And, as is typically the case with ad-man characters, Vic is estranged from his rural hometown, his parents, and his past. His character does not begin as an idealist seeking romantic notions of art or commercial enterprise; he just wants to make as much cash as he can as easily as he knows how.

Though *The Hucksters* reveals only a couple snippets of Vic’s upbringing, his past still plays a profound role in his motives and drives, and his sentiments about the past are key to understanding his character. Vic’s cynicism about his future as a mercenary advertising man extends to cynicism about his past, as well. The narrator explains that, “Like many a

midwesterner, he had long ago chosen to ignore his birthplace, and to forget, literally, the home soil in which his roots had once been deeply planted” (5). Unlike either *Tono-Bungay* or *The “Genius,” The Hucksters* does not recount its protagonist’s youth or upbringing in any detail at all. This expository repression parallels Vic’s repression of the experience of lack and the subsequent pull of desire that psychoanalytic theory suggests would have emerged at infancy and first been shaped by his earliest years. Revisiting and recovering some version of that past proves to be Vic’s eventual triumph in the novel.

Looking out a window at the Midwestern landscape as he travels on the Super Chief train from New York to Hollywood, Vic’s near-total disconnect is maybe even a little overwritten as he struggles to recognize his hometown: “Vic noticed the Super Chief was passing through a small city. He took a longer look; sure enough it was Fort Madison. He’d spend seventeen years of his life there, had returned only once – to bury his mother. He looked briefly at the landmarks which he could still identify, lost interest, and then leaned back and closed his eyes” (114). The plot sequence of this scene is particularly significant: in the very next line, “He opened his eyes and saw a child in the doorway watching over him” (114). This child is Kay Dorrance’s son, and his appearance marks the beginning of Vic’s exploration of the kinds of relationships he has idealized in his recollections of his own childhood. However, in the meantime, Vic’s character has simply remapped his past: having rejected his Midwestern origins, “now, wherever he was, he claimed New York and New York, more than any other place on earth claimed him” (5). What he now identifies as “those luxurious signs of home” include “his part of the city, the high rent, expensive, snobbish, hustling, gossiping, drinking, conniving, show-offy east side” (6), and it is now these values that inform his drive to return, go back to, revisit “home.”

Vic’s childhood emerges at another significant point in the narrative as a stark and obviously idealized contrast to his superficial life as an advertiser dashing from coast to coast,

negotiating quick deals, engaging in one-night-stands, and making loads of money. Vic is speaking with Kay Dorrance, the one character in the novel who lives a life that Vic believes is outside or beyond his own world of commerce and marketing, and her presence is the one factor that prompts him to reflect on his way of life. During this particular conversation, he is poking fun at himself for the airs he has assumed as part of his position: “To hear me sound off about sauces and dishes and cafés and gastronomy in general sometimes, you’d think I lived to eat. Actually, it’s just a fashionable pose with me. The really memorable food is that of my young, hungry, growing and lusty youth” (194). This confession is followed by a highly sentimentalized recollection of boyhood hunting adventures and his mother’s loving efforts to incorporate his catches into family dinners, making young Vic, despite his family’s ostensible poverty, “the richest boy in Iowa” (194).

Vic’s wistful reverie seems especially delusional or contrived coming so quickly after his cold dismissal of the vision of his hometown through the train window. Perhaps this is a past he wishes he had lived, but it seems unlikely that if such fond memories were representative of lived experience, Vic would have stayed away from Fort Madison and his doting mother for so many years. Victor explains to Kay the very modern, very limited horizons of his adult life: “In my world, America is a place called Hollywood and a place called New York. There are cities and places in between, but to me they are total abstractions called markets, important only for the curves they make on sales charts” (131). Once Vic has been lured into the cities by the promise of lucrative jobs, there is no question of going back, and it is much more a matter of history and ideology rather than geography that prevents his re-entry into the idyllic simple life, one in which desires are satisfied and sustained in their excesses, with pleasures such as rich food and unconditional love. This passage seems most significant as an indication – one he doesn’t realize he is articulating – of Vic’s dissatisfaction with his current way of life. The likelihood that his

fond boyhood memories are half-truths at best (and possibly fantasies altogether) heightens his dilemma, for this wish-expression points to desire for something beyond the superficial satisfactions available to him via participation in the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, yet Vic insists to himself and others that he is content having settled for this form of fulfillment.

Before Vic learns to see through to his desire, he convinces himself that his rogue cynicism will save him from despair and protect him from corruption in the advertising industry. And indeed, despite the fact that both the Kimberly and Maag agency and Evans's Beutee Soap company depend on absolute conformity and compliance in order to maintain their airtight organizations, neither attempt to eradicate the apparent threat Vic poses to their businesses by firing him, relegating him to a lower position, or even reprimanding him. Rather, both Mr. Kimberly and Mr. Evans instinctively draw him nearer, quickly immersing him in the uppermost levels of their business dealings and the concomitant responsibilities and demands. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer observe of those who attempt to resist the confines of the "culture industry," "once his particular brand of deviation from the norm has been noted by the industry, he belongs to it" (132). Kimberly and especially Evans take Vic and his maverick ways to the heart of the fold and the result is right "on the beam," as Mr. Evans would say: before too long and much to his dismay, Vic is as submissive and fearful as every other man under Evans's rule.

Adorno and Horkheimer speak to Victor Norman's plight again when they write, "Anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in." After having worked on the Beutee Soap account for several months, and having managed to maintain some perspective and dignity throughout, at the crux of one of Evans's frequent tempter tantrums, Vic finds himself faltering. He is sitting in the board room as Evans spouts out rhetorical questions: "A man either knows where he is going. Or he don't. Right?"

“‘Right,’ said Vic. ... And at that instant two blows struck him. The first blow struck simultaneously with the knowledge that he had answered ‘Right’ before anyone else around that table” – even the lackeys he had previously despised and ridiculed. “The second, and the most horrifying blow was the feeling that he was now gripped by it. The Fear.” And “the discovery ... was even more shocking than the Fear itself” (290). Furthermore, Vic realizes that this has not been a sudden transformation, but rather that “The Fear had been lying sluggishly within him, and he had not been conscious of its slow awakening, until it had stretched and yawned and shaken itself into a thing of muscle and life” (291).

Looking back after Vic makes this discovery, the reader can see that the cynicism that initially looked like originality – a fresh new attitude refusing to take the dictates of capitalism too seriously – still only added up to subservience and conformity. As it turns out, being a top-level “yes man” requires a lot of work, creativity, and deception of the self and others. Vic essentially says as much when he explains to Kimberly that he expects to get better work out of those working under him by creating a more relaxed atmosphere. Vic complains that, “Nobody does good work in that hysterical state,” and he intends to remedy the situation “by being relaxed myself. I want to seem to them not to give a damn about this job or old man Evans or you” (17). The trouble for Vic and Mr. Kimberly is that, although Mr. Evans is the perfect example of Adorno and Horkheimer’s contention that among top executives in the culture industry, there is a “determination not to produce anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all, themselves” (22), Evans oftentimes does not know how to reproduce the status quo as he would like, and it is up to Vic and Mr. Kimberly to do this for him by subverting his wrong-headed ideas without appearing to contradict him. Vic and Kimberly are constantly contriving ploys to convince Evans that their new ideas – which are of course only careful renovations of the same old ideas – are in fact Evans’s own. What is ironic – or painfully

logical – in *The Hucksters* is that the ideas Vic and Kimberly “sneak” in on Evans serve him better than he could serve himself. At this point in his career, were he left to his own ideas, carried out exactly as directed by automatons, Evans’s empire would quickly crumble. But, having early on, along with the capitalist system at large, inculcated his underlings with the understanding that their personal wellbeing is synonymous with the success of Beautee Soap, *he* can now relax; Evans’s incompetence in matters of marketing and publicity are of no consequence to him, since he has terrified yes-men such as Vic and Kimberly rushing in to revise and resubmit his bad ideas, clean up his messes, and make him feel clever and insightful while they’re at it. Such compliance is, as Vic realizes, a powerful and oftentimes nearly invisible force. As much as he had wanted to resist – as much as he did in fact resist, and despite his claims to the contrary, Vic was convinced from the start that he needed Evans’s Beautee Soap account to “survive,” and ultimately, he could only do so by “fitting in,” joining the chorus of “Rights” and “Checks.”

Adorno and Horkheimer quote Alexis de Toqueville’s observation that captures the relative subtlety of such modern capitalist coercion: “The ruler no longer says: you must think as I do or die. He says: you are free not to think as I do; your life, your property, everything shall remain yours, but from this day on you are a stranger among us.” Adorno and Horkheimer go on to say that “not to conform means to be rendered powerless, economically and therefore spiritually” (133). This is exactly where we find Vic at the conclusion of *The Hucksters*. He did exercise his freedom to not think as his colleagues did, and eventually to not do as they did, and it resulted in exile from his professional cadre and rejection from his only friend. Adorno and Horkheimer also suggest that, under the influence of the culture industry, “tragedy is reduced to the threat to destroy anyone who does not cooperate, whereas its paradoxical significance once lay in a hopeless resistance to mythic destiny” (152). Victor’s resistance in *The Hucksters* is

noble but useless; his renunciation of his job and his love has no consequence beyond his own removal from the established social order. The greater woe, though, is precisely what Adorno and Horkheimer lament: rather than a “mythic destiny” – an end that may cause one individual to suffer, but points toward the greater good of humanity – *The Hucksters* portrays the system of consumer capitalism as the permanent, immutable end that the protagonist is up against. Within *The Hucksters*, there is no chip in this structure, no flaw in the machine, and nothing within the novel suggests anything other than that the system will go on running forever, even if it occasionally spits out a defect like Victor Norman.

Yet Vic is the hero of *The Hucksters* because he does set out to resist, and because he is able – eventually – to recognize that his resistance has been incorporated and re-formed into compliance, and because once he makes these discoveries, he has the strength to give up his job and walk away into a very uncertain future. The first line of the novel is prescient of these discoveries prompted by Vic’s near-complete submersion in the agency ideology: “Victor Norman came awake quietly and looked at his watch” (1). As mentioned above, Victor’s first “awakening” takes place as he realizes that, despite his adamant declarations to the contrary, he is not immune to the coercive agency atmosphere. His second discovery is that, immune or not, he is wasting his time and wasting his life working in the advertising and entertainment industries. This is another important way in which Vic is distinguished from his fictional predecessors: his character has a genuine epiphany; he realizes that his immersion in capitalist commodification is hurting him, is thwarting his opportunity to develop and live real desire. After becoming involved with Kay Dorrance and her children, he is then able to “understand why he’s missed this deep, satisfying value that a family and a permanent, enduring love gives to a man – why, in fact, he’d been unconscious of it for over a decade,” and he realizes also that “he’d found a thousand substitutes for this value, all of them bad” (278). With this knowledge at

hand, when Mr. Kimberly offers Vic a partnership and complete control of the Beautee Soap account, Victor simply says, “Kim, you’ve got to get yourself a new boy” (302). Kimberly is incredulous then angry, yet Victor stands firm.

Vic’s experience highlights the bravery required of an individual to seriously enter into the discourse of the analyst. It is perhaps no coincidence that Vic’s character is the first of the fictional ad-men discussed thus far who makes this important step toward discovery of desire; the plot of the novel reflects the increasing popularity of Freud’s ideas and applications of psychoanalysis. For instance, Kimberly’s character refers freely, albeit with skepticism, to his sessions with a psychiatrist, and it even “pleased him to be thought neurotic” (47). Vic’s character also acknowledges the trend, remarking in jest that, “It’s nice to know there’s a free psychiatrist around” (29) when he learns that Kimberly has referred other agency men to his own therapist. Though the novel’s attitude toward psychoanalysis is one of gentle mockery, by the end of *The Hucksters*, Vic’s character has indeed entered into a discourse with his own desire, but is faced with the serious danger of falling into the discourse of the hysteric. Mark Bracher explains that “the hysterical structure is in force whenever a discourse is dominated by the speaker’s symptom – that is, his or her conflicted mode of experiencing jouissance, a conflict manifested ... as a failure of the subject to coincide with, or be satisfied with the jouissance underwritten by, the master signifiers offered by society and embraced as the subject’s ideals” (66). Furthermore, “the problem with the discourse of the Hysteric lies in its demanding the master signifier from the other rather than producing it oneself” (67). Vic has taken an important step toward relinquishing his attachments to the master signifiers imposed upon him by the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, but is now confronted with the task of recognizing his desire and actively re-formulating a set of master signifiers accordingly, on his own. This is the

hard part, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the novel ends at this moment, implying a looming question mark: what now?

Wakeman's inability to answer this question as an author may also be related to the persistence of this question in his own life. Though not autobiographical in the sense that *Tono-Bungay* and *The "Genius"* are fictionalizations of Wells's and Dreiser's lives respectively, most of Wakeman's novels, *The Hucksters* included, are based upon protagonists having much in common with the author and whose tales are drawn directly from Wakeman's own experiences. Like Vic Norman, Wakeman left a lucrative advertising job. But contrary to what the end of the novel implies for Vic, Norman did not leave the industry altogether – he went on to become a popular novelist and Hollywood scriptwriter. The exposé quality of his fiction – whether he is railing at the navy, philandering husbands, or the advertising industry – suggests a powerful dissatisfaction with the world of Hollywood mores and late capitalism, but it seems that for Wakeman, unlike Vic, the position of insider-as-critic has been rewarding. However, one of the important functions of fiction is to imagine on paper what we cannot yet live in our lives: perhaps Wakeman's fictional doppelganger thrusts himself into the unknown precisely because Wakeman himself could not.

The experience that opens the door for Vic to re-evaluate his cynical disposition, cut his ties with advertising, and peek into an alternative mode of existence is his encounter with Kay Dorrance. Vic meets Kay on the Super Chief train, where she is the one “genuine” character who poses a dramatic contrast to the gambling, drinking, slick-talking, double-dealing businessmen and the overdone, overeager glamour girls who comprise the microcosm of the entertainment and advertising industries aboard the train. Kay is the only character in the novel with whom Vic has a “real” conversation – they discuss religion, philosophies of art and

business; they criticize the “American intellectual” and modernity – Kay is the only character with whom Vic doesn’t seem to be “dealing.” Additionally, it is not just Kay, but Kay *and* her children to whom Vic is attracted – the appeal is that of a family relationship, not just a romantic or sexual experience. His idealization of his past home as the location of desire and jouissance comes full circle when Vic, after he and Kay have become serious lovers, remarks, “Home again ... holding you is like being home” (248).

After first meeting Kay on the train, Vic experiences a brief moment of doubt which may have been more significant than he realized. Vic separates from Kay and disembarks the train feeling “a sense of loss which he overcame at once as he realized that it was a train friendship and the closeness he felt for the Dorrances was artificially induced by the confinement on the train” (140). Vic describes the train itself – the SuperChief transcontinental – as essentially a microcosm of the industry he works for, cars full of Hollywood and New York producers, writers, and distributors accompanied by “glittering, gesticulating shrill and glossy women,” all drinking, gambling, flirting, and schmoozing (109). Indeed, it is aboard the SuperChief that Vic makes one of his most important deals to secure talent for Evans, and the fact that Vic’s relationship with Kay Dorrance was born out of this culture industry on wheels, hurtling toward Hollywood, sets the stage for the melodramatic and unhappy end of that relationship and the discovery that Kay does not in fact constitute a viable alternative to Vic’s shallow lifestyle.

Vic does seek Kay out in Hollywood and he comes to love her because she seems to embody values that are antithetical to the superficial market values espoused by everyone else in his life (which is synonymous with his work). Kay is somewhat shy, not socially sophisticated, but thoughtful, contemplative, and naturally graceful – the polar opposite of the confident, flirtatious, and frivolous women Vic has chosen as lovers in the past, and the opposite of Vic himself. In this respect Kay’s character represents not only the woman that Victor wishes he

could love, but the person he wishes he could be. Before she had a family, Kay studied art and had wanted to be a sculptress, and even continues to sculpt when she has time. This is another respect in which she espouses and lives by desires that seem out of Vic's reach; he frequently longs for artistic sensibility and "real" art objects, but he is never able to actually engage himself in the pleasures of art or artistic endeavors of any kind.

By the time Vic comes into her life, Kay's primary interest is family – her husband is away at war, but she dotes full time on her two children, Hal and Ellen, characters which Wakeman takes notable care to develop. Kay's family dynamic represents many of the things that Vic supposedly left behind in his Midwestern youth, with the significant exception of her missing husband, who is away at war. Mr. Dorrance's absence provides an imaginative opening, enabling Vic to insert himself into the family tableaux; his romance with Kay is very much a romance with the entire family, with the *idea* of family: "he was strongly attracted to her, just as he had been attracted to her children" (118). However, Kaja Silverman claims that "it not only makes a difference where the subject 'stands' within the *mise-en-scene* of its desire, but what identity it there assumes or [by] what values it is marked. It is here that sexual, racial, and class difference all come into play in crucial ways" (8) and her point applies to Vic's character in this situation. Though Vic revels in the fantasy of being the head of this unit of domestic bliss, his lingering allegiance to the dominant fiction of patriarchal capitalism ultimately makes realization of this fantasy impossible. When he leaves his job, he leaves Kay as well, despite her protests; he cannot imagine himself as husband to Kay and father to her children without also being a capitalist breadwinner.

Like every other ad-man character here considered, Vic is incapable of engaging in a meaningful sexual relationship. When Kay expresses her desire and willingness to end her marriage and be with Vic, he cowers. Vic feels that if he adopts the anti-market values he is so

attracted to in Kay, he, paradoxically, will not be “man enough” to be involved with her because he would be economically unable to support her in the manner he imagines is necessary and right. He cannot imagine being the object of her desire (and that of her children) outside of his role as producer within the capitalist system. But it is Vic who imposes this limitation on his relationship with Kay – when he tells her he quit his job, she asks, “Are you upset about it, darling? ... If you are, then I’m sorry about it. If you’re not, I’m happy,” – and this reveals (at least one of) the limits of his own liberation.

Adorno and Horkheimer identify a relevant feature of social life amidst the ubiquity of commodified culture as follows: “jovial denial takes the place of the pain found in ecstasy and in asceticism. The supreme law is that they shall not satisfy their desires at any price” (141). Though *The Huckster*’s reviewers were “unanimous in their disapproval of the love story,” disparaging this line of the plot with “adjectives ranging from ‘naïve’ to ‘revolting,’” (Roth 615), within the context of the dumbed-down entertainment industry and the advertising that is indistinguishable from it, Wakeman’s depiction of this romance makes sense as the logical product of such a milieu. Within the context of the culture industry, “love is downgraded to romance” (Adorno and Horkheimer 140). Vic’s relationship with Kay can be read as a sentimentalized wish that is not so different from the sappy, predictable plots that fill the radio shows and soap commercials he sells and directs. As such, the reductive wish must stand in for the real desire for a relationship because such desire simply cannot come to fruition within the existing social structure – like everyone else, Vic may accept the paltry substitutes offered by the mass media; if he chooses to reject what the media offers, he will get nothing at all – or so he has been conditioned to believe. In his overwrought and martyred renunciation of Kay, and thereby his own happiness, it appears that even this relationship (or at least the end of this relationship)

which Vic initially idealizes as an alternative to his subsumption in the basest forms of mass culture, is only and always a product of that culture.

It is significant that the children are present in the novel at all – in both *Tono Bungay* and *The Genius* children are conspicuously absent. The social structures illustrated in these novels seem to be infertile, incapable or unwilling to reproduce themselves. As vital, vivacious characters, Hal and Ellen dramatize and sentimentalize what Vic is missing in his life, but, despite their inclusion in *The Hucksters*, they turn out to be incarnations of the impossible. Wakeman's narrative, like its predecessors, refuses to assimilate them into the social structure of which Vic is a part. For capitalists in the novel, children come in the form of commodities: Evan Evans "was a born salesman." Selling soap "was his life and his wife and his children as well as his job" (64). Flesh and blood progeny simply don't fit into the picture. Vic's character does not so willingly embrace selling in lieu of family, but he does articulate his feeling that he cannot do both: he explains to a disappointed lover, "I harden myself against marriage" because "I don't want to take the responsibility for luring any woman into the same trap that I'm in" (95). And even though he eventually walks away from this "trap," because he is still unsure of his "own salvation," he still cannot consider marriage and family. The novel ends with a phone conversation in which Vic is breaking the news to Kay that he no longer wants to pursue their relationship; Kay quietly concedes, then asks if he would like to speak with her children; the last line of the novel is Vic's response: "Yes, ...I want to say good-bye to them" (307).

Participation in the capitalist marketplace doesn't just incidentally exclude the possibility of reproduction, children, human relationships and desire; in *The Hucksters*, as is the case even more literally in *Tono Bungay*, such participation actually creates bodily sickness that is diametrically opposed to the health, vitality, and vigorousness most conducive to fertility and

reproduction. Kimberly, the man Vic's character fears he will become, is unflinchingly invested in the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism and willing to do whatever it takes to maintain his status within that fiction. As a result, he is an alcoholic hypochondriac, constantly checking his pulse and his temperature while reaching for whisky, scotch, sulphur, benzadrines, or some combination thereof, forever attempting to medicate a sickness precipitated not by microbes or viruses, but by his work in the advertising industry. Vic's character compares favorably to Kimberly's; his cloak of cynicism seems to help him keep such sickness at bay. His secretary admires him because "he still has hair," and she doesn't "think he's got ulcers yet" (14). Though Kimberly entreats Vic a number of times to share in his pharmacopoeia, Vic always declines the drugs, and eventually chooses to separate himself from the cause of the sickness rather than attempt to relieve the symptoms. Kimberly's afflictions symbolize Adorno and Horkheimer's point that, however superficially varied the content of mass cultural productions may be, they all serve the same purpose: "the self-derision of man." The production and consumption of these materials has "completely liquidated ... the possibility of becoming a subject in the economy, an entrepreneur or a proprietor" (153). In short, everyone becomes an employee, and the effect is sickening.

Tracing the ad-man characters from Ponderevo on reveals a related trend: a decline in entrepreneurial ambition. Ponderevo starts his enterprise from scratch, builds it from the ground up and remains the figurehead of his operations until they crumble. Eugene Witla starts out wanting to earn his living as an independent artist, but discovers he does not have the connections or the capital necessary to make this happen. He does not begin his advertising career with such grand ambitions, but once he gets a taste of success, he does long for control and for a hand in bigger things, things that are his own, such as his campaign for the position of art director at the agency, and finally his real estate development deal that is enormous in scope.

If Ponderevo and Eugene Witla had to learn the hard way the risks and, in these narratives, almost certain ruin that accompany individual endeavors to unalienated labor and enterprise within a capitalist system, by the mid-forties, Victor Norman's character is wiser and avoids the danger altogether: he despises being a toadie, but he claims to have no desire to run the show. Ponderevo and Eugene were driven toward control of a capitalist empire as a means to freedom within the system; Vic, on the other hand, believes that freedom lingers closer to the bottom of the totem pole. He warns his boss, Mr. Kimberly, that he wouldn't want the position even of "that lowest form of agency life, a vice-president ... don't think I'm punching for it. I'd turn it down if you offered me one" (29).

And though the partnership that Mr. Kimberly eventually offers him would make Vic his own boss and give him sole control of the Beautee Soap account, Vic wonders whether Mr. Kimberly isn't just looking for a way to get out from under Mr. Evans's thumb and leave the entire burden of Evans's difficult and demeaning account on his shoulders. Vic knows that accepting a partnership at Kimberly and Maag would not change the fact that the entire agency is at the mercy of their main account, Beautee Soap. Indeed, this conviction progresses through literary history: by the time of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955), protagonist Tom Rath fully embodies the notion that one should be satisfied with a rank and file position. Though most businesses are interdependent in one way or another, as Roland Marchand points out, the particular relationship between the advertising agency and the big client is almost always one in which the agency is constantly in a position of subservience; no matter how far one moves up the ranks in an advertising agency, an advertising man will always be an employee.

Many ad-men, both real and fictional, have attempted to find a degree of freedom within the confines of consumer capitalism by incorporating art into their work, but overall, the advertising man's relationship to art has been contentious throughout. The contention

surrounding boundaries between “high” art and the mass market, the economic lure of advertising and other mass media industries for individuals who cannot “make it” as independent artists, as well as the compromises required by the practical demands of moving merchandise comprise just a few of the conflicting concerns that emerge in novelistic representations of the ad man. Wells’s Ponderevo expresses very little interest in fine art, but masters and lives the art of showmanship and spectacle in his advertising and production enterprises and flirts with the idea of integrating art into his advertising campaigns; Dreiser’s Eugene Witla is driven by a conflicted passion to develop his talent for fine art that he can only finance by working as an advertising illustrator and copy writer. Wakeman’s Victor Norman maintains a much more distant and wistful relationship to art; the subject comes up repeatedly throughout *The Hucksters* but represents the impossible: the desire that Vic cannot have so long as he subscribes to the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism.

For Vic, work is a daily drudge that supposedly means nothing to him beyond the money he earns doing it. He does not engage in his profession in such a way that it could be called his “art,” perhaps primarily because, unlike both Ponderevo and Witla, Vic doesn’t make or create anything. His work at Kimberly and Maag requires him to scout talent, negotiate contracts, and massage Evans’s ego; over the course of the novel, he only writes one radio spot, and Vic himself would be the first to insist that it certainly did not involve anything resembling art. Vic has no artistic talent himself, but he spends a lot of time throughout *The Hucksters* lamenting the absence of art in his life and simultaneously denigrating others in his profession who have pretensions to art. When Kay suggests that perhaps Vic is an artist who has yet to discover his own talent, he quickly corrects her: “I told you I’m not an artist. I don’t feel like an artist, I don’t have any position about life that is even slightly artistic. And worst of all, I don’t burn to capture some interpretation of experience” (132). Vic’s character attempts to compensate for this lack

by adopting a cynical and condescending posture from which he incessantly insists on the impossibility of art in his world of capitalism, commerce, and mass culture.

For instance, when a young assistant producer – none-too-subtly dubbed “Artie” – approaches Vic with an idea for a new radio drama, Vic looks at “the impressive folder” and then berates the young man’s artistic ambition: “It’s literally waste of time to think about new show ideas in an ad agency. They pay you dough for different reasons – for helping to put on a well produced show every week, according to a strict formula ... so my advice to you is, concentrate on putting the right kind of crap in the show you already work on. It ain’t art but it’s good radio” (50-1). Furthermore, Vic has nothing but disdain for those who are working in what might be considered an artistic capacity in the advertising industry: “About writers, it’s their pretense I dislike. Most of them are semi-literate folk who have acquired a certain meagre skill at stringing words together. So they begin to look on themselves as being something special ...” Vic claims to have very little patience for their “fashionable chatter about the writer’s position in society” and thinks they’re “a bunch of not very convincing poseurs” (133). In these scenes, Vic’s character is perfectly compliant with the dominant fiction’s protective mechanism, by which it deflects potential detractors that, in this case, might portray or evoke liberation of desire. In fact, Vic even characterizes Artie’s innovative ideas as “hazardous” to the broadcast industry (50). In Adorno’s terms, “the culture industry finds ideological support precisely insofar as it carefully shields itself from the full potential of the techniques contained in its products” (14).

Wakeman’s decision to cast Vic as such a staunch cynic enabled him to shore up his critique of advertising by representing the industry, via Vic, as negatively as possible, especially in regards to its capacity for art. Without exception or ambiguity, Vic sees advertising in particular and mass culture in general as altogether opposed to art, as mutually exclusive spheres of experience. He explains to Jean, a lounge singer who is also his part-time lover, “On some

shows, like Fibber McGee and Molly, as many as forty million people listen. That's why radio can never be an adult art form – too damn many people to please" (69). In layman's terms, Vic is blaming the economic structure of broadcast radio for excluding the possibility of art. Adorno makes a similar point when he writes that, in a work of art, "technique is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic. In contrast," he contends, "the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object" (14). A radio production cannot use artistic techniques to speak genuinely to human desire, cannot "raise a protest against the petrified relations under which they [the producers and audiences] live" (13), so long as its primary directive is profit predicated on mass distribution.

And it's not just a matter of numbers for Vic; he is convinced that the average American citizen is too dim-witted to appreciate material that is even remotely artistic. Vic "marvel[s] at the dramatic taste of the American Housewife" with disdain (45); he feels "a kind of contempt for what you have to put on the radio to get a lot of people to listen to your program" (130); and about the studio audiences, he wonders, "Why do they laugh when pointed at, clap their hands when directed, [and] whistle at the pretty girl singers?" (258). Vic imagines a mass public that is no more culturally sophisticated than dogs doing mindless tricks for cheap(ened) treats – he has fully assumed the patronizing position of the culture industry, one that assumes "the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery" (Adorno 12). This attitude towards humanity in general seems to have deeply affected Vic's ability to enter into the desire of the Other in any form. He cannot see himself or a reflection of his desire in any of his sold-out lackey co-workers, in any of the prostituted women by whom he is surrounded, and certainly not in the audiences for his advertising, which he imagines is comprised of ignorant, foolish dullards.

Unlike the moronic masses from which he is so careful to distance himself, Victor holds “high” art in great esteem. As he is admiring Jean at a club where she is singing, he distinguishes her, an object of “talent” – something easily commodified – from “real” art: “She was talent and he enjoyed the free show which talent always put on during its offstage moments. But he was always very careful not to confuse talent with art, which he really respected” (40). However, this art that Vic holds in such high regard is present in his life only in the form of a wish – he has no access to it. Early in the novel, Vic suggests that his love of money is only in service to his desire for art: “The only time I ever get an impulse to make lots of money is when I see something like that El Greco at Korner’s. God, I’d like to have that for my apartment” (67)¹. Shortly thereafter, however, Vic reveals the ironic fact that his desire for art has the dangerous potential to undermine itself by motivating him to succumb to the yes-man mentality that would enable him to make the money that would in turn allow him to purchase the art – which at that point he would probably no longer desire. Vic’s concern that he will be sucked in entirely to the workaday world grows the longer he works for Evans, and he warns himself, “Watch your step Vic, old man, keep one eye on the ball, the other on the clock and forget about that El Greco. It’s bad to want El Greco in a spot like this. Weights a man down” (75). By Vic’s logic, he is caught in an impossible dilemma where he is damned to an artless life either way.

Despite his supposedly atypical desire for art, because he is not himself an artist, Vic feels that this entire experience is unavailable to him. In response to another of Kay’s entreaties that art is possible for him in one way or another, Vic explains, “You see ... a real honest-to-god artist has an easy out – his ivory tower. It’s we characters who haven’t any ivory tower to run to that are really trapped. And we find out too late that a thousand dollars a week won’t help us

¹ Vic’s particular taste in art is a matter for discussion as well; it seems odd – or perhaps perfectly appropriate given the wish-status of art as well as deep attachment and spirituality in Vic’s life – that he is drawn to such a dramatically religious artist as El Greco.

much either” (132). Here Vic again reiterates his belief that art and commerce are entirely separate from one another, and furthermore, that it is not possible for one to move back and forth between these two separate spheres; in Vic’s mind, being on the payroll at Kimberly and Maag necessarily excludes him from participation in “honest-to-god” art. And perhaps Vic is right – Amy and Douglas Koritz’s suggestion that “to the extent that we persuade [people] of the dominance of the economic in their lives and actions, we risk erasing the possibility of thinking – and finally acting – in any other terms” (417) resonates with Vic’s predicament. Perhaps it is not that a sphere of autonomous art does not exist, it is simply that once one has been so inculcated with purely economic means of knowing and being, the way to that “ivory tower” is entirely obscured.

If many novelists and the characters they create have envisioned autonomous art as an alternative space outside the capitalist economy, Victor Norman is one character who just can’t see it, and perhaps Frederic Wakeman himself doubts the viability of such “separate sphere” idealism. Such doubts point toward continually increasing efforts on the part of artists, advertisers, and consumers alike throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to understand and experience art as integrated into, rather than separate from, consumer capitalism. Unlike Ponderevo and Eugene, who in their various ways *live* their art, the only relationship Vic can conceive of with art is that of a buyer and a commodity – ironic, given his insistence on the absolute difference between the two. Similarly, Wakeman himself, after leaving his job in advertising and writing a scathing exposé of the industry, did not head for the “ivory tower,” but rather found great success writing screenplays in Hollywood. As Vic sees it, his only alternative if he cannot create art is to buy it – hence his goading desire for the El Greco. Vic’s wistful fantasies involving what he regards as “real art” suggest that these works represent for him something entirely different, and undoubtedly better, than the world he knows and the life he

lives – that missing “something” that would provide longed-for satisfaction, Lacan’s *object a*. But even in moments of wishful thinking, Vic is unable to extricate the capitalist principle of exchange value from his fantasies.

Another aspect of Vic’s character that illustrates Amy and Douglas Koritz’s contention that economic ideologies have the dangerous potential to be all-consuming and thereby terribly limiting is evident in his relationships with other people. Vic’s desire for the Other is manifest only as a drive for money; he treats every man he comes into contact with as a potential profit. Upon first meeting Kimberly, Vic tells him exactly what he wants from him – money – and even though Kimberly is clearly eager to strike up a friendship with Vic, Vic only engages himself so far as it takes to secure his income. This dynamic is further exemplified by the partnership coup drama that forms one of the subplots of the novel. On separate occasions, both of the existing partners of Kimberly and Maag approach Vic, express their dissatisfaction with the other, and propose that Vic join in a partnership that would shut out the existing partner. Even though Vic has worked closely with Kimberly and hardly knows Maag, he considers both of their proposals with equal regard, and eventually decides that if he were to pursue a partnership at all, a partnership with Maag (which would cut Kimberly out) would be best because Maag was weak enough that Vic could quickly cut Maag out as well. Vic’s “theory of making friends” sums up his behavior nicely: “I am a man of many friends. They get me railroad reservations, hotel rooms, steak, scotch, all sorts of friendly things. But is it because of my personality? Because they like me? No. I just give them money. The cleanest, simplest basis of friendship you can find” (30). Vic cannot imagine anyone caring about who he is beyond the contents of his wallet, and likewise, Vic is only able to participate in a male friendship if it is based on “friendly things” – emphasis on the “things” – rather than actual friendship. The desire for the pleasures of love has been replaced by desire for stuff.

While men signify to Vic only as potential profits, he views women almost exclusively as potential expenses, bargains, and acquisitions – especially those he meets before Kay. A male character treating female characters as objects is by no means a novelty (or a fiction), but within the context of Vic’s professional commitments and the concomitant ideological blocks his character faces, the commercial nature of his interaction with women is especially significant as a demonstration of the patriarchal gender dynamics that both support and emerge from the dominant fiction of modern capitalism and the ways that these dynamics shortcut desire. The first scene of the novel depicts Vic saying good-bye to a one-night stand: “Vic was glad to see her go ... all night is a long time to spend with an old friend” (4). That Vic would refer to a one-night-stand as “an old friend” indicates from the start that his sense of human relationships is perhaps compromised.

A scene built around prostitutes is another obvious illustration of this dynamic, and it is especially telling that while Kimberly enters into the contract frequently and without questions, Vic objects to the terms of the deal. When Kimberly asks Vic to meet him one afternoon, Vic was “somewhat surprised to find Kim with a couple of whores. Not that he objected, but he could never understand the necessity for a man to use them, amateurs being a dime a dozen” (71). For Vic, it is not simply that human relationships should be reducible to capitalistic exchange; as a savvy capitalist, Vic expects that exchange to be in his favor. He is reluctant to pay the wages of a professional when he can get comparable labor from an amateur at a greatly reduced rate.

In this spirit, Vic refers to Jean Ogilvie (his occasional lover) as “talent” and “a free show.” He compliments her by saying, “to me you are just a sound effect – a sound effect with red hair and one breast lower than the other” (65). He appraises her in the same way he appraises potential performers for his radio spots, an assemblage of unrelated physical features

that do not coalesce into a whole, but rather form a collection of instruments with which to sell goods. *The Hucksters* also depicts women who have internalized this form of assessment: Jean “was always stroking herself, patting her breasts, feeling her legs,” and “straightening her dress,” in constant reappraisals of her “goods” – her value as a commodity. But although she recognizes that her parts are all she has to offer Vic, Jean wants him to want more: she says to him, “Some day I hope you find something that is important. I really do, darling, I really do.” To which Vic can only respond, “I wish I had some dough” (67). And in fact, Vic soon decides that Jean’s red hair, lopsided breasts, and sultry voice could make him some money, and subsequently offers her a spot on the *Beautee Soap* show. This complete fusion of cold commerce and heartless romance makes clear the correlation between Vic’s immersion in capitalist values and his stunted ability to participate in human relationships. And as mentioned above, though Kay Dorrance’s character inspires Vic to pursue a more meaningful relationship, ultimately he can only conceive of her as an object to be bought, and though he is noble enough by the end of the novel to refuse the transaction, he is not changed enough to imagine their relationship outside of economic terms altogether.

Though Vic is privy to the inner machinations of the advertising industry and is well acquainted with strategies of orchestrating consumer desires, he is no less subject to the lures of consumerism. However, like the other ad men discussed thus far, his consumer tastes reflect his wish to separate himself from the mass of consumers he imagines as he produces painfully asinine advertisements and entertainments meant to tantalize and bamboozle the simplest of minds. As Roland Marchand has noted of advertising professionals, “most ... occupied a class position and displayed cultural tastes that distanced them from popular conditions and values” (xvii). Likewise, the fictional Victor Norman attempts to position himself above the masses by

channeling his consumer desires toward things that embody values antithetical to the mainstays of mass consumerism, such as novelty, contemporary fashion, affordability, and consumer capitalism's tendencies toward overproduction. Vic's consumer identity is highlighted once he decides that he despises the transient feeling of living in a hotel: "he felt so homeless, so rootless, he ... thought he might have a more settled feeling if he established a home," and so he sets out to rent and subsequently furnish an apartment (66).

In an enthusiastic quest to furnish his apartment, Vic heads straight to the antique shops. His choice is significant: his overpayment for used goods symbolizes an allegiance to supposedly timeless values of style and craftsmanship that will withstand the test of time. Furthermore, antique shopping gives Vic the opportunity to flex his elite cultural capital as a discerning shopper: "he liked furniture, and he knew something about it, so there was a satisfaction in fixing up his own place" (66). Unlike the (feminine and feminized) consuming masses, Vic is a savvy buyer, well-informed, not influenced by specious claims of novelty and ephemeral fashions. His shopping companion, the decidedly lower-middle-class club singer Jean Ogilvie, emphasizes this distinction by questioning Vic's choices: "I don't see what you see in antiques ... Now if it were me, I'd put a beautiful white rug on the living room floor, and get some of those mad curved sofas and things, all modern and bright with big mirrors." Vic voices his disagreement harshly by claiming, "I'd cut my throat before I'd live in one of those decorator salons." Jean also highlights the discrepancy in their respective consumer knowledge when she refers to the antique stores as "junk shops," disparagingly notes "the prices you pay. Five hundred dollars for that old beat-up sofa," and is foolish enough to ask, "Who is this character Sheraton anyway?" (65).

The difference in consumer styles depicted in this scene reveals that the difference between the knowledgeable, discerning consumer and the easily-swayed consumer of frivolity is also a difference in sex. Vic, privileged by his gender within a system of patriarchal capitalism,

is cast as a connoisseur-consumer; his female counterpart is left with the part of duped consumer. Jean becomes excited about the latest, gaudiest trends in home décor, and beyond not understanding Vic's taste for antiques in particular, she cannot understand his interest at all. Frustrated by their shopping trip, Jean remarks, "I thought men didn't care what their furniture was ... I thought women were the only ones that cared" (66). The idea that the media has habitually gendered consumers as female and that the majority of actual consumers during the larger part of the twentieth century were in fact women are both well-established, but Wakeman offers an image of the consumer that is decidedly male, and not surprisingly, the male consumer is depicted as immune to the follies of consumerism. Male consumer desire is cast as sophisticated and culturally substantive, while female consumer desire is cast as ignorant and easily changeable.

Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, however, that there is actually little difference between the antique shopper and the consumer of novelty when they point out that the system of consumer capitalism ensures that "something is provided for all so that none may escape," and that, furthermore, "What connoisseurs discuss as good or bad points," – as does Vic – "serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition or range of choice" (123). And indeed, despite the fact that Vic's character is portrayed as a savvy, elite consumer, his desires and purchases are revealed to be no less empty than the sort one might be led to expect of a less sophisticated female character such as Jean Ogilvie. When Vic returns from Hollywood where he met Kay Dorrance – the epitome of all things genuine, the seeming alternative to life in the rat race – Vic looks upon his furnishings with different eyes: "His new apartment, cluttered with all the fine furniture of another century, was just as he had left it – could it only be two weeks ago?" The extent of his change of heart makes his absence seem lengthier, and the objects that he relished only fourteen days ago now appear as so much "clutter." Vic attempts to organize to the scene,

moving the sofa, hooking up the telephone, angling a chair, but all to no avail – he cannot make these things signify what he thought they had before he left: “he looked around him and the room suddenly became distasteful. All this junk. What had he been thinking about when he bought it?” (304). He was uncertain of his motives from the beginning; when he set out to find an apartment, “Vic did not actually know why he was doing it ... he felt so homeless, so rootless, living in the hotel, he halfway thought that he might have a more settled feeling if he established a home” (66). Perhaps what is on his mind, or lingering in his unconscious, is his desire for a home that included the kind of relationships his idealized childhood home represents. As an adult, Vic has tried to re-create, re-enact a meaningful domestic existence via consumerism; what he has discovered is that it is a paltry substitute – the *object a* available under the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism cannot sustain desire.

As I have noted in earlier chapters, the inability to sustain desire within a dominant fiction of consumer capitalism has led to violence in fictional portrayals of ad-man characters. As H.G. Wells’s George Ponderevo walks away from his uncle’s crumbled empire to build and operate war ships, he enters a profession in which destruction is not a likely by-product, but rather the stated intent. His murderous exploits on his uncle’s behalf have perhaps paved the way for this career move, and by the end of the novel, George has clearly gone from bad to worse, seeking increasingly violent encounters. Dreiser’s Eugene Witla was driven to pursue his own fall from capitalist grace in order to secure his freedom from the system. The portion of Vic Norman’s career detailed in *The Hucksters* follows the opposite trajectory: capitalism as a system that is incapable of sustaining desire is characterized from the start as an ideology intimately related to military violence. At the start of the novel, Victor has only been back in New York for a week; having just resigned from the “Office of War Information, Overseas

Radio Division,” he is now seeking a position in advertising (5). However, the novel’s exposition reveals that Vic had worked in radio advertising *before* the war as well, and had already earned a reputation as one of the best in the field. His experience in advertising preceded his success as a propagandist for the war, and though he is to some degree disappointed in his experience with the Office of War Information, it leads him back to advertising as a civilian, which is suggestive of some degree of continuity between using words to justify the violence of war and using words to justify the violences of capitalism.

During their initial meeting, Mr. Kimberly asks Vic why he left the war and he is shocked when Vic responds, “Because the war’s over” (9). Vic continues, “That’s right. This is an air war and a production war, Mr. Kimberly. Sure there’ll still be a lot of big battles, and the communiqués will make them sound decisive. But it’s just street cleaning. Nothing else” (9). In a very blasé manner, Vic assures Mr. Kimberly that “the war in Europe was over with the Normandy landing”: that the rest is just a matter of “street cleaning” and media spin is a tremendously bold claim considering that, for the United States, D-Day was followed by several fierce battles, tens of thousands of additional U.S. casualties, and over two hundred thousand deaths resulting from the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It seems that Vic’s position as propagandist for the war effort trained his eye to battles on paper, fighting with words, and emptied his conscience of concern for human life ending with bullets and bombs.

Yet, though Vic suggests that the war is determined more by media than by combat, he turns around and complains to Mr. Kimberly that working in “overseas propaganda” was only a second choice to regular enlistment, for which he did not qualify but would have preferred; “Actually,” says Vic, “a man in OWI is only halfway in war, and it’s no damn good” (9); “combat is the core of war and they turned me down” (10). The seeming contradiction may point toward what Vic has experienced as a discrepancy between reality and an ideal. A war

should be determined by actual battles fought by soldiers on land, at sea, and in the air; however, Vic's job of spinning information about those real battles displaced the conflict, resituating it in the airwaves and telegraph wires, arming less valiant men with words and communication technologies, weapons that proved more decisive than guns and bombers and men dying in the fields. That Vic worked in advertising before entering the war also suggests that his life as an ad man prior to the war was related to his drive to be involved in full combat as a member of the military, perhaps a drive toward an experience more essential, more concrete than what he was accustomed to as an advertising professional. Vic expresses his discomfort with this disjuncture when he goes on to say, "So when I started to work with OWI I began to hate myself and then quite naturally the work I did. I began to think the only good propaganda was a big victory – and that no other propaganda can ever compensate for lack of victory. In these times, only a middle aged man can think of words as bullets" (10).

Immediately after hearing this, Mr. Kimberly is eager to offer Vic an executive position at Kimberly and Maag – Vic's ability to sell a war and equate "words" with "bullets" has impressed Mr. Kimberly, who complains about other veterans returning to the workforce: "I'm having quite a problem filling jobs for returned veterans now ... They don't seem able to readjust to this business. Object to irritating radio commercials, that sort of thing. Some are really psychiatric problems ..." (11). This dialogue suggests that Vic's ability to accept the equation, or even the substitution of language and media for physical combat qualifies him not only for gainful employment, but establishes him as well-socialized. On the other hand, war veterans, after firsthand experiences fighting a war with traditional weaponry and witnessing the loss of human lives en masse, constitute a social problem because they "object to" language that renders such violence and destruction facile and palatable. These objectors are cast as deviations from the norm, which is comprised of an expectation that military goals and experiences are

contiguous with those of capitalism: Evan Evans himself is enthusiastically relying on his own son's military training and "organization" experience to groom the young man for a successful career selling Beautee soap upon his return (293).

This dynamic encapsulates one of the most interesting critiques of the advertising industry that *The Hucksters* has to offer. While *Tono Bungay* and *The "Genius"* cast violence as a possible end to (and end of) capitalism, *The Hucksters* depict violence and capitalism as having an affinity for one another, suggesting that modern capitalism *entails* violence. Though the war veterans present disruptions in this relationship, and though Evan Evans complains about war regulations infringing on his profits, *The Hucksters* as a whole illustrates the mutually beneficial connections between modern capitalism and military violence. These connections are made explicit in Vic's character: he has been successful in analogous positions as a war propagandist and an ad-man. The skills he used for the former translate seamlessly into the skills required for the latter; as such, he is welcomed into the advertising business with open arms and the promise of lots of cash. In Vic's character, the collusions between physical violence and mystifying language come to fruition as he establishes himself as a star ad-man at Kimberly and Maag.

Moreover, the west coast branch of the Kimberly and Maag agency profits greatly from handling publicity for the numerous war-time munitions plants running in California, and the branch also relies on service men desperate for entertainment to fill their studio audiences: their desperate conditions make them "the noisiest and best audience" (213). The agency does not hesitate to hijack patriotic sentiment to sell their show, either: in order to garner support from the audience, the announcer tells them "confidentially" that "we want to sell it to a sponsor so we'll all have more money to buy more War Bonds with" (259). This dynamic becomes particularly ugly when efforts to sell the show manifest as racist jokes mocking the death of foreigners. War heroes themselves are depicted as commodities, available for purchase, to be put at the service of

higher profits for the advertisers as guests on commercially sponsored programs (60). The partnership of violence and capitalism is also evident in Vic's description of Evan Evans, the most successful capitalist of all in *The Hucksters*: Vic says of Evans, "He was certainly the General MacArthur of the ad game" (21). Vic's metaphors simultaneously link the ideologies of both advertising and war, and trivialize the impact of each by comparing both to a game. Though Vic expresses his distaste for the ethics of his jobs in both fields, his willingness to work at these jobs anyway makes him a model of success – both social and economic – within the context of 1940s American capitalism. The violence of commodification and the commodification of violence both contribute to a dominant fiction that reduces the integrity of human relations, that subsequently displaces human desire from human relationships, redirecting desire to consumer goods and destruction.

Wakeman offers a spectrum of characters whose relationship to the ongoing war runs the gamut from enthusiastic supporters to the merely inconvenienced to the deeply distraught. Along this spectrum, there is an inversely proportionate relationship between capitalistic success and concern regarding the war: those who can most easily ignore the seamy underside of capitalism as it is manifest in military violence fare best. For example, Evan Evans, owner of the Beautee Soap account and posterboy for the dominant fiction of capitalism in the novel, treats the war as a bothersome distraction whose only noteworthy consequence is that it is infringing on his efforts to sell soap. In an illustration of advertising and media at its worst, when presented with a report outlining wartime measures to be taken by manufacturers, Evans complains, "It's too damn complicated. Get Brown to boil it down to one page ... then I'll study it" (58). One suspects that such refusals are habit when it is subsequently revealed that Evans does not even have a general idea as to where the American troops are stationed in Europe, and cannot recall (or did not know in the first place) the significance of D-Day (59). In response to a subordinate's

plea for inclusion of war news in his program, Evans chides her; he “couldn’t see why the French should interfere with his radio shows” (60). Likewise, in anticipation of V-E day, Evans tries to make plans that will ward off any war-related intrusions into his programs and commercials. He’s willing to tailor the music to the spirit of the occasion, but in regards to giving up airtime, he is adamant. Evans refuses to allow military officials to speak during his show because “those fellows are always after you to cut out commercials” (60). Like siblings who are too similar to get along, despite their affinity, Western war-wagers and advertising are also in conflict, fighting over access to instruments crucial to the dissemination of their propaganda, not realizing that they are both fighting for the same thing: power and profits in the hands of a select few.

The opposite end of this spectrum is represented by a couple of characters who make brief appearances on the train from New York to Hollywood. Understanding the Super Chief as a microcosm containing all the interdependent types that made up the advertising industry at that time, it is especially significant that the cheerful drinking, carefree gambling and deal-making is interrupted by a disgruntled major who is drunk and intrudes on the Hollywood scene by loudly and repeatedly stating his situation: “he had been overseas for twenty-seven months and now his wife didn’t love him anymore.” When another military man, a captain, enters the cabin, the major abandons his story and focuses on the captain, asking the Hollywood crowd, “Can anyone in this car identify those ribbons properly – for ten bucks?” None are able to reply. He expresses his disgust by remarking to the captain, “We earn our ribbons the hard way, don’t we Ninth Air Force? And these goddamn civilians don’t even know what they are” (101). When the major is escorted out of the car, the man sitting next to Victor “said that there was going to be a lot of that now, and it was a hell of a problem. Really a hell of a problem. . . . You just don’t know what to expect when they come back” (101). It seems that, for this bi-coastal group of media elites, the violence of war is distant enough to be ignored; the “problem” is comprised of

American soldiers who have served their country overseas and now their return as compromised images of masculinity disrupts – but only ever-so-slightly -- the patriarchal fantasy world of easy women, easy money, and empty talk that claims the desires of these advertising and entertainment professionals.

On the same train journey, Vic overhears a research scientist who implies that he is privy to confidential information and is lamenting what he sees as an inevitable escalation in the development and use of weapons. In comparison to the weapons that will be used to fight the next war, he says, “rockets are just primitive things ... this is only the beginning of a race to develop weapons which can destroy the world” (104). Vic is affected by this lamentation; he knew the scientist was “speaking the truth,” and “Vic’s feelings about the future, when he permitted his mind to dwell on futures, were dark and gloomy” (104). But not thinking about such things, as mentioned above, is the key to Victor’s success. After his dark moment, Victor, “as usual,” “deliberately drove his mind out into the prosaic present where it was soothed and occupied by the simple sights and sounds of human beings frantically inventing devices to help them pass the time away” (105). Though Victor is not oblivious to or ignorant of the threats and consequences of war and violence and the ways in which it is implicated in the capitalist system, he has conditioned himself – or has allowed himself to be conditioned – to rely on superficialities and material objects to distract him from such unpleasant realities, realities which are very much a truth of the dominant fiction in which he is living. Within the spectrum of characters Wakeman creates, Vic is situated firmly in the middle: Victor Norman’s character, as we know him throughout most of the novel, represents the well-adjusted “norm.”

In their comparison of the practices of the official discipline of economics to the ways in which fields such as literary and cultural studies have taken up the study of various “economies,” Jack Amariglio and David Ruccio note that “the positing of an other space outside of capitalism”

frequently “occupies the central place” in these recent adoptions and reformulations (390). And though Wakeman was not an academic, and *The Hucksters* was a popular work of fiction rather than a scholarly endeavor, it seems clear that in *The Hucksters*, Wakeman is making an effort to outline the real-life fictions supporting a real-world socioeconomic structure in which characters such as Evan Evans, Kimberly Maag, Victor Norman, a host of demoralized women, and a debased general public are relatively true-to-life. Furthermore, via Victor Norman’s search for a desire and his rejection of the position at Kimberly and Maag, Wakeman is, as Amarglio and Ruccio suggest, expressing a wish for something better, searching for a space that is outside this capitalist economy.

And though *The Hucksters* is insistent about the importance of this valorous search for an alternative, it simultaneously points toward the difficulty and near-inconceivability of it. Searching for a space outside the dominant fiction of capitalism, the novel, like its hero, is left speechless, sending Vic out into the literally indescribable wilderness of life after capitalism, ending without another word. And it seems that Wakeman is not alone in his lack of vision: Amarglio and Ruccio note that many of these “literary and cultural economies that have recently found favor are caught in the tension between the desire to uncover the realm in which markets, capital, and self-interested rationality have not penetrated, and the fear that such a space is no longer discursively possible” (391). Despite his lack of literary clout and his decidedly non-radical political practices, what Wakeman has achieved in his novel is a portrayal of one man who rejects the dominant fiction of capitalism and the cynicism that assuaged it, not for some sure alternative, but rather for something completely unknown. Vic’s character rejects the pessimism implicit in Adorno and Horkheimer’s contention that, “the freedom to choose an ideology ... everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same” (167). Though his character has not yet reached the point in the discourse of the analyst at which he can

pledge his desire to master signifiers of his own choosing, he has rejected those that were imposed upon him as a first step toward the discovery of alternatives, and he has not, as in the case of the hysteric, submitted to impositions from other sources. Vic Norman has never known anything other than capitalist drive – such that he is ill-equipped to imagine anything else; his character may be admired for his willingness to step out into existential territory that is entirely foreign.

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Chapter 4: The Ad-Man as Dystopian Agent: The Failed Marriage of Art and Advertising in Jonathan Dee's *Palladio*

Dramatic shifts in the advertising industry, corporate culture, and U.S. culture in general had taken place since *The Hucksters*. Though the ad-man character does not appear as the sole protagonist of a novel focused on his travails in the world of advertising for several decades after *The Hucksters*, the ad-man as a representation of the cultural consequences of consumer capitalism maintains his fictional presence in other ways during the interim, marking shifts and continuities in novelistic understanding of the advertising industry and its appropriation of desire.

For instance, the narrator of James Dickey's 1970 novel, *Deliverance*, works as an art director for an advertising agency. Though the novel focuses on Ed Gentry's attempt to *escape* from his work and his "gentrified" suburban existence rather than on the details of his career and his identity as an ad-man, the character's drive to escape – to be delivered from his consumer-capitalist-driven way of life – is of course very telling in its own right. Gentry's chosen route leads him to the uncharted wilds of Georgia, following a man whom he admires for his drive to find the ineffable "thing" that he wants, a drive that is closely shadowed by a drive to death: easy abandon and extreme risk taking. The wilderness adventure does indeed bring the men in contact with primitive selfishness, desperation, violence and death – the "real" (and also their fantasy of the real) that they were seeking.

Ed's experience prompts him to return gladly to his home life and his career in advertising, but he holds on to his experience as a precious thing, a lens through which his wife, his career, and his colleagues all appear more brilliant. Ed relates that, "The river underlies, in one way or another, everything I do" – "the river and everything I remember about it became a possession to me, a personal, private possession, as nothing else in my life ever had ... I could

feel it ... on different places on my body ... It pleases me" (275). It is as though his exhilarating brush with death and the intense bonds he formed with his fellow male travelers provided him with the *jouissance*, the excesses of transgressive pleasures, that enables Ed to take pleasure again in that which had become too familiar. Significantly, upon his return, Ed is also able to return to his artistic ambitions with renewed fervor and unprecedented success.

Dickey's novel, like earlier ad man novels, depicts the advertising life as one that stunts desire, and points toward the need for the protagonist to extricate himself from the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism via a courtship with violence and trauma in order to re-invigorate or re-discover desire. *Deliverance* also highlights an important shift in the trend of ad-man novels: while ad-man protagonists in the first half of the century were drawn to urban centers as sites where desire could be realized, in the latter half of the century, the geographical location of such discoveries is anti-urban: wild rivers, small towns, and, as is the case for Don DeLillo's *Americana*, the stark landscapes of the American Southwest.

DeLillo's 1971 novel has as its protagonist and narrator not an advertising man, but the son of an advertising man. David Bell's character is, in fact, a legacy of advertising, for his grandfather "had been one of advertising's early legends, the second man to use a coupon in a newspaper ad" (132). David was literally raised on advertising: he and his siblings "spent many ... adolescent nights ... sitting in that dark basement watching television commercials" that their father had created. David's character plays out the fears that had informed earlier ad-men characters' resistance to reproduction in that his deeply troubled existence is attributed directly to the infiltration of advertising into his domestic relationships. David says of his father, "I wished he were dead ... My freedom depended on his death" (85).

David's own career does not stray far from his father's: he develops programming for network television. The way in which the success of his creations is saddled to the sale of

advertising spots suggests that, as was the case in Wakeman's *The Hucksters*, advertisers have the final word in many, if not most, of our popular cultural productions, and furthermore, that this is a circumstance that drives men to pinnacles of crisis requiring drastic remedy. To this end, David's character asks, "Why is it that all advertising people I've ever known want to get out? ... They all want to build their own schooners, plank by plank, and sail to the Tasman Sea" (85).

Though he is not an ad-man, David's character also wants to escape the constant barrages of advertising culture, and his escape plan resonates with the desires sought by the fictional ad-men discussed herein. He defects from a work-related trip in order to pursue his own independent film project amidst small Midwestern towns, Indian reservations, and the desolate Southwest. David's film project revolves around a fantasy re-writing and re-imagining of home and youth that his character explores as an alternative to, as well as an explanation for, his troubled adulthood. David expresses the difficulty of expression, the challenge of moving beyond the symbolic order of advertising and television, and suggests that the project will serve as an excavation of self, an entry into the discourse of the analyst, when he describes his filmic intentions: "What I'm doing is kind of hard to talk about. It's a sort of first-person thing but without me in it in any physical sense, except fleetingly ... my mirror image at any rate. It's a reaching back for certain things. But not just that. It's also an attempt to explain, to consolidate ... An attempt to explore parts of my consciousness" (263). David's film is an opportunity for him to reflect his own image to himself, such that the refractions reveal both a clearer truth and a truer desire. The film helps him to see himself as he is, by bringing his attachments to particular master signifiers fully into the light, and to see himself, especially his past, as he wished he would have been, in order to help him imagine the person he wishes to be now.

Like Vic Norman's character, David ends his discourse and his role in the novel not having found an alternate mode of existence, but having traveled some distance towards dismantling the psychic structures supporting his previous relationship to the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism. Upon finishing his film, which he considers a success, David describes it as "an exercise in diametrics which attempts to unmake meaning" (347), but adds that "there was nothing to announce to myself in the way of historic revelation" (349). Like Dickey's protagonist's return, once David has spent his energies and has had his run as a penniless, suffering artist, he whips out his American Express card, buys a plane ticket, and flies back to New York. *Americana* and *Deliverance* both portray characters associated with advertising relinquishing the master signifiers of consumer capitalism, and both novels depict these processes of stripping away and breaking down in ways that the earlier ad-man novels could not yet fathom. Both stop short of suggesting the possibility of subjectivity outside the master signifiers of consumer capitalism; rather, both novels imply that the socioeconomic structures of consumer capitalism can be embraced if they are tempered by forays into intense experiences of jouissance – "extreme" vacations.¹

Another thread common to the ad-man novels that DeLillo's *Americana* picks up is the emphasis on the relationship between consumer culture and violence. The Vietnam War forms a persistently troubling backdrop to the plethora of souls lost in advertising in *Americana*, much the same way WWII informs our understanding of the advertising industry in *The Hucksters*. DeLillo's use of juxtapositions such as, "Opposite a picture of several decapitated villagers was a full-page advertisement for a new kind of panty-girdle" (104) suggests the fluidity between war

¹ David Brooks makes a similar point in his examination of the "bohemian bourgeois," *Bobos in Paradise*, in which he suggests that the element of the middle and upper classes that fancy themselves as borderline bohemians are especially attracted to the near-death-experience variety of vacation as a way to reinforce their fantasies of themselves as independent, nature-loving, free souls who are not really so deeply invested in the corporate structures that, incidentally, allow them to finance these high-end travels.

and advertising and the inability or unwillingness of both the media and the masses to discern between the two. *Americana*'s protagonist replicates this association on an individual level, as he is prone to fantasies of violence, especially against women.

Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel, *American Psycho*, relies directly on violence as a metaphor for the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism: the protagonist, Tim Price, fully immersed in the culture of advertising and consumerism, is a remorseless serial killer. Set in the economically booming 80s, Price does not work in advertising, but his narrative depicts the pervasiveness of an advertising culture and its effects on the individual, nonetheless, by saturating the text with the language of advertising and portraying characters whose images and stories seem to be interchangeable with their glossy, two-dimensional counterparts in advertising texts. Brand names, logos and slogans are frequently catalogued and serve as the primary means by which a character or event is defined; the dialogue and narrative are comprised of short, powerful phrases peppered with shocking images, imbued with lust, thereby reflecting the slogans, appeals, and methods of advertising language. Similar to DeLillo's David, Ellis's protagonist, Timothy Price, is the figurative (rather than literal) offspring of advertising and consumer culture: his materialistic drives know no bounds; his cynicism makes Vic Norman's character seem truly sincere; he is a brutal misogynist; he is purely selfish, wildly narcissistic, and extremely violent. In contrast to *Deliverance* and *Americana*, *American Psycho* does not depict a protagonist seeking to re-negotiate his relationship to the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism; rather, Timothy Price and his escalating episodes of gluttonous spending and violent encounters exist simply as a symptom of that fiction. His character is put forth as the logical end of the fictions we accept in a million different, seemingly insignificant little ways, every day. In this sense, *American Psycho* offers a rather old-fashioned morality tale: a warning to the rest of us.

Jonathan Dee's 2002 novel, *Palladio*, returns the ad-man to the role of the protagonist and continues the fictional exploration of human desire in its relationship to the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism. Dee's utopian vision of a marriage between art and advertising manifest in an advertising agency, capable of productively facilitating modern desire, is the most ambitious fictional exploration of this possibility, and is also perhaps the most adamant indictment of this vision. Dee's utopian experiment did not come out of nowhere: many of the ideas informing his fictional agency were drawn from events and innovations born in the 1960s and revisited in 1990s advertising and popular culture.

One of the governing notions of Dee's novel is also the point that Thomas Frank makes at length in his book, *The Conquest of Cool*. Frank argues that, contrary to the popular perception of "revolutionary" counterculture as fully and directly opposed to corporate culture, the two cultural movements actually express many of the same desires and have benefited from one another in ways not commonly acknowledged. In the first half of the twentieth century, ad men and the agencies for which they worked – both real and fictional – struggled to establish themselves as legitimate professionals and businessmen. Their efforts culminated literally and symbolically in the corporate culture of conformity, made famous in the early 1950s and notorious by the 1960s, housed in the big-name agencies that lined Madison Avenue. Frank's point is that the disdain for organizational conformity that emerged as part of the 1960s anti-establishment counterculture was actually shared by many corporate leaders. He writes, "As it turns out, many in American business, particularly in advertising, imagined the counterculture not as an enemy to be undermined or a threat to consumer culture, but as a hopeful sign, a symbolic ally in their own struggles against the mountains of dead-weight procedure and hierarchy that had accumulated over the years." Frank also suggests that the critique of traditional corporate practices and the mass culture it espoused generated by corporate leaders

actually predated the emergence of that same critique from the “outside”: “In the late 1950s and early 1960s, leaders of the advertising businesses developed a critique of their own industr[y], of over-organization and creative dullness, that had much in common with the critique of mass society which gave rise to the counterculture. Like the young insurgents, people in more advanced reaches of the American corporate world deplored conformity, distrusted routine, and encouraged resistance to established power” (9).

Beginning in the 1960s, narratives of advertising, both fictional and non-fictional, embraced this idea of creativity as the new corporate ethic. Frank notes that, “advertising narratives suddenly idealized not the repressed account man in gray flannel, but the manic, unrestrained creative person in offbeat clothing.” Such narratives often highlighted not professional successes but antics and strife, perhaps borne of conflicts between art and advertising not so easily resolved as the corporate world would have liked to believe. The industry as depicted by the new wave of narratives was characterized as “artistic and dysfunctional, a place of wild passions, broken careers, fear, drunkenness, and occasional violence” (54). Dee’s *Palladio*, set in the 1990s when anti-corporate corporate management was again in vogue, falls into this pattern. The novel puts forth a cast of characters designed to test the affinity between art and commerce: a group of artists and advertisers who come together around the idea that autonomous art can flourish and profit under liberal corporate management in the form of an advertising agency.

Though the advertising trends depicted in *Palladio* were drawn from events taking place in later twentieth-century U.S. history, the novel’s title alludes to 16th-century Italy. Andrea Palladio was born in Padua in 1508, and is cited as “the most imitated architect in history,” whose “influence on the development of English and American architecture probably has been greater than that of all other Renaissance architects combined” (Ackerman 19). Andrea

Palladio's creations and philosophies resonate with the ideals of the fictional Palladio agency in a number of ways. Palladio's career took place amidst "one of the most creative periods in the history of architecture" (19), while the Palladio agency flourished during a period in which the values and practices of the creative revolution² of the 1960s was enjoying a powerful renaissance. Along with a number of other students carefully selected for their talented and promise, Andrea Palladio trained under Count Giangiorgio Trissino, "the pre-eminent intellectual of Vicenza," in a private residence Trissino had designated for this communal learning experience (20). This arrangement parallels that of the Palladio agency, in which the founder of the agency, a guru of the creative revolution, carefully selects from a wide range of what he deems untapped potential, and gathers them under one roof, secluded from the deleterious influences of New York and Madison Avenue in order to cultivate their talents. As Janet Maslin points out in her *New York Times* review of the novel, *Palladio*'s title also hearkens to the Latin word, "palladium," which most commonly refers to an icon believed to safeguard a city or maintain cohesion of valued social institutions. The fictional Palladio agency attempts to act as such a safeguard, with the intent of preserving two deeply entrenched cultural institutions, both of which are in peril and both of which are fundamental to individual desire and social structures in late 20th-century U.S.

One of Andrea Palladio's most original contributions to the architectural innovations of his time was his simultaneous concern for aesthetics and utility. While his contemporaries would have nothing to do with such matters, Palladio bothered himself with issues of accessibility, ease of use and repair, and economy: in so doing, "Palladio carefully balanced two antithetical styles" (Ackerman 22, 43). Similarly, Mal Osborne's vision for his Palladio agency

² A period in the history of advertising, beginning in the 1960s characterized by an industry-wide shift in approaches to management and advertising style which "recognize[d] nonconformity, even more than science or organization or standardization or repetition or regulation, as a dynamic element of advertising." The inception of the creative revolution is widely attributed to Bill Bernbach (Frank 89, 56).

involves harnessing practices of autonomous art to the profit-making endeavors of advertising, with the idea that the funding and visibility provided by advertising will make autonomous art more accessible both to its creators and its audiences, and that the cult-value prestige attached to “high” art would constitute the most effective advertising gimmick to date. However, as will be discussed at greater length below, the contradictions inherent in the assimilation of art and advertising fracture the 20th-century Palladio agency beyond repair.

Indeed, the fundamental incompatibility between the modes of desire sanctioned by the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism and the modes of desire enabled by autonomous art constitutes the basic conflict motivating each of *Palladio*'s plot lines. As in *The Hucksters*, cynicism plays an important factor in the way these conflicts play out. In fact, one of the strongest continuities between *The Hucksters* and *Palladio* is the role of cynicism as a subjective disposition by which to ameliorate frictions between inclinations to autonomy (informed by art) and attachment to corporate structures. By the 1960s, the cynicism and disdain for mass culture that made Vic Norman's character an industry renegade were on the forefront of what was, ironically, a mass cultural movement that would, by the 1990s, become an industry norm. Theodor Adorno notes the momentum gathering behind this cynical subjectivity in a 1963 radio address, during which he stated that, “Among those intellectuals anxious to reconcile themselves with the phenomenon [of the culture industry] and eager to find a common formula to express both their reservations against it and their respect for its power, a tone of ironic toleration prevails” (15). In the later ad-man novels, the cynicism Adorno describes appears to be a consistent symptom of the cultural intermediary's³ subjectivity. Written just after the turn into

³ Bourdieu's term for “those in media, design, fashion, advertising, and ‘para’ intellectual information occupations, whose jobs entail ... the production, marketing and dissemination of symbolic goods. Their habitus, dispositions and lifestyle preferences are such that they identify with artists and intellectuals, yet under conditions of de-monopolization of artistic and intellectuals they have the apparent contradictory interests of sustaining the prestige and cultural capital of these enclaves, while at the same time popularizing and making them more accessible to wider audiences” (Featherstone 19).

the 21st century, *Palladio* offers a retrospective portrait of late 1990s advertising professionals desperately seeking to escape the new corporate model (but certainly not the corporate life altogether) – one in which fervor for non-vertical organizational structures, celebrations of creativity, and sympathy for critiques of mass culture had hardened into a cynical resignation to “selling out.” Ironically, what is “revolutionary” about the Palladio agency is its attempt to return to sincerity, led by a group of artists and advertising men fleeing Manhattan, now too much glutted with smartness and cynicism, for the softer, more “genuine” atmosphere of the Old South.

In a separate narrative strand, *Palladio* unfolds the life of Molly Howe, a young woman who lives her life from the start according to an ethic of cynicism; she expects only the worst from her family, friends, and lovers, and is gratified, rather than disappointed, when the worst is what she finds. *Palladio*'s advertising strand, centered on the avant-garde advertising agency and its employees, and the strand centered on Molly's character are developed in separate chapters throughout the novel, until the end at which point the two converge. When the narrative strands come together, what begins as a fairy tale revolution attempting to marry art and advertising ends in fiery disaster. In this way, *Palladio* continues to explore the questions that have plagued advertising in its modern form almost from the beginning – can advertisers be artists? Can advertising be art? Can there be art in advertising? Can art and advertising even co-exist? – and seems to conclude that though advertising (certainly) and art (most likely) will both survive, it will not be as symbiotic partners working together to re-formulate a dominant fiction for the twenty-first century that simultaneously facilitates genuine desire and supports consumer capitalism.

The opening chapters of Dee's novel suggest that regardless of whether advertisers can be artists, artists can certainly be advertisers. In some fashion, every ad man in *Palladio* – and

there are several (even a couple of minor ad-women!) – is or has been a practicing artist.

Palladio's protagonist and part-time narrator, John Wheelwright, is perhaps the one exception: his artistic talents and abilities are not nearly as creative or ambitious as those of the other characters. In the late eighties, John studied art history – not studio art – at Berkeley. By the late nineties, his artistic proclivities have enabled him to earn a very comfortable salary as a member of Canning Leigh + Osbourne, a mid-size and relatively progressive New York City advertising agency. Like Dreiser's Eugene, John has talents that seem particularly suited to advertising because they in no way threaten or exceed the censorious confines inherent to the practice. He "hadn't gotten into advertising in the first place to make any sort of statement, but rather to exercise, at something close to full capacity, his skills as an artist" (119). Unlike his prolific partner, Roman, who has a desk drawer full of unpublished novels, John's work at Canning Leigh + Osbourne appears to tax his abilities to the utmost, and indeed John understands himself and his skills as tools for labor rather than as artistic genius expressing visionary ideals: "he put nothing of what he believed [into his work]. He felt much more like an instrument of what seemed ... like a vast and powerful blankness, an opacity" (120). Like Eugene whose writing is effectively suggestive but lacks any "real nobility of thought" (Dreiser 136), John initially appears to be a technical craftsman whose work is not inspired by a desire to communicate a particular vision of the world. He recognizes himself as such, claiming that "if there were ideals in the service of which he wanted those skills employed, he might have become a painter, started a magazine, something in that line." But as it happens, "he had no specifically individual creative impulse" (119). This absence of drive becomes material when John joins the *Palladio* agency. Here, initially, absolute artistic freedom is granted – neither client, nor partner, nor coworker may make any demands, changes, or suggestions and it is here, in the absence of such parameters, that John finds himself entirely sterile, unable to produce anything at all. It is as

though his complete identification with the utilitarian ends of the agencies he has worked for before has drained his character of the desire necessary to invest in a work of autonomous art.

However, despite the fact that his talents seem to depend solely on the desires and deadlines of others, it is John who, out of all the Canning Leigh + Osbourne employees, actively expresses dissatisfaction with the working conditions to which he is subject. In several respects, Dee portrays Canning Leigh + Osbourne as a clear antithesis to the Madison Avenue nightmare depicted in earlier novels: it is relatively small, maintains an informal atmosphere, and claims to encourage individual creativity. These features are manifest in the casual, playful and personalized workspace that John and Roman share. Bare cubicles and stuffy décor have been replaced with “years’ worth of imaginative detritus,” including “a framed picture of David Ogilvy”; “old Farrah Fawcett posters from the ‘70s; a Frisbee with the Backstreet Boys’ faces on it; several of those miniature football player dolls whose heads bobbed when you tapped them; Pee Wee Herman’s mugshot; a mounted ad for Chesterfield cigarettes featuring John Cheever; a three-foot-high inflatable Monica Lewinsky doll; a dog eared copy of *American Psycho*; a stuffed iguana ...” (17). These objects symbolize an attempt at integrating the cultures of art and consumerism, and reveal a sense of humor and a spirit of playfulness that are the legacy of the creative revolution and certainly a welcome relief from the rigidity of more traditional agencies. But they are also “little totems of an ironic sensibility” (17) – kitschy emblems signifying their owners’ remove from their work, their refusal to take any of this nonsense too seriously. While in 1947, Vic Norman’s adoption of this cynical stance toward the industry is a refreshing demonstration of critical effort, by the time of *Palladio*, this pose has become as institutionalized as the blind conformity it sought to disrupt. It is this constant, mandatory, corruptive cynicism that begins to bother both John Wheelwright and Mal Osbourne at Canning Leigh + Osbourne, and sets the Palladio vision in motion.

Victor Norman refers to his “sincerity” as an ad-man with repeated irony in *The Hucksters*; in the 1950s, the idea of sincerity is depicted with full-blown disgust by way of Tom Rath’s character in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Yet by the late nineties, what both John Wheelwright and Mal Osbourne’s characters genuinely miss in their work is, in fact, sincerity. John doesn’t blame advertising per se for the existing lack; as he explains to his girlfriend, Rebecca, “It’s not a bad business. It doesn’t have to be.” But Mal’s notion of “getting rid of the smirk,” and of “saying something instead of finding new ways to say nothing” – significant departures from the work being done at Canning Leigh + Osbourne – “touches some chord” in John (123). Though Mal and John see such sincerity as a departure from the status quo, Pierre Bourdieu suggests that sincerity is “one of the pre-conditions of symbolic efficacy” and is “only possible ... in the case of perfect, immediate harmony between the expectations inscribed in the position occupied and the dispositions of the occupant” (240), and indeed the search for sincerity in *Palladio* is the expression of the ad-men’s wish to be more closely allied with the dominant fiction to which they have committed themselves. The reluctant and condescending acceptance endemic to the cynical subjective position has, for these characters, proven to be an unsustainable relation to the dominant fiction.

Though John’s character does not complain about a lack of artistic freedom at his agency, Dee’s narration reveals that Canning Leigh + Osbourne is more narrowly confined than its employees proclaim, and one may wonder whether John’s dissatisfaction is, unbeknownst to him, indirectly related to his lack of even a proximity to inspired works of art. John does not regard his agency work as an expression of his own creative vision, but he seems to be under the impression that if he were so inclined, he would be free to pursue such personal visions at Canning Leigh + Osbourne. The narrator poses a question in response to the idea that John’s work lacks this dimension of individual creative purpose: “So did his work then put forth the

values, the beliefs of whoever happened to hire him?” From John’s perspective, no. “On the contrary – in his experience, he and Roman were hired to do exactly as they pleased” (119). But the incidents Dee uses to characterize John’s experience at Canning Leigh + Osbourne suggest that John is mistaken, that he has unwittingly accepted a farce of creative freedom in exchange for a real opportunity to explore and express desire.

For instance, as John and Roman are brainstorming ideas for a television ad for an important client, Doucette clothing, their process of trial and error reveals that their artistic sensibilities are by no means the only forces in play as they work on this account. John initially wants to “mount the camera on a waist-high pole in the middle of the intersection and spin it horizontally 360 degrees, as in a shot he remembered from Brian De Palma’s *Blowout*.” The panorama would be accompanied by a “talky Altman-esque burble.” When John and Roman submit the idea to the supervising partner, Channing rejects it immediately – not because *he* doesn’t like it, but because the piece is too trendy for a client that is known to be conservative (16). After going back to the drawing board, John suggests a second approach: a scenario in which the wearer of Doucette clothing reveals his maverick spirit by showing up at a formal wedding in casual Doucette attire, accompanied by a voiceover suggesting that “the truly well-dressed man is comfortable at any occasion.” John apologizes in advance for his proposal, warning his partner, “I know it’s kind of conservative ... but let me just remind you that this is a pitch, that we have to sell this idea not to a bunch of your East Village film-studies-major friends ... but to the marketing director from Doucette, who lives in Wilkes-Barre, for God’s sake, and who’s a member of the Christian Coalition for all we know” (70).

Their struggle with content is further complicated by the deadline they must meet. Although John claims that the tight time frame is “no problem” because “creativity learned to thrive on such pressure” (69), this reveals yet another way in which the ad men’s productions

must adapt and conform to limits imposed by outside forces, motivated by profits. Clearly, whatever degree of artistic freedom Canning Leigh + Osbourne ad men enjoy relative to employees of other agencies, they are still, like the fictional ad-men who have preceded them, ultimately subservient to the demands of their corporate clients. If artistic freedom entails freedom from persistent ideological, political, economic and creative checks and constraints, then what John is granted at Canning, Leigh + Osbourne is perhaps more accurately termed artistic sympathy.

Though John's character does not articulate or even seem to recognize this lack of artistic freedom, he does express his sense that he is alienated from the production process in which he is involved. He doesn't feel that his work caters to the particular beliefs of his clients, but his description of himself as "an instrument of what seemed ... like a vast and powerful blankness, an opacity" (120), gives the impression that John simply cannot identify to whom or to what he is subservient: this ad-man protagonist is not yet engaged in a process of analytic discourse whereby he is identifying and interrogating the master signifiers by which he is living his life. This sense is reiterated when, referencing the creative work he has done on various campaigns at Canning Leigh + Osbourne, he complains that "I'm the one *making* it, and I still don't understand how it gets made. It's a weird feeling" (133). So although John claims that he is not beholden to any one corporate client, he seems to feel – but not understand – that his labors are subject to a force greater than himself: an "opacity" that is simultaneously a "powerful blankness," the all-enveloping dominant fiction of consumer capitalism: invisible because it is absolutely everywhere, opaque because, in *Palladio*, it proves to be nearly impenetrable.

To an even greater extent than John, Mal Osbourne, longtime partner at Canning Leigh + Osbourne, is disenchanted with the agency he helped make great. Mal's character stands in as the living connection between the creative revolution of the 1960s and the direction of the

advertising industry in the mid-90s. An agency employee and dedicated Mal Osbourne admirer explains that, back in the days of the creative revolution – a period now idealized by both the ad men in *Palladio* and real-world advertising professionals – Mal, as a copywriter, “did some groundbreaking work”: “he was in on the Apple 1984 ad. He once got a client, a vodka importer, to use their whole promo budget to hire actors to go into the trendy bars in New York, L.A., Miami, and just order the stuff. Performance advertising, I think he called it” (24). The two cultural institutions in which the novel is interested are merged into Mal’s character, for in addition to being an advertising idol, he is also cast as one of the biggest art collectors in New York City. He is intensely interested in the plight of the contemporary art scene and in the prospects of creators of avant-garde art. Mal has achieved legendary status in the advertising world and is a formidable art collector as well; however, he is an elusive figure in the halls of Canning Leigh + Osbourne. Among the regular employees, not much else is known about him; his character is shrouded in mystique. Dee is setting Mal up to be the ideal Other, to whom his chosen prodigies will subject their desire. The unknown elements of his character, combined with his legendary status, easily come to represent the *object a* for the advertising men and artists who follow him in search of that *something* that is missing from their work: the intangible bit of inspiration, gratitude, meaningfulness, impact, recognition.

Mal’s presence becomes more concrete when he unexpectedly steps in and takes control of the struggling Doucette account. He appears as a prophet and a revolutionary; beginning with the claim, “I hate advertising.” Mal goes on to pronounce that the old ways of advertising are dead, and that he has come forward to lead the chosen into the new world – not just a new world of advertising, but, through advertising, a new world altogether (79). Pointing to a mainstream ad that had run for Doucette in the past, Mal begins to articulate his specific complaints about advertising in its current state. He characterizes it in Baudrillardian terms as “cultural noise,”

“*mental* noise ... a billion images ... all speaking at the same time, all of them saying nothing. Images like these open their mouths and nothing comes out, and yet the noise they make is deafening” (79). Mal expounds upon the vacuousness of contemporary advertising, echoing many of John’s concerns, though in more emphatic terms: “traditional advertising is about nothing. Its great resources don’t concern themselves with anything important. It’s not about life and death. And I ask myself – why *can’t* it be about life and death?” (79).

What Mal suggests as an alternative for Doucette and for advertising in general is a fictionalized version of the infamous Benetton campaigns⁴, taken one significant step further. Unveiling two images, one depicting a “boatload of Cuban refugees landing on a South Florida beach,” and a second, “an enormous close-up of a woman giving birth” shot “from knee to knee,” “the baby’s head fully emerged” (80, 82), Mal contends that such “transgressive images ... are your only viable strategy for rising above a market that’s frankly overcrowded, for making yourself heard above the noise” (81). The respect in which Mal departs from Benetton’s use of similarly politically and culturally provocative non-product-related images is that he omits entirely the company logo – an absence that does not go unnoticed by the already mortified Doucette representatives. Mal attempts to mollify the reps by explaining that this omission is in fact the most genius element of his proposal: “That, if you’ll permit me, is the master stroke, I think, of the campaign we’ve devised for you. On one level, it’s a way of acknowledging the truth that any powerful image, whatever its provenance, once it’s released to the world, *belongs* to the world. There’s no claiming authorship of a picture like this, and it would be unseemly to try to do it. It has a kind of guerilla aspect to it ... And of course the paradox is that people all

⁴ In 1984 Luciano Benetton, president of Benetton clothing company, hired award-winning photographer Oliviero Toscani to take complete control of international advertising for his merchandise. Similar to Dee’s fictional ad-maverick, Toscani proclaimed that “ad agencies are obsolete,” and turned the industry status quo on its head by removing all Benetton products and copy from the ad, leaving in its place provocative images depicting controversial social issues, accompanied only by the Benetton logo. These images include a dying AIDS patient, a bare-breasted black woman nursing a white infant, and a newborn baby still attached to its umbilical cord, covered in birth canal matter (Tinic, www.ciadvertising.org).

over the world will forget the other five hundred ads they see that day in their frenzy to find out who's behind these anonymous images. I guarantee a buzz the likes of which your product could never generate by any other means" (81). Inherent in Mal's proposal is the idea that the photos, or other such art, can express human desire for a better, more beautiful world while simultaneously creating desire for consumer objects manufactured and sold by entities whose interests are not well-served by artistic visions of alternate socioeconomic structures. In other words, he suggests that we can have our cake and eat it, too – enjoy the benefits of desire borne of autonomous art without relinquishing the intermediary satisfactions of consumer pleasures or suffering through the radical socioeconomic restructuring pursuing such desires would require.

The Doucette representatives, along with Mr. Doucette himself, reject Mal's proposal out of hand, withdraw their account from Canning Leigh + Osbourne, and turn their business over to an agency offering a more traditional approach. This incident, however, marks not an end, but rather the beginning of Mal's "revolution." Every revolution needs a charismatic leader, and Mal's character is developed accordingly. He is a modern compilation of the agency heads who have come before him in the fiction of advertising: his character entertains Ponderevo's grand visions, sense of performance, and indomitable enthusiasm; he exudes Evan Evans's aura of eccentricity and unapproachability; and eventually, he embodies Summerfield's dictatorial approach to running a business.

Both *The Hucksters* and *The Genius* end with the suggestion of a personal revolution that will take the protagonist to a more meaningful life outside the confines of the advertising industry and the values for which it stands. *Palladio*, however, *begins* with the promise of *global* revolution. Furthermore, it is a revolution that will take place *within* the realm of advertising, but promises nonetheless to subvert the values which have informed that realm in the past. This shift in the site of proposed and attempted revolution suggests that the

imaginative space occupied by the culture of advertising has now become all-encompassing. However vague and indeterminate the alternatives were to which previous novels alluded, the “outside” to which they pointed no longer exists in *Palladio*.

Mal pitches the feasibility of his proposed revolution by characterizing the ubiquitous infrastructure of advertising as a tabula rasa: He claims that “economic and technological history has bequeathed to us this network for the distribution of visual messages, a network so self-sustaining and efficient and culturally vital that it’s frankly overwhelmed the whole idea of praising commodities that brought it into being in the first place”; in its modern incarnation then, according to Mal, “It’s just a form, after all ... and so the question of content is wide open” (79). Mal’s description of the structure of advertising echoes the psychological structure of desire: desire as it is defined by psychoanalytic studies is an impulse, and urge, a longing, but the directions of its drive, the objects of its attention can be almost anything: it is essentially an empty apparatus, seeking an object to motivate its mechanism. This affinity between the structure of advertising and the structure of desire offers one way of understanding how a dominant fiction expressed largely through vehicles of advertising has been so effective in determining the ways in which human desire has defined and expressed itself in capitalist America. However, as will be discussed below, provenance is crucial: human desire emerges organically from human relationships and bodily needs; the vehicle of advertising was devised in pursuit of profit.

Mal continues his manifesto by suggesting that the crisis in advertising is paralleled by a crisis in contemporary art. During his many years as an avid collector, Mal had observed that “the art I saw was increasingly ... well, I don’t want to say bad, it wasn’t bad. It was *frustrated*. It was hobbled by a sense of its own irrelevance, by a sense of the impossibility of mattering, of doing anything new. ... It became totally, irremediably self-referential, and the basic paradox

was that in order to gain acceptance as an artist, you had to make sure that you were working with precisely that small, knowing, insular, incestuous, ever-shrinking audience in mind. No wonder the artists were frustrated!” (229). Mal’s revolutionary idea, then, is to save art and salvage advertising in one fell swoop: by using the corporate capital and media channels that support advertising to sponsor and disseminate art, and using avant-garde art to revitalize the monotonous drone of meaningless slogans and images that have made advertising so hated, Mal’s proposal promises a win-win situation. Neither corporate clients, advertisers, nor artists will have to compromise – all will benefit handsomely.

Mal’s invitation to a select few advertisers, artists, and other variously promising personalities he hopes will join him in his venture alludes to the historical revolution upon which he made his fictional mark. The creative revolution was, in Mal’s view, contiguous with the cultural revolution “taking place outside the tiny confines of our office.” According to Mal, the creative revolution was taking place simultaneously “in music, in literature, in radical politics,” and it seemed to him that “what was happening was less a political movement than a movement to restore the idea of truth in language, of plain speaking – a kind of democratic speech to set against the totalitarian language of the times ... After a hundred years of the hard sell, honesty and plain speech was making its way into the unlikeliest of places, the language of commerce” (115). Mal’s nostalgic historical reference suggests the possibility of a repetition, and, more specifically, suggests that a widespread cultural and political revolution can, in fact, originate from a source that is ostensibly opposed to any disruption of the status quo. The closing lines of his invitation reiterate the grandiose scale of his vision: “The language of advertising is the language of American life, American art, American politics, American media, American law, American business. By changing that language, we will, perforce, change the world” (117). Despite the incredulity Mal’s proclamation inspires in his clients and colleagues, Mal’s character

implicitly agrees with Lacan when he suggests that language is the principle by which we organize our world, and by shifting anchor points, or to use Mark Bracher's term, master signifiers, it is possible to change our relationship to the symbolic structure of language, and thus change our experience of the world.

In the world of advertising depicted by *Palladio*, changes of grandiose proportions will indeed be required to reincarnate the free-thinking creativity of the sixties. Thirty years after the creative revolution, Mal finds himself immersed in and deeply distressed by "a world ... held together by irony alone." He indicts contemporary American culture as one that "propagates no values outside of the peculiar sort of self-negation implied in the wry smile of irony, the way we remove ourselves from ourselves in order to be insulated from the terrible emptiness of the way we live now. That wry smile mocks self-knowledge, mocks the idea of right and wrong, mocks that notion that art is worth making at all" (116). It seems that the wish expressed by a character like Wakeman's Vic Norman to separate oneself from the massification that characterized the fifties and horrified the youth of the sixties has, by the 1990s, gone too far, from an assertion of individuality and skepticism towards established values to an intensely cynical rejection of the notion of values altogether. Thus one of the dominant ideals that will inform Mal's revolutionary mission: a return to the genuine. And what becomes evident as the novel explores the possibility of such a revolution is that this resurrection of authenticity will be complicated by the second ideal to which Mal hopes to marry the first: democratic dissemination of the True and the Real.

Mal's notion of the genuine is autonomous art, and, as mentioned above, autonomous art is the content with which he intends to fill the wide-open structure of the advertising apparatus. The agency he founds – *Palladio* – seeks to use traditional advertising media as vehicles for the wide dissemination of genuine works of art, and in order to ensure that the artists are free to

produce unadulterated art, Mal wants “the issue of influence taken off the table.” He accomplishes this by refusing to disclose any information about the agency’s clients to the agency artists, and notifying clients that their logos, slogans, and product images will be entirely absent from the advertising for which they are paying. He also refuses to pitch campaigns for clients – they either hire Palladio and accept what they’re given, or they don’t – no dog-and-pony presentations, no pandering to clients, no negotiations, no censorship, no compromises. Mal insists that the Palladio artists’ “efforts [be] shaped by no sensibility other than their own” (202).

However, depending upon the channels and outlets of advertising does inevitably impose some constraints on artistic production. Traditional advertising is predicated on wide dissemination and reproducibility, and these are the aspects of advertising that Mal believes will benefit artists struggling with obscurity. But not all art lends itself to such repeatability throughout time and space; as Mal, the Palladio artists, and their clients will come to realize, some works are inviolably singular – chronologically, geographically, and spatially. As Walter Benjamin points out, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” – a quality of originality Benjamin terms “aura” (220). And it is this originality that Palladio clients are paying for: the idea that they have identified and enabled an individual genius who produces original works on their behalf. Yet they are also paying for advertising, which entails criteria not so easily merged into autonomous artistic production. Adorno speaks to the incommensurability of the processes of art and advertising when he writes, “the concept of technique in the culture industry is only in name identical with techniques in works of art. In the latter, technique is concerned with the internal organization of the object itself, with its inner logic.” On the other hand, “the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object”

(“Culture Industry Reconsidered” 14). Both Benjamin and Adorno agree that modern culture is largely structured by the technologies of reproduction and dissemination; however, while Benjamin is willing to suggest that the definition of art may change accordingly, Adorno maintains that art is fatally compromised by integration into such technologies. Dee’s novel pays homage to the utopian vision inherent in Benjamin’s treatise, but ultimately accepts Adorno’s perspective as reality. What *Palladio* eventually illustrates is that if we hold on to a idea of art as something that relies upon authorship, authenticity, and provenance for validity – as does Mal’s character – art and advertising, however modified, are fatally at odds with one another.

Though Mal attempts to deny the relevance of provenance in art, location is clearly a priority for his vision of the Palladio agency. Geographically, *Palladio*’s depiction of the ad-man introduces a shift in the country/city opposition as it is present in the novels discussed in earlier chapters. The geographical pattern familiar to the earlier novels was one that located the past – idealized, but impossibly outmoded – in a rural setting, and opportunities for capitalist success and commodified desire in urban settings, the locations of the future. In *Palladio*, Mal’s utopian re-thinking of agency practice is accompanied by a geographical relocation, as well, but this journey turns back on the established trend as Mal and the other ad-men *begin* in the city and leave, seeking desire and authenticity in a smaller town with close connections to the past. This is another fictionalization of a very real dynamic in the advertising industry. As Ken Auletta notes in 2005, “agencies have long since left Madison Avenue ... for other parts of Manhattan and,” most significantly, “the rest of the world” (34). Identifying New York City and urban centers in general as hotbeds of the cynicism, detachment, and disingenuousness he seeks to subvert, Mal chooses to construct his refuge in Charlottesville, Virginia. His choice is

significant not only because of its cultural and geographical distance from the city with which he is so disenchanted, but because of its many connections with a still-present American past. Earlier novels looked to the protagonist's past for evidence of desire; *Palladio* looks to the nation's youth for evidence of the same. Palladio departs from industry norms by looking forward to a future in which advertising can be a "force for social good" (126), but also by refusing the presentism of advertising ideology and looking to a past that, for Mal, signifies permanence, continuity, and authenticity – the same qualities he expects of the art-as-advertising produced by the Palladio artists.

Mal's avant-garde agency promises to create a new future for both advertising and the world at large, and Mal looks to past revolutionaries – those of the 1960s creative revolution in advertising and those who founded the United States in the 18th century – as models and representatives of ideals with which he hopes to infuse the future. Mal's character feels an intense and ambitious affinity with the revolutionary forefathers of the United States – Thomas Jefferson, in particular – who once built upon their own utopian visions in and around the region of Charlottesville. The significance of these forefathers for Mal is not simply their ability and willingness to orchestrate and implement revolutionary changes; he also views them as a connection to what is real, something concrete, solid, and meaningful in a way that contemporary advertising is not. In Lacanian terms, it seems that Mal's character regards these historical figures as examples of men who were not alienated from their own desire; they were men who saw clearly, acted directly and effectively – whose drives were rightly geared toward their satisfaction.

For John Wheelwright's character, the southward migration is not just a return to an idealized revolutionary past; it is a return to his own past, his youth. Unlike the modest, rural pasts of earlier fictional ad men, John's character was born into a wealthy Southern family, rife

with Old Money and mannerisms, and he looks back on it fondly. Upon his return, John is at first put off by the ways in which Charlottesville resembles every other mid-size town in its “chain hotels and chain stores, the strip malls and overused local roads,” and the “grotesque boosterism that led to the too-expensive Center for the Performing Arts,” but when he makes his way past the parts of the city open to the masses to the much more exclusive enclaves of the historic district, he “couldn’t help smiling with pleasure just at the sight of the sprawling, colonnaded antebellum houses, with the great chandeliers hanging above the portico,” branded by little “historical markers” in the front yards and “oversize[d] front doors” looming over the porches – John “was lost in admiring the sheer arrogant beauty of them” (154).

However, though John is fondly nostalgic of the homes that remind him of his childhood, his character is consistent with the earlier ad-men characters in his inability – whether in New York or Virginia – to create a sense of his own home as an adult, to revisit the desire that gave rise to such pleasures. Returning from his initial visit to Charlottesville to the apartment he shares with his girlfriend in New York, John is noticeably unattached to “the silhouettes of the scarce, new furniture, the cocked squares of ambient city-light on the white wall,” and is in no hurry to respond to “the patient, miniscule blink of the answering machine” (25). The images that comprise his place of residence do not add up to a home; they do not suggest warmth, familiarity, or comfort. Even after ending his relationship and moving to Charlottesville where he is surrounded by landmarks, architecture, foods, and manners that are all evocative of his happy youth, John is unable to recreate this sense of home as an adult. The apartment he rents in Charlottesville is peopled with drunks, divorcees, and adulterers; John characterizes his relationship with his new neighbors as one of “depthless interaction,” and it is not just the sobs, screams, and sighs coming through the thin walls that John finds demoralizing: “The rented room, the haphazard furniture, the books still in boxes, the neighbors who weren’t really

neighbors ... It didn't seem to him the way a man now in his thirties ought to be living – no connection to anybody, no sense of personal history” (191).

Once he is settled in at Palladio and his salary has started to accumulate, John does begin looking for a house to buy; however, his continued efforts to create a home for himself are thwarted finally by his allegiance to his duties (and identity) as an advertising man: “the first few places he saw were not right – too new; too garish; too big for one man living alone,” and eventually “the whole house-hunting effort ran out of the steam of its initial enthusiasm, swamped by the more pressing short-term concerns of work” (219). John's place of employment literally becomes his one and only home, as he brings his possessions to work with him and takes up full-time residence in the agency. This literal integration of home and work symbolizes the way in which the marketplace has increasingly penetrated the domestic sphere. If desire is generated by family relations located in a domestic tableaux, and that desire subsequently is short-circuited by entry into a public domain governed by a dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, once the home and the market have seamlessly merged, the possibility of “going back” in an effort to recover desire is diminished almost entirely.

The Palladio agency itself is housed in an antebellum mansion Mal has bought and restored; the mansion is rife with a history that Mal wants to appropriate for himself and the agency. Built in 1818, the mansion stands on two hundred acres – the remains of a plantation – which Mal furnishes with a combination of antique furniture and modern art. When John gives a tour to visiting clients, he emphasizes the “datedness,” the authenticity, and the historical significance of the building: he points out the “original wooden chandelier from 1842” and the “lavish parquet-floored ballroom” in which an “all-night dance was held in 1861 to celebrate Virginia's secession from the Union” (239). He boasts of the estate's connection with Thomas Jefferson, the aged cherry orchard, the “brick footpaths and ornate iron benches” – some of

which are “more than a century old,” and even throws in “a quote from Jefferson’s famous essay on the beauty of Virginia” (241). For Mal and John, Palladio is physically and imaginatively linked to a specific historical time and place that they believe lends validity and authenticity to their commercial artistic endeavors – it provides solid roots for their drive.

The perceived value of such historical originality is emphasized again when Mal returns to Palladio with a rare find, the result of a successful bid at Christie’s: “Thomas Jefferson’s actual inkstand, originally from Monticello.” Mal boasts, “he wrote part of the *Notes on Virginia* with that.” As has been the case in other ad-man novels, the role of consumer is cast as a masculine. The male characters are those who actively lust over consumer objects; the female characters are constrained to simply being one among those objects. Male consumer lust is also, as in other ad-man novels, depicted as connoisseurship, and indeed, just as he so carefully selected the combination of new and antique pieces with which to adorn his house, Mal is giddy with pride over his smart “find” at Christie’s.

John is impressed with the Benjaminian aura of the precious object: “it actually was amazing to be in the presence of an original object like that, to think for a moment about the past from which it had emerged, the other hands that had been where mine had now been” (264). Both John and Mal are impressed with the physical weight of the thing, and in *Palladio*, this weighty historical object symbolizes that which is real, that which is opposite of all that Mal hates about contemporary culture: the superficial, the empty, the cynical, and the meaningless. However, Mal’s fascination with the inkstand introduces us to one of Palladio’s fatal contradictions. The inkstand is precious *only* because of its aura, its historical and geographical provenance, the circumstances of its existence, the hands through which it has passed and the purposed for which it has been used. Outside of these factors, the inkstand is meaningless, and in his appreciation for the object, Mal gladly accepts these terms. Yet the doctrine of democratic

art with which he has been inculcating his artists, his clients, and his public states just the opposite, claiming that good art can come from anywhere and cannot be owned by anyone, claiming that it is only the actual tangible content, not the historical and individual circumstances that create meaning and value. His fundamental contention that “the husk” of advertising is a suitable infrastructure for the creation and dissemination of autonomous art depends on these assumptions.

Another chink in Mal’s democratic revolution is evident in the very real historical element that is noticeably *absent* from the old plantation grounds and mansion. When a visitor inquires whether the plantation held slaves or not, John replies that though it is likely that slaves did live and work there, and in fact old blueprints show evidence of a building that probably served as slave quarters, no physical evidence of the slaves remains. For whatever reason, all indications of slaves’ existence have been lost or eradicated from the Palladio estate, and in a stroke of contiguity, the current-day presence of non-white men and women working in advertising is also indiscernible at Palladio.

White privilege is another aspect of the past that Mal silently reincarnates – or maintains – both by relocating his agency to a site that is a powerful symbol of racism and white supremacist convictions, and by his hiring practices. As one new hire observes at the introductory meeting, the new face of advertising as Mal has created it is white: of all the artists, writers, and thinkers Mal solicited, not one is not white. Dee replicates Mal’s maneuver by depicting the advertising industry as peopled by advertisers and artists of all ranks and persuasions who are all white. *Palladio* depicts a situation that is true to life: in 1999, the FCC launched an investigation of agency policies that encouraged discrimination against ethnic markets, and by 2004, the NYC Commission on Human rights, upon reviewing complaints lodged in the past decade, subpoenaed fourteen of New York City’s most prominent advertising

agencies in efforts to garner a commitment to greater diversity within their professional ranks (Melillo). As ad-man Harold Levine notes as he recalls his own struggle finding an agency job, “the history of the agency business is one of white male Christians. The culture is very white and masculine” (Sanders). In both the contemporary U.S. and Dee’s *Palladio*, the writers of the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism create a tableau that is a reflection of themselves: mostly male, and mostly white. It is no surprise then, that those who are most marginalized by this dominant fiction are those who have the most difficulty imaginatively inserting themselves into the subjective position of the Western white male.

Mal and his agency are oddly silent on the issue of slavery, but the presence of domestic servants also throws Palladio’s stated commitment to a hierarchy-free work environment into question. In order to establish Palladio as a home as well as a workplace, Mal hires a live-in housekeeper, a combination butler and head cook, and a full-time kitchen staff, all of whom are at the beck and call of the artists. Like Mal, these characters are virtually invisible in the Palladio household; the crucial difference is that they are largely absent from the *Palladio* narrative as well. Their invisibility is a symptom of their powerlessness and the irrelevance of their desires, while Mal’s invisibility is both a privilege and condition of his absolute power to enforce his will. Just as the Palladio vision does not include racial minorities, it overlooks the lower socioeconomic classes, as well – those upon whose backs the agency is literally and symbolically built.

Mal’s commitment to the democratization of art and advertising becomes increasingly suspect when we see how his stated intentions of creating a rank-free communal work setting compare with the microcosm of class conflict that he continues to orchestrate inside the Palladio mansion. During the initial gathering of Palladio artists, Mal insists that he is dismantling the tradition of divisive workplace hierarchies, informing his new employees that they will not have

offices or assigned work spaces, and that there will be no job descriptions, and no titled positions (175). However, in addition to the “lower” classes he has created by hiring domestic servants, there is also one position in the Palladio mansion that, from the very beginning, pulls rank on all others – Mal’s. When gathered with his employees “it was easy for Osbourne to rule the conversation. No one was inclined to interrupt him in any case” (156), and because “Osbourne wasn’t drinking,” “no one else dared have more than one” (157). Mal’s character unambiguously embraces the role of intimidating and all-powerful leader of the Palladio endeavor, and the ominous portents of his first name become increasingly manifest in his behavior.

Mal’s personal living quarters and workspace are symbolically secluded on the top floor of the mansion. Once settled into the mansion, Mal makes himself increasingly scarce, and as his physical presence diminishes, his psychological hold on the Palladio artists – the mystique of his eccentric personality – grows dramatically. Clearly “the boss,” Mal “almost never came downstairs, at least not during conventional working hours. He had his meals served to him on the fourth floor, and the east wing had a separate entrance which allowed him to come and go without being seen” (222). The more he is absent from the common spaces of the mansion, the more his ubiquitous presence is felt: “he was less and less visible, though he was usually, as they were all aware, in the mansion somewhere” (213). From behind closed doors, Mal ultimately exudes a force that is larger than life, and his god-like omnipotence and invisibility is highlighted by the heavenly pure-white décor of his private rooms. Only in one instance does a Palladio employee cross this sacred threshold, and this intrusion into Mal’s sanctity immediately precedes, and perhaps catalyzes, the fiery demise of the agency.

Mal’s attachment to the notion that historical authenticity somehow lends credence to his own endeavor coupled with his racist and socially-stratified hiring practices illustrate one of the

central conflicts of Mal's utopian vision for the marriage of advertising and art. Mal wants to hang on to exclusionary ideals of authenticity, the genuine, and individual genius at the same time as he attempts to advocate and provide a democratic liberation of art for the masses. Within the confines of the Palladio mansion, Mal articulates this ultimately impossible tension as if it were not problematic, but merely a question of balance: he claims that he selected the mansion as the work space for the new agency because of the anti-corporate, communal feel of working together in a house, but, he adds emphatically, "that doesn't mean you're going to hear a lot of that team-first bullshit"; "I believe in cooperating, but not at the expense of the emergence of individual genius. No great work of art has ever germinated from some committee decision. Greatness is a pure product of the individual consciousness" (174). Mal is essentially suggesting that they will all be working together to promote and achieve absolute individualism – a suggestion that is paradoxical at best; at worst, delusional and impossible.

At first, these ideological contradictions remain in the realm of the theoretical, and on the ground, Palladio runs smoothly. Mal's ambitions are seemingly being realized as the artists enjoy unfettered production, the clients enjoy unprecedented positive publicity, and the public is smitten with Palladio art. After just a few weeks, with the exception of John, "the staff was ... working at peak inspiration. They had internalized Mal's message, which was that only the art mattered, that clients and their interests were an aesthetic crutch which was hereafter kicked out from under them, that the world of commerce would subsidize them endlessly in return for a portion of the reflected glory of the work they happened to do within the walls of the mansion ... They were dependent on no one" (212). The ideological merger of capitalism, popular art, and high art is complete when Palladio work is also acknowledged and honored by the cultural institutions that back "legitimate" art. The Whitney Museum puts on an exhibit of Jean-Claude Milo's "life work" – all of which was done at the agency; Mal is invited to serve on the board of

the Bilbao Guggenheim, and he is awarded NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Provost's Medal (221). And, of course, they are all making more money than they know what to do with. This fairy tale forebodes tragedy when things simply get too good: "The scope of their success and their influence seemed to be surging past the boundaries of even their fondest original hopes" (222).

And indeed, what initially were merely ideological sticking points eventually emerge as visible fissures in Palladio agency practices and output. At first the artists' works were created within the traditional forms of advertising – billboards, magazine inserts, and television spots. But, given their freedom, many of the artists' works begin taking the form of performance events, which only occur once, in very specific and limited locales. For instance, Jean-Claude Milo stages a piece in which he sits on a rock in the middle of an isolated Arizona desert and cuts himself, letting his blood form random patterns on the rock. As John Wheelwright's character notes, by operating outside the empty shell of advertising, this artist "contravened Mal's stand on the whole notion of the technological, the reproducible, as the foundation of popular art" (271). On the other hand, a performance piece such as this certainly falls within the parameters of an original, genuinely autonomous work of art – precisely the sort of thing Mal has advocated so vehemently. This conflict illustrates the distinction Walter Benjamin makes in his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": technology, if it is to become part of art, must simultaneously re-shape our definition of art. One cannot insist on aura and originality if one also wants to take advantage of technologies of reproduction and dissemination.

With the introduction of such performance pieces into the Palladio repertoire, it becomes evident that Palladio is indeed beholden to market forces, despite all hopes and claims to the contrary. When clients begin complaining about the difficulties of accessing and disseminating the art they are paying for, Mal feels he cannot confront the artists directly. He is reluctant to

compromise their autonomy and perhaps more pressing is his fear that “any appearance of turmoil, of some kind of aesthetic conflict” might “start affecting future commissions” (271). So, although surely autonomous art depends upon the freedom to challenge the status quo – in this case the forms of traditional advertising – inside the walls of Palladio, such debates must be silenced or evaded in order that the idea of Palladio itself continues to be marketable. But unless Mal imposes some controls on the artists’ output, and establishes and enforces some basic requirements for reproducibility and accessibility, clients will no longer see Palladio work as an effective means of promotion.

Not long after this conflict is introduced, Mal’s character undermines entirely his own premises and promises of “free” art. Though he claims it is in the interests of maintaining a necessary distance from the habits of traditional advertising, the fact remains that Mal censors a Palladio artist’s work: he intervenes in her autonomous expression of desire on behalf of the market. It is especially important to note here, that within the patriarchal structure of Palladio, it is a woman’s art, a woman’s desire that is censored, and furthermore is censored for being derivative. Elaine, the artist, had included a lengthy quote from *On the Road* as a voice-over accompanying a short film she has made. Mal rejects the piece at an agency meeting, and humiliates Elaine as he proceeds to warn all the other artists, “we don’t co-opt, we don’t filch value, no matter the source. Advertising has skated by on that method for decades. Any artistic value a piece like this one might have is value established elsewhere, in some other context, established and then bought. ... Well, we’re putting a stop to that here. We are about original value, about the creation of value ... No looting, no sampling, no colonizing of the past!” (297). In addition to being an unprecedented act of censorship at Palladio, Mal’s indictment, in the interest of making a distinction between two things – art and advertising, which he has previously insisted could be synonymous – also ignores the fact that allusion, reference, and

intertextuality (certainly features of *Palladio* itself) are key components of all art forms, and have been since long before modern advertising came around. His final comments – “no looting, no sampling, no colonizing of the past” – are also ironic, given his odd, narrowly selective resurrection of the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson, and the plantation life of the Old South as the foundations for Palladio. Mal confirms his change of heart, which reads as deep confusion, when he concludes that Palladio’s “direction has evolved,” and the artists are now instructed to turn their efforts toward “the original, the unique, the unrepeatable. The perfect magic of the artifact. This is our new creed,” he tells them. This is a turning point for Mal’s character, the agency, and the novel. All remnants of Mal’s initial optimistic, revolutionary vision give way to his despotic imposition of his own will and his foray into his own egomaniacal fantasy; he has abandoned his role as facilitator of art for the masses in favor of an image of himself as authentic genius in his own right. It is as if his drive to bring art into everyone’s life via consumerism cannot withstand the call to individualism that is so central to the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism. And what follows in *Palladio* further demonstrates the incompatibility of notions of originality, unrepeatability, and individual genius with art and desire that is accessible – both physically and philosophically – to the masses.

This shift in narrative direction is cued by a change in the way in which the Palladio artists regard Mal. At first they admire him as an eccentric guru, but once the first blush of the romance between art and commerce has faded, they begin to recognize him as a megalomaniacal tyrant. Initially, Mal describes his decision to make his presence at Palladio scarce as a personal sacrifice he is making for the benefit of the group. He tells John that “his greatest achievement when all is said and done will be his own obsolescence,” and, borrowing a phrase from Marx, compares his gradual disappearance to “the withering away of the state.” Mal confides that once

“they” – referring perhaps to both the Palladio artists and the public at large – “get it” and “understand the new way of thinking,” they won’t need him anymore (255).

Mal’s idealism, is, however, challenged by what Elaine and others sees as a much more immediate reality. Despite Mal’s physical absence, the Palladio artists feel his presence much more powerfully than they’d like; rather than a quietly receding institution, Elaine’s character sees Mal as a tyrannical dictator, comparing him to Pol Pot (299). After Mal rejects Elaine’s video, another Palladio employee, Jerry Strauss, initiates a petition against Mal and his act of censorship, and attempts to persuade his fellow artists by exclaiming, “It’s about your fucking *freedom!*” Daniel is one of the artists unwilling to sign, but nonetheless he agrees that Mal is limiting their freedom. He cheerfully concedes, “This place is not a democracy,” – “And I’m glad it’s not.” Daniel believes that Palladio is “the best job in the history of the world,” and in order to keep it, he’s quite willing to follow the edicts of their leader. Daniel asks the others, “Do you want to go back to publishing zines and working at Kinko’s?” (303). The conflict between these two Palladio employees highlights a dichotomy between desire expressed in terms of autonomous art and desire expressed in terms of consumerism, and even these artists are conflicted as to which they’d rather sacrifice to the other. The economic incentive is nearly irresistible, and despite the outrage the Palladians feel in response to Mal’s increasing belligerence, they are rather easily pacified by their paychecks, free lodging, and in-house chef. This spat is only the beginning of larger discontents among the artists, and, like leaders of other revolutions, Mal does in fact become a megalomaniacal dictator, lording over a little microcosm of art and industry that, in the end, does not look much better than the established traditions and relations he sought to dismantle.

In addition to tensions mounting within the agency, Palladio has now been around long enough to provoke some passionate opposition from the outside. Among its detractors is Dex, a

young filmmaker inspired by his hatred for the agency to attempt a documentary exposé that will reveal what his character believes to be Palladio's fraudulence. When Dex gets the opportunity to meet Mal, he expresses his complaint in no uncertain terms: "My own view of this place is that it is the absolute epicenter of corruption ... you know? I mean back before you got started, whoring was whoring; if you had to abandon your art for a while to go shoot a Coke commercial at least everyone knew what that was all about, and even understood how maybe it was necessary from time to time. But look at these people you've hired. They're brainwashed. They don't even know what it is they've been brought here to do." Mal had originally called the meeting because he had hoped Dex would agree to come work for Palladio; Dex responds to his offer by stating, "I would never do any work for you guys in a million years" (259).

This incident reveals yet another way in which Mal's Palladio is not so different from the institutions of advertising against which he claims to be rebelling. Mal's efforts to incorporate resistance and turn the resources of his detractors toward his own ends are certainly tried and true methods of modern advertising. As Dick Hebdige pointed out in the 70s, mainstream culture – of which advertising is a major part – seems instinctively to seek out potential threats residing in marginal groups and subcultures, whether they are comprised of skateboarders, headbangers, hippies, trekkies, or avant-garde artists, and incorporate them into the dominant fiction, draw them in to the fold, then re-distribute their key symbols and slogans – sans genuinely critical or radical content – as the latest trend, available to all for purchase. This process of appropriation allows mainstream consumers the pleasure of believing that they are in fact unique individuals, acting on their own desires, while simultaneously dismantling the countercultural threat by reducing its ideas, motives, circumstances and adherents to a series of ephemeral and politically impotent sales pitches and fashion trends. By outlining the conflict in this way, *Palladio* adheres to the model of counterculture versus mainstream culture that Thomas Frank wants to challenge

when he suggests that the two are more intimately entwined and symbiotic than many proponents of either “side” care to admit. Though *Palladio* initially puts forth the idea that the kind of symbiosis Frank describes is both possible and desirable, it is not long before the plot casts this idea as naïve, and the novel begins to portray a situation that is more closely aligned with Hebdige’s view of the appropriation process than with Frank’s more optimistic outlook.

Though Dex vehemently rejects his offer, Mal is not discouraged, and in fact continues his efforts to incorporate the opposition on an even grander scale. His next challenge is CultureTrust, a two-man organization that has spoken out against Palladio on a nationwide scale, and has consequently garnered a substantial amount of media attention. Mal’s first act of appropriation is merely symbolic: in his office he hangs a “miniature gallery” comprised of faxed images of CultureTrust’s various acts of “culture-jamming”-style vandalism. He solicits an admiring response from John, suggesting, “it’s not bad stuff, is it? They actually have a lot of good things to say” (264). However, Mal feels that the things CultureTrust has to say would sound a lot better coming from within the walls of Palladio, rather than from without. So, he sends John to Spokane, Washington to offer the two ex-professors jobs.

Palladio’s offer to Professors Gradison and Liebau is much more concrete – and more generous than that which was made to Dex, perhaps because Culture Trust poses a greater threat to the agency. John promises them “No restriction on content,” and invites them to “keep making fun of us, if that’s what you want to do” (326). Like Dex, Gradison and Liebau refuse emphatically. John’s character seems sincere when he interprets the professors’ refusal as an indication that their past protests have been nothing more than gimmicks. He doesn’t understand why Gradison and Liebau do not want to abandon their status as “unemployed middle-aged leftie dinosaurs” in favor of positions at Palladio, where they could disseminate their work more effectively – or rather, to a much wider audience, which may not be the same thing as

“effective,” depending on point of view. John accuses them of insincerity, remarking that, “it’s the trappings that really concern you, not the art. I think it’s all a pose, I really do. I think you don’t really believe in yourselves at all” (327). John perhaps thinks he is luring them into compliance by suggesting that if they want to prove their authenticity – their dedication to their subversive art and ideals – they will take the “risk” of disseminating it to a wider public via Palladio.

Gradison and Liebau, however, disagree with Mal and John’s premise that advertising is a benign, empty form just waiting to be filled with great art for the masses. They counter John’s challenge, claiming that “*dissent is the art* ... and crushing dissent, Johnny, in case you haven’t twigged to this yet, is the business that you’re in. Swallowing it, bastardizing it, eliminating it. The reason you think our art’s meaning wouldn’t change if we sold it to you is that you don’t think it means anything anyway. Art comes from somewhere. It has a provenance. Changing that provenance changes the art. Denying that provenance denies the art” (327). Here Gradison and Liebau articulate another version of Dex’s complaint against Palladio: the origins and contexts in which works of art are created are significant, and any work of art that is a product of a context which, like advertising, by its very nature seeks to subvert the principles of free expression and critical thought, is essentially compromised and, as Dex suggests, false. Again, the parallel with the formation of desire emerges: the context in which it is formed has a tremendous bearing on its shape and quality. Both Dex and the Culture Trust Professors press firmly upon Palladio’s ideological weak spots, hypocrisies, and internal contradictions. Gradison and Liebau are certainly correct to suggest that inviting CultureTrust to make fun of Palladio on Palladio’s dime bankrupts their work; the offer is a perfect instance of the ironic cynicism and refusal of values that Mal himself had cited as the scourge of the industry.

Though both Dex and the CultureTrust professors make very compelling arguments against Palladio's practices and philosophies, the novel undermines their consequence in its mocking depiction of the "provenance" of these comments. The portrayals of those who challenge Palladio suggest that their characters are not to be taken seriously. Dex is cast as violent, perverse, and abusive. He first expresses his disgust with Palladio, and Mal Osbourne in particular by telling Molly (now his girlfriend), "I just want to take this guy Osbourne, I want to take a scalpel and cut his throat down to his belly and pull him open and show him to everyone, I want to fuck him up the ass, I want to rip his head off and shit into it, I want to pop his lying eyes out with a spoon and skullfuck him" (225). The sexualized violence characterizing his wish list suggests that at least some, if not a lot, of Dex's resentment is born of jealousy, a desire for Mal and what he has achieved surfacing as delusional self-righteousness. And Dex's abuses are not just fantasy rants; when he drinks too much or becomes jealous of Molly, he bruises, hits, and punches her.

While Dex's character is too pathological to be taken seriously, Professors Gradison and Liebau are portrayed as simply too ridiculous. In response to John's summary of Palladio's mission, "Leibau, a man nearly old enough to be a grandfather ... stuck his tongue out as far as he could, crossed his eyes" and uses baby talk to mock and mimic John's speech. Professor Gradison changes the subject entirely by asking John if he would like to thumbwrestle. A few moments later, one of the professors throws a pencil at John, while the other "ran over to the wall and took down a mask"; "holding it over his face, he ran back across the room and stood inches from [John], hopping from foot to foot. Booga booga booga! He shrieked" (328). They bid farewell to John by throwing a cup of tea at him, and as he pulls out of their driveway, the two men jump on the hood of his car, make tortured faces, and pound on his windshield. Dex doesn't even grant them proficiency in their perhaps ironic adolescent antics and tantrums; as John pulls

away, he sees them in his rearview mirror, “still huffing after me, shaking their fists, before they finally stopped, leaning over with their hands on their knees, trying to get their breath” (329). Professors Leibau and Gradison are cast as complete buffoons, silly old men, acting like children who need to grow up and let go of an idealized past in which art was defined by its origins. Objectively, readers might credit these characters for criticizing the commodification of art by refusing the manners of corporate politeness as vehemently as they reject the content of corporate philosophy – but Dee’s characterization and narration do not necessarily encourage such a reading.

The narrative thread running parallel to that of John Wheelwright, Mal Osbourne, and Palladio focuses on one woman, Molly Howe. Molly’s counternarrative positions her as the object of desire onto which others – mostly men – project their various wishes for autonomy. Molly’s character is anti-communication, anti-consumerist, and in many ways, anti-self: her character has lost her own desire, living instead, through the desires of others. In this latter regard, despite her adamant efforts to refuse the culture of consumerism, her chosen mode of resistance merely serves to emphasize her status as a commodity: an object promising to fulfill the wishes of others. However, within the formative context Dee constructs for Molly’s character, readers are encouraged to understand that she could hardly be anything else.

Palladio’s narrative of Molly’s life directs much attention to her upbringing and early years. In comparison, readers learn only a few cursory details regarding John’s upbringing, and nothing of Mal’s life before he became an advertiser. With respect to the thread of ad-man novels, this shift is significant: the focus in *Palladio* is no longer the growth and cultivation of the desiring subject seeking art, but rather the history of one – not surprisingly, a woman – who can only be an object of desire, whose active desiring processes have been deeply compromised

by the milieu of consumer capitalism in which she was raised. For Molly, there is no idealized past that was not dominated by consumer capitalist ideologies; there is no model for her to refer to, even as fantasy, as she negotiates her own subjectivity in relation to the dominant fiction. From her earliest years, consumer capitalism is the only mirror in which she has been able to recognize herself. This narrative approach emphasizes the (at least) two-fold denigration of desire under modern consumer capitalism: because of her lifelong immersion in the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, Molly's character finds it nearly impossible to formulate or act upon any self-generated desire; furthermore, she becomes the de-humanized object of the desires of others – others whose desire has not been dismantled, but degraded (and thus is degrading) by consumer capitalism.

The reader is first introduced to Molly's character as an unborn child, followed by detailed depictions of the defining episodes of her life as a young girl and teenager. Her history – her miserable parents, the drooping town in central New York in which she was raised, her friends, her boyfriends, her eccentric older brother – all play very specific roles in the development of her character. Much of the context that Dee creates for Molly is explicitly symptomatic of modern capitalism; most of the key events and circumstances in Molly's life result from her father's struggles in a competitive marketplace, her mother's dissatisfaction with the results of those struggles, and her brother's efforts to find alternatives to his parents' immersion in such struggles. The lives that Molly's parents pursue are typical of the American lifestyle that advertising puts forth as ideal; the lives that Mr. and Mrs. Howe, Molly, and her brother actually live play out the disappointments and frustrations inherent in this pursuit.

In contrast to the booming business of advertising in the 1990s in which Mal and John are situated, Molly's story begins amidst an economically depressed region of central New York in the early 1980s. Ulster is no longer the "farm country" it once was, but the new industry that

replaced the agricultural operations has, by Molly's time, failed as well: "Ulster ... prospered briefly in the 1960s and '70s when IBM opened a regional sales division on the site of an old dairy two towns away," but by the eighties, the sales division has shut down, and, though Molly's father keeps his managerial position longer than most of the other employees, it is not long before he, too, is out of a job (3).

Molly's mother, Kay, is chronically depressed, hates Ulster, hates her husband for bringing her there, and sees in Molly an opportunity for escape, to re-focus thwarted desires. Kay's solace from the woes of her husband's alienation at IBM is proffered to her in the form of consumerism: buying and selling surfaces and fantasies revolving around her beautiful young daughter. Kay's fellow IBM wives croon over Molly, still a young child and "such a beauty"; they tell Kay, "you shouldn't waste it ... She should be on TV." The assumption that human beauty not earning cash is "wasted" suggests a great deal about the values by which Kay and her friends are living their lives. Molly, not yet imbued with such equations, is decidedly unenthusiastic about the prospect of getting dressed up for a talent scout. Kay, however, cannot understand her daughter's resistance: "'Other girls love to get all dressed up,' Kay said, not in a conciliatory way. 'When I was a girl, I begged my mother to help me get all dressed up. I liked looking pretty for other people'" (6).

Subsequent scenes between Molly and her mother demonstrate that efforts to make Molly 'marketable' – dressing her up, shopping, advising Molly how to 'act like a lady' – constitute the only activities that Mrs. Howe knows how to initiate in order to try to forge a meaningful connection with her daughter. Kay's persistence in making Molly the object of her own desires leaves little room for Molly to learn how to become a desiring subject herself. As Kaja Silverman suggests, "since a crucial part of learning how to desire is the assumption of a desiring position, fantasy would seem to involve the insertion of the subject into a particular syntax or

tableau, and so to play an important part within the formation of identity” (6). The “syntax or tableau” to which Molly’s character is repeatedly forced to submit as a child is constructed entirely around the desires of others, so it is perhaps no surprise that Molly’s fantasies as a young adult revolve largely around her own objectification. Though Kay is desperately seeking something different than her own familiar experiences, she is unable to imagine or follow a drive that would allow her to pursue that alternative through her daughter’s experience. Rather, Kay unwittingly, helplessly, participates in an interpellative process that would have Molly grow up to be just as miserable as her mother.

When the two arrive in New York City, Molly enacts the first of many passive refusals to engage with the capitalist market. When the talent scout instructs her to recite lines for a television commercial, she remains silent, despite his repeated entreaties: “ordinarily Molly found silence to be a preferred way of hiding, but this time silence itself was playing, quite inadvertently, as an act of disobedience, an accidental exercise of her will. She was only trying to do nothing; still she saw in their faces and felt in the air of the room that she was doing something wrong” (8). The interview is a bust, and Molly and her mother take the train back to Ulster in angry silence. This scene is the first of several depicting the social consequences of failure to engage fully with the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism.

This scene also introduces a pattern that will shape Molly’s life, a shape symbolic of the ways in which desire is gendered in late capitalism. Molly’s status in all of her relationships is that of desired object; she is desired for what she represents to Others about themselves. There is no reciprocation, no expression on Molly’s part of how she wants to see herself through these Others. And, as she matures, Molly’s character no longer attempts passive resistance as she did as a child; rather, she welcomes the dynamics of passive anaclitic desire, what Mark Bracher defines as a form in which “One can desire to be desired or possessed by the Other as the object

of the Other's jouissance" (21). She claims that exposure to the raw desire of others is gratifying as evidence of the real, but then for her, the "real" is synonymous with male desire; she does not exist in the "real" that she observes. In the absence of active narcissistic desire, which Bracher defines as a form in which "one can desire to become the Other – a desire of which identification is one form and love or devotion is another" (20), it seems that Molly's character must be resigned to the discourse of the hysteric. That is, if the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism has rendered her incapable of an active desire by which she forms and acts on identifications and attachments, Molly is also rendered incapable of identifying and allying herself with master signifiers of her own choosing that will facilitate her desire in the most satisfying ways.

Given the above, it is not surprising that Molly's adolescent social life revolves around the kind of cynicism that will later prompt Mal and John to seek new approaches to their work in advertising. When she spends time with her friends, the 'in' crowd at their small school, "the girls lounged or paced around the strange living rooms, absentmindedly opening cabinets and drawers, trying the father's brand of cigarettes, talking ironically about the world as they found it, defining themselves through the instrument of their contempt" (46). Like Mal, Molly, though she half-heartedly adopts these poses herself, simultaneously feels disconnected from and disgusted with this manner of social relation. She complains that "none of it was real. Or rather, something was hardening around whatever was real, taking the place of it, strangling it" (47). Neither Molly nor Mal want to accept that this world of veneer and interchangeable surfaces is in fact the real; they both insist on believing that there is something to be gotten at beneath these surfaces, and in their own ways, attempt to tear through the cynical sheath separating humans from genuine meaning.

One way in which Molly disrupts the protective and alienating surface of cynicism is by refusing to date a group-approved boy. Instead, she pursues a young man who has been

stigmatized by trauma: Ty was the victim of a house fire, and has many visible burn scars. His physical surfaces do not meet the criteria, as set by both parents and peers, for premium market value, and this is precisely the allure for Molly. She is quick to initiate sex, and, though her aggressive promiscuity may initially seem like typical teenage transgression, the pleasure she gets from this transgression is not just the pleasure of testing boundaries and defying authority and social expectations; she takes pleasure in the connection with what she feels is real. She is fascinated by the combination of Ty's sexual lust and undisguised fear: "he was so scared, so in thrall, that she thought she had never seen anything more worth looking at in her life. He couldn't pretend, he couldn't hide anything from her, not from himself, there was nothing interposing itself between the two of them and what was real" (64).

Molly seeks out a similar experience when, at the age of fifteen, she encourages the attentions of Dennis Vincent, the father of two children she baby-sits. She is not ignorant of his desires when he asks her whether they can drive around a bit before he takes her back to her parents' house. He rambles on about feeling old, and being attracted to and envious of Molly's youth, and "she didn't want to cut him off ... she didn't want to do anything to bring it all to a resolution: she wanted to keep it going, not because she enjoyed being the object of it but because for these few minutes, everything that was unreal seemed to have been scraped away, everything was vital and true only to itself" (62). During the sexual affair that ensues, Dennis's desire to recapture his youth and sexual freedom is clear as he wants to extract Molly's youth and beauty from her, appropriate it for himself: "He ... dreamed ... of dominating her, of seeing her beholden to him" (95). Like the social scandal Eugene Witla's character unconsciously orchestrates as an interruption in his allegiance to consumer capitalism, the important thing that Molly gets out of the affair is a harsh disruption of the status quo. Her relationship with Dennis rather violently pierces the seemingly never-ending expanse of her friends' cool cynicism: when

the affair is revealed, they are shocked, disgusted, and quickly shun her. Ostensibly, Molly is not hurt; she simply observes that she had finally “found the limits of their apathy” (103).

It is this “passion for the real,” as Slavoj Žižek terms it, that prompts Molly to seek out increasingly dangerous sexual encounters, with strangers, in deserted buildings, with men she knows want to hurt her. Žižek offers the comparison of cutters, who he claims engage in practices of self-harm in “a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or ... ground the ego firmly in bodily reality, against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent” (10). Adorno offers a slightly different take in his consideration of the relationship between the self and the real: he writes, “the sole avenue of intellectual communication between the objective system and subjective experience is the explosion which tears both apart and momentarily illuminates in its glare the figure they form together” (*Prisms* 90). The dialectic that is central to Adorno’s statement is especially relevant to an understanding of Molly’s drive to seek out dangerous sexual encounters. Having her youthful desire thwarted by the ideologies of consumer capitalism by which her parents, and thus their relationship with her, were defined, Molly seeks knowledge of the real in place of the impossible consumer fantasy. Molly’s character is struggling against what Žižek describes as “the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized ... dematerialization of ‘real life’ itself” (14). Molly wants to confront the reality of that fiction head-on: knowledge of the power structure and its supporting fantasies offers a satisfaction that participation within the most visible facades of that structure does not. Žižek suggests that, “the very core of ‘the passion for the Real’ is this identification with – this heroic gesture of fully assuming – the dirty obscene underside of Power” (30). Molly’s character cannot desire with the mainstream, so, because she must be recognized in some fashion by her social context, she asserts herself by assuming the ugly desires of others in a martyr-like fashion: the violent, misogynist drives and fantasies that are the “real” counterpart to consumer capitalist fictions of

family, success, and utility. Yet her sadistic longing for the violence of the real is also itself a fantasy: a fantasy of knowledge, of penetrating a fiction in order to discover truth – a fantasy that facilitates her deviant desire, which takes the form of longing to encounter the dangerous real.

The dismal apathy and superficiality which plague Molly's family life are central to her wish for sensation, even if it is violent or traumatic. With her family, Molly is aware that "there was a language of home, a kind of anti-language in which the sentiments expressed were not true ones, and the facts were really encoded sentiments" (54). Her observation parallels Mal's own frustration with the language of advertising, which he claims has been robbed of sincerity and is bankrupt in meaning. Parallel to the merging of the work of advertising and home in John Wheelwright's life, Molly's experience suggests that the empty language that was once most typical of advertising has come to be characteristic of human interaction in general – hence her especial difficulty formulating desire within the symbolic order. Molly shares Mal's drive to reconnect with meaning, but she cannot imagine meaning in terms of language – not the language she knows: "Molly never felt any sort of teenage scorn for the outright bogusness of all this, nor any lament for the absence of the genuine in every look, every word exchanged within her family. Of course it was false, but there was no true language she knew about in any case" (56). Mal Osbourne and John Wheelwright believe that, through Palladio, truth can be restored to language, and that this can be done by introducing art into advertising. Molly's behavior, on the other hand, suggests that she does not believe language can be rehabilitated. She refuses to assert herself in either her home, her peer group, or in the market which perpetuates this empty language, and instead seeks meaning that she believes is external to language, non-linguistic experiences, such as transgressive sex.

Collectively, members of the Howe family all seem to acknowledge lack – the existence of an intangible "something more" lurking beneath the conventions of congeniality that dictate

their relationships with one another, for which they each long, but they also seem to have resigned themselves to the belief that it is too difficult to confront; they are unable to formulate desire in response to the sensation of lack. For instance, Kay “wanted to believe that there was something in her life besides fear and maybe vanity that made her regret the passing of the days and for long spells she did believe it: but always some small frustration or thoughtless remark would tear down the curtain that separated her from this vista of pointlessness and waste, and when that happened, she would quit what she was doing, quit doing anything, really” (51).

When Molly returns to Ulster because her father has attempted suicide, she finds that “the transparently phony aspect of normality that her father had always maintained – and which, in his absence, her mother now seemed committed to – was now, even with one of them in the mental ward and the other at home watching *Cheers*, all that stood between them and a wholly genuine life of terror and hatred; Molly, for one, wished only that that false front might somehow still be preserved” (201). Though in other social situations Molly seeks to penetrate surfaces in order to get at some more authentic reality, whatever constitutes the real in the sphere of the family – whatever it was that hobbled her desire in the first place – is too much for her.

Kay, on the other hand, occasionally “found herself perilously close to expressing what she felt: that she was thrilled to imagine that Roger’s office might be shut down, that he and indeed most of the people they socialized with might suddenly be jobless, ruined, that they would lose the house and not be able to send their son to college, that existence would become the wreck she had long dreamed of and to which she felt temperamentally better suited to than the infuriating haze of life as a middle-class wife and mother” (56). Kay would welcome disaster, if disaster meant a break from the institutions of mainstream capitalist culture that had thus far defined – and confined – her life. But her suburban woes are all too typical; they are easily incorporated into the symbolic order. Since disaster does not come her way, and she lacks

the courage to create her own disaster, Kay simply retreats further and further into the surreal, acting out her part as loving mother and happy housewife despite her utter removal from such identifications. In this respect, Molly has lived her mother's fantasy: her social suicide was an active attempt on her part to invite disaster, and much more effective than her father's failed attempt to kill himself. Writing about the greater but not unrelated violence of war, Slavoj Žižek suggests that "the ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality," and goes on to write that "the Real in its extreme violence" is the "price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality." In the same essay, Žižek suggests that the drive towards such violent excavation is, ironically, motivated by the complacency of consumer capitalism. In the fictional setting of *Palladio*, what both Kay and Molly want differs only in scale. They crave the "authenticity" that "resides in the act of violent transgression ... the Lacanian Real – the Thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the City" (6). According to Lacan, the real is traumatic because it cannot be known in terms of the symbolic order; paradoxically, then, both Žižek and Dee reference the Real through symbols of trauma: war, disaster, violent sex.

Kay, despite her intense frustration with her stultifying day-to-day existence, is unable to even articulate her hatred for the life her husband has made for her. Instead, she makes little attempts to embrace her assigned fantasy and participate in the life she's supposed to be living by shopping, occasionally volunteering, and fiercely pretending that she is part of a happy family. Molly, however, acts out an alternative to her parents' lifestyle by actively doing nothing – nothing that is recognized by the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, anyhow. She refuses to attend college, hold a job, maintain a relationship, or harbor any kind of ambition, professional or personal. When she finishes high school, Molly is uninterested in enrolling at a university, so she moves out to Berkeley with her brother, Richard. Here she leads an ostensibly aimless life,

though she does develop one consistent positive interest: when the crowds and class sizes are large enough to conceal her, she sneaks into film viewings and art lectures on campus. It is in an art history class that Molly's narrative first comes into contact with that of John Wheelwright, whose character is a senior at Berkeley when Molly comes around. They become friends and eventually lovers, and after several months, John asks her what she wants to do: "from the stress on the word *do*, Molly knew what he was talking about, but she pretended not to. 'For a living, I mean,' John said. 'Or a career, or whatever the word is. What kind of work would you most want to do?' Molly shrugged, unhappy with the question" (184). For John's character, questions about career plans are personally definitive, the articulation of his masculine desire in capitalist culture; for Molly, they are irrelevant. Molly's character sees no channel for her desire in the direction of the capitalist sublime: the workaday world and the notions of career and family entailed therein.

Rather than pursue a career of any kind, Molly lingers and loiters, spending very little and earning almost nothing, refusing to be either producer or consumer. She is forever hovering about the fringes of the art world, but has no drive to create art of her own, either. For instance, "She admired people who could act, but that didn't mean she wanted to try it herself. She was a little afraid of it, actually – not of doing it badly but of doing it well" (100). In her twenties, living in New York City, Molly is basically squatting in a tiny apartment with six struggling artists, all of whom were "involved in the arts in some peripheral and materially unsuccessful way." Her proximity is misinterpreted as affinity: "everyone else Molly met took it for granted that she was an artist of some sort herself." After all, "she was living the life, she had the demeanor, and ... she had come to the city with no prospects in the first place." But, "if Molly was involved with creation of any kind, it was only to weave herself so seamlessly into this life

that she might not stand out from it at all” (215). Her character functions as a conduit for others’ desires, as patron, audience, confidante, or sexual object.

The narrator states explicitly that Molly “had no inclination toward art itself” because “art is communication; she wanted only to be silent. Music, acting, anything that involved getting on stage was outside the realm of possibility for her – “Even writing seemed to her much too demonstrative. It wasn’t fear so much as distaste. In talking about a thing, you automatically forgave yourself for it” (217). Molly’s behavior and decisions consistently deny the symbolic order of language and the commercial world for which it has come to stand. The fact that Molly’s character rejects both the language of commercialism *and* the language of art suggests that her character recognizes that, in her world, they both serve the same masters, the same purposes.

Her notably non-consumerist consumption habits are consistent with this rejection. Unlike every other character, not once throughout the entirety of *Palladio* does Molly express admiration of or desire for any consumer object – basic or luxury. When she moves to Berkeley and is freed from the ritual of mandatory family dinners, she quickly loses fifteen pounds simply because it does not occur to her to eat regularly. When Molly becomes estranged from her brother and moves in with John, “she had so few belongings that she wasn’t altogether sure John even knew this was the case” (173). Molly is, largely by means of her refusal to invest in communication and consumerism, not beholden to anyone – not her family, not her friends or peers, not her boyfriends or lovers, and certainly not to an employer. As she observes in Berkeley, not without sadness, there is certainly a down side to the unattached life: “not quite twenty years old, she found herself without an attachment in the world she could rely upon, not even within her own family” (168). Molly lives a life that suggests a radical alternative to investment in the dominant fiction, but her character pays dearly: it is lonely on the outside,

weaving in and out of cities, migrating from one circle of acquaintance to another, hovering about the fringes of society, living only a few moments away from hunger and homelessness. In this respect, *Palladio* explores what *The Hucksters* left to readers' imaginations, and the tableau is rather bleak. Molly is "the stranger among us" who, through her attempts to reject the dominant fiction, becomes invisible, unknown, and unknowable ("Culture Industry" 133).

Toward the end of the novel, about fifteen years after she met John at Berkeley, Molly's narrative fully entwines with that of Mal, John, and Palladio; she has moved into the mansion as Mal's lover. That Molly has been a common denominator between Mal and John, and even Dex, highlights Silverman's suggestion that "the circulation of women can thus be seen to represent the most rudimentary articulation of the Name-of-the-Father – the most basic mechanism for defining men, in contradistinction to women, as the producers and representatives of the social field" (36). Molly's status as object is confirmed as she passes from one man to another, conforming herself to the desires of each, and finally, in the case of Mal, being sequestered like a treasured Christie's find in his third floor suite. This series of fictional relationships illustrates a powerful symptom of a dominant fiction that requires a rather specific sexual relationship for its maintenance: one in which male-driven social institutions privilege and perpetuate masculine desire, much to the exclusion of feminine desire.

This symptom is elaborated in the contrast between the career-minded Palladio employees and Molly's lack of any similar or analogous ambition, as she is the only resident who has no job, contributes nothing, does nothing – except provide reinforcement and inspiration for male desire. In an effort to explain to John what it is that appeals to him about Molly, Mal suggests the following: "I think I've figured out what it is about her that is so inspiring ... She's not uncomfortable with silence. If she has nothing to say then she doesn't say anything. In fact, now that I think about it, she goes further than that: she *makes* these silences ... there's

something about it that's intolerable, really, in terms of how self-conscious it makes you: it makes you want to fill it up. And so you go on to give more of an answer than you thought you wanted to, and inevitably, that's where you say your best stuff, you know? She brings it out of you" (274-5). Here Mal describes Molly essentially as a catalyst for artistic creation by others – one who is especially valuable as she is quiet, sacrificing any assertion of herself so that she may receive the assertions of (male) others. The well-worn gender stereotypes of the passive feminine receptacle and an active, creative masculinity deployed in this scene are consistent with the ways in which the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism supports masculine desire and drive by attempting to express all desire in terms of masculine desire. And indeed, Molly inspires Mal by being the object of his desire: he elaborates on her appeal: "It's *purity*. It's an unconsciousness of being observed. Like ... the anti-Heisenberg; she's not changed by being observed, right? Like a work of art" (276). And it is only appropriate that, as a collector of art, Mal has taken Molly as his girlfriend – his latest piece.

The circumstances of Molly's upbringing in a home plagued with problems symptomatic of consumer capitalism have much to do with the course she chooses – or follows – for her own life. Likewise, her brother Richard pursues a radical lifestyle, one that departs dramatically from the conventions of his middle-class home. While Molly's rejection of her parents' values and aspirations takes the shape of an essentially silent refusal, her brother, Richard, embraces increasingly more vocal, more confrontational methods of indicting his family, Molly included. Like Molly, he recognizes the stultifying effects of his parents' allegiance to the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, proclaiming that the "The Howe family live[s] by nothing, for nothing" (186). However, rather than silently transgressing as his sister does, Richard looks for an alternate language, an alternate set of master signifiers order through which to articulate his

desire. Though Richard is able to re-define himself in this way, *Palladio* depicts his resistance to the dominant fiction as no more successful than his sister's silent withdrawal.

During high school, Richard pursues an interest in Eastern cultures and religions which leads to his subsequent renunciation of Western consumerism. In particular, it was "the ascetic, ancient, somewhat brutal side of Japanese culture which interested him" and inspired him to move "all the furniture out of his room and into the attic" and buy "a tatami mat." In addition to relinquishing his material possessions, Richard severely limits his consumption of food, as well: "at dinner if Kay mentioned that he didn't look well, he might reply gamely that he hadn't eaten since dinner the night before." What Molly can't figure out is "how all this Eastern self-denial squared with the fact that Richard was still smoking prodigious amounts of dope and even dealing it to friends out of the closet of his otherwise purified bedroom" (41). Dee's depiction makes clear that Richard's transformation is largely a pose, but though his drug use, minimalist bedroom, and self-congratulatory attitude might be ideologically at odds, they are consistent in that they each contribute to his character's endeavor to challenge and transgress the middle-class culture his parents represent by adopting and testing alternative relationships to the dominant fiction. That the escape is more important than that to which he escapes is made apparent when Richard requests a Rotary Club sponsorship to spend a year studying in Japan. There are no spots available in the Japanese sister city, but at the last minute a spot opens in Germany; knowing absolutely nothing about German culture, Richard accepts without hesitation.

Richard's efforts to construct a life for himself outside of the consumer capitalist order become more extreme once he enrolls at UC Berkeley, where he shares an off-campus house with several other students. Initially, it seems that Richard and his friends are devout non-denominational Christians who are living modestly and communally, sharing all household tasks and expenses, and gathering for regular meals and prayer sessions. When Molly arrives, they

allow her to live with them without pressuring her to participate in any religious activities, and in fact without even requiring her to pay for her share of food and rent. However, after a few months, Molly becomes aware of “a seismic shift, the nature of which she was not made privy to, [that] had taken place in the last few weeks in the house on Vine Street. It now resembled less a home than a sort of base of operations” (167). She found Richard “wearing a red polo shirt and khaki pants, which didn’t strike her as unusual until she walked through the dining room and saw two of her housemates, Steve and Guy, typing into laptops at the table, also wearing red polo shirts and khaki pants” (169). The atmosphere at the shared house becomes less relaxed, more rigid; there are now long lists of house rules that are strictly enforced. Considering the uniforms, the regimen, and the rules, it is striking how closely Richard’s religious commune resembles the corporate culture so central to the debased capitalist society against which it defines itself.

In his red shirt, Richard stands on a wooden box on Telegraph street “and announced the damnation of everyone who passed in front of him, damned them without looking at them, his gaze leveled above their heads” (180). At his moment we see that the religion Richard has embraced as an alternative to consumer capitalism has rendered him just as incapable of contending with the Other’s desire as does consumer capitalism itself. He and his fellow street preachers harangue passers-by with loud questions: “Is this the life you wanted for yourself? ... What are you rushing toward? To the office? To the store to buy things? What are you rushing toward, really? Death, my friends, death! ... Does money matter, in the end? Do nice clothes matter?” (319) He denounces even – or perhaps especially – his family. When he learns that Molly is sleeping with John, he refuses to look at her when they pass on the street. When Richard is forced to contact Molly to relay the news of their father’s suicide attempt, he expresses no concern whatsoever, telling Molly that the incident is “of no consequence to me,

and that in any case [Mr. Howe] has sinned mortally and without evidence of his repentance, I could not be in his company” (186).

When Molly does not return from Ulster, John visits Richard’s house in Berkeley, hoping to find out where Molly has gone. He is greeted suspiciously by two ineffective-looking henchmen and instructed to remove his shoes. He finds Richard in the main room, reclining in a leather LaZ-Boy, surrounded by minions sitting on pillows beneath him. Richard tells John that he has no notion as to Molly’s whereabouts, then accuses John of defiling her and taking advantage of her. He offers John the opportunity to begin saving his soul, then and there, and when John refuses, and makes an angry advance, “Richard flipped up the armrest of his reclining chair, reached into a little wooden compartment there intended by the manufacturers ... to hold a bag of chips or a TV Guide, and pulled out a gun” (322). Just as Mal’s character, in his search for an alternative to mainstream advertising, devolves from charismatic leader to fearsome despot, Richard’s character, in his efforts to create an alternative to capitalist values altogether, changes from spiritual guide to a violent bully. Richard’s religious endeavor further parallels Mal’s attempt at a revolution in advertising: both men hoped to incite a rebellion against the consumer capitalist status quo, a rebellion that would reincarnate meaning, values, and sincerity. Yet eventually, both men end up reproducing, to some extent, the same practices and problems that spawned their discontent in the first place. Their failures to discover a viable alternative relationship to the dominant fiction suggest that their fantasies of art and religion are merely symptoms of, rather than alternatives to, that dominant fiction.

The failure to renegotiate a relation to the dominant fiction and the recognition of the failures of the dominant fiction itself inform another fictional generation of childless ad-man characters in *Palladio*. Significantly, upon arrival at Palladio, not one of the artists is married or partnered, and their characterizations are devoid of references to family connections of any kind.

With the exception of John's failed affair with Elaine, and Mal's failed affair with Molly, this continues to be the case as the novel progresses. Reproducing the social order as they know it, even as they believe they are improving it, is simply not within the fictional cosmos of *Palladio*. As has been seen with ad-man characters in the previously discussed novels, the advertising profession and children are here again portrayed as mutually exclusive. Likewise, when Molly discovers that she is pregnant with John's baby, she immediately schedules an abortion. The prospect of reproducing her fear and despair is even more unthinkable than the prospect of marriage, or even a long-term relationship. This failure implies that a marriage between art and advertising will be barren, and that in a marriage characterized by such an imbalanced power dynamic, practices of autonomous art may not survive at all.

The failure of Mal's utopian vision comes fully to fruition in the last chapters of the novel. *Palladio* follows the two narrative strands of Molly and John respectively, and enters a third stage when those two narratives come together; the three books into which *Palladio* is divided reflect these narrative divisions and meetings. Though the perspective is clearly sympathetic to John, the first book is a third-person limited omniscient narration. The second book begins with a shift to first-person narration; John's character is now communicating directly with the reader. The structure of the narrative changes as well. John's storytelling is confessional, at times disjointed, and takes the form of diary entries, asides directed to readers, and letters – no doubt unsent – to Molly. The novel shifts to first person narration at the same time that the plot turns to Molly and John's tumultuous reunion at the Palladio agency. Molly's arrival is concurrent with the beginning of the end at Palladio; John tells her, "Everything around here is fucked up, it's falling apart, and that's because you're here. I'm not sure why that's true, exactly, but I'm sure it's true" (330). By focusing on Molly as the precipitant of Palladio's

demise, Dee lends a great deal of weight to the idea that the patriarchal sexual relation upon which the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism is contingent is perhaps its fundamental flaw. Since John has taken control of the narrative, he will have the last word on how this confrontation is depicted.

John Wheelwright's character is not an independent artist, and, as mentioned above, given his "freedom" at Palladio, he finds himself unable to produce anything at all – for the agency, anyway. In fact, John finds the other Palladio artists' penchant for performance pieces and postmodern "events" utterly inexplicable. For instance, when Jean-Claude asks John for a refrigerator in which to store "some of his bodily fluids," John wishes "I had someone around to help me make sense of stuff like this" (263). However, in the chapters which his character narrates, John does create a work of art: that work of art is the story of *Palladio*, and his part is precisely to "make sense of stuff like this." Readers are invited to conclude that, unlike his peers' creations at Palladio, John's masterpiece *is* independent and autonomous. Though it ends up being made public, he did it for no one other than himself: "the contents of my laptop – returned to me following its miraculous survival – were subpoenaed ... So my most private thoughts, all the things that I considered unsayable, are now about to become part of the public record." Given this circumstance, John decides that even though "the lawyer has told me in no uncertain terms to stop writing things down," "it would feel pretty hypocritical that way; if it's all going to be out in the open anyway, then this little digital record, permanent and ephemeral, may as well have at least the virtue of completion" (334). By this point, the reader understands that this digital record is synonymous with John's narration in *Palladio's* second book – his own work of art.

John's narrative section ends by describing the climactic event that best illustrates *Palladio's* judgment regarding the fate of the marriage between art and advertising. It is Jean-

Claude Milo's most recent production: a performance piece that will take place inside the Palladio mansion. As advertising, Jean-Claude's work ventures fully into absurdity: this piece will be performed only once, for an audience comprised solely of representatives of the company who paid for it, and will never be seen outside the agency walls. This is what Palladio has come to: the agency that promised to provide art for the masses has re-created the same exclusionary institutions and practices that supposedly inspired its inception as an alternative. Palladio may as well be a museum, and only corporate clients can afford the price of admission. And within its walls indeed it is the same old crowd of rich white men and their "comely secretaries" standing in the gallery, viewing "high" art, soaking up the cultural capital that will help legitimize their financial capital.

When John leads the corporate crew into the ballroom, they find Jean-Claude sitting monk-like amidst drawn curtains and numerous computer monitors. When the monitors are turned on, each features "still shots of various works of art, some famous, some unknown" and shots of some of Milo's own works. After the audience has had a few minutes to contemplate the images, a background audio emerges: "an empty sort of crackling and hissing." One by one, as if taking their cue from the crackling sounds, the computer images are "consumed on the screen by a digital image of fire, creeping from the corners, blackening the center, until it was gone" (337). Dee's imagery here is well-suited to his point. Etymologically, consumption of the type that advertising encourages and consumption that is destructive, such as disease and devouring, have both evolved from the same word. Milo's performance piece reminds his audience – both his fictional corporate audience and Dee's readership – of the intersections and interdependence of the two meanings. By foregrounding the often de-emphasized destructive facet of consumption, and pitting it against images of creative productivity, Milo's piece insists on the impossibility of subjecting art to the economics of advertising; the effort to use art to

promote consumption will result in the destructive consumption of the art itself – consumption that will annihilate, rather than merely appropriate, the product.

Following the digital destruction of the artworks, Milo displays a lengthy quote from Kafka's 1914 story, "In the Penal Colony," which includes lines that read, "And now I ask you: because of this Commandant and the women who influence him, is such a piece of work, the work of a lifetime, to perish? Ought one to let that happen?" (337). Out of context this quote makes sense as a criticism of Mal Osbourne's attempt to subject works such as Milo's to the destructive forces of commercialism. More abstractly, Dee's allusion implies a comparison between Kafka's French colonists' violent appropriation of the tropical natives' resources, labor, and livelihood, and Mal's despotic reign over the Palladio artists and their productions. Furthermore, readers familiar with Kafka's story may also detect a more ambiguously sinister implication of the quote if they recall that in "In the Penal Colony," the work in question is an elaborate instrument of torture, a death machine. Especially insidious is the machine's method: it literally inscribes victims' bodies with the doctrines they have disobeyed. Read within the context of *Palladio's* exploration of the relationship between autonomous art and a dominant fiction of consumer capitalism, Kafka's tale suggests that the work of art – and the desire that drives one to a work of art – created under a such a powerful ideology, such as despotism or consumer capitalism, is indeed so deeply inscribed by the symbolic order of that ideology that it is doomed to serve and reinforce that ideology. The allusion's dual connotations – both a lamentation for the appropriation and degradation of the work of art, and the suggestion that the work itself is a deadly thing – point toward Milo's finale.

"There was a sound, a whoosh like the sound of a tablecloth being snapped, and before anyone knew what was happening, the center of the ballroom was lit by a kind of pillar of flame"; this flame is the actual, hot, devouring thing, not a digital reproduction, and it is not long

before “the fire had reached the heavy, floor-to-ceiling drapes and,” John comments, “from there you pretty much knew that the whole house was bound to go up” (338). Though John and all the corporate sponsors escape, the mansion burns to the ground, and Milo, according to his own plan, burns to death, the willing victim of his own deadly creation. By destroying Palladio, Milo’s performance defies the doctrines for which the agency stood; by allowing himself to be destroyed along with it, Milo seems to suggest that his character has already been suffocated. The only art work of which he is now capable is destructive, deadly.

Milo’s piece expresses his sense of the impossible situation of the contemporary artist: he is essentially impotent as an independent, and fatally compromised as a follower. Milo’s allusion to “In the Penal Colony” has further relevance in this regard. Kafka’s officer – the character who runs the machine and acts as executioner – is a product of the former regime whose glorification of rigid indoctrination and merciless violence he is inescapably loyal to; when the officer realizes that his adherence to the old tradition does not make sense in the contemporary world, he releases the prisoner awaiting execution and instead submits himself to the machine, allowing himself to be tortured to death as he has tortured so many others. The prisoner awaiting execution had been sentenced for disobeying and insulting a superior; the officer executes himself for precisely the opposite reason – his unwavering, inflexible adherence to a past Commandant. Milo’s suicide performance piece both represents and constitutes his own failed attempt to re-negotiate his relationship to the dominant fiction. In so doing, his character puts forth a damning critique of the dominant fiction, but that powerful critique also renders his own existence impossible. Among the fictional ad-men here considered, Milo reaches the greatest epiphany – and dies for it. Milo’s character fits into Silverman’s paradigm in which, confronted with the insufficiency of the patriarchal dominant fiction, masculine subjects are propelled by a “death drive” which is an “insistence within the subject of a force

inimical to the coherence of the ego” (61). When Milo discovers that his ideal self – male, producing, independent artist – is incommensurate with the consumer capitalist dominant fiction which sanctions the phallic ideal only in its own image, his desire is to relinquish his pretensions to masculine power. For Milo, this means relinquishing himself altogether, as he is driven to deconstruct the dominant fiction and self-destruct through his art.

Molly’s character, the object and facilitator of masculine desire in *Palladio*, disappears when the product of masculine desire, Palladio, burns to the ground. John risks his life to ascertain that she is not in the burning building, finally jumps out of a top floor window onto the firefighters’ inflated tarpaulin, and with that, his stint as first-person narrator comes to an end (though his character survives the leap). In book III, the third-person narrator briefly returns in order to fill in narrative gaps and tie up loose ends. Readers find Dex – hater of Mal and everything Palladio stood for – “directing a commercial for deodorant ... under an assumed name” (361); his career as an independent filmmaker is still on hold, and his character remains pathetic in the most negative sense.

Professors Liebau and Gradison are in prison for disrupting their trial; “Liebau had no problem with that. If you were a revolutionary, then you should simply consider jail one of your addresses.” However, once he’s actually locked up, Liebau finds that jail time doesn’t quite measure up to his Gramscian fantasies of prison-time philosophizing: “jail was ... an unbelievably noisy place. For hours at a stretch he found it hard to think at all” (368). Liebau and Gradison are eventually forced to the conclusion that “they had gone to jail to await rebirth as minor players in some monumentally irrelevant soap opera.” They are eventually both found guilty of contempt, fined five hundred dollars each, and “when they refused to pay, the judge waived the fine and commuted their sentences to time served” (369). Like Dex, whose character also presented a coherent counter to Mal Osbourne and Palladio, the professors and their efforts

to challenge the Palladio ideology have been reduced to impotent nuisances, not even granted the acknowledgment of a severe punishment from the system against which they acted out.

Mal, too, ends up looking pathetic. Like Wells's Ponderevo and Dreiser's Eugene Witla, Mal's story ends in a disastrous real estate venture. Having amassed a sizable fortune from Palladio's success, Mal decides to build an extravagant villa in Umbria, which he expects to be a homage to his great success, a refuge from his busy schedule, and a honeymoon destination for him and Molly. Mal's architectural vision is predicated again on vestiges of authenticity and unrepeatability, as he insists upon such things as rare imported marble and antique doors and mouldings. And just as Ponderevo's country estate goes uncompleted and Eugene's seaside resort is lost before it is ever begun, it seems unlikely that Mal's dream home will be completed. After Palladio is destroyed and Molly disappears, Mal's opulent Italian refuge begins to crumble, as well. He receives a call from his contractor, who informs him that "the marble bought at great expense ... had cracked in the first frost" and "the quarry was refusing to replace it" (366). Ultimately, the comparison between the gifted Renaissance architect who was able to create beautiful designs with an eye to accessibility and affordability for the eventual occupants and Mal's egomaniacal attempt to house the best of art and the best of advertising for the benefit of both falls apart: Mal's brainchild could not live up to its namesake.

John Wheelwright "finds himself" in Oxford Mississippi, where he volunteers his graphic design skills for a Baptist church: "nothing too Bible-thumping, just illustrations to accompany Sunday-school texts, newsletter design, pamphlets for the troubled about alcohol abuse, marital difficulties, things like that" (373). Somehow John is satisfied with what he feels is "a certain integrity" to his newly adopted position, though in the sense that he's still using his skills to convince other people to live their lives according to a third, more powerful, party's value system – one that John does not himself endorse – it does not seem that he has strayed too far

from the dynamics of his earlier profession, though his character feels very self-satisfied about the fact that he isn't making much money at it.

Molly's brother Richard has progressed, so to speak, with his religious group. Along with twenty followers, he is living in a beach house given to him by a "former disciple." They have no furniture, keep the thermostat at fifty-six degrees, and are eating lentil soup for the fourth time in as many days. Richard is not discouraged when he feels "a kind of cramp, an actual hunger pang, under his rib," and is instead inspired to "begin a fast ... as a way of refocusing himself, and through himself all of them, on the unseen. He would invite, but not require, his followers to join him," figuring "it would be a way to separate the wheat from the chaff." Richard's private concern for his own salvation centers on what he suspects is an unconscious wish for death, a desire "to put behind him the degradations of this life and arrive earlier than scheduled at the feet of a gratified Lord" (375). In this regard, Richard's plight parallels Jean-Claude Milo's: his attempt at evading the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism is leading him to the notion that the only satisfactory escape would be death.

Molly, after wandering about aimlessly for a period of time, "stopped in a state she'd never been to before, in a city she'd never heard of" (381). She rents an upstairs apartment from a single woman with two small children and begins working as a secretary for an insurance company. Molly now lives in a "virtual society of women," and finds that "it suits her fine" (383). Contemplating the various types of violence the men in her earlier life inflicted upon her, Molly considers the possibility that "there was something in her that seemed to bring it out"; "they all wanted to make her talk, when all she wanted was to stay silent ... They all wanted to make her belong to them, for no other reason than that they could see she did not want to belong to anybody" (384). Given the many ways that Molly has refused to enter into consumer society, her lonely respite is both a triumph and a tragedy. She has successfully escaped the fate of her

parents; she has managed to salvage herself from to ideas, practices, and lifestyles that offer her nothing in return, but her refusals have rendered her friendless, homeless, and anonymous. Molly is not unaware of the implications of her choices: “Life alone, she understands, life without attachments, means that when she dies something will die along with her. But she doesn’t find any great cause there for regret – and indeed on some nights, in some moods, there’s something grimly satisfying about it ... a life like a spy’s life, never disguised but essentially, retrospectively, unseen” (385). Even in her refuge, Molly’s character is subject to the condition of invisibility imposed upon women under the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism – a fiction which, paradoxically, mandates that women’s visibility, their surface, is also their content and the sum of their value. Surface as content renders female desire, thus female subjectivity, nonexistent, invisible. Nonetheless, Molly’s character has created some hope for herself. By secluding herself in an environment comprised only of women and children, she is at a greater remove from projections of masculine desire. Perhaps in the absence of male desire and the consumerist ideology with which it is so deeply implicated, Molly’s character will have an opportunity to locate her own.

Though book III returns to a third-person narrator, the narrative voice takes a turn in the final pages. Interspersed between the final accounts of each character’s trajectory are “*MESSAGE*”s, textual diversions presumably aimed at the reader directly. The content following the notice of these messages consists of quotes plucked from ad campaigns, postmodern works of art, the words of popular activists and leaders, ironically juxtaposed, one guesses, in a way intended to highlight the sometimes surprising ways in which these media coincide, contradict, and reflect upon one another. For instance, a quote from a 1999 Winston cigarette ad that reads “You have to appreciate authenticity in all its forms” is positioned above a

quote that alludes to a question of authorship: “But there’s a twist. The artist is not Gary Cross, who took the picture, but Richard Prince, who took a picture of the picture” (349) – the picture in question being the infamous portrait of a very young Brooke Shields looking as though she might have very adult inclinations. Another “message” begins by quoting a spokesperson for American Express: “‘We had already developed a brand plan that encompasses who I am,’ Mr. Woods⁵ said. ‘American Express isn’t going to branch off into areas where we’re in conflict. So I’m going to be promoted in the way I hope to be perceived.’” This declaration of advertising as personal definition is followed by an MCI slogan which asks, “Is this a great time, or what?” (359).

Certainly by making explicit references to actual advertising campaigns, artworks, and news stories, Dee is emphasizing the connection between the tragic fairy tale of Palladio and the historical context in which it was written. It is ironic that *Palladio* insists on the possibility of such a conversation between the novel and the dominant fiction within which it resides since, within the novel’s narrative, that same conversation is depicted as impossible. And although Mal’s character proposes Palladio as a radical departure from contemporary commercial culture, something entirely new, the narrator’s final “messages” suggest that the ambitions, conflicts, and failures of these fictional artists and advertisers are too-familiar symptoms of an ailing world we know well. That the Palladio agency comes to such a violent end, and that the novel’s central characters are ultimately able to sustain themselves only through exile are storytelling maneuvers which prompt readers to consider the future prospects of a society in which such tales are not so far-fetched.

The final lines of the novel appear in the form of one of these messages, the last quote of which reads, “YOU’RE ALL FORGIVEN!” (385). The intent of this quote is ambiguous, and

⁵ Probably Tiger Woods

renders the conclusion of the novel ambiguous, at best. Who is forgiven? The fictional characters? The readers? Perhaps both. And forgiven for what? Failed ambitions? An inability to escape the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism in any meaningful way? The source of this particular quote is unclear, but the words themselves resonate with Molly's earlier complaint about confessional-type works of art. She claims that, "in talking about a thing, you automatically forgave yourself for it" (217). With this in mind, it seems possible to infer that by virtue of having confessed these trials, trespasses, and failures on paper, Dee is suggesting that they are forgiven. If we understand *Palladio* as both a critique of contemporary advertising and an exploration of alternative possibilities, this final forgiving gesture may work in a couple of different ways. Especially since, even before the final line, the phrase "you are forgiven" is repeated four times in between other phrases having to do with advertising theories and slogans, it may seem that the point is "never mind" – these characters tried an alternative form of participation in the culture of advertising; it didn't work out; so just forget it, there's no other way. Adorno speaks to the importance of accepting that art oftentimes must fail in this way, but that its failure is precisely its invaluable autonomous gesture, when he suggests that the "promise held out by the work of art that it will create truth by lending new shape to the conventional social forms is as necessary as it is hypocritical" – hypocritical because it "posits the real forms of life as it is by suggesting that fulfillment lies in their aesthetic derivatives" ("Culture Industry" 130).

Adorno also wrote that "the culture industry finds ideological support precisely insofar as it carefully shields itself from the full potential of the techniques contained in its products" ("Culture Industry Reconsidered" 14): in his reconsideration of the culture industry, Adorno acknowledges the potential for autonomous critique that resides within, even as he suggests it is heavily repressed. In conjunction with his first, Adorno's later observation leads to another

interpretative possibility – one that is more appealing, but not necessarily better supported by any compelling evidence in the novel – which is that the narrator’s message forgives *Palladio*’s characters and readers for their failings in a gesture that invites all to rise up, continue to create and desire, and to try again; that is, a forgiveness that acknowledges the acceptability – even the importance – of failure. Frederic Jameson speaks to this point when he suggests that “at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment,” and further, that “what is most revealing” in a narrative such a *Palladio* is “not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus” (xiii). With this in mind, it is especially interesting that several of Dee’s critics have characterized *Palladio* as an ambitious failure. For instance, Claire Dederer opens her 2002 *New York Times* review of *Palladio* with the statement that, “there’s such thing as a good failure.” Almost without exception, Dee’s critics have been eager to forgive him his artistic trespasses, perhaps because within failure exists a vision and hope, and hopefully the will to push the limits of our limitations and try again.⁶

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⁶ Indeed, it appears that Dee’s *Palladio* has inspired a revisitation and re-working of his vision: in 2004, performance artists Ben Neill and Bill Jones (in collaboration with a creative director for an advertising agency) released their “music video performance work” based on Dee’s novel. Taking advantage of all the possibilities of intertextuality that Mal’s character attempts to denounce as derivative dead ends, Neill and Jones’ work extends the life of Dee’s vision, giving it a new form, a new angle, insisting upon unleashing the “full potential of the techniques contained in its [the culture industry’s] products” (www.palladiomovie.com, “Culture Industry Reconsidered 14).

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Chapter 5: The Ad-Man in Drag: The Future of Art as Female Desire in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*

By the turn into the twenty-first century, the figure of the ad-man has opened new vistas and, in some respects, come full circle from the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1909, science-fiction writer H.G. Wells took a hiatus from aliens and time machines to write *Tono-Bungay*, a “romance of commerce” exploring the burgeoning future of capitalism through his early ad-man figure of the late nineteenth century, Edward Ponderevo. Almost a century later, in 2003, William Gibson departed from his popular cyborgs and netscapes to write *Pattern Recognition*, in which he returns to a very recent past: the year 2002 – a vaguely familiar present infused with hyperbolic incarnations of global consumer capitalism, the vivid memory of 9/11, navigated by a truly millennial “ad-man,” Cayce Pollard. Gibson’s Cayce is the first protagonist in this thread of novels to be cast as a woman. Though her character is by far the most technologically advanced, her gendered traits actually link her to the earliest fictional ad-man here discussed: like Edward Ponderevo, Cayce is a creature of instinct, intuition, and magic. As will be discussed in greater detail below, *Pattern Recognition*’s feminine incarnation of the 21st-century ad-man works both to re-think feminine desire in late capitalism and reiterate the primacy of patriarchal structures of mediation between the dominant fiction and individuals – and, perhaps most importantly, to refigure a relationship between art, capitalism, and the consumer citizen.

Immersed in the increasingly fast-paced and hyper-commodified world of global capitalism, Cayce encounters many of the same challenges her predecessors faced. Like other fictional advertising professionals, Cayce’s connections to her own past, home, and family are tenuous and conflicted. The violence of war, colonialism, suicide and abuse have underpinned the events of the earlier novels, and likewise, the narrative and setting in which her character is

located are deeply inflected by the violence of September 11th. Readers may recognize contiguity with the pattern established by earlier ad-man characters in that she also is missing a father, lost on 9/11. Because he worked as a CIA operative, Win Pollard loomed as a figure of mystery in Cayce's life, forever shrouded in secrets, and his death was no exception. He was not expected to be in Manhattan on September 11th; his body was never recovered; and no information regarding his whereabouts is available. Though their relationship was opaque in many ways, Cayce is haunted cruelly by the loss of her father.

Her mother, Cynthia, on the other hand, is still living – on a commune calling itself Rose of the World, located “back up in the red dirt country of Maui.” Here her mother and the others work full time “scrutinizing miles of audiotape, some of it fresh from its factory wrap, unused, listening for voices of the dead.” Though by using technology to seek out and create meanings from the past, Cynthia and her group are engaged in essentially the same thing as the young women creating the film footage that *Pattern Recognition* puts forth as an ideal of art in a globalized high-tech economy, Cayce wants nothing to do with it. She “has long managed to have as little to do with her mother and her mother's penchant for Electronic Voice Phenomena as she possibly can” (115). Though Cayce does not reject her parents as part of a backward, rural past as have earlier fictional ad men, she is significantly distanced, both emotionally and physically, from her familial roots, leaving her to seek out other, alternative relationships and values by which to anchor herself in her present and direct her toward her future.

Though her particular family situation may constitute an added difficulty, Cayce is not alone in her compromised ability to construct, or reconstruct, family or family-like relationships. With the tenuous exception of the film artists' relationship with their uncle, few of Gibson's characters have relationships with parents or relatives, none are married, none have children or siblings, and the empty flats, apartments, trailers, and abandoned buildings in which they exist

hardly coincide with the idea of home as a place of refuge, comfort, and family. *Pattern Recognition* suggests that such notions are outdated, but not forgotten.

Cayce differs from Wells's Ponderevo significantly (and is therefore consistent with each of the other fictional ad-men discussed thus far) in that she grapples with the ethics of her job, and her consumer habits and laments are often ideologically at odds with her career as an advertising consultant. She frequently questions the value of the work she does and has difficulty finding meaningful connections in her personal life. Her character is bombarded with mass-produced simulacra, and, while she contributes to this production professionally, when she's off the clock, Cayce rejects what she perceives as the phony derivativeness of mass culture. Instead, like Dee's *Palladio* characters, she seeks out that which she perceives as genuine and authentic. As has been the case in earlier ad-man narratives, Cayce defines herself by what she regards as her own brand of consumerism – a brand indicating that genuine and authentic objects of desire are manifest in historical relics, one-of-a-kind artifacts, and upscale fashion.

Like other ad-men, both real and fictional, one of Cayce's primary motivations is a search for an existential counter to what Gibson depicts as a disease of consumerism – an outlet that compensates for, or provides an alternative to the superficial, materialistic, ephemera-obsessed culture of the advertising world in which she works. Aside from her frequent visits to exclusive Pilates studios, Cayce's non-work-related interests revolve entirely around mysterious film footage being posted on the internet, fragment by fragment, from an unknown source. The footage is not just Cayce's hobby and passion; the fragments and the online discussion group that has emerged in response comprise her tenuous version of home.

Amidst these various narrative impulses, what emerges as the penultimate concern in *Pattern Recognition* is contiguous with the novels about advertising at end of the twentieth century discussed in previous chapters: the tumultuous relationship between art and advertising,

and the possibility of creating and having access to forms of art that may facilitate revolutionary desire in ways that commodity objects are incapable. *Pattern Recognition* plots this concern in a manner similar to that of *Palladio*: the worlds of advertising and autonomous art weave in and out and around one another until they finally converge at the conclusion of the novel. Gibson's novel, however, envisions this meeting more hopefully than does *Palladio*; his optimism is contingent upon a re-conceptualization of art that doesn't quite seem possible for the decidedly twentieth-century characters of *Palladio*'s failed utopia.

Like earlier novels in this thread, *Pattern Recognition* features an eccentric, egotistical, larger-than-life agency head, but in Gibson's work, this character operates on a global template, and turns out to be a mostly beneficent, if patronizing, leader. Though, like his predecessors, he concentrates action in urban areas, Gibson's global setting is devoid of anything *other* than the urban; his characters and plots exceed the national borders by which earlier fictional ad-men were determined and move freely between cities in the U.S., Western Europe, Japan, and Russia (not to mention cyberspace) in a multi-national urban setting that seems to have collapsed into a single metropolitan conglomerate throughout which different "neighborhoods" are distinguished only by the merest of surface details. And while the novels discussed thus far have tended to conclude with ambiguous endings – either vaguely hopeful, as is the case with *The Hucksters* and *The Genius*, or vaguely ominous, as is the case with *Tono Bungay* and *Palladio* – *Pattern Recognition* leaves readers with a comparatively sound, positive resolution and a clear glimpse at a possible future.¹ Though *Pattern Recognition* has these focal points in common with the

¹ Many of Gibson's reviewers and critics have found his seemingly conclusive resolution to be the weakest feature of *Pattern Recognition*. Gibson's postmodern settings and high-tech adventures strike many as antithetical to traditional narrative structures, and most especially to endings characterized by closure and certainty. Darko Suvin has said of Gibson's oeuvre in general that "a happy ending is in his work a signal for a lowering of narrative intensity" (45). Similarly, Claire Sponsler writes, "Gibson unfortunately does not problematize the adventure-detective plot" endemic to most of Gibson's stories. "In the end, like their countless detective-adventurer forebears, Gibson's protagonists succeed in their quest, not incidentally conquering their own demons along the way" (636) – this is certainly true of *PR*. Writing for *The Guardian*, Toby Litt criticizes the ending of *Pattern Recognition*

earlier novels, Gibson's depiction of a twenty-first century advertising professional offers new angles on many of the relevant issues. Gibson's fresh perspectives hinge largely on three circumstances upon which he predicates the plot and style of his novel: the feminine perspective of his protagonist, the portrayal of autonomous art as an expression of feminine desire, and a persistent recognition of capitalism in its most recent globalized form as a factor informing every facet of every scene.

Though *Pattern Recognition* differs from Gibson's earlier work in that it is not set in a future populated by cyborgs, the novel retains many features of cyberpunk, the generic offshoot of science fiction which Gibson has been repeatedly credited for bringing (closer) to the forefront of postmodern fiction.² Frederic Jameson heralds cyberpunk as "the supreme *literary* expression ... of late capitalism itself" (*Postmodernism* 419), and *Pattern Recognition* is heavily informed by Gibson's cyberpunk sensibility; thus it is important to review some of the most relevant features of the genre. Claire Sponsler introduces cyberpunk as a genre "spawned by mass market 'hard' science fiction, influenced by the work of New Wave writers like Samuel R. Delaney, J.G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, and Norman Spinrad as well as by the postmodern writers William S. Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon, and developing in the eighties as an exploration of human experience within the context of media-dominated, post-industrial, late capitalist society" (626). "Cyberspace," a term coined by Gibson before the real thing existed, is fundamental to the cyberpunk genre as a spatial metaphor for the ways in which new communication and information technologies have exponentially increased the amount of data being generated and circulated around the globe on a daily basis – and the ways in which these information

specifically as retro in all the wrong ways: "The conclusion of *Pattern Recognition* reenacts the ultimate fantasy ending of 1980s movies – the heroine has lucked out without selling out, has kept her integrity but still ended up filthy rich."

² Among several others, Lauraine Leblanc claims that "William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is the original and still definitive text of cyberpunk fiction" ("Razor Girls" 2)

technologies have dramatically affected social and economic relations by both enlarging the world of information and by diminishing the spaces one must traverse to access information and to access others. David Brande adds that, “Cyberspace is Gibson’s fantastical geography of postnational capitalism, fulfilling the same basic functions as did the frontier and the nation-state in an earlier era: a fantasy of endless expansion of markets and future opportunity” (105). In one of the only book-length studies dedicated exclusively to the study of Gibson’s fiction, Dani Cavallaro maintains that the ideology of cyberpunk includes foregrounding “the provisional status of all definitions of value, rationality and truth in a radical rejection of the Enlightenment ethos.” In practice, cyberpunk fiction “amalgamates in often baffling ways the rational and the irrational, the new and the old, the mind and the body, by integrating the hyper-efficient structures of high technology with the anarchy of street cultures” (xi). Larry McCaffery adds that cyberpunk fiction is concerned with the notion that “reality and identity are rendered unstable by their reduction to the status of commodities ... interchangeable and disposable products doomed to a fate of planned and rapid obsolescence” (15).

Finally, “cyberpunk’s characters are people on the fringe of society: outsiders, misfits, and psychopaths, struggling for survival on a garbage-strewn planet” (Cavallaro 14); however, Sponsler specifies that though “the surface attention is all on the counterculture ... the dominant culture always looms in the background – in the multi-national corporations as well as in the form of a few powerful individuals” (629). Darko Suvin also makes the crucial point that “cyberpunk is representative for the structure of feeling of an important but certainly not all-inclusive international social group.” Suvin identifies “some factions of the youth culture in the affluent North of our globe” – “the technicians and artists associated with the new communication media and the young who aspire to such a status” as those who occupy the foremost spots in cyberpunk fiction. This is certainly the case for *Pattern Recognition*, whose

main characters are manifest as globalized high-tech versions of the “cultural intermediaries”³ leading the spheres of art, advertising and cultural production in earlier ad-man novels. Though unlike more typical instances of cyberpunk, *Pattern Recognition* remains firmly grounded in the extant “now,” the novel does rely upon each of the abovementioned generic features to emphasize the manner in which subcultures and globalized corporate entities interact with technology in ways that both support the dominant fiction of late capitalism and create new methods of resisting and negotiating subjectivity in relation to that dominant fiction.

Cayce’s character is heavily involved in the internet subculture surrounding the film footage and she is a bit of an outsider; she is separated from her family and distant from her friends. However, it with herself that she seeks reunion. Her persistent complaint throughout *Pattern Recognition* is that she is separated from her soul, that it lags behind her, hovering “too long in a holding pattern,” lost in time warps effected by transcontinental, transcultural, transmedia travel (253). The chronology of Cayce’s narrative suggests that her experience of soul-loss and her quest for recovery were both triggered by her father’s death on 9/11. As Dana Heller aptly suggests, “the trauma of 9/11 is in large part the trauma of having been abandoned by our fathers, who were unable to prevent the attacks from occurring” (15). Cayce’s journey leads her into the deepest recesses of both the late-capitalist advertising industry and a manifestation of autonomous art, and indeed coming to terms with the role each of these entities will have in her life is the condition upon which she will retrieve her soul. Gibson’s conceit of soul-separation can thus be read as a depiction of conflicted subjectivity. In the absence of both her father and the law of the Father, which was severely compromised by the symbolic and

³ Pierre Bourdieu’s term for “artists, intellectuals, and academics” who are “specialists in symbolic production and consider their relationship to other symbolic specialists in the media, and those engaged in consumer culture, popular culture and fashion occupations ... who rapidly circulate information between formerly sealed-off areas of culture, and the emergence of new communication channels under conditions of intensified competition” (Featherstone 10).

deeply traumatic castration enacted by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers, Cayce is, in Mark Bracher's terms, struggling to identify an ideologically consistent set of master signifiers in which she can invest her desire. David Brande's critique of Gibson's earlier writing reveals that Cayce is not Gibson's first protagonist to have lost a father; Brande reads this as a narrative strategy that creates a promising ideological fissure. That is, the promise of "new and potentially liberating relations to machine and animal life and even the promise of a new form of politics" which can "be achieved *only* through the death of the father," "outside the symbolic framework of immediate phallic interposition" (95, emphasis added).

Cayce's family relations constitute a metaphorical exposition the state of the dominant fiction at the outset of *Pattern Recognition*. That Cayce could never relate to her father because of his secrecy – mandated by another, more powerful incarnation of the Law of the Father – the CIA – is significant: Win Pollard represents a symbolic order that, for Cayce, was impenetrable and inaccessible. In the age of the image, even his own visage is obscure: "deeply and perhaps professionally camera-shy," Win "left remarkably few full-face images" (186). His disappearance and presumed death suggest that that same symbolic order is not sustainable; it is not meant for the next millennium. However, Cayce's mother's relegation to a condition of hysteria indicates that there is no matriarchal alternative waiting in the wings, either; it is up to Cayce to navigate and negotiate a sustainable relationship to the dominant fiction of global capitalism on her own. Early in the novel, Cayce reflects that she has allowed her talents to "carry her along, and gradually she'd let them define the nature of what it was that she did. She'd thought of that as going with the flow, but maybe, she thinks now, it had really been the path of least resistance." She then asks herself, "What if that flow naturally tended to the path of least resistance? Where does that take you?" (94). *Pattern Recognition* depicts Cayce's character at a moment in her life when she must make a transition from passive interpellation to

actively re-negotiating her subjective relationship to “the flow.” The “outsiders, misfits, and psychopaths” typical of cyberpunk fiction guide her on this journey, introduce her, by way of example, to new ways in which she can understand herself and express her desire in relation to the dominant fiction. Though the characters who help Cayce forge her path are mostly male, the characters who are cast as the light at the end of the tunnel, the two that effect Cayce’s interpellation into a new subjective relationship to the dominant fiction through art, are female.

Cayce’s search literally leads her closer and closer to an experience of autonomous art, and as such, her life parallels that of her creator. Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* is not a fictionalized autobiography in the literal episode-by-episode sense that applies to Wells’s *Tono Bungay*, Dreiser’s *The Genius*, and Wakeman’s *The Hucksters*, but his heroine’s life reflects his own in a significant way: Gibson lost his father – a man whose life was also surrounded by secrecy because of his work with atomic facilities – when he was six; his mother died when he was eighteen. Like Win Pollard, Gibson’s “father went off on one more business trip. He never came back.” His father’s death led to a move for young Gibson, which resulted in social exile and ultimately, his relationship with science fiction. He writes, “I eventually became exactly the sort of introverted, hyper-bookish boy you’ll find in the biographies of most American science fiction writers, dreaming of one day becoming a writer myself”

(www.williamgibsonbooks.com).⁴ Like Cayce’s narrative, Gibson’s biography posits the experience of autonomous art as the possibility of an alternative subjectivity formulated in the absence of the Father.

⁴ Appropriately, Gibson’s brief biography is published only on his webpage, accompanied by a blog in which he responds to fans’ questions and chronicles the minutiae of internet cafés, the various qualities of airport wireless connections and newfangled technological gadgets he encounters in his travels.

The setting of *Pattern Recognition* is, if not futuristic, ultra-contemporary – a hyped-up version of a familiar present, focused on the edgiest, trendiest factions of society, and a significant departure from the milieus of previous ad-man novels. Long gone are the big, hulking bureaucratic advertising agencies of *The Hucksters* and the 1950s, and gone even are the creative workshop-type agencies like *Palladio* that flourished in the last decades of the twentieth century. By the time of *Pattern Recognition*, the fictional advertising agency is “relatively tiny in terms of permanent staff, globally distributed, more post-geographic than multinational,” and “bill[s] itself as a high-speed, low-drag life-form in an advertising ecology of lumbering herbivores” (6). The agency Gibson creates for *Pattern Recognition*, Blue Ant, does not advocate outdated capitalist tropes such as putting in one’s time or working one’s way up through the ranks; the agency does not take in young novice designers and copywriters with promises of potential partnerships in exchange for hard work and loyalty, nor does it maintain a board of senior executives who make agency decisions collectively. Rather, Hubertus Bigend, the agency owner and head, keeps a couple of lower-level employees in full-time positions, essentially as executive assistants, and contracts out all of the actual work of advertising his firm is hired to do.

Relationships – if there are any at all – among co-workers are temporary and provisional. Unlike the agencies described in earlier fictional accounts, Blue Ant is not determined by or linked to a specific geographic location; rather, it is defined in part by its independence from such stationary constraints. Blue Ant is everywhere and headquartered nowhere. The agency’s postmodern corporate nomadism enables it to be agile, amorphous – and sneaky. And in contrast to the trendy creative workshop-style agencies of the nineties and *Palladio*, which heralded absolute creative freedom as ideal business practice, Bigend claims, “I don’t work that way. The client and I engage in a dialogue. A path emerges. It isn’t about the imposition of creative will”

(62). Bigend's description of his agency pretends to a rhizomatic model of multi-nodal interconnectivity and lateral communication that resonates with cyberpunk depictions of the internet as a similarly de-stratified, multiple-user, equal access space that facilitates free expression and a nearly infinite number of entrance points. Bigend's name alone is likely to raise readers' suspicion regarding his character's vision of the agency, which does indeed turn out to be more a matter of public relations than of agency policy. *Pattern Recognition* reveals both Blue Ant and the cyberspace to which it is linked as much less than the ideal in practice, and much more firmly grounded in traditional power structures.

Blue Ant's below-the-radar global presence is part of a larger emphasis on globalized capitalism that characterizes *Pattern Recognition* as a whole and constitutes one of its major affinities with the cyberpunk genre. Though they are manifest in nearly every sentence, intercontinental communications and consumption are portrayed as blasé banalities, as if to suggest not only that the world has become thoroughly globalized and commodified, but that globalized consumerism is so familiar and firmly entrenched that it is hardly a noteworthy topic of discussion. The most obvious example of this is to be found in Gibson's cast of characters: two Americans, a Briton, a Belgian, an Italian, a Pole, a couple of Japanese, and a handful of Russians – all interacting seamlessly, with no evidence of culture clash or confusion, regardless of locale. Consumption patterns exhibit the same: in a London flat, readers find Cayce running “tap water through a German filter into an Italian electric kettle” in preparation for a cup of “Californian tea-substitute” (3). Cayce's offhand observations also reiterate this grasp of multinational, multicultural mingling that is so familiar as to be second nature. Dining at a London restaurant, “Charlie Don't Surf,” whose name references both a song by the British punk band, The Clash, and the popular American film, *Apocalypse Now* – which, by the way, depicts the Vietnam War as a re-working of (Polish) Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which was set

in both Belgium and Africa – Cayce casually describes the cuisine as “California-inflected Vietnamese fusion with more than the usual leavening of Colonial Frenchness” (14). The multicultural intertextuality is thick, to say the least.

Another scene has Cayce concluding that perpetrators of a recent attack were not Blue Ant employees, based on her quick observation that “Italians who work in Tokyo ad agencies don’t wear Albanian Prada knockoffs” (159). Such fluency in cultural exchange and international commodities highlights a shift in the dominant fiction of capitalism as Gibson depicts it: in the information age, the importance of financial capital is diminished (though certainly not demolished) by the cultural capital of knowledge, the ability to smoothly navigate and translate the symbolic economies of cultural signs, brand names, and, of course, technology. As Jameson puts it in his review of *Pattern Recognition*, “class status [is] a matter of knowing the score rather than of having money” (*New Left Review* 109).

One implication of this shift in the dominant fiction is the possibility that the desire of the racial or ethnic or sexual Other becomes less terrifying, less threatening. Tony Myers observes of similar scenes in Gibson’s earlier work, “the taxonomic specificity of the expert gaze here obviates the unknown terror of the urban crowd and replaces it with cognizance of an otherwise invisible concatenation of distinct purposes that unite in the collective experience of ‘desire and commerce’” (890). The alarming implication here is the possibility that the Other’s desire is emptied of its potential for both antagonism and pleasure because it is undergoing a process of homogenization via global consumer capitalism; multi-cultural recognition becomes worldwide assimilation as it is facilitated by the global circulation of consumer objects.

Another revealing element of Gibson’s dominant fiction of cyberpunk capitalism is the language of online correspondence. The internet has certainly been one of the most significant facilitators of global exchange during the last two decades at least, and Gibson’s characters

suggest that the conventions governing e-mail have infiltrated off-line exchanges as well, and are now structuring the nature of face-to-face human interaction. For instance, Gibson's narrator, generally sparing anyway, often lapses into a register of language that is seemingly abbreviated for conservation of time and space, as has become the custom of many frequent e-mailers, chatters, and bloggers. Multi-syllable words are shortened, and complete sentences are pared down to mere fragments: in one scene, Cayce "Deletes spam. Sips the tea sub. Watches the gray light becoming more like day" (5). Later, she will dispose of her trash in a "recyc canister" (161). Again influenced by the conventions of internet communications, when Cayce meets a fellow "footagehead" at a coffee bar, her first inclination is to reconstruct him in terms of emoticons: she suggests that "you could do his glasses with an eight, hyphen for his nose, the mouth a left slash." Though Gibson's writing, and cyberpunk in general, celebrates technology, this technology-inspired habit of rendering other individuals in what Cayce admits is cartoonish "playschool emotional code" (19) not only illustrates the degree to which technology informs the postmodern subject's worldview; it also points toward what may be lost as we formulate our subjectivities according to structures of technology. Reading one another as an assemblage of emoticons does not promote conditions favorable for human exchange that goes beyond the superficial.⁵

Though Gibson's portrayal of high-tech globalized culture suggests that it has become routine, some characters express concern that it is not benign, and they see consumerism as the primary force perpetuating the spread of a reductive version of globalization. In London, Cayce and fellow Blue-Ant contract hire, Boone Chu, marvel at the little discrepancies among everyday

⁵ Claire Sponsler notes that the habit of reading relations in the language of technology applies to the whole of the natural world in Gibson's cyberpunk fiction. The opening sentence to *Neuromancer*, the work for which Gibson is most famous, reads "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." Sponsler uses this example as an illustration of her contention that in general, "the natural world in Gibson's writings is refigured as technological, cybernetic, and machinelike. Trees, sky, plants and animals, even humans are identified, described, and apprehended only through the language and images of technology, which provides the dominant paradigm for the mediation of reality" (628).

objects that make foreign countries noticeably foreign, comparing the sensation to a mirror reflection: all the parts are familiar, yet turned around, slightly different. Their observations remind us of the pleasure of the unfamiliar, of the unknown. Without acknowledging their own complicity as Bigend's hired help, Boone laments that the world will not "be that way much longer. Not if the world's Bigends keep at it: no borders, pretty soon there's no mirror to be on the other side of" (106).

At this point it is important to note that rather than relying on a country/city dynamic as earlier ad-man novels have to contrast a idealized rural past in which desire was formed with an urbanized present in which desire is commodified, overwhelmed and compromised, *Pattern Recognition* introduces a global dynamic in which all spaces are urban spaces; the difference of desire is articulated instead in terms of relative capitalist development. Gibson's novel locates the Other – as both a foreign threat and a location of desire and art that is threatened – in post-soviet Russia, where the capitalist order is still in its nascent stages.

With this in mind, Boone's lament seems to be a prescient prediction: in a final scene Cayce sits down to a formal family dinner in Russia and notices that the traditional cultural signposts – shots of vodka and a series of hearty toasts – are missing, and she wonders if perhaps in fact "this isn't a Russian meal," but rather "a meal in a world where there are no mirrors to find yourself on the other side of, all experience having been reduced, by the spectral hand of marketing, to price-point variations on the same thing" (341). This may well be the kind of experience Jameson had in mind when he characterized cyberpunk as a form that depends upon "the evaporation of a certain Otherness" (*Seeds of Time* 151); in *Pattern Recognition*, this registers as a loss.

Lacan's notion of the mirror stage posits that the experience of recognizing one's reflection creates an imaginary ideal of a coherent, bounded body and also establishes an

understanding of oneself as separate from others and the physical environment. Cayce and Boone's fears are rooted in anxiety over a similar process of identification: without a "mirrorworld" containing Others who are *not* recognizable as the self, there is no evidence that the self is indeed a bounded, separate entity. Sponsler criticizes what she regards as Gibson's "difficulty in handling plot and agency in a manner commensurate with his postmodern impulse," and his reliance on an "epistemology that privileges cause-and-effect plot development and the unified humanist subject" (636); however, though Gibson's narrative is predicated on causality and some notion of the "unified human subject," he does not depict that subject or the rationality of cause-and-effect as entirely unproblematic in *Pattern Recognition*. Veronica Hollinger offers a more useful characterization of cyberpunk in this regard, writing that the genre is "concerned on the whole with near-future extrapolation" and though it is "more or less conventional on the level of narrative technique," it is "nevertheless at times brilliantly innovative in its explorations of technology as one of the multiplicity of structures that intersect to produce that unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the 'self'" (30). Despite the fact that the dissolution of the self and the diffusion of subjectivity are ideas celebrated by many fans and scholars of cyberpunk as emancipatory visions,⁶ Gibson's exploration in *Pattern Recognition* of ongoing negotiations between subjects who still perceive themselves as coherent, if not entirely bounded, and a dominant fiction of global capitalism that both reinforces and threatens that coherence is still relevant and valuable. Rather than depicting a world transformed, he depicts a world struggling through transformation; in so doing, Gibson unapologetically insists on a multi-ethnic, multi-gendered, technologically upgraded version of the "I."

⁶ Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth-Century" (1991) remains one of the premier scholarly treatments of this topic. In her 1997 article, "Razor Girls," Leblanc cites Laura J. Mixon's novel *Glass Houses* (1992) as one of the best fictional explorations of the subjectively liberated cyborg.

To this end, Cayce's character is trying to "find herself" and forge meaningful connections with other coherent, separate subjects, but instead of husband and house-hunting in the suburbs, she logs on to the Fetish:Footage:Forum, a listserv conceived as a space where "the front page opens, familiar as a friend's living room" (3). *Pattern Recognition* dramatically refigures the notions of home and family for which earlier ad-men longed. Cayce locates her home and social network explicitly in cyberspace when she is exchanging e-mails with fellow "footagehead" Parkaboy and we learn that, for Cayce, spending time on the FootageForum "is a way now, approximately, of being at home. The forum has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar café that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones" (4). Those that inhabit her internet abode are not relatives, college friends, or childhood playmates. Her closest forum friend – and indeed one of her closest friends altogether – is not someone with whom she has shared various life experiences, or any kind of history; rather, "she knows almost nothing about him, other than that he lives in Chicago ... But they know one another's passion for the footage" and "their doubts and tentative theories," and that's enough to constitute a close friendship in Cayce's world (39).

The footage forum serves Cayce as a sort of postmodern home, a space traditionally conceived as relief from the public marketplace, and that this footage and the online conversations surrounding it seem to be entirely beyond the boundaries of the marketplace is indeed a large part of the attraction for Cayce. In a world where, as Dana Heller puts it, the American flag has been transformed into a "national corporate logo" "founded primarily on resistance to the possibility that 9/11 might require a rethinking of our limits, our consumption habits, our domestic values and our global principles" (18), the footage forum operates as a space in which Cayce can engage in something resembling the discourse of the analyst. Logged on to the forum, Cayce can, via discussions regarding the content, provenance, and cultural situation of

the film footage consider her own investments in the dominant fiction and that which may be other to it.

Though there exists a substantial following for the footage, it has somehow resisted media coverage and market appeal, what Cayce describes as “an entirely welcome lack of attention from the major media.” This cyberspace retreat is explicitly not commercialized: “‘It’s no-name,’ a friend had said, ‘That’s why you like it’” (94). For Cayce, “the mystery of the footage itself often feels closer to the core of her life than Bigend, Blue Ant ... even her career ... it matters, matters in some unique way” (76). Cayce later explains that the appeal of the film fragments lies in a sense that they constitute “an opening into something. Universe? Narrative?” (109) – perhaps an entry point into an alternative dominant fiction. Cayce observes that “the footage has a way of cutting across boundaries, transgressing the accustomed order of things” (20). This is one of the crucial functions of autonomous art, and it means everything to Cayce: she “had been rescued from inner darkness by this suggestion of just how many people might be following the footage, and just how oddly invisible a phenomenon like that was” (52). A dominant fiction is sustained by social consensus; the footage followers imply that an alternative to the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism might not be an idiosyncratic pipe dream; yet the invisibility of the movement suggests that cyber-fantasies may have little bearing on the real world.

Unlike the “anti-humanist science fiction” Veronica Hollinger describes as displaying “a certain coolness, a kind of ironically detached approach to its subject matter which precludes nostalgia or sentimentality” (38), the ultra-cool language of Gibson’s cyberpunk narrative is deeply infused with sadness and longing. Gibson’s depiction of Cayce’s milieu of friends and acquaintances is edgy and perhaps appealing in its incarnation as a hip global network, in which contents, connections and usernames are endlessly shifting, but Gibson also depicts a world in

which pursuing friendships, romances and alternative ideologies almost exclusively via instant messages and internet blogs is not, in the end, sufficient. After joining Parkaboy online for forum chat, then lying down to sleep, alone in her friend's flat, Cayce feels deeply "the perfect and now perfectly revealed extent of her present loneliness" (24).

Because of her online "family" and her international circle of friends, Cayce – like Bigend's advertising agency and the internet itself – is at home everywhere and no where. She can log on from anywhere in the world, but she is rarely in the physical presence of friends. She has the luxury of friendly accommodations around the world, but that doesn't translate into a sense of home that has been effectively globalized. As she travels from New York to London to Paris, she stays with equal ease and comfort – which is not to say a lot – at her friends' flats as she does at her own apartment in Manhattan. But when Cayce stays at friends' homes, it is not an opportunity for a visit, for catching up and spending time together, though she clearly longs for such interaction. The friends are usually absent from their borrowed apartments, present only in smells, memories, e-mails, the very few personal traces strewn about their living spaces. Noticing a friend's lingering scent on the comforter she's using while staying at his place, Cayce decides, "actually it's not unpleasant; any physical linkage to a fellow mammal seems a plus at this point" (2).

Having recently come to stay at her friend Damien's empty flat, she observes that "whatever faintly lived-in feel the place now has ... is the work of a production assistant" (2) – even the personal traces have been manufactured. Damien had hired decorators for his London flat, only on the condition that they would not decorate: "He's kept his decorators from decorating, resulting in a semiotic neutrality" that Cayce appreciates. Her own apartment in New York is perhaps the most featureless of all: it is a "whitewashed cave, scarcely more demonstrative of self." She keeps her place "carefully cleansed of extraneous objects," and her

friend Margot has commented that Cayce “has fewer things in her apartment than anyone” (89). The loneliness and anonymity of these urban domiciles echo – perhaps literally – the anonymity of postmodern human interaction that Gibson emphasizes throughout *Pattern Recognition*. Still alone at Damien’s place, Cayce “wonders where she’ll be this winter. Will she be here? In New York? She doesn’t know.” She is not comforted by her contemplation of permanent transience: “What is that, to be over thirty and not know where you’ll be in a month or two?” (88). As it turns out, Cayce doesn’t even know where she’ll be by the next weekend; her multiple homes amount only to homelessness, and her inability to identify with a space mirrors Cayce’s struggle to identify with a fantasy: she can’t find a home because she doesn’t know where she wants to live.

This insistent minimalism is part of Gibson’s cyberpunk generation’s rebellion against the ubiquitous consumerism in which they are immersed (and Gibson’s wry details, such as Damien’s decorators hired not to decorate, convey clearly that the rebellion lacks rebelliousness). Cayce complains that “she feels the things she ... owns as a sort of pressure” (89), suggesting that the saturation point has been reached, creating a backlash, a will to retreat into an empty haven free of all auspices of consumerism, seeking a brief remission from the disease. Earlier distinctions between the domestic and public spheres have been turned on their heads yet again in *Pattern Recognition*: during most of the twentieth century, Westerners have constructed their domestic dynamics around practices of consumption meant to provide a refuge from the public sphere of production. Near the end of the twentieth century, domestic interiors begin moving in to the workplace, as was the case in Jonathan Dee’s *Palladio*, and as can be observed in corporate spaces that now serve food and drinks at every corner, invite employees to dress as though it is the weekend, bring dogs and children, and even to enjoy a workout and a shower before heading “home.” Gibson’s vision of the twenty-first century, however, presents the ideal

domestic interior as nearly empty: it functions as a refuge by disallowing both production *and* consumption.

Despite their edgy millennial minimalism, Cayce and Damien's reactionary domestic aesthetics are expressions of a too-obvious paradox that has been central to all of the novels discussed thus far. Cayce is willingly employed by the advertising industry, and consciously contributes to the consumer capitalist machine that produces the materialism she loathes. She "knows that she is, and has long been, complicit" (194). So what may initially pass (or be sold) as rebellion is, upon closer examination, compensation for deep-seated guilt: Cayce must (attempt to) compensate for her complicity and this overload of commodity culture by stripping her living spaces bare of objects altogether. Jameson suggests that "the point of having your own object world, and walls and muffled distance or relative silence all around you, is to forget about all those innumerable others for a while." Her "effacement of the traces of production" requires the removal of products altogether (314).

In this context of desperate minimalism, it is significant that the latest of the 135 released segments of film footage places the two featured figures on the verge of a kiss. As Cayce views the new segment for the first time, she observes "light and shadow. Lovers' cheekbones in the prelude to embrace," and ruminates that it has been "so long now, and they have not been seen to touch" (23). In Gibson's cyberpunk world of disembodied, provisional relationships, it is telling that the film footage that has captured so many people's attention is an exploration of the intense difficulty of – and the intense desire for – corporeal human contact. By hearkening to a past in which people lingered face to face, reflecting light in three dimensions, anticipating physical contact, the footage envisions what is now a radically different future; the fact that the lovers do not touch expresses the truth of the present.

The very traditional figures of the man and the woman in the footage indicate one way in which *Pattern Recognition* itself attempts to reincarnate the past, especially as the couple is portrayed as “timeless,” “not a period piece” (23). Gibson’s depiction of Cayce’s character appears to problematize the conventional ways in which the dominant fiction has prescribed gender roles to its subjects; however, Cayce’s gender ambiguity registers as such precisely because, within the fictional world of *Pattern Recognition*, traditional gender expectations remain firmly in place. Informed as it is by the September 11th attacks, *Pattern Recognition* is perhaps reflecting rather than responding to the fact that, “in post-9/11 America, marketing strategies and advertising images have played a major role in reaffirming faith in masculinity” (Heller 13). Kaja Silverman contends that “within every society, hegemony is keyed to certain privileged terms, around which there is a kind of doubling up of belief” (16), and, indeed, both historically and in Gibson’s fiction, “9/11” has taken up this role as master signifier or “ideological stress point,” and one of the collective fantasies it underwrites is that of masculine infallibility and superiority. So although the events of 9/11 constituted a deep tear in the fabric of the existing dominant fiction, a revelation of “a historical moment at which the equation of the male sexual organ with the phallus could no longer be sustained” (2), this tear has been almost from the start accompanied by frantic efforts of ideological suture: a frenzied re-investment in national mythologies (often in the form of commodities) of masculinity.

In Gibson’s hyper-commodified world, traditional gender differences are maintained in the advertising industry specifically and in culture production generally most obviously through the hierarchies of ownership and management. Cayce’s character has learned to traverse the categories of male and female in order to operate as a professional woman in a man’s world; her skills testify to the fact that male and female gender roles remain distinct and stratified. Judging by mainstream standards, Cayce’s character is somewhat androgynous. However, it is

significant that her androgyny is primarily a surface feature, manifest in her name, her hairstyle, clothing choices, posture and stride; she equates her refusal of makeup with a visible announcement of her intelligence. It is as if “dressing up not-female” enables her to identify with and act within the parameters set for masculine behavior. But despite Cayce’s symbolic transgressions, the plot Gibson ekes out for her characters ultimately relegates her to a traditional female type: victim, dupe, soft-hearted, self-sacrificing and badly in need of a man. Rather than re-working her gender in relationship to the dominant fiction, it seems that by adopting surface effects that signify something other than “only” or “definitely” feminine, Cayce is engaging only in an act of passing for something other than she is.⁷

The gender ambiguity surrounding the protagonist, as Gibson conceives it, begins with her name. “Cayce,” pronounced the same as the more familiar spelling, “Casey,” designates no particular sex, being a name commonly given to both men and women. Though her name appears in the first sentence of the novel, readers must wait for the third paragraph to find a pronoun that designates Cayce’s gender as female. And in keeping with her gender-flexible appellation, the details Gibson provides regarding Cayce’s personal appearance are also ambiguous. Her usual attire consists of a “small boy’s black Fruit of the Loom t-shirt, thoroughly shrunken, a thin grey V-necked pullover” and “a new and oversized pair of black 501’s” (2). The sizes indicate that Cayce is a woman who is very small in stature, and the colors, brands, and style are suggestive of an adolescent boy. She also wears her dark hair in a short cut: waking up from a nap, she finds her “sleep hair poking up like a toilet brush” (3). Though Cayce works as a taste-maker and is deeply attuned to every nuance of fashion – what it is, where it came from, and what it signifies – she is not a shopper, and she prides herself on her personal brand of anti-fashion. Cayce’s character also rejects what many might recognize as one of the

⁷ Which is not to say that such acts of costuming and passing do not carry with them the potential for subjective transformation to follow, but Gibson suggests nothing of the sort in his depiction of Cayce.

most well-known symbols of contemporary Western womanhood: the purse. Instead, Cayce carries a “purse-analog”: “an envelope of black East-German laminate, purchased on E-Bay” (8) – in which she stashes her “seldom-used compact” (71).

Not only does Cayce reject many of the normalized trappings of femininity (especially those that reflect masculine desire), the terms of her rejection suggest that the mainstream, make-up wearing, fashion-conscious female is synonymous with unadulterated stupidity. Having gone to a spa in Tokyo, she leaves “wearing more makeup than she’d usually apply in a month,” and feeling “simultaneously lighter and less intelligent, as though she’d left more than a few brain cells back there with the other scruff” (141). Later, when she tries to recreate the look she was given at the spa, Cayce suspects that “the result would have the spa girls trying not to laugh.” However, it is understood that Cayce does not sincerely lament her lack of cosmetic proficiency. Her ineptitude at primping works to align her character with substance rather than superficiality; one suspects she actually is more proud than embarrassed of the fact that “she could probably be mistaken ... for the correspondent for some obscure sub NPR cultural radio operation,” but “definitely not television” (275).

Though she is not skilled in the application of customarily feminine cosmetics and accessories, Cayce is adept at manipulating her appearance. She disguises herself as a man – or at least someone who is not definitely a woman – with ease. In Tokyo, “she buys a black knit cap and a pair of Chinese sunglasses from an Israeli street vendor ... With the cap tugged low, hair tucked up into it, and the Rickson’s to zip up and slouch down in, she feels relatively gender neutral.” As she makes her way down the street, she reminds herself to put “her feet down firmly” and “walk like a man” (130). What is particularly significant about Cayce’s mastery of disguise is that she must make use of her ability to come across as not-female in order to do her

job as an advertising “man.” In order to pursue her drive to wealth and commercial success, coded male by the dominant fiction, she must go under-cover.

In the star of a cyber-punk tale, Cayce’s androgyny makes sense as a manifestation of high-tech hip; certainly styles of dress and personal mannerisms geared toward young, urban, trendy girls and women have, in the last decade referenced the signifiers of male adolescence.⁸ But especially in light of Cayce’s personal aesthetic of anti-fashion, it seems that she has more in common with Jonathan Dee’s *Palladio* protagonist, Molly, who, for lack of a workable manner of identifying positively with the master signifiers of the dominant fiction, attempts to define herself in a negative relation to that fiction. But what both Molly and Cayce’s narratives reveal is that negative and positive identification amount to the same thing: suppression of female desire and exclusion from masculine privilege. In terms of her position as newcomer in a long line of fictional ad-men, Cayce’s boyishness may also be read as a hedge against the prospect of disrupting the dominant fiction of consumer capitalism by positioning a woman in a traditionally male role, albeit a fictional one. And, perhaps in an additional measure of caution, though her character is endowed with several masculine traits, her experiences as an advertising professional, compared to those of fictional ad men, are thoroughly feminized.

Cayce’s character is cast as a boyishly female ad-man, but she is no organization man; she is not a rebel, nor is she an independent artist. While Victor Norman’s character raged against the strict office norms of the organization era, and Eugene Witla and the *Palladio* employees strove express themselves as serious artists, Cayce’s character is more like a modern incarnation of Wells’s late nineteenth-century carnivalesque medicine man, Edward Ponderevo.

⁸ Gender-bending styles seem concurrent with economic boom times: the bobs and chest-wraps worn by flappers in the 20s; the cross-dressing fetish of the 80s; and then the ubiquity of adolescent boyishness in 1990s styles for both men and women. Conversely then, it seems that economic uncertainty prompts a renewed commitment to the rigid gender roles that support the dominant fiction of capitalism, and styles fall back into more traditionally distinct categories. This dynamic constitutes a good illustration of Kaja Silverman’s contention in *Male Subjectivities at the Margin* that the division of the sexes is fundamental to our relation to the capitalist order and modes of production.

She is not a writer; she is not a manager, a “creative type,” or a salesperson. Rather, Cayce is essentially a mystic, a fortune teller. She inherited her name from Edgar Cayce, a historical American figure well-known for clairvoyant and psychic abilities. Cayce’s particular talents for advertising are described as “peculiar, visceral, but still somewhat undefined sensitivities” (15), and seem to come at the expense of several other faculties – those most privileged by a patriarchal capitalist order. Her character is portrayed as incapable of being rational and logical: “Cayce is not someone you hire to run an agency” – in fact, “not someone you hire to run anything. She is hyper-specialized, a freelancer, someone contracted to do a very specific job. She has seldom had a salary. She is entirely a creature of fees, adamantly short-term, no managerial skills whatever” (61). She is an advertising professional who depends instead upon powers that have, historically, often been gendered female – the powers of instinct and inexplicable inclination. When Cayce is contracted to evaluate a proposed logo for an existing brand of footwear, “she knows immediately that it does not, by the opaque standards of her inner radar, work,” and furthermore, “she has no way of knowing how she knows” (12). Cayce’s work is rarified and narrowly defined: her “contract for a consultation of this sort specifies that she absolutely not be asked to critique anything, or provide creative input of any sort. She is only there to serve as a very specialized piece of human litmus paper” (13). Put this way, Cayce, like Molly, is reduced to an instrument of patriarchal capitalism, perfectly tuned to masculine desire.

Cayce’s subjective distance from logic and rationality, and also from any drive to creative expression, is particularly well-suited to Bigend’s philosophy of advertising. Like Mal Osbourne, he resolutely rejects the claims of market researchers and statisticians; however, neither does Bigend look to artistic accomplishment as a driving force behind effective advertising. Rather, Bigend’s postmodern vision of advertising invokes the human unconscious, the location of desires that exceed the expressive capacities of rationality and

language. Discounting what he dismisses as the overrated significance of conscious knowledge, Bigend seeks instead to create advertisements that appeal to the “limbic brain. The seat of instinct. The mammalian brain” that is “deeper, wider, beyond logic.” He insists (rightly) that this “is where advertising works, not in the upstart cortex,” and postulates that, “what we think of as ‘mind’ is only a sort of jumped up gland, piggybacking on the reptilian brainstem and the older, mammalian mind, but our culture tricks us into recognizing it as all of consciousness.” Bigend wants his advertising to connect with “the mammalian” gray matter that “spreads continent-wide beneath it, mute and muscular, attending its ancient agenda” that he believes “makes us buy things.” He summarizes, “When I founded Blue Ant, that was my core tenet, that all truly viable advertising addresses that older, deeper mind, beyond language and logic” (69). Bigend’s philosophy is Lacanian: he understands desire as dependent upon symbolization, formless in the unconscious, materializing only via recognition, translation, articulation, and direction in symbolic form. His business is creating the symbols that identify (and so sell) objects of desire; he ushers desire into the drive to buy by articulating it in the form of the commodity. And who better to execute Bigend’s will than one whose sex has, for centuries, been both heralded and chastised for operating outside the bounds of language and logic, adored and defiled as the object of masculine desire.

The transactions between male and female incarnations of the ad-man in *Pattern Recognition* model the gendered dynamics of desire under late capitalism. As the protagonist, Cayce’s character, and so her gender, invite the reader’s empathy; Bigend is in many regards cast as a buffoon. Cayce is hired by Blue Ant to track down the makers of film footage – the manifestation of autonomous art in *Pattern Recognition* – that has been circulating on the internet. Though Cayce has followed the postings of the mysterious footage out of personal

interest for some time, it is Bigend who initiates and finances her search for its creators. Bigend is evasive regarding his motives, but Cayce understands that he wants her to search the footage and its creative milieu for marketing opportunities. As his name suggests, Bigend has in common with his fictional predecessors a big personality, a tendency toward eccentricities, ridiculousness and an inflated ego. His character first appears in London wearing “a cowboy hat, a fawn waterproof of archaic hunting cut, gray flannels, and a pair of Tony Lama boots” (60) – an ensemble that would certainly stand out as odd at best among London’s media elite. Bigend is also extremely presumptuous in a way that is less direct than Evans’ or Summerfield’s tyrannical tantrums, but perhaps even more effective: “every Bigend deal was treated as a done deal, signed and sealed. If you hadn’t signed with Bigend, he made you feel as though you had, but somehow had forgotten” (67). And like Dee’s Mal Osbourne, Bigend’s presence and power seem ubiquitous, for “there was something amorphous, foglike, about his will: It spread out around you, tenuous, almost invisible; you found yourself moving, mysteriously, in directions other than your own” (68). Like other charismatic agency heads, Bigend is able to use his enigmatic aura to compel or coerce those working for him to concede to his wishes, and Cayce does just that. When he asks her to accept the assignment to track down the creators of the film footage, her immediate inclination is to refuse for fear that Bigend’s motives are exploitative. Nonetheless, by the next morning, for reasons that are unclear to Cayce herself, she has signed on with Blue Ant and accepted Bigend’s proposal. Gibson’s description of Bigend’s “amorphous, foglike” influence works well as a metaphor for the generalization of masculine desire and drive as a key mechanism of late capitalism, while Cayce’s mystification illustrates the lack of adequate symbolic construction of female desire.

Cayce’s character presents an interesting symptom, an expression of her inability to formulate and direct her desire under the dominant fiction of global capitalism: advertising –

logos in particular – actually make Cayce sick; she finds the symbolic order of consumerism unbearable. Slavoj Žižek describes the Lacanian idea of “symptom” as “a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus” (21), and indeed this is precisely the case for Cayce. Readers are told that “the Michelin Man was the first trademark to which she exhibited a phobic reaction” (34): “The first time she’d seen Bibendum had been in a magazine, a French magazine.⁹ She’d been six. She’d thrown up” (97). In his discussion of Cayce’s affliction, Jameson characterizes the image of the bloated man made of tires as “that crack through which the Lacanian Real makes its catastrophic appearance” (114). As an adult, Cayce is subject to an unexpected encounter with a large Tommy Hilfiger display; her surroundings “all started to go sideways on her,” and the narrator explains, “some people ingest a single peanut and their head swells like a basketball. When it happens to Cayce, it’s her psyche” (17). Cayce goes to great lengths to avoid exposure to these kryptonite-like dangers: she has “every trademark carefully removed” from a new pair of Levi’s 501s; “even the buttons have been ground flat, featureless by a puzzled Korean locksmith” (2). The watch she wears is “a Korean clone of an old-school Casio G-Shock, its plastic case sanded free of logos with a scrap of Japanese micro-abrasive” (7). And even coffee makers and can openers are potential antagonists: her friend Margot “had discovered that most of the products in Cayce’s kitchen were generic, unlabeled, and Cayce had admitted that it wasn’t a matter of economics but of her sensitivity to trademarks” (94).

So what might initially appear to be a conscientious aversion to materialism is something beyond voluntary refusal; Cayce cannot psychologically or physically endure the symbols of conspicuous consumption. Her affliction serves as a physical manifestation of the ideological

⁹ Gibson has chosen a historical landmark of logos to initiate the manifestation of Cayce’s symptom: Bibendum – “the Michelin Man” is the Michelin tire company’s symbol. Created in 1889, Bibendum is one of the oldest registered trademarks in the world, and one of the most well known, appearing in over 150 countries (www.michelin.com).

contradictions between her professional life and her unarticulated desire, and more generally as an expression of the necessarily contradictory nature of consumer capitalism. Her symptom is itself inconsistent and self-contradicting: the one place throughout her world travels that serves as a calming sanctuary, a beacon in the storm, is Starbucks! For some reason this logo, familiar from nearly every block, in nearly every city, in nearly every nation – the epitome of success in brand labeling and recognition – doesn't bother her at all; in fact, she finds it comforting. On three different continents, Starbucks shops serve as Cayce's safeties, anchor-points that enable her to make sense of the unfamiliar things going on around her. When circumstances get sticky or when she needs to think through a difficult situation, Cayce heads for Starbucks. She claims that "the décor somehow fosters emotional neutrality, a leveling of affect. She can feel it actually starting to calm her down ..." (207). Her character is either hopelessly inconsistent, or, precisely by way of this inconsistency, Gibson is suggesting that the contemporary individual is immersed in consumer culture to such a degree that the overload causes adverse reactions and even sickness, but that this mode of culture, because of its ubiquity, has also established itself as the primary signifying system – to such an extent that individuals have little choice but to depend on it to participate in and make sense of their world.

This point is part of a thread that runs both throughout *Pattern Recognition* and throughout the entire group of ad-man novels (*Tono-Bungay* most explicitly), in which advertising and consumer culture in general are described in terms of disease. Bigend describes Cayce's product-promoting talents as "her tame pathologies" (94). And when Cayce discovers that Blue Ant is secretly a parent agency to a smaller outfit commissioned to covertly promote the film footage, she suggests that this "effective way to disseminate information" is based on a "viral model," and complains that what seems to be the increasingly invisible pervasiveness of advertising gives her a queasy feeling; like airborne pathogens, advertising firms and their

minions – of which Cayce is one – “seem to be infecting everything” (88). And for this particular affliction there seems to be no preventative measures, no cure available; all will be infected by the epidemic spread of the global market, and all will have to learn to live with their disease. David Brooks points to the very popular tendency among upwardly mobile young professionals such as Cayce to manage this contradiction by consuming in ways that signify a reluctance to fully identify with the dominant fiction of capitalism; this, as I will discuss in more detail below, is the true content of Cayce’s symptom.

The marketing strategies that facilitate this cancerous growth and spread in *Pattern Recognition* are depicted as cutting-edge methodologies that depend upon a deep blurring of the lines between advertising and the social, advertising being the dominant influence. The result is that social interaction is increasingly determined by the practices and values native to the advertising industry, and with this in mind, the metaphor of disease takes on another meaning: the dominant fiction is not well if its supporting subjects are ailing. The effects are pointedly manifest in Gibson’s characters. Because of her profession, Cayce feels that “she knows too much about the processes responsible for the way product is positioned, in the world, and sometimes she finds herself doubting that there is much else going on” (194) – in other words, living in relation to a dominant fiction constructed almost entirely around the icons and ideologies of advertising refigures the social as well as the economic according to the logic of advertising. Any and all experience is, more likely than not, a marketing ploy of some kind. Cayce’s suspicions are strengthened when she meets a young woman, Magda, who is employed by Blue Ant’s secret sub-agency. Magda’s job, as she explains it, is to “go to clubs and wine bars and chat people up. While I’m at it, I mention a client’s product, of course favorably. I try to attract attention while I’m doing it, but attention of a favorable sort” (84). Magda has only been doing this for a short while, and she doesn’t like it because she feels “it’s starting to do

something to me. I'll be out on my own with my friends ... not working, and I'll meet someone and we'll be talking and they'll mention something ... something they like. A film. A designer. And something in me stops ... I'm devaluing something. In others. In myself. And I'm starting to distrust the most casual exchange" (85). The interesting thing to note is that the advertising practices in question are not newfangled, futuristic methods – they have been around and in use for many years. Gibson literalizes the point ad-man authors since Wells have been expressing figuratively: human relations *literally* become market exchanges; interaction takes only the form of pitch and sale.

Yet despite Cayce's revulsion towards trademarks and her uneasiness about the power advertising practices wield in her experiences of contemporary cultures, she is mired in a version of anti-consumerism that is in many respects consumerism at its finest. My analysis of other fictional advertising professionals has suggested that their consumer savvy has been an important part of their character development, shown to be heavily influenced by their expertise in marketing to mass publics and an expression of their will to negotiate a specific relationship to the dominant fiction of capitalism via consumer objects. This is perhaps most true in the case of Gibson's Cayce Pollard. Though her brand allergy may appear as an expression of unilateral anti-consumerism, it would be more accurate to describe Cayce as an elite consumer who, along with other fictional ad men such as Vic Norman, Eugene Witla, and Mal Osbourne, has a powerful dislike for popular tastes, and adopts a highly specialized, elite fashion sense in order to distance herself from the common consumer: she wants nothing to do with the masses she's helped massify. Though the narrator suggests that, "what people take for relentless minimalism is a side effect of too much exposure to the reactor-cores of fashion," and goes on to explain that "this has resulted in a remorseless paring-down of what she can and will wear. She is, literally,

allergic to fashion ... She's a design-free zone, a one woman school of anti" (8), taken in context with other events, we can see that Cayce's allergy is specific, not general.

Her condescension toward mass-fashion is evident when she rants against Tommy Hilfiger and those who would buy his products: "My God, don't they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row ... But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul" (17). It is not that it is *a* brand, but rather *the* brand that offends Cayce, its lack of originality, its tiredness – granted, characteristics most brands share. True, derivativeness and overplaying are key features of mass culture, but a scathing critique of these aspects is not the same as a wholesale renunciation of fashion. Though the narrator suggests that Cayce denies fashion altogether, her character is actually quite engaged in the pursuit of style, for her response to the tiredness of popular fashion is to create her own avant-garde brand: "CPUs. Cayce Pollard Units," which "are either black, white, or gray, and ideally seem to have come into this world without human intervention" (8). It is ironic that Cayce's attempt to remove herself from mass consumption is predicated on a fantasy taken straight from Marx's critique of capitalism – the complete alienation of consumer from producer.

Cayce's symptom becomes increasingly complex: Cayce's most prized garment is itself very expensive piece of simulacra. "The Rickson's is a fanatical museum-grade replica of a U.S. MA-1 flying jacket," and she goes through two of them during the relatively brief course of events depicted in *Pattern Recognition*. And quite contrary to her stated wish for clothes that betray no history, she values her Rickson's precisely because of how it was made and by whom: "Cayce knows ... that the characteristically wrinkled seams down either arm were originally the

result of sewing with pre-war industrial machines that rebelled against the slippery new material, nylon,” and that “the makers of the Rickson’s have exaggerated this, but only very slightly, and done a hundred other things, tiny things, as well, so that their product has become, in some very Japanese way, an act of worship.” And in true postmodern simulacra form, Cayce proudly contends that the jacket is “an imitation more real somehow than that which it emulates” (11). In true “bourgeois bohemian” fashion, Cayce’s spending “renounces accumulation and embraces cultivation” (Brooks 85).

Cayce’s fashion fervor emerges again when she has to dress for a meeting with an informant. She determines that “Levi’s and Fruit of the Loom Ts” are definitely not appropriate; instead, she heads for the ultra-exclusive Parco boutique with her Blue Ant credit card and “emerges wearing ... black Fogal tights that she suspects cost half a month’s rent on her place in New York and a black pair of obscurely retro French suede boots that definitely did” (141). Apparently, name brands on the very tip top of the fashion continuum don’t bother Cayce in the least, and, in fact, are names worth dropping. Donning her new duds, Cayce goes on to reveal that her everyday fashion is just as disposable as the popular fashion she so vehemently disparages. She feels that her plastic shopping bag containing her CPUs is not the right accessory for her meeting: “It feels wrong,” and since there’s nothing in it besides her “third-best skirt, tights” and “shrunken black Fruit,” she “slides it between two ragged bushes, leaving it there, and walks on” (146).

Cayce’s exclusive tastes are not restricted to fashion; her interest in I, objects, and artifacts is also guided by a sense, shared by most of her fictional ad-man predecessors, that the rare and historical stand out as especially meaningful in a world flooded with mass-produced ephemera. The one decorative gesture she allows herself in her “whitewashed cave” of an apartment can be found in its “uneven tenement floors painted a shade of blue she discovered in

Northern Spain.” She finds the hue appealing because it is an “ancient tint, arsenic-based,” and “peasants there had used it for centuries on interior walls, and it was said to keep flies away.” Again, Cayce seeks only style that has a unique story, a history that she can perhaps substitute for her own; she “likes ... evidence of long habitation, but nothing too personal” (89). Cayce’s uniquely historical paint shade illustrates David Brooks’ contention that, “we educated elites surround ourselves with the motifs of lives we have chosen not to live” (96).

Thomas Frank includes such consumer habits in his definition of “hip consumerism,” suggesting that the continuous appeal of retro style since the 1960s “simultaneously reinforces contemporary capitalism’s curious ahistorical vision and its feverish cycling of obsolescence.” Frank suggests that, in the postmodern era, “retro has become our favored means of understanding history” (227); in Cayce’s life, and in the lives of other fictional ad men, fervor for antiques and decontextualized historical allusions has accompanied alienation from personal history, and has supplanted any understanding of the past as a coherent historical force with implications for and connections to both the present and the future. Cayce and her friends and coworkers are not unaware of this phenomenon: In an effort to jolt a dying dinner conversation, Bigend asks his companions, “How do you think we look ... to the future?” (55). Cayce suggests that, “They won’t think of us ... any more than we think of the Victorians.” And to clarify, “I don’t mean the icons, but the ordinary actual living souls” (56). Cayce assumes that her generation’s reductive indifference will be shared by the generations that follow. The existential position one might be tempted to adopt based on such assumptions is one of apathy, or even nihilism: if the past is untouchable, and the future won’t care, then what do the actions of the current generation matter? Gibson’s vision of the dominant fiction of global capitalism in *Pattern Recognition* is one that remembers the past only as nostalgia-laden souvenirs and looks to the future not at all; his narrative includes exploring the possibility of re-engaging with the

past in hopes of actively shaping the future. Cayce exhibits behaviors clearly borne of these circumstances, her character also expresses dissatisfaction, a longing for a connection to both the past and the future that circumvents the channels of consumerism held out by the dominant fiction.

Cayce and her peers gladly consume and display their own iconic scraps of history, and express appreciation for antiquity simply as antiquity in the abstract. For instance, when Boone Chu and Cayce take refuge in an (of course, empty) apartment belonging to one of Chu's friends in Tokyo, both are impressed by its "oldness"; Cayce is nearly awe-struck, for "she'd almost never seen anything genuinely old, in Tokyo, let alone in this state of casual disrepair." They express mutual admiration for the "silvered wooden planks, an entrance ornately roofed with Japanese tiles, decaying stucco columns," and "balconies for airing bedding." Chu flaunts his own idiosyncratic knowledge of historical details when he tells her it is "a prewar apartment building. Most of them went in the firebombing. Seventy units in this one. Communal toilets. Public bathhouse a block away" (161).

Again exemplifying Frank's definition of hip consumerism and her own encyclopedic knowledge of consumer objects, when Cayce is exploring the Camden markets, she is drawn to a vendor selling antiques: "Victorian surgical instruments, a trepanning set, by Evans of London, circa 1780, in original fishskin case, an early nineteenth-century French lithotomy set with bow drill, by Grangert. Brass-bound mahogany case" (35). Not only are these musty relics the ones she finds most interesting, the narration of this passage suggests that the knowledge of their provenance is Cayce's own – a knowledge that sets her apart as the most discerning of consumers, an individual whose consuming habits define rather than diminish her individuality. It is a knowledge which creates and reinforces a vast divide between Cayce and the consumers to whom she panders in her capacity as a logo consultant – Cayce's elite consumerism is an

exemplary illustration of Pierre Bourdieu's dictum that "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (5). And though knowledge of such historical tidbits is clearly valuable as cultural capital, there is – among the characters working in advertising – no sense of *why* such information might be significant. It is for them, as Frank suggests, merely superficial hip. The *Pattern Recognition* characters, however, are not cast as shallow materialists. Their attraction to isolated icons of history and their display of such as superficial hip speaks to a desire to connect with something that signifies permanence and continuity; their refusal to engage with history in all its complexity speaks to the difficulty of doing so in a world in which history is often painful and may entail a confrontation with the possibility that contemporary consumer capitalism is not leading toward an equitable and sustainable future.

In the case of one particular historical artifact, the value of the antique is portrayed not just as something that money can't buy, but as the one currency that can purchase historical legacy for the next generation. Cayce is first introduced to the Curta calculator during a chance encounter on the streets of London; she is mistaken for a buyer, and is made privy to the specs: "it is made in Lichtenstein ... a precision instrument" that performs "calculations mechanically, employing neither electricity nor electronic components. It is the smallest mechanical calculating machine ever constructed" (28). And more importantly, the Curta has a particularly compelling history: "it is the invention of Curt Herzstark, an Austrian, who developed it while a prisoner in Buchenwald. The camp authorities actually encouraged his work ... they wished his calculator to be given to the Führer, at the end of the war. But Buchenwald was liberated in 1945 by the Americans. Herzstark had survived" (29).

Cayce is put into contact with a man by the name of Hobbs, an avid collector of Curta calculators, and a mutual associate explains that the draw is indeed "not so much about the artifact ... as about the ultimate provenance" – "the camps ... surrounded by death, by

methodical erasure, by an almost certain fate. [Herzstark] continued to work. In the end the camp was liberated. He walked free, never having abandoned his vision of the calculator. Hobbs honors that triumph, that escape” (231). Herzstark’s story is that of the work of art, liberated from violence and appropriation, thus his calculators remain as tributes to this tale that is also a fantasy – a fantasy circulated, sold, and treasured in the form of a limited edition commodity. Cayce is able to use Hobbs’s passion for this original artifact in order to procure a piece of information she needs to continue to seek the provenance of *her* fantasy, the film footage, exchanging one unique piece of history for a lead that will take her one step closer to what she believes will be her generation’s priceless artifact. She knows that Hobbs will not accept money from her, so she offers to use Blue Ant’s credit card to buy a Curta from an antique dealer who is asking an exorbitant sum. Cayce threatens to throw the calculator into the Camden canal if she suspects Hobbs is cheating her; it is only the irreplaceability of this artifact, and its value to Hobbs as such, that enables her to strike this bargain – cash in the Camden canal wouldn’t bother Hobbs one bit. The transaction between Cayce and Hobbs challenges the equation of quality and quantity fundamental to consumer capitalism; rather, they are trading in priceless terms, each facilitating the desire of the other.

This emphasis on antiques and historical detritus is key to Gibson’s depiction of the realm of art, as well. As has been the case in earlier novels focusing on advertising professionals, the relationships between history, art, and advertising are complicated and often antagonistic. In *Pattern Recognition*, advertising is initially cast as antithetical to any kind of engagement with history or art, depending instead upon an ignorance of history and a will to pure profit. Cayce is not an artist, but it is notable that, in contrast to all of her professional contacts in the advertising industry – none of whom are artists – her friends (and her passions) are all involved in the arts in one way or another.

One of *Pattern Recognition*'s most significant contributions to the genre of ad-man fiction is the explicit link the novel forges between feminine desire and autonomous art. David Brande credits Gibson with "invoking the possibility of a 'feminist futurism'" by way of casting female characters as "value-carrying agents," and, though Brande is well aware of the long literary tradition of assigning women the (still basically powerless) role of moral compass, he posits that the women of Gibson's fiction do provoke more "imaginative thinking about the future" (86). Gibson does transcend trends established in earlier ad-man fiction when he not only offers us a female ad-"man," but also places art solely in the hands of female creators; however, though their contributions to a re-thinking of subjective relationships to the dominant fiction are crucial, these female characters are, in the end, moral heroes and powerless subjects.

When Cayce finally meets the two sisters responsible for the creation and distribution of the footage, the two motivations – the desire for art and the drive to commercial profit – come into direct conflict with one another, and the outcome suggests the unlikelihood of a symbiotic co-existence. Nora and Stella's work emanates from an intense historical experience, fraught with violence. Nora is the sister who does most of the actual creating; she attended film school and directed three shorts that were well-received at Cannes. Subsequently targeted because of their family's wealth and political affiliations, Nora and Stella's parents were killed in a bomb attack, leaving Stella with injuries and Nora with severe brain damage. After months of hospitalization and several surgeries, only after being shown her Cannes films did Nora become responsive. When a nurse noticed that Nora was watching the closed circuit monitor mounted in the adjacent hallway, Nora's uncle Volkov installed editing equipment in her hospital room, fed the video stream from the monitor to her station, and "soon she began to use the equipment. To edit. Recut."

Gibson's depiction of autonomous art in this particular form, digital video posted to the world wide web, echoes both Frederic Jameson's contention that film is "the one new and historically unique art invented in the contemporary period" – new because it is "distinctively mediatic" (*Postmodernism* 68) – and the hope Walter Benjamin expresses in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" for an art for the masses: an art that integrates technology into its creation, such that reproducibility is built into its inception; there is no original to diminish the value of the copies. Such a vision is complicated, however, by the way in which the film fragments are released into the public sphere; fragments inevitably pose the possibility of a preexisting whole. An additional complexity emerges when Cayce learns that the film clips have been digitally watermarked, a process Gibson fuzzily explains as a method of tracking the dissemination of the footage and, most importantly, maintaining the anonymity of its creators. The irony here is that the digital watermarking requires an extremely advanced, very expensive process, which is funded by Uncle Volkov's oil profits and executed by an entire prison full of Russians working for free: a nearly hyperbolic example of capital maintained by surplus value derived from labor. Yet the very reason Volkov must protect his nieces in this extravagant manner is precisely because he is a wealthy capitalist, harboring something of high monetary value to other capitalists that he wants to shield from those who would seek to make similar profits off of Nora's work.

The film footage as Gibson imagines it couches historical content – a man, a woman, a street scene, a romance – in postmodern form: digitized film posted on the internet in fragments. This particular expression seems to argue for an embrace of technology that does not, in the rapture of infatuation, turn its back on the history from which it has emerged. As James Annesley suggests, globalization and the concomitant technological advances do not constitute "a transformation," but rather "an intensification of existing processes." Or as Jacques Rancière

has put it, “the dominant ideology is not the shadowy Other of the pure light of Science, it is the very space in which scientific knowledges are inscribed” (Barrett 39). As such, “globalization needs to be considered as part of capitalism’s history” (Annesley 221). The context in which Gibson presents the footage suggests to readers that Marx’s call for the masses to claim ownership of the technologies they helped create is still a relevant mandate for our future.

Nora and Stella do not participate in the watermarking processes; in fact, their workspace is isolated and well-protected from the market, housing only warm memories and video equipment. Volkov set the sisters up not in a modern, state of the art studio – which he could easily afford – but in a space exuding historical significance, just like the other spaces in which meaning is made throughout *Pattern Recognition*. “Up a forbiddingly steep flight of narrow concrete stairs,” through “a kitchen ... like the kitchens in the oldest, still-unrenovated tenements of New York,” housing a stove – “a squatting pre-Stalinist presence” – and an “ancient galvanized showerhead ... suspended from a sixteen-foot ceiling gone sepia with decades of smoke and soot” is the film studio, a room with a view of “the Kremlin ... and the Duma.” The walls have gone “unpainted since Soviet days at least,” and “the individual planks of the wooden floor are lost under layers of paint” (301). The space is special to Stella and Nora, because it was here, as young girls in the nineteen-eighties, that they witnessed ongoing gatherings of progressive thinkers, “talking of freedom, art, things of the spirit.” Stella reminisces that “once Victor Tsoi sang here ... people had time, in those days” (303).

The work that Nora does in this space is creative in every sense. What Gibson emphasizes about Nora’s film segments, and what compels Cayce, is their transformation of destructiveness into creativity. Considering the bomb that was used against Nora’s family, Cayce thinks of “something stamped out, once, in its thousands, by an automated press in some armory in America. Perhaps the workers who’d made that part, if they’d thought at all in terms

of end-use, had imagined it being used to kill Russians ... and somehow this one specific piece of ordnance, adrift perhaps since the days of the Soviet's failed war with the new enemies, had found its way into the hands of Nora's uncle's enemies, and this one small part ... had been flung into the very center of Nora's brain. And from it, and from her other wounds, there now emerged ... the footage" (305). This seems to constitute one of the crucial distinctions in *Pattern Recognition*: a distinction between those who create something positive out of negative materials – death, violence, destruction, disappearance – and those who only contribute to the overabundant store of such incidents and ideologies.

After hearing Stella's story, Cayce "feels as though something huge has happened, is happening, but she can't define it. She knows that it's about meeting Stella, and hearing her story, and her sister's, but somehow she no longer is able to fit it in her life. Or rather she lives now in that story, her life left somewhere behind, like a room she's stepped out of. Not far away at all but she is no longer in" (293). This is the moment at which, whether she realizes it or not, Cayce's subjectivity undergoes a shift. Having been invited into Stella and Nora's trust, she can no longer maintain her allegiance to Bigend, Blue Ant, or their efforts to mine the footage for marketing opportunities. Her character has relinquished attachment to the master signifiers of advertising in order to identify herself with the sisters and their art; she has stepped out of the office and into the studio.

Gibson's characterization of the people Cayce meets along the way to her discovery of the filmmakers points toward her sea change: they each engage with art, some of them in ways that explicitly re-figure their own relationships to the dominant fiction of late capitalism. Cayce's online friend Parkaboy is a professional musician in Chicago who also shares her interest in the film footage. Other friends' art projects involve strong historical elements. Voytek collects and re-assembles Sinclair ZX 81s – old, inexpensive, computers from the early

eighties. His current project involves re-assembling “close to three hundred ZX 81s,” then “individually altering their cases to accept connections of some kind”; “he is creating ... some sort of lungfish-primitive connection machine” (215). Voytek considers himself a “serious artist,” and his passion is preserving and reconstructing artifacts from the technological past. His art consists of reviving and re-valuing the castoffs of capitalist obsolescence and waste; Voytek’s art imagines a socioeconomic order in which waste is not waste and commodities are reunited with a creator.

Damien is a documentary filmmaker working on a project in Russia, where he is filming the amateur excavation of sites of “some of the largest, longest-running, and most bitterly contested firefights of WWII” (72). He is stationed near Stalingrad, recording “a post-Soviet summer ritual involving feckless Russian youth” who, amidst a “party atmosphere” (73), come from the surrounding areas to dig “through strata of Germans, Russians, Germans”; the “flesh is long gone, ... but bone remains, and also artifacts, in brilliant condition when you get the mud off, which is what brings the diggers” (72). Damien’s character is “apparently immune to the lure of the footage,” but Cayce knows “in his case ... it has to do with his being his own maker, with his own obsessive need to generate his own footage” (191) – to be able to sublimate his desire according to his own will. Damien’s relationship to his art points indirectly to the importance of public art like the film footage for those such as Cayce who are not themselves artists, but who long for that which represents an expression of human endeavor not driven by mandates of consumerism and profit-motives – endeavors which, in each of the novels here discussed, have become increasingly crucial and increasingly precarious.

Like Voytek’s work, Damien’s is intensely historical, and his visceral confrontation with a violent past and an irreverent present makes Cayce uncomfortable. She considers his project as “cannibalism beyond expression, some eating of the dead” (119), and Cayce wonders, “What

was that, to do that to the dead, to history?” (118). Cayce feels that the past “shouldn’t be dug up, ravaged, thrown away” (119); her strong feelings about the sacredness of history are bound up with a refusal, a sense that history should be entirely left alone, not to be resurrected or examined. Coming on the heels of her father’s disappearance, Cayce’s assertion implies that though she is ostensibly seeking answers – perhaps because it is what is expected of her – there are questions surrounding her father that she would prefer to leave unanswered. This may go some way toward explaining her willingness to surround herself with an array of disconnected, de-contextualized historical icons and references; such conspicuous consumption of history allows Cayce to display little totems of solemn regard for history without ever subjecting it to analysis, or being forced to make any connections or draw any conclusions about its meanings and implications. Perhaps not incidentally, these are habits that also serve her well as an advertising woman. Her work evaluating logos, slogans, and trends that will capture the public’s unquestioning attention depends upon her ability to identify words and images that signify in a big way without meaning too much.

Though Cayce’s talents are depicted as indispensable to the advertising projects with which she is involved, she is fully subordinate to her male superiors. Bigend set the terms for Cayce’s exploration of the film footage, and unbeknownst to her, he also hires others to spy on her, hack her e-mail, bug her phones, and report back to him. Bigend assigns one of these coverters, Boone Chu, to Cayce as her partner on the project. Chu tells Cayce that Bigend has hired him “to facilitate. You have an idea, I make it happen” (105). Though it is perhaps flattering to have someone claim to be prepared to execute your every whim, Chu’s presence also suggests that Cayce lacks the knowledge or ability to act on her ideas. To make matters worse, Cayce finds that Chu, rather than merely being available to assist her, is actually vying with her

for control of the mission. After a terse phone conversation with Chu in which he dictates their course of action and then ends the call abruptly without allowing her to respond, Cayce notes “something about a lack of autonomy here that bothers her” (171), and complains later that “she doesn’t like the way she winds up doing what he tells her to do” (183). And indeed, Boone’s “real” work for Bigend is undercover: he is only concerned with facilitating Cayce’s strategies in so far as it enables him to spy on her. While Cayce is under the impression that she has been set out on her own with a Blue Ant credit card, a tech-savvy assistant, and free reign to do her job as she sees fit, she later discovers that she has been manipulated, second-guessed, and sabotaged from the beginning.

This patriarchal power structure is not just operating in the advertising industry. When, despite the efforts of her saboteurs, Cayce does find the women who created the footage, Nora and Stella, it turns out that their work also is subsidized and managed by powerful male characters, the most important of whom is their Uncle Volkov, an oil mogul who is “the wealthiest man in Russia” (336). He facilitates Nora’s filmmaking by providing the private, secluded space for her work, a rare and precious luxury in post-Soviet Russia. Nora tells Cayce, “There are few buildings like this one, now ... The land is far too valuable.” But her uncle owns the land and the building and “he keeps it from the developers, for us, because Nora finds it comforting. Whatever cost is of no importance to him. He wishes us to be safe, and Nora to be as comfortable as possible” (306). Volkov also employs a small group of male henchmen to protect his nieces, and, as mentioned above, has coerced an entire prison full of laboring men to protect their creations. Nora explains that in Russia “these precautions are not unusual, for a man like my uncle” (307). This scene explicitly conflates the patriarchy of the symbolic order with the patriarchy of capitalism. As David Brande suggests, “in the symbolic economies of subjects and object – that is, in the realm of desire – the father and the phallus mediate and

regulate exchange” (89). It is not unusual at all, in Russia or anywhere else governed by dominant fictions of late capitalism, to find that feminine production and artistic endeavors are commandeered by masculine-identified power structures.

So as *Pattern Recognition* draws to a close, it becomes evident that the female successes – Cayce’s opportunity to protect the production of autonomous art, and the artists’ opportunity to create and disseminate their work – are only possible as byproducts of masculine mercy. While at the end of most of the novels discussed thus far, the male ad-man protagonist is left with some version of a redemptive self-assertion, a victory of some sort over the negative forces of the advertising world, this is not Cayce’s situation at the close of *Pattern Recognition*. By the end of the novel, it becomes evident that she is and has been merely a pawn in a much larger operation, controlled exclusively by male figures. Though her final grandiose gesture is to give up her job in order to protect the autonomy of the two filmmakers, her gesture is worthless (to the artists, anyway) without the cooperation of Bigend, who, independently of Cayce, had planned to keep their secret, anyway.

This dynamic – female endeavors being orchestrated, facilitated by, and ultimately subordinated to male power and expertise – is reiterated ad nauseam in one of the final scenes of the novel. Cayce, after having been drugged and kidnapped, escapes her captors and is stumbling through the dark in a deserted, toxic wasteland north of Moscow, directionless and on the brink of dehydration and collapse. At this point of desperation, Parkaboy – Cayce’s e-mail friend from Chicago – literally descends, God-like, from the sky to rescue her. Having discovered her situation and location, he charts a helicopter to whisk her away from her night of despair. After the dust has settled and other narrative loose ends have been neatly tied up, Cayce acknowledges her male hero in the most predictable fashion: the final lines of the novel, not lewdly but pointedly, depict the two in bed together. So, although Gibson’s female

protagonist has moved into the advertising position traditionally occupied by fictional males, the power structures implied by a fictional universe of patriarchal capitalism have not changed dramatically in *Pattern Recognition*.

Initially, Cayce approaches her search for the filmmakers from two positions: as an aesthetic connoisseur, admirer, and fan, on one hand, and an advertising professional who, though she continues to reassure herself to the contrary, is well aware that she is likely contributing to the commercial exploitation of the artists on the other. When Bigend proposes the search to Cayce, his explanation of his motives gives her room to be optimistic regarding the fate of the footage makers, despite the fact that his interest in the footage is indeed entirely commercial. When Cayce expresses surprise that Bigend is even familiar with the footage, he explains that “My passion is marketing, advertising, media strategy, and when I first discovered the footage, that is what responded in me. I saw attention focused daily on a product that may not even exist.” He describes it as “the most brilliant marketing ploy of this very young century,” “the single most effective piece of guerilla marketing ever,” – “and new. Somehow entirely new” (65). But, like Jonathan Dee’s Mal Osbourne, Bigend also sees the commercial opportunity as symbiotically linked to the artistic interest. When Cayce asks what he would do if she did find the makers, he responds, “I don’t think there’s a title yet for doing whatever it is that would be required. Advocate, perhaps? Facilitator?” (70). Bigend is not exactly sure what he would want to do with it, but as Mal does, he wants the access that would permit him and his advertising agency to use the footage once he decides.

When Cayce finds Nora and Stella, their art, though surrounded and supported by capitalist structures and practices, remains largely their own: they create it according to their own wishes and visions; they have insisted that the film footage be disseminated to the masses, and

have declined to “possess” the work by refusing to announce their authorship. Firsthand exposure to the sisters and their isolated world of autonomous art tips the scales for Cayce: she identifies with the sisters in a manner that would seem impossible for the other characters in the novel, and her identification effects the significant realignment of her subjectivity discussed above. As is often the nature of revelation, it occurs only briefly, in the form of a flash or a glimpse, and that is the case in *Pattern Recognition*: the discovery of and engagement with autonomous art is only a moment – a moment that changes Cayce’s character permanently, but does not change her completely.

Gibson’s ending, as the abovementioned critics have complained, is too tidy, and backs away from and thus undermines to some degree the transformations Cayce’s encounter with the footage and its creators catalyzed. Tony Myers aptly ruminates that “like the narcissistic infant captivated by its own image, there is a danger of imagining the future in terms of the present and thereby of forming a closed circuit of representation” (900). This *almost* occurs in *Pattern Recognition*: the conclusion of the novel reads like the most traditional tale: the anonymous artists are revealed to those who care about them, and are promised protection from those who would exploit them. Both Cayce and Bigend are redeemed by their decisions to defy their industry and deter such exploitation. And, by coming down on the side of art rather than advertising, Cayce’s character, in addition to finding resolution regarding her father’s death, is granted participatory rights in activities that previously seemed out of reach: romance and consumer culture. Having joined forces with Parkaboy – in violation of her commitment to the Blue Ant agency – to protect the autonomy of the filmmakers, Cayce seems also to have finally earned the right to a happy love affair – also with Parkaboy, known more intimately by his given name, Peter. And in another closing scene, we find that a “Louis Vuitton attaché ... now causes her no discomfort at all. Nor had a section full of Tommy in Galleries Lafayette the week

before, and even the Michelin Man now registers as neutral” (355). Cayce has downgraded her degree of complicity by resigning her job with Blue Ant, and is rewarded with a newfound ability to consume with impunity. There is much about *Pattern Recognition*’s resolution that is consistent with the ideology of post 9/11 marketing: “the promise of closure through consumption” (Heller 20).

However, the “glimpse” is not entirely diminished by the too-neat wrap-up; in fact, it is telling that a glimpse is all that this novel can sustain. In reference to Gibson’s earlier writing, Brande argues that “reading Gibson ought to involve close attention to the structure of the fantasy he creates, because it is that fantasy that itself structures the social ‘totality’” (97). Similarly, Myers cites Jameson’s observation that, “setting forth for the unknown,” science fiction “finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar; and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits” (900). But Jameson also believes that the presence of the film footage “makes *Pattern Recognition* over into something like Bloch’s conception of the novel of the artist, which carries the unknown unrealized work of art inside itself like a black hole, a future indeterminacy shimmering in the present” (*NLR* 110). And indeed, even in its brevity, Gibson’s “glimpse” suggests that, out of the exponentially expanding spaces of late capitalism and from the violence that ripples through those spaces, occasionally rupturing the smooth surfaces, autonomous art can emerge from the fissures born of these ruptures and put forth a wish for something else.

The “limits” to which Jameson refers are manifest largely in the form of violence. Even more so than the case of George Ponderevo sailing away on the destroyer following his murderous colonial misadventure, or Palladio’s fiery demise, the events of *Pattern Recognition* are firmly embedded in a background of violence. The devastating events of 9/11 are always at least lingering in the periphery, and often at the forefront of Cayce’s thoughts and the narrative

perspective.¹⁰ Damien's documentary is focused on incidents and aftermath of WWII; Hobbs' fascination with the Curta is largely inspired by its emergence from Nazi concentration camps; and Stella and Nora's film footage has come about largely as a result of the politically-motivated bombing of which they were victims. However, while it can be said that George Ponderevo's turn to military vehicles of destruction is part of his pursuit of success in a capitalist society, and the burning of the Palladio mansion is the result of an effort to force a merger between autonomous art and advertising, the violence in *Pattern Recognition* plays a different role. As is the case in Wakeman's *The Hucksters*, violence is depicted in Gibson's novel as phenomena endemic to capitalism, but what *Pattern Recognition* adds to this dynamic is the possibility, "shimmering in the present," that art can transform the content of violence – a death drive – into desire driven toward new futures.

One of the distinctive features of Nora's footage is her use of blank spaces, and her ability to infuse them with feeling and fantasy. In an e-mail to Cayce regarding the footage, Parkaboy muses, "as to how blankness can yield image, I do not pretend to know, though I suppose that is the question, ultimately, that underlies the entire history of art" (170). Herzstark, Voytek, Nora and Stella all work to create positive meaning out of negative spaces: a concentration camp, a forgotten invention, a disabling injury. Cayce is able to do the same when she engages with the sisters' art: when she abandons her job with Blue Ant and offers her full support to the preservation of Nora and Stella's autonomy she is only then able to come to terms with her father's disappearance amidst the chaos of 9/11. Once she has renounced her allegiance to commercial interests, she is finally able to acknowledge Winfield's "missingness." To a dark

¹⁰ Dana Heller offers a good summary of some of the broadest connections between the September 11 attacks and the consumer culture in which they took place. She points out the almost immediate emergence of "9/11" as a slogan or logo that symbolized "a new kind of national identification – or national branding awareness ... refashioning fantasies of coherent, monolithic nationhood and consensual nationalism." She refers to this response as "'natural' because the model of twentieth-century national identity that was challenged by 9/11 ... is one that mirrors the individual and collective identities of shoppers: that of the American consumer" (3).

ceiling in Russia, Cayce finalizes the fact by articulating it: “I know you’re gone.” And she is then able to bid him farewell: “‘Good night,’ she says to the dark” (351). Similarly, in the cases of Damien, Hobbs, and Stella and Nora, art seems to hold a place, outside (but obviously in relation to) the realm of global capitalism, in which both the creators and those who come into contact with their projects may process, deal with, heal from, and indeed transform the ravages of violence. Read in line with each of the ad-man novels discussed thus far, *Pattern Recognition* depicts a world in which capitalism’s reach is more expansive than ever, but it is precisely out of this near-saturation and the violence that accompanies it that autonomous art and its visions of what may come emerge most fully.

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Epilogue

In the preface to his 1984 history of American ad-men, *The Mirrmakers*, Stephen Fox announces that he has, upon completion of his study, “concluded that advertising gathered power early in this century, reached a peak of influence in the 1920s, and since then – despite consistent gains in volume and omnipresence – has steadily lost influence over American life” (6). Having completed my own study of fictional ad-men and their novelistic and historical contexts, I’ve come to just the opposite conclusion: advertising has become not just a formidable social and economic institution with which we must contend, but a basic existential paradigm of the late capitalist era. Fox is correct in that the signposts of advertising that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century have largely fallen by the wayside: big Manhattan-based agencies, the hard sell in newsprint and television spots, and even the ad-man himself now carry with them an aura of nostalgia, a suggestion of simpler times, when advertising was advertising – recognizable as a clearly defined practice. But what *Soliciting Desire* demonstrates is that advertising has *never* been so simple, and its twenty-first-century incarnation as near-ubiquitous social relation is the logical trajectory of a practice that has always been deeply implicated in our processes of identification and desire within an ever-expanding capitalist system.

The figure of the ad-man is no longer a curiosity, representative of an eccentric tribe of snake-oil salesmen or offering a peek into an elite enclave of creative corporate executives. Likewise, the methods of advertising are no longer hidden or mysterious: most people living in late-capitalist societies have at least a basic working knowledge of the ways in which advertising relies on association and fantasy to sell consumer objects. This transparency is perhaps the most remarkable dimension of the role advertising plays in contemporary culture: despite the fact that consumers are well aware that advertising consistently makes promises its products can never

keep, the vast majority of Westerners nonetheless accept the (fantasy of) consumer culture perpetuated by advertising. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, the figure of the ad-man – one who is actively and knowingly, but not unproblematically, engaged in the reproduction of consumer capitalism – is an image in which many of us can easily recognize ourselves and our peers. This character in its many manifestations symbolizes the dilemmas of desire and subjectivity common to each of us living in a late capitalist consumer culture, and as such, is more relevant than ever as a subject of inquiry.

The technologies of late capitalism have brought new media forms into existence that have revolutionized the way in which we communicate, play, work, build relationships and express ourselves. So why cling to the novel as a vehicle for inquiry into the post-modern culture of advertising? Though the forms of the novel and advertising entered the sphere of cultural production bound to one another, in the twenty-first century it seems the two – textually, at least – have gone their separate ways. Contemporary advertising practices are developing hand in hand with technologies of digital editing, portable personal electronic devices such as mobile phones, PDA's (personal digital assistants), and mp3 players – all of which are becoming increasingly similar in their mutual capabilities for digital photography and video, internet access, and GPS. Advertising informs and is informed by the practices enabled by these technologies: video clips on You Tube, personal web pages on My Space, blogs, multiple-user gaming, cyber-sim-cities, and individually tailored consumer tracking: all of which, among other things, consistently reinforce practices of self-promotion via consumption – construction of the self as celebrity. The celebrity figure emerges as a symptom of late-capitalism's insistence on isolation and individualism: a celebration of the self – now available to almost anyone with an internet connection – that entails a refusal to engage with Others. Though novels most often

require solitary acts of writing and reading, they speak to possibilities of community that are denied by commodity fetishism and cults of celebrity.

As Jonathan Franzen notes in his soul-searching vindication of the novel, “Perchance to Dream,” our “consumer society loves a product that sells at a premium, wears out quickly or is susceptible to regular improvement.” In contrast, “a classic work of literature is inexpensive, infinitely reusable, and worst of all [from an economic perspective], unimprovable.” As such, literature is “an antithetical product.” This is one important respect in which the novel retains value amidst a sea of commodities designed precisely to lose value promptly: the very notion of an object that is a beautiful and useful result of unalienated labor *and* durable, affordable and accessible constitutes a challenge to the culture of consumer capitalism. Though a brief perusal of displays such as those at Barnes and Noble offers a plethora of evidence that the novel, too, is susceptible to planned obsolescence and celebrity cults, the genre contains possibilities that are foreign to SUV’s, microwaves, and PDA’s.

The novel is an ideal form for exploring our individual and collective engagement with consumer capitalism because within the dialectics of narrative, text, context, and reader resides the possibility of a relationship that resembles analytic discourse. Franzen suggests that “what distinguishes the novel from more visual entertainments is the interior collaboration of writer and reader in building and peopling an imagined world.” Indeed, because the novel’s form is capable of sustaining thousands of details and images, multiple characters, interweaving plots, and even other genres of writing while at the same time maintaining the *absence* of a thousand other details, images, motivations and forms which must be supplied by the reader, a reader’s engagement with a novel may be a truly dialectical process of discovery and negotiation. The novelistic form invites recognition of the Other’s desire that contains the possibility of

discovering one's own desire. In the case of the "Ad-Man" novels, the potential is for discovering the ways in which one's desire may be channeled, compromised, or conditioned by dominant fictions of consumer capitalism – a discovery that goes far beyond the methods and aims of advertising.

Many postmodern cultural critics have pronounced the novel dead: cumbersome, archaic and undemocratic. Yet, as the above suggests, serious novelists and their readers have good reason to persist. In his lament of the "culture industry," Theodor Adorno writes that, "Only their deep unconscious mistrust, the last residue of the difference between art and empirical reality in the spiritual makeup of the masses explains why they have not, to a person, long since perceived and accepted the world as it is constructed for them by the culture industry" (18). Even if some do not quite traverse the distance between empirical reality and art, in one way or another, the novels discussed in *Soliciting Desire* articulate the importance of the difference to which Adorno alludes. It is, I believe, imperative that writers and scholars continue efforts to maintain this crucial "difference between art and empirical reality," in hopes that those of us caught up in reality may always have visions of art to which we may aspire.

Vita

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