

Negative Realism: Reading the Novels of John Williams

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to posit a dynamic theory of literary realism that accounts not only for the commonly understood “historical” realisms of the 18th and 19th centuries, but for the more fluid realisms that arise in the modern and postmodern eras. Realisms of this sort are still understood to be expressions of particular, sociohistorical eras, but these expressions must be understood to be subject to material change in society. This paper breaks, then, with traditional Marxist conceptions of realism as the direct response to enlightenment thought and early capitalism, and instead argues for traceable eruptions of realism throughout the history of the novel, including in contemporary literature. As a case study, this thesis will examine two major novels of John Williams—*Butcher’s Crossing* and *Stoner*—in an attempt to clarify what a contemporary theory of realism might look like once it is divorced from its Georgian and Victorian origins.

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INTRODUCTION

Discussions of literary realism frequently align with one or both of two trends. The first, which is often traced to Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel*, finds the origins of realism in 17th and 18th century enlightenment philosophy. Realism in this formulation rests on the empirical notion that "truth can be discovered by the individual through the senses," a philosophical trajectory Watt traces through Descartes, Locke, and Thomas Reid.¹ As such, the realist novel emphasizes the minutiae of human experience and, in direct refutation of the romantic tendencies of poetry, moves from depictions of the universal to those of the particular: "the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it."² In *Rise of the Novel*, although he traces the sociohistorical factors that gave way to realism, Watt lays the groundwork for what this paper will refer to as the formalist approach to realism. This is, for the moment, "formalism" in a loose sense of the word, though as Daniel Schwarz points out, Watt's notion of formal realism is itself a bit loose due to its sociohistorical emphases, particularly when contrasted with Watt's New Criticism contemporaries and his Russian Formalist precursors.³ For the purpose at hand, we can take Watt's definition of "formal" to refer merely to "a set of narrative procedures which are so commonly found together in the novel."⁴

The second trend, which for the sake of setting up a familiar opposition I will refer to as the content-oriented conception of realism, is often traced to the work of Georg Lukács. Addressing what he views as the modernist overemphasis on form and style, Lukács writes that "[style] is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content ... Content determines

¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (University of California Press, 1957), 11.

² Watt, 10.

³ Daniel R. Schwarz, "The Importance of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* (Vol. 13, No. 2, Spring 1983), 59-73.

⁴ Watt 31.

form.”⁵ This is the theoretical statement at the heart of content-oriented realism. As opposed to Watt’s description of Defoe, who “merely allowed his narrative order to flow spontaneously from his own sense of what his protagonists might plausibly do next,”⁶ Lukács’ realism requires a conscious, concerted effort on the part of the novelist to create the content of realism, with the form of expression being of secondary concern. As an example of this, he points to the use of the stream-of-consciousness in both James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Thomas Mann’s *Lotte in Weimar*. In Joyce, Lukács sees the danger of a stylistic device which “is itself the formative principle governing the narrative pattern and the presentation of character.”⁷ Joyce’s emphasis on form, in other words, supplants any narrative presentation, and the novel becomes merely the presentation of form itself. In Mann, however, the stream-of-consciousness is not merely formal adornment or stylistic boasting, but “simply a technical device” which allows Mann to access aspects of his narrative—of his content—that would otherwise have not been available.⁸

Although both of these critical strains have gone through fundamental changes and reconfigurations in the past few decades, each carries with it a set of theoretical baggage that would seem to preclude the possibility of “realism” of any sort surviving past the era of high modernism, if not the Victorian era. In Watt’s case, the existence of realism seems intrinsically tied to the society which produced it—to the rising middle class, to mounting urbanization and industrialization, and, importantly, to the inherent “authority of print.”⁹ What of this social influence, we must ask, can remain in an era where, to echo the oft-quoted declaration by John Prescott, “we’re all middle class now”? Or when the Dickensian industrial cities of the 19th

⁵ Georg Lukács, *Realism in our Time* (Harper & Row, 1971), 19.

⁶ Watt 14.

⁷ Lukács *Realism*, 18.

⁸ Lukács *Realism*, 18.

⁹ Watt 196.

century become the spaces of digital, post-Fordist production? Or, finally, when the notion of some inherent authority of the printed word becomes laughable both to the academic and to the average member of the middle class?

Lukács presents other challenges. Like Watt, his realism seems to derive most of its theoretical contours from the specific historical moment which produced the novel, namely the slow creeping of alienation and interiority into civilization. “The epic individual,” Lukács writes, “the hero of the novel, is the product of estrangement from the outside world.”¹⁰ Lukács presents a positive theory in the sense that he believes realism as such *can* still be written, though his descriptions of how such realism can be made possible tend to be complex if not prohibitively impractical, which, as Bloch points out, often leads him to a conservative classicism:

Permanent Neo-classicism, or the conviction that anything produced since Homer and Goethe is not worth considering unless it is produced in their image or as an abstraction from them, is no vantage point from which to keep one’s eye on the last avant-garde movement but one, or to pass judgement on it. Given such an attitude, what recent artistic experiments can possibly avoid being censured?¹¹

Bloch’s point here is specifically referring to the rise of German Expressionism, though it raises a crucial problem with Lukács’ literary theory—what can constitute literary realism? If his fondness of Thomas Mann is any indicator, realism is not bound to the writer’s ideology, yet Lukács does not seem to extend this grace toward future authors. Future authors of realism, he argues, must consciously move toward socialist realism while remaining firmly in line with the literary tradition that came before.

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, (MIT Press, 1996), 66. For the moment I will eschew the lengthy discussion of the notion of totality that Lukács alludes to here, as it will be investigated in depth below.

¹¹ Ernst Bloch, “Discussing Expressionism,” *Aesthetics and Politics*, (Verso, 2020), 14.

As mentioned above, both of these critical strains seem to point toward a historical possibility of realism, one which has either passed entirely or which must be regressively strived toward. As Philippe Harmon notes in his complex Todorovian examination of realist discourse, conversations concerning realism, including his own, “hardly depart from the realist *school* of the nineteenth century,”¹² and the fact that even contemporary scholars of realism like Fredric Jameson and Anna Kornbluh ground their notions of realism in Victorian literature seems to attest to this. What this paper hopes to do instead is to argue for a conception of literary realism divorced from a specific historical moment, one that can be seen obtaining in both the history and present of the novel as a literary *tendency* or *effect* or, in perhaps more emphatic terms, as *eruptions* of realism. In this conception, realism exerts an effect on to the text, and this effect can be registered within the novel and traced to specific, though not necessary, sociohistorical conditions. Harmon provides a useful starting point:

...it must be remembered that a statement is never *homogenous*, that it is a product of a *constructed* theoretical type, and that it would therefore be vain to seek out an exemplary occurrence. In the last resort, it is perhaps through these specific contradictions that realist discourse could best be characterized, contradictions between the opening presuppositions and the ignorance of the constraints innate to the text and its writing.¹³

Realism cannot be reduced to an exemplary occurrence, to a purified notion of the singular realist novel. Instead, realism is produced as and by the tensions between what Harmon calls the “utopia of language as nomenclature” and the novel form of expression itself. When we register

¹² Philippe Harmon, “A Constrained Discourse,” *Realism*, (edited and translated by Lilian R. Furst, Longman Publishing, 1992), 184.

¹³ Harmon 184.

realism in a text, then, what we are seeing is precisely this tension between language that strives toward an ideal and the actual, problematic functioning of language.

In attempting to elucidate this notion of realism as a struggle between ideal language and the constraints of novelistic expression, it is necessary to search for the traces of the realist impulse within the novel. This paper will examine several areas in which realism can leave its trace, but what is crucial in each instance is that realism is preeminently destructive, or rather, deconstructive. Watt notes that realism can be seen as a response to previous literary genres, notably the romance, but we should not take this to mean that realism is itself something entirely different than the romance. Inevitably some kernel of genre, of naïve narrativity, always resides within the realist work, even if only to serve as that which is destroyed. Here Jameson provides an example of the sort of oppositions between utopian language and the novel that Harmon describes though, again, not the only one:

Early on, we counted melodrama among the numerous foils (such as romance or modernism) against which realism was often defined. Now, however, we must admit that all these oppositions are somehow also internal: and that realism is opposed to romance only because it carries it within itself and must somehow dissolve it in order to become its antithesis¹⁴

This is the *Aufhebung* of realism—realism, as the purported antithesis of genre, must simultaneously lift up the genre in question, elevate it, while simultaneously deconstructing it.

To use Jameson's word, realism must "dissolve" something prior to itself in order to be.¹⁵

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, (Verso, 2015), 138-139.

¹⁵ In conceptualizing this *Aufhebung*, one might consider the relationship between Richardson's *Pamela* and Fielding's *Shamela* or Haywood's *Anti-Pamela*. The achieved effect of the latter two, indeed their existence at all, is wholly reliant on the prior, through which they are expressed.

If this theory of realism is functional, however, it must be applied to works that fall outside of the Wattian or Lukácsian periods of realism. As a test case in examining the traces of realism in the post-modernism era, this paper will take as its subject the two novels of John Williams: *Butcher's Crossing* and *Stoner*. Williams provides a ready entry point for this notion of realism, primarily due to the intense focus each of his novels place on genre and, particularly, because of the ways each genre is undermined. The first, ostensibly a Western though more recently grouped with intentional anti-Westerns, uses its genre to stage the conflict between the empiricism that gave rise to realism and American transcendentalism. *Stoner*, a campus novel, forces us to consider the scope and possibility of totality within the novel form by erecting a closed totality (the university) within totality, both of which consume the story's protagonist who attempts to remove himself further and further from each. The through line in both of these works, the manifestation of realism, is that the individual is always shaped by a complex array of negative forces, and that any attempt at a grander narrative, whether it be a philosophical one like transcendentalism or a literary one like genre, is undermined by realism.

CHAPTER 1: NEGATIVE REALISM

The question of realism, as has been hinted at already, is inexorably tied to that of totality, and an understanding of totality is essential before progressing to further discussions of realism. The term itself is of course a highly contentious one, both within Marxist theory and in analytic philosophy and psychoanalytic theory more generally. Within the Marxist framework, discussions of totality typically fall into one or both of the following forms described by Martin Jay. The first, what Jay calls “normative” statements of totality, “equate totality with a desirable goal that is yet to be achieved.”¹⁶ Here totality seems to point toward something akin to Lukács’ “integrated civilizations,” where the unalienated individual (an oxymoron in Lukács’ figuring) can attain “complete self-being,” where one’s deeds are adequate “to the soul’s inner demand for greatness, for unfolding, for wholeness.”¹⁷ Lukács’ poetic descriptions aside, the key feature of this totality is that it describes a sort of integrated wholeness between the subject and the world that is not present in the current economic moment.

The second use of totality, the “non-normative” for Jay, is methodological in nature: “It stems from the insistence that adequate understanding of complex phenomena can follow only from an appreciation of their relational integrity.”¹⁸ This is the totality most often invoked in literary theory, particularly in relation to the novel. It is the sort of totality advocated for by Lukács when he claims that “the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given”—in the space between the integrated civilization of the past and the predicted one of the future, totality must be created within the novel form.¹⁹

¹⁶ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, (University of California Press, 1984), 23.

¹⁷ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 30.

¹⁸ Jay, pp. 23-24.

¹⁹ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 56.

Totality of this second sort triggers a second, closely related question of realism, which is the extent to which literature can or should be considered mimetic. The question of course predates realism and the novel, finding its origins in Plato and Aristotle, both of whom theorize a necessary distance between art and that which it represents.²⁰ The traditional conception of realism as mimetic, which we have already seen in Watt's descriptions of Defoe's "plausible" patterns of behavior, receives perhaps its most thorough treatment in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Auerbach's description of realism as "a serious representation of contemporary everyday social reality against the background of a constant historical movement"²¹ is a deceptively simple one which has gone on to bolster much of the mimetic-leaning adherents of theories of realism. In grounding his realism within a sort of Marxist historicism, Auerbach approaches something akin to Lukács' emphasis on totality in the novel, though we should again take a moment to clarify what Lukács' totality looks like. Like Auerbach, realism for Lukács hinges on a robust historical perspective on the part of the author—it is not enough that the characters in the realist novel behave realistically as does Robinson Crusoe, they must entirely "fit" within their historical realities, and their respective narratives must embody the contradictions and tendencies of their era as "part of a larger and historical whole."²² Simply put, realism cannot merely copy the world as it is experienced through the immediate senses—Lukács makes abundantly clear the failings of these sorts of naturalist experiments. Some method of selection must be utilized by the author, and this is true not only of Lukács' Marxist theory of realism, but more generally of all literature.

²⁰ For Plato this distance arises from the inherent distance between the artist and the object, while for Aristotle the distance is a calculated technical decision.

²¹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, (Princeton University Press, 2003), 518.

²² Lukács, *Realism*, 54.

Several tensions at this point arise in Lukács' system. Realism must depict totality, the total sum of historical relations, and yet this is contingent upon the author's selecting the necessary elements of reality and excising the unnecessary ones.²³ Further, realism must not only be bound to the history and future of production, but it also must reflect, and thus be grounded in, any current sociohistorical conditions. Yet, it is precisely the realist novel, and particularly the realist novel which so often falls in line with the canonical notion of the realist novel, which alone can accomplish these feats. Where Lukács appears at first to evade allegations of classicism through an emphasis on content over form, we can trace two points that begin to cast doubt on this. The first is his clear predilection for the classical novel form, as Bloch polemically points out. The second is his belief that an author's ideology is irrelevant to the intention realized in the work,²⁴ a belief that seems to stand only until the moment that socialist realism is introduced, at which point the novelist is tasked with making *consciously* socialist works of realism in the style of the previous novelists for whom ideology was irrelevant.

Lukács becomes stuck between two positions. On one hand, history moves, and modes of production and relations inevitably change, and yet, on the other hand, the representation of these changes in society must remain the same. This, primarily, is the point at which Lukács is severed from thinkers of the Frankfurt School such as Bloch, who we have already mentioned, as well as Bertolt Brecht. Like Lukács, Brecht believes that realism cannot be reduced to form. Yet he believes that Lukács, by precluding the possibility of an avant garde, is still enforcing the sort of formalistic criticism that Marxism should avoid:

²³ Lukács, *Realism*, 53. "Art is the selection of the essential and subtraction of the inessential."

²⁴ Lukács, *Realism*, 19. "We are concerned here, of course, with the intention realized in the work; it need not coincide with the writer's conscious intention."

Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to question the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists. For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.²⁵

Brecht's point here is strikingly similar to Bloch's earlier. To draw an unbridgeable distinction between realism and the avant-garde as diametrically opposed to each other is to also deny that new methods of expression develop to reflect an ever-changing reality. In fact, we can draw a connection between this static notion of totality in literature to what Raymond Williams sees as a frequent misreading of Marx's totality. When we talk about totality, we are describing "the base," which for Marx is the "sum total of the relations of production [which] constitute the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness."²⁶ Crucially, Williams points out, we cannot consider this base to be a mere "object," or as a static and consistent set of relations, "for while a particular stage of the development of production can be discovered and made precise by analysis, it is never in practice either uniform or static."²⁷ The mechanisms and relationships of production are consistently in flux and evolving, and as such, the totalities represented by literature, as well as the ways in which those totalities are approached, must evolve alongside them.

²⁵ Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," *Aesthetics and Politics*, (Verso, 2020), 86-87.

²⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy*, (translated by N. I. Stone, International Library Publishing Co., 1904), 11.

²⁷ Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *New Left Review*, (Nov/Dec 1973), 5.

One more qualification of totality should be described before moving on. If we claim merely that literature aims to depict the whole economic workings of society at a particular moment, we not only risk outdating literature of the past, but of describing a literature which is always already outdated. Kornbluh finds the solution to this problem, of stillborn literature, in Frederic Jameson, for whom totality is not merely the whole of economic relations, but is instead contradictions of capitalism made visible:

“Totality is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth,” it is instead the “properly unrepresentable ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.” Harkening back to the Hegelian importance of contradiction, Jameson transfigures any notion of totality-as-object into totality-as-contradiction... To theorize in terms of totality is not to produce some suffocating enclosure of false unity but rather to chart the historical process of the capitalist mode of production’s foreclosure of other modes of production, and at the same time to resist that foreclosure by highlighting contradictions.²⁸

Literature now takes on a twofold operation. It depicts the foreclosure of other modes of production first through its pseudo-adherence to conventional forms—things like genres, typical narrative moves and tropes—which strike the reader initially as familiar and predictable. However, in the second stage of this operation an instability is introduced to the text which renders it impossibly foreign to its own origin, and yet this negation is only possible by first inhabiting the strictures of conventional form. Once again, Hegel’s *Aufhebung* maps the process by which literature can contend both with its own social moment and with the tradition that it is never entire apart from. If we cede that the function of literature, at least from a Marxist

²⁸ Anna Kornbluh, “Defamiliarizations: Totality,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, (Vol. 47, No. 3), 674-5. Here Kornbluh is quoting Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 55 and *Postmodernism*, 51.

perspective, is to grasp totality as an inherently contradictory, ever-elusive wholeness which is nevertheless strived toward, than any text which we might deem “realist” must be approached through the Hegelian schema in which totality as such is approached only through the negation of negations:

Something behaves in this way in relation to the other through itself; since otherness is posited in it as its own moment, its in-itselfness holds negation in itself, and it now has its affirmative existence through its intermediary alone. But the other is also qualitatively distinguished from this affirmative existence and is thus posited outside the something. The negation of its other is only the quality of the something, for it is in this sublation of its other that it is something. The other, for its part, truly confronts an existence only with this sublation; it confronts the first something only externally, or, since the two are in fact inherently joined together, that is, according to their concept, their connectedness consists in this, that existence has passed over into otherness, something into other; that something is just as much an other as the other is.²⁹

Returning to the disagreement between Lukács and the Frankfurt School, we should understand Bloch’s and Brecht’s position alongside this Hegelian one. In essence, the classicism they see Lukács adhering to becomes the “something” of Hegelian sublation, which risks only ever existing in the immediate if it is not pushed to the point that it is forced to bring its own negative to bear. In other words, the strict adherence to a particular *type* of novel—whether this adherence relates either to form or to content—risks that type becoming a reified, hollow version of itself as it is assimilated into the capitalist system. It is precisely movements like German Expressionism, to use Bloch’s point of reference, as well as countless other modes of experimental art, that

²⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, (translated and edited by George Di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 97-98.

function to bring about this essential negative through which earlier works can be sublated. The experimental work is of course experimental only insofar as it maintains a difference from the “non-experimental,” or simply, “earlier,” works which it can be compared to, and yet something of these earlier works must necessarily be present in the experimental work for it to be recognizable as art at all. All the while, the work’s aspirations toward totality, the real, the Absolute, remain the same.

This is a familiar notion in literary criticism. That prolonged antagonism is one of the conditions for the evolution of language into and within the novel form is a topic much described by the Russian formalists. In contrasting a common unitary language which serves as the “stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language” with a “centrifugal, stratifying” heteroglossia, Mikhail Bakhtin is describing precisely this continued unfolding of literature into new confrontations with the negative.³⁰ “Every utterance,” Bakhtin writes, “participates in the ‘unitary language’ and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia.”³¹ The synthesis between Bakhtin’s linguistic “center” which vies with centrifugal oppositions and the more overtly Marxist argument being made here might run thus: Each novel, through its necessary relation to its predecessors (all prior novels), grapples first with its relation to the *novel as such*, which is to say, its relation to the linguistic center of *novel-ness*. In reading the novel, we first note the ways in which it has aligned itself with the tradition of novel writing, that is, the familiarity of its forms, its genres, its narratives, or its archetypes. However, in the second movement, the novel relates to its predecessors through its *difference* from the linguistic center of novel-ness. What sustains the novel as a genre is this continued unfurling of difference and

³⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, (edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1992), 270-72.

³¹ Bakhtin, 272.

repetition, with each additional element in the sequence altering by turn the history and future of the genre. Here, we see the novel genre participating in a large-scale version of the metonymic unfolding of language which, as critics like Roman Jakobson have described, serves as the elemental structure of realist form.

Importantly, when Bakhtin describes the center as “stable,” we should note that this stability only extends so far. Although the center is certainly omnipresent, it is nothing if not open to change. As a given novel enters the canon—whether through its direct addition by those who construct canons, or its indirect addition by those who, chancing upon an unfamiliar work and drawing from it some mode of novelistic presentation, nevertheless bring it to bear upon the center—it has a rippling effect upon the entire tradition. This is the reason that even some of the most unfamiliar novelistic presentations can be reified into the center—any difference from the center can only be sustained for so long before it is inevitably drawn into the center, becoming only another arm of a diverse, yet unitary, literary language. This is precisely what we find behind familiar statements like, “*Tristram Shandy* is the first postmodern novel.” We are dealing here with an impossible temporality which brings the future to bear on the past and in turn retroactively changes the meaning of the past object. The more typically Bakhtinian elements of heteroglossia are still at play in this definition. While each introduction of the novel into the canon alters novel-ness itself, the conditions that both give rise to the novel and determine the canon that is to be altered are found within the social sphere. Elements of high and low language, particular regional dialects, and particular identity experiences each form new modes of antagonism to the center before eventually becoming a part of the center. It should be noted at this point, however, that we are not dealing with the familiar post-structuralist deconstruction championed by Derrida; the difference between texts described here functions more closely to

what Todorov has called the “transformation” between discourses and between texts. In his defense of critical practices often decried by Formalism as “exterior” to or “outside” of language, Todorov notes that the origin of a given text is always found partly within the text and partly outside of it as something referred to: “There is no genesis of texts starting from what is not the texts themselves, but always and only a work of *transformation*, from one discourse into another, from the text to the text.”³²

If we are to speak of totality in literature, it must be done with an understanding of this paradox of the diverse, unitary language which is always stable and yet always incomplete. There is, coming to the point of this introduction, no reason that “realism” should not work in the same way. If we now attempt a definition of what it means for there to be elements of realism in a novel, or, in other words, what we can gauge as the “effect” of realism, it can be this naïve one: the real of the novel is the striving toward and confrontation with totality. It is, furthermore, the negation of its own form in the service of advancing toward the Absolute. Eschewing the notion of realism as mimetic, maintaining that realism strives toward some totality, and emphasizing neither form nor content, we can say that the reality effect of the work is by and large characterized by destructive attitude toward its precursor. What follows are readings of two novels by John Williams which attempt to illustrate and apply this principle.

³² Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 61.

CHAPTER 2: ZONES OF REALISM, *BUTCHER'S CROSSING* AND THE ANTI-WESTERN

Realisms of the type described herein must be birthed and fostered by myriad conditions which make negativity possible. These conditions are, foremost, reductive in nature. They manifest in narratives as limits imposed on the worlds contained in the novel and construct a space at once safely distant from and yet nevertheless engaged with the world outside the zone. A typically Lukácsian example of this sort of zone can be found in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, where the majority of the lengthy novel takes place at the *Berghof*, an isolated sanatorium in the mountains of Davos. And yet, as Mann would later remark on the novel, contained within the secluded sanatorium is an entire European historical moment, a metonymic representation of society in the moments before World War I. Institutions such as the *Berghof*, Mann says,

...were a typical pre-war phenomenon. They were only possible in a capitalistic economy that was still functioning well and normally. Only under such a system was it possible for patients to remain there year after year at the family's expense. *The Magic Mountain* became the swan song of that form of existence. Perhaps it is a general rule that epics descriptive of some particular phase of life tend to appear as it nears its end.³³

As Judith Marcus describes, Mann's *Berghof* exists in a distinctly "historical sense" which "tries to capture the psychic temper, the 'inner significance of an epoch.'" ³⁴ Thus we find that each of the novel's major characters—Castorp, Settembrini, Chaucat, Ziemssen, and Naptha (ironically a

³³ Thomas Mann, "The Making of the *Magic Mountain*" in *The Magic Mountain*, (translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter, Secker and Warburg London, 1971), 721.

³⁴ Judith Marcus, *Georg Lukács and Thomas Mann: A Study in the Sociology of Literature*, (The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1987), 53. Here Marcus quotes "The Making of the *Magic Mountain*" p. 725.

parody of Lukács himself)—serves as an allegory of some particular, historically bound ideology of the period. Within the sanatorium we see precisely the form of totality Lukács advocates for in the realist novel. A stage is set so that the dominant modes of reality are placed into opposition with each other, with their prolonged conflict serving to highlight the contradictions of capitalist society. If *The Magic Mountain* is any indication, this sort of totality is only possible in the microcosmic, metonymic scheme. For this reason, it is unsurprising that Hans Castorp, immediately upon leaving the sanatorium, is killed (or what is the same, left alone by the novel) amidst the confusion of a battlefield. The macrocosm cannot be totalized; it is out of the scope of the narrative.

This is the first half of what Mann characterizes as a “time-romance.” *The Magic Mountain*, as a work of realism, is inextricably tied to its historical moment. It is only one moment of European history and is thus a form which cannot be translated to earlier or later conditions. And yet, this historical precision is problematized by the second feature of the time-romance, which concerns the way time is thematized within the novel: time is “dealt with not only as a part of the hero’s experience, but also in and through itself.”³⁵ Time in the novel becomes immanentized. It is no longer the historical, linear passage of time, but a time-substance that permeates the realist zone: “It depicts the hermetic enchantment of its young hero within the timeless, and thus seeks to abrogate time itself by means of the technical device that attempts to give complete presentness at any given moment to the entire world of ideas that it comprises.”³⁶ It is not enough, then, to say that the zones of realism depict a particular historical moment. We must instead think about the way in which these zones bring “complete presentness” to totality.

³⁵ Mann, “Making,” 725.

³⁶ Mann, “Making,” 725.

What gives rise to the complete presentness of totality? In other words, how can we arrest totality so that it can be examined and so that its contradictions can tarry for a time in the pages of the novel? Anna Kornbluh, in her mathematical analysis of *Wuthering Heights*, seems to give some indication. Brontë's novel, Kornbluh argues, introduces immediately a fraught, recursive relationship to time which cannot be understood through diachronic linearity (the first page of the novel juxtaposes "1801" and "1500," narration shifts seamlessly from past to present and between voices, characters and situations are doubled and repeated). Instead, *Wuthering Heights*' narrative gives rise to a spatial rather than temporal relationship between the various aspects of its form rather than its content. *Wuthering Heights* in this way constructs itself in a largely architectural sense: "With its extensive tropology of architecture, the novel orients us toward a spatial episteme."³⁷ As with *The Magic Mountain*, time alternates between stagnation and erraticism:

The story ends exactly where it begins, the novel's final scene repeating its opening architectural survey in its concluding appraisal, tuckpointing the structures that outlast lives, the forms that rebut withering, the foundational relationality that indifferently weathers all comings and goings. This spatialization of diachrony, this nondevelopmental narrative, suggests that the type of historical logic assembled in this novel works not diachronically, in arraying the past as narration, but synchronically, in addressing the structures that organize space and perdurate the present.³⁸

If *Wuthering Heights* in this sense seems to evoke Mann's complex, densely rich historical present, it should perhaps do so as a supplement or clarification. What we are dealing with in

³⁷ Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*, (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 66.

³⁸ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 67.

both novels is not “a blueprint or a photograph”³⁹ of a particular moment that exists outside of a larger diachronic time, but a performative production of space within irregular time. To conceptualize this relationship between the operation of time within the realist zone and the broader historical time outside the zone, we can use the metaphor of one who is sleeping and, unconsciously hearing noises around them, integrates and repurposes them into dream-reality where they, the noises, are only partially divorced from their source, just enough for them to behave freely and pseudo-independently. To say that either reality—the dream or the waking world exterior to it—is more *real* than the other would, however, miss the point, for what the zone of realism actually fosters within a text is the ability to see registers of negativity made visible, the contradictions which align to construct totality that go undetected amidst the confusion of waking life.

Jameson approaches this notion of the static dynamism of time in his discussion of Franz Kafka, the seeming precursors of whom are English eighteenth century novels such as *Tom Jones* and *Clarissa*. Novels of this sort, Jameson says, are characterized by a prolonged “acting out of all the possible consequences of a new situation, before the latter is decisively modified in turn, leading on to a new series.”⁴⁰ In these sorts of works, a real, diegetic moment is prolonged indefinitely as its logical possibilities are one by one exhausted, and the synchronic moment of an initial situation becomes the ground for endless riffs upon the situation. Already in the eighteenth century time is deformed in these realist novels. However, as this paper has been arguing, that initial negation lives for only so long before it is itself negated. In Kafka’s case, the various logical possibilities explored in the work are not “all embodied in diegetic reality itself, in the various and logically varied results of an act in the real world itself,” but are instead “a

³⁹ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 67.

⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, (Verso, 2007), 97.

subjective brooding on interminable logical possibility.”⁴¹ In Kafka’s deformation of time, an actual, real-world event need not even happen for a synchronic moment to explode outward into the subjunctive realm. All that is necessary for the endless subjective brooding is a conditional entrance.

One further negation of the present moment should be described before looking at the way time functions in *Butcher’s Crossing*. If, as this paper is attempting to claim, realisms reflect the present sociohistorical from which they are born, we should examine the more modern trajectory that such arrests of time have taken. Mark Fisher, drawing primarily from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, describes the contemporary, post-Fordist economic moment as a *hauntological* one. Under the abstract spell of the virtual, the hauntological society is rendered unable to conceive of futures without utilizing forms from the past in a sort of eternal recurrence.⁴² This is, importantly, an anhedonic recycling of form which Jameson describes as the postmodern moment when pastiche eclipses parody:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor.⁴³

We, in the post-modernist era, are left with countless literary forms which now, their moment passed, are democratized and endlessly reusable. This proletarianization of high modernism

⁴¹ Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, 97.

⁴² Fisher describes two simultaneous forces which operate in hauntology: “The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality. The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual.” We can compare this second sense to the conditional situations which give rise to Kafka’s stories. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, (Zero Books, 2014), 19.

⁴³ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, (Verso, 1998), 5.

comes at an ontological price, however, as our culture has stagnated to the point that our productions are merely the endless, joyless repetitions of form.

This point as well should be clarified. When we operate within what Jameson calls the “nostalgia mode,” in other words, when we are engaging in neutral pastiche, there is always something uncanny residing in the new nostalgic object. This is, from one angle, the typically Derridean spectral absences which plague any seemingly positive existence (the “thing” is simultaneously the “not-thing”), but from a second, related angle, which is that there is always some *tell* which gives the object away as fraudulent. The forms that are recycled strike us as familiar and properly nostalgic (Jameson describes the metonymic similarities between *Star Wars* and the Saturday afternoon serials of the 1930s-1950s), but there is always some unbridgeable distance between the origin of the object and the new object, and in traversing this distance there is always some deformation. “If there is any realism left here,” Jameson writes, “it is a ‘realism’ which springs from the shock of grasping that confinement and of realizing that, for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach.”⁴⁴ This is negative realism. Realism which betrays itself precisely in its desire to be “realist.” In utilizing forms, it deforms them, leaving its own mark. The postmodern, hauntological society serves as a *real* zone of realism—as with the logical explorations which characterize both eighteenth-century novels and Kafka’s stories, the eclipse of modernism leaves room only for an endless playing with abandoned instruments.

Time thus described is only one aspect of the organic, morphing zone of realism, to which we can also add the deformation of genre described earlier. Time, though, will serve as the

⁴⁴ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 11.

initial entry point in the realist zones that populate John Williams' novels, and which serve as the phenomenological basis for their planes of negativity. Our naïve question upon approaching the first of these novels, *Butcher's Crossing*, is simply: What is *Butcher's Crossing's Berghof*?

The novel opens with shades of brown and yellow. The first thing the protagonist Will Andrews sees is "an instantaneous impression of color," a "light dun blending into gray set off by a heavy splash of green." Andrews wipes his forehead under "his light brown hair, the color of Virginia tobacco," he wears "yellowish-brown nankeen trousers" and a "brown sack coat." Around the wagon that brings him into the town of Butcher's Crossing is "a cloud of dust like yellow smoke," and Andrews watches horses feed on short yellow grass from the coach. The air in Butcher's Crossing is brown: "the faint odor of manure was locked in the hot air." When Andrews finally descends from the wagon to the ground a cloud of dust flies up and settles on his new black leather boots and on the bottoms of his pants, "making their colors nearly the same."⁴⁵ Already the novel's monochromatic opening seems to suggest a sort of stagnation, a blending of objects into each other under the impressionistic veil of a few colors. We learn immediately that Andrews is an outsider to this world—his "neatly clipped" hair and previously-unsullied boots giving him away as a naïve visitor to the west—and yet he is immediately drawn into the strange ways of Butcher's Crossing. The omnipresent brown settles over him the moment his feet touch the ground, and he spends the rest of his first day alternating between consciousness and sleep.

Butcher's Crossing is not, however, the novel's *Berghof*. Instead, the town functions more closely to a waiting room—it is the necessary liminal space that must be endured before entry into the zone itself. Enduring here has a twofold meaning. The first, more simplistic one, is that Andrews must endure various characters and places that stand between himself and his goal

⁴⁵ John Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, (New York Review of Books, 2007), 9-11.

which is, abstractly, of achieving some Emersonian experience of the natural world and manifestly, of attending a buffalo hunt. This enduring begins some time before the novel's opening in Butcher's Crossing:

For nearly two weeks, by coach and rail, he had let himself be carried across the country. From Boston to Albany, from Albany to New York, from New York—The names of the cities jumbled in his memory, disconnected from the route he had taken. He remembered the grinding discomfort of the hard coach chairs, and the inert waiting in grimy depots on slatted wooden benches.⁴⁶

The journey to Butcher's Crossing, Andrews recollects, had been interminable, and he smiles at "his knowledge of the journey's end." Yet here Andrews' naivety betrays itself again. Exhausted from the journey so far, he mistakes a means for an end, confusing entering Butcher's Crossing with his actual goal of experiencing the wilderness. In truth, his journey has not yet ended, and just as the two weeks spent in coaches and trains are reduced to a few, blurred memories, so too is his time in Butcher's Crossing merely a prerequisite for what will be his actual, desired experience.

The second meaning of endured is a psychological one. Before entering the zone, in order to make Andrews receptive to the novel's realist impulses, his beliefs must be challenged. We learn early in the novel that he is deeply under the spell of Emersonian idealism as he recalls fleeing "the confines of Cambridge to the fields and woods that lay southwestward to it." Andrews remembers that in the fields and woods, "a phrase from a lecture by Mr. Emerson that he had attended came to him: I become a transparent eyeball. Gathered in by field and wood, he was nothing; he saw all."⁴⁷ We learn, also, that Andrews' religious beliefs extend not toward any

⁴⁶ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 14.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 45.

particular denomination of Christianity (despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that his father is a Unitarian minister), but to a more abstract, philosophical transcendental ideal. In the woods, “in a way that he could not feel in King’s Chapel, in the college rooms, or on the Cambridge streets, he was a part and parcel of God, free and uncontained.”⁴⁸ And yet, Andrews finds no one in Butcher’s Crossing who seems to feel the same excitement that he does at the prospect of westward expansion, of harmony with nature. J. D. McDonald, a former member of his father’s church, has little sympathy for religion of any sort. When Andrews tells McDonald that his father admired him, he is no doubt expecting the admiration to be mutual. Instead, McDonald explains that his involvement with the church was merely in his own business interest: “I went to your father’s church because I thought I might meet somebody that would give me a better job, and I started going to those little meetings your father had for the same reason.”⁴⁹ Further, far from being Andrews’ intermediary to the West, McDonald’s motivations are explicitly selfish and capitalistic. As Mark Asquith notes,

[McDonald] offers a vision of the West a vision of the West that has been narrowed by commerce: the Emersonian eyeball has been transformed into those whom McDonald celebrates as “men with vision.” McDonald’s West is not a wild space where man might explore deeper truths; it is part of a capitalist production opportunity.⁵⁰

While McDonald’s image of both religion and the West is a utilitarian one aimed toward profit, Charley Hoge, the one-armed, alcoholic hunter that Andrews meets, takes a drastically different approach, and yet it is one that is still unsatisfying to the young Emersonian. In his evangelical ramblings, in his exasperated concern with minute points of scripture, Hoge reminds Andrews

⁴⁸ Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 46.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 18.

⁵⁰ Mark Asquith, *Reading the Novels of John Williams*, (Lexington Books, 2018), 67.

only of the chapel at Harvard he had been so eager to escape from, “where hundreds of soberly dressed young men gathered each morning to hear the mumbled word of God.”⁵¹

Returning to this second meaning of endurance, we should note that Andrews’ beliefs must not be shattered early in the novel—they cannot be too greatly challenged by alternative perspectives. Merely, returning to Jameson’s schema, Andrews must be presented with logical possibilities. His beliefs must be shown to be but few among many. A crack, however small, must begin to form and allow adulteration. Andrews’ naïve optimism exhibits itself both in his idealistic nature-based religious beliefs, and also in a more material, cultural way not uncommon in Western fiction. Fresh from Harvard and intoxicated by the prospect of “The West,” Andrews embodies the typical resident of the city who projects a romantic vision onto the untamed, uncivilized natural world. The extent to which Andrews really wants to leave this world behind thus invites speculation. Lying in bed his first night in Butcher’s Crossing, his past life in the city emerges spectrally around him:

He felt that the sounds of laughter, the voices, the subdued thumps and gratings, the jingling of bridle bells and harness chains, all proceeded from his own head, and whirled around there like wind in a hollow sphere. Once he thought he heard the voice, then the laughter, of a woman very near.⁵²

Later, speaking to McDonald and attempting to explain what it is that brought him west, Andrews tries to form an image in his mind of precisely “the wildness that he sought.” He imagines a prairie, its fibered roots symbolizing the connectedness, the persistent renewal, of the natural world. But “suddenly,”

⁵¹ Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 45.

⁵² Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 15.

in the midst of the great flat prairie, unpeopled and mysterious, there came into his mind the image of a Boston street, crowded with carriages and walking men who toiled sluggishly beneath the arches of evenly spaced elms that had been made to grow, it seemed, out of the flat stone of sidewalk and roadway; ... the image of tall buildings, packed side by side, the ornately cut stone which was grimed by smoke and city filth; ... the image of the river Charles winding among plotted fields and villages and towns, carrying the refuse of man and city out to the great bay.⁵³

As is typical with liminal spaces, Andrews inhabits two, partial worlds that obtain spectrally around him. In *Butcher's Crossing*, he is neither in Boston nor truly in nature, yet the familiarity of the prior and the tantalizing promise of the latter continue to swirl around him, constantly confusing and interrupting each other. Even his fantasy of the perennial interconnectedness of idealized nature is not immune to intrusions from his past.

It is at this point that the groundwork is laid for the explicitly anti-Emersonian thrust of the novel. There is, if only unconsciously at this point, a real trepidation on Andrews' part as he comes to terms with the reality of his situation. The conflict between Eastern idealism and Western reality, staged first virtually as in the examples above, becomes the real material basis of the rest of *Butcher's Crossing*. Indeed, Williams' intent with the novel was precisely to stage this conflict and to subject it to real, uncompromising scrutiny. *Butcher's Crossing*, he says, "developed from my notions of what would happen if the Emersonian ideas that were in vogue in the East in the late nineteenth century were put to some kind of test in the *real* kind of nature that the Easterners were so romantic about."⁵⁴ This conflict will take three distinct forms in the novel, each marked, crucially, by a distinct temporality and by a unique point of oblivion. The second

⁵³ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 21-22.

⁵⁴ Bryan Wooley, "An Interview with John Williams," (*Denver Quarterly*, 1986), 16.

two will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter, but a few concluding remarks should be made about the first. *Butcher's Crossing* in the beginning of the novel serves as a virtual battleground between Andrews' past and imagined future. Neither the real-West nor the Emersonian-West has actually obtained yet, and each exists only in a suggestive, inchoate state. As such, we find here flickers of ecstatic natural connection juxtaposed with moments of disillusioning reality, neither pulling strongly enough to counteract the other, though each foreshadowing their true manifestations later in the novel. Time at this point is, like Andrews himself, confused, uncertain and naïve. It exists by the same paradoxical logic as Emerson's transparent eyeball. Asquith expands on this logic when describing Andrews' "transcendental" experience in the woods around Cambridge:

Andrews has not escaped the droning voices for the 'solitude' of nature but is simply ventriloquizing the voices of Emerson and the Transcendentalists amid the trees.

Furthermore, the attempt of Andrews to understand his own behavior is not helped by Emerson's contradictions: how can he be nothing and yet see all? What can a transparent eyeball with no retina see? As the ill-conceived figure suggests, Emerson never managed to resolve the idealist paradox in which the world seems to both exist to administer comfort to man and be a creation of the senses.⁵⁵

In the opening pages of the novel, we see already a definite gap between what Andrews consciously believes and asserts to be true and what he intuitively or unconsciously presumes to be the case. This division persists throughout *Butcher's Crossing*, giving rise to three distinct sections of the novel, each marked by a traumatic break in Andrews. Although his confidence is not entirely shaken as he arrives in *Butcher's Crossing*, the Emersonian paradox clearly weighs

⁵⁵ Asquith, *Reading*, 64.

on him, manifesting itself through his hallucinatory flights to the city. As such, a distinct change occurs on Andrews' first night in the town where, lying in bed, "he looked about him and in the total darkness could not perceive the walls, the limits of his room; and he had the sensation that he was blind, suspended in nowhere, unmoving."⁵⁶ Something of a death occurs here. To invoke our earlier spatial metaphor, some door closes behind Andrews as he enters into what this paper has called the waiting room or liminal space of the novel. Suddenly there is an ironic inversion of Emerson's transparent eyeball: Andrews has not found that he is nothing and sees all, but rather the opposite. In his half-awake state, he sees nothing and becomes all—rather than taking in the totality of his surroundings, even his immediate space vanishes until he becomes all that is left. Here, then, is one of the key aspects of these points of oblivion, these traumatic breaks. They depict, first, the shift from one mode of temporality to another (in this case, the shift from the muddled linear temporality of his travel to Butcher's Crossing to the paradoxical gyre of past and future within the town), and second, the withdrawal of Andrews into himself in a total eschewal of Emersonian transcendentalism.

But Andrews has not yet entered the realist zone. After agreeing to accompany Miller—an experienced hunter begrudgingly recommended to him by McDonald—on a buffalo hunt, Andrews must wait in Butcher's Crossing while Miller gathers supplies for the expedition. Waiting, Andrews meditates on his situation and surveys the land outside of town. As he anticipates his upcoming trip further west, his old Emersonian passion again begins to flare. Looking toward the horizon, he is struck by a resemblance between his current feeling and his earlier sublime experiences in Boston where he had "looked eastward across the gray Atlantic until his mind was choked and dizzy at the immensity he gazed upon."⁵⁷ Importantly, in both

⁵⁶ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 15.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 41.

instances—the western horizon and the Atlantic Ocean—the sublime remains at a distance from which it can be comfortably pondered and idealized, and the novel reminds us again that we have not yet entered the West in a meaningful sense. Instead, we find more of the same temporal disjunction. As Andrews' gaze alternates between the horizon and Butcher's Crossing, he notes the way the town moves in "a sluggish erratic rhythm like the pulse of some brute existence," standing in stark opposition to the "sharply defined" and "absolute" horizon.

There is something peculiar about standing outside of the realist zone attempting to look in. The zone is at once totally opaque, the true wealth of its contradictions existing precisely in their inability to be predicted, while also being largely reflective, if only in an obscured distorted way. On the outside walls of zones of realism we find reflected the internal dialogism suggested by Bakhtin, the "dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object" from which "only the mythical Adam can escape."⁵⁸ The west, viewed from the outside, becomes "The West," an endlessly modified and narrativized virtual space constructed of ideological materials. This notion of the always-already constructed and narrativized West is in fact inherent to the Western as a genre. Max Westbrook, in an essay on Western Aesthetics, notes that

the hero's land has not been given to him in primitive innocence. The land has come into the hero's touch already tainted by history, as the hero himself is tainted by history. The American West is not—in the vision of its major contemporary critics—a land one grows up in. *It is a land one goes to.*⁵⁹

There are two points to emphasize here, one from which we will differ and the other with which we will agree, the prior due to our search for the negative in *Butcher's Crossing* and the latter

⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 279.

⁵⁹ Max Westbrook, "The Western Esthetic" in *Critical Essays on the Western American Novel*, (G. K. Hall & Co., 1980), 81.

through our establishment of the realist zone. Picking up on this latter point, we might say the zone of realism is nothing if not “a land one goes to.” It is always a beyond place entered by an already-marked hero who not only does not grow⁶⁰ within the space, but is if anything cut down, reduced in some essential way to an embodiment of the negative which he then becomes marked with. This engagement with realism is more aptly characterized as traumatic or as a fracture inflicted on the individual. This is of course only possible by slightly reformulating Westbrook’s second point which (correctly) describes the way that the notion of the West is sustained only through its cultural-historical significations; this is likely true of the Western novel *as such*. However, if we are describing the Western novel’s negative successor, the so-called anti-Western, we must do so with an awareness that it must inherently exert centrifugal pressure upon its generic center. This awareness might be cognizable by opening up another dimension within Westbrook’s formula by positing first, that although the West of the Western can be identified by its unmistakable signatures (diverse and varied as they may be), the West of the anti-Western utilizes these signatures only as a false front, as a sort of parody of the generic security and familiarity implied by the label “Western.” We might say that *Butcher’s Crossing*, picking up *in medias res* in a small, dusty trading post, does so with the intention of placing the reader into the same naïve perspective as Andrews, by painting a portrait of the West utilizing the colors of signification borrowed from the generic center, but to that it must be added this new dimension which lies behind the portrait *within* the West itself, for this is the actual zone of negativity. We might say, simply, that the West of the Western is only the outside walls of the West of the anti-

⁶⁰ In one of the novel’s great ironic moments, Andrews argues with Francine, a prostitute in the town of Butcher’s Crossing, about what will become of him after his journey. Francine asserts that Andrews will age and become like the “others” of the town; Andrews promptly responds: “I will only become myself!” Neither prediction, of course, is true in any meaningful way. Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 61.

Western, at which Andrews stares while awaiting Miller's return, and onto which he projects an image of Emerson.

The question that arises at this point pertains to what exactly lies beyond the symbolic wall that separates both the familiar past and the confused liminal space from the zone of realism. With regard to *Butcher's Crossing*, we can another question which is more similar to the previous one than it initially appears: At what point in the novel can we say that Andrews has made it to "the West." Referring back to the book's three-part structure which has already been partially illuminated, we can say that there will be two Wests presented chronologically in the remainder of the novel, which for the moment can be called the "West" and the "anti-West," though only with the understanding that by "West" what is referred to is already the negative West which carries an additional realist dimension that sets it apart from the "West" of the Western, and that by "anti-West" we are describing the aftermath of the encounter with the realist zone, the situation in which one finds themselves after a prolonged engagement with negativity. Put more simply, to invoke the phrase "Western literature" is to imply an artifice congruent with the genre expectations of the Western (to describe the ways in which the Western itself is the negative successor to some prior genre or fictional approach is beyond the scope of this paper). However, if we invoke the phrase "anti-Western," we do so with an implied double meaning. Subsumed under the anti-Western we find our expanded, extra-dimensional West as well as the implied future that exists on the other side of the realist zone, affected by the negative.

There are no decisive indicators that the novel has moved from one stage to the next, though there are perhaps clues whose accumulation eventually reaches a point that it cannot be ignored. If the novel is in fact an anti-Emersonian Western, as Anthony Hutchison claims, then

these clues will be found in the spots where, “far from evidencing communion with nature, the hunters are shown to be wholly at its mercy.”⁶¹ One of the first moments of this phenomenon comes as the party traverses the plains beyond Butcher’s Crossing, en route to a secret hunting location that only Miller knows about, one that he claims has remained untouched and thus unaffected by the recent shortages of buffalo. As the group travels, we see early indicators of a temporal shift:

Andrews eventually found himself less and less conscious of any movement forward.

During the first few days of the journey he had been so torn with the raw agony of movement that each forward step his mount took cut itself upon his nerves and his mind.

But the pain dulled after the first days, and a kind of numbness took its place ... It was during this numbness that he lost the awareness of any progression forward.⁶²

Andrews’ derealization, coupled with the repeated “forward,” seems to imply a parodic interpretation of Emerson’s transparent eyeball. Suddenly, the related structures of American Transcendentalism and the Western novel—the importance of the individual and the individual’s connection to the world—are showing their cracks, and the contradictory relationship of the two appears. As Andrews progresses through the plains his individual identity begins to dissolve: “He felt himself to be like the land, without identity or shape; sometimes one of the men would look at him, look through him, as if he did not exist; and he. Had to shake his head sharply and move an arm or a leg and glance at it to assure himself that he was visible.”⁶³ Only a few days into the journey, we see a great deal of foreshadowing of what the West will actually be like for Andrews. Though Andrews recedes into nothingness, it is not in the service of some greater,

⁶¹ Anthony Hutchison, “‘Young America’ and the Anti-Emersonian Western: John William’s *Butcher’s Crossing*,” (*Western American Literature*, Fall 2020), 243.

⁶² Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 77-78.

⁶³ Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 78.

totalizing connection to the world around him (we should note the phrase “*like the land*”), but rather to a near-obliviousness to his surroundings which have melted into formless shapes, organized only around some vague notion of “forward”-ness, itself propelled by a mutated breed of McDonald’s capitalist future-thinking which will come into its own once the party makes contact with the buffalo herd. If Butcher’s Crossing was the place where the past and the future vied and mingled, the plains are where ideological symbols wither and are bleached by the sun. For Westbrook, this is precisely the nature of the West, as a place where “reason is only relevant at times, and it lacks the ability to pick those times. God is not necessarily good or evil or even attentive. In the soul, in reason, God, land: in all areas the hero finds good, evil, and irrelevance.”⁶⁴

In the case of *Butcher’s Crossing* and the anti-Western, we are not, however, dealing with the same type of irrelevance described by Westbrook. Focused as he is on the typical Western novel, Westbrook’s irrelevance, and with it, a lack of “reason,” serves more of a leveling and then romantic function than a purely effacing one, and his characterization of the Western returns again to something very like the Emersonian model of nature. If the West is unreasonable or “irrational,” he says, this does not mean we have reached some anti-individualist zone in which one cannot achieve some type of self-actualization. Merely, it means that we can no longer rely on the civilized “intellect” fostered in the Eastern United States, and that instead “only the unconscious intuition—the raucous and disturbing homunculus of man’s inner self—can face such perverse realities and such multiplicity without panic.”⁶⁵ Grounding his argument in ethics—and ultimately, man’s relationship to God—Westbrook proposes that the Western novel espouses an ethics stemming from the gut rather than the mind, that Western novelists “do

⁶⁴ Westbrook, “The Western Esthetic,” 81.

⁶⁵ Westbrook, “The Western Esthetic,” 81.

not propose a formula...but a direction, a possibility.” The reasoning here allows for achievement within irrationality, a delicate balance of Eastern reason and Western intuition that “has the possibility of maintaining an individual ego while feeling the generative power of our archetypal selves.”⁶⁶

There is nothing generative in the anti-Western. In the harsh, unforgiving West, transcendentalist spiritual growth is replaced by the total annihilation of agency and purpose. The “forward” which subconsciously leads Andrews across the plains toward the buffalo has no actual object of desire—not the buffalo, and for most of the novel, no longer even Emerson. The path toward the valley is arduous and along the way the party face the extreme oppressiveness of nature, coming close to death for lack of water. Finally, however, after a brutal, visceral ascent which leaves Andrews bloody and stunned, into sight comes “a long narrow valley, flat as the top of a table, [winding] among the mountains. A quietness seemed to rise from the valley; it was the quietness, the stillness, the absolute calm of a land where no human foot had touched.”⁶⁷ Here we catch our first glimpse of the realist zone, totally divorced from the world, a realm of pure negative experience, the ostensible goal of the “forward.”

What do we find here in the zone? First, buffalo, and second, winter. Although the landscape so far in the novel has been crushing and nihilistic, here Williams has the opportunity to bring about the birth of a Western hero. Andrews, a Harvard escapee becomes roughened by the harsh land, becomes one with it, and learns to thrive under the harsh conditions, his Western intuition finally as sharp as his Eastern intellect. This of course is not what happens, and indeed in the valley precisely the opposite of the romantic Western idea of self-discovery occurs.

⁶⁶ Westbrook, “The Western Esthetic,” 82-83.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 117.

Now that the party has found the buffalo in the valley, an important question arises. Why is it that the group is hunting the buffalo in the first place? It is clear that, besides Schneider, the skinner Miller has hired to accompany them, no one in the group is undertaking the hunt for explicitly financial reasons. Andrews, already of an upper middle-class family, has endless opportunity to find gainful employment, and we learn early on in the novel that both Miller and Charlie have opted out of numerous buffalo hunts sponsored by McDonald prior to Andrews' arrival. What then is the motivation? Jane Tompkins, in her definitive exploration of the Western, describes a similar paradoxical relationship of the Western big-game hunter to his prey. If we exclude those who merely hunt buffalo for financial gain, we are left with those who, in Tompkins' analysis, do so for a much deeper reason:

The men who hunted game animals had a kind of love for them and a kind of love for nature that led them to want to preserve the animals they also desired to kill. That is, the desire to kill the animals was in some way related to a desire to see them live. It is not an accident, in this connection, that Roosevelt, Wister, and Remington all went west originally for their health.⁶⁸

Though Miller and Charlie would seem utterly apart from Tompkins' empathetic, ecologically conscious hunter, their reasons for attending the hunt are still largely in question. Andrews, on the other hand, seems to be (or at least strives to become) exactly the Roosevelt figure, for whom hunting is merely one of many ways to achieve unmediated contact with the natural world.⁶⁹ Yet

⁶⁸ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything*, (Oxford University Press, 1993), 187.

⁶⁹ Emerson, of course, understood hunting in much the same way Tompkins describes, as a means of communing with nature while simultaneously asserting one's own self-reliance and achieving self-realization. See: "The lesson one learns in fishing, yachting, hunting or planting is the manners of Nature" in *The Complete Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 750, and "any relation to the land, the habit of tilling it, or mining it, or even hunting on it, generates the feeling of patriotism" in his "The Young American" lecture.

it is here that we see one of the primary eruptions of realism in the novel, one which problematizes Andrews' idealistic notion of hunting as an engaged, mutually respectful activity between man and animal. For although the buffalo hunt is initiated on at least partially non-economic grounds (the argument could thereby be made that Miller attends the hunt to satisfy some masculine urge to dominate or to reassert his presence over nature or that Charlie attends either out of total subservience to Miller or out of some obscure biblical logic), by the time Miller begins firing on the buffalo he is totally embroiled in the logic of capitalist overproduction.

We see this shift occur in several ways. First, by the degree of what we might call "respect" paid by Miller, diagetically, and on the part of Williams, authorially, to the various felled buffalo. The first buffalo killed, the "leader" of the herd, is not only paused over but is, if only briefly, described, a grace hardly extended to the other buffalo aside from anonymous collective descriptions like "a blackness," "dark rocks without identity or shape," and, later, "mounded corpses." The bull—Miller's first target—however, "carried thick scars on his sides and flanks that could be seen even at [a] distance" and "stood somewhat apart from the other animals." The bulls "ebony horns" and "dark mop of hair" are also noted, along with a lengthy description of its corpse once Andrews approaches it.⁷⁰ Another, directly related, way to theorize this shift is to take a cue from Todorov's poetics and to note the differences in duration between the death of the first buffalo and the scores of dead in the pages that follow. The novel expends four pages on the first buffalo—its initial sighting, its description, Miller's shot and explanation, its slow death, the examination of its body—no small feat given the concise prose Williams normally utilizes. The next few deaths receive around a sentence each before we reach: "In quick

⁷⁰ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 127.

succession, Miller shot three more buffalo.” Within the next three pages Miller has killed “seventy or eighty,” and by four he has killed “two-thirds or more” of the around 300 buffalo in the herd.

The practical, authorial reasons for this shift in duration are self-evident (avoiding the tedium of describing 200 buffalo deaths), but we must nevertheless ask what is implied by the shift. The description of the dead buffalo leader when Andrews approaches it points us in the correct direction:

Andrews regarded the felled buffalo with some mixture of feeling. On the ground, unmoving, it no longer had that kind of wild dignity and power that he had imputed to it only a few minutes before. And though the body made a huge dark mound on the earth, its size seemed somehow diminished.⁷¹

Here, the synecdochical representative of nature’s nobility has been reduced merely to an inert object, its size, dignity, and power diminished. In this transformation the buffalo, once imbued with authority (the designation of it as “leader”), power (the mentions of its size), and history (the scars that traverse its body), is instantly rendered into an object of economic exchange; even before the buffalo dies, Miller appraises that “his hide ain’t worth a damn.” In the carnage that follows the death of the first buffalo, we see once again the anti-Emersonian thrust of *Butcher’s Crossing*, and indeed the repudiation of Tompkins’ big-game hunter. The buffalo killed after the leader are done so unceremoniously; they receive no description, nor do they elicit a reaction from Andrews, the member of the group most eager to extract meaning from the hunt. Before long, the slaughter becomes entirely mechanized, with Miller merely a reified force of production:

⁷¹ Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 130.

During the last hour of the stand [Andrews] came to see Miller as a mechanism, an automaton, moved by the moving herd; and he came to see Miller's destruction of the buffalo, not as a lust for blood or a lust for the hides or a lust for what the hides would bring, or even at last the blind lust of fury that toiled darkly within him—he came to see the destruction as a cold, mindless response to the life in which Miller had immersed himself. And he looked upon himself...and did not know who he was, or where he went.⁷²

This, finally, is the true realist break of the anti-Western from the Western, the anachronous intrusion of late capitalism into the text. Miller is driven not by a propensity for violence or domination, nor by any notion of profit. Instead, it is the unbridled capitalist logic to produce unceasingly which drives him forward. If the first buffalo, carefully considered and logically killed, represents the “artisanal” approach to hunting, what now occurs is a wholly absent-minded, autonomous slaughter that reduces Miller to a machine unaware and uncaring of its purpose, motivated only by a vague “forward.” Whatever sacred bond exists between hunter and hunted, whatever grandiose perennial life system it maintains, has been broken, as both Miller and the buffalo are now reduced to objects. Crucially, the sensitive Andrews is not exempt from this transformation. Whatever disgust or surprise Andrews felt as he watched the mechanical Miller murder hundreds of buffalo dissipates as he begins skinning their corpses (a skill he has only recently acquired):

The stench of the buffalo, the feel of the warm meat on his hands, and the sight of clotted blood came to have less and less impact upon his senses. Shortly he came to the task of skinning almost like an automaton, hardly aware of what he did as he shucked the hide

⁷² Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 137.

from an inert beast and pegged it to the ground. He was able to ride through a mas of skinned buffalo covered black with feeding insects, and hardly be aware of the stench that rose in the heat from the rotting flesh.⁷³

There is a certain dynamic at work here which can be traced back to early American literary depictions of the West, namely, the way that the frontier serves as a portentous indicator for future economic paradigms, whether intentionally or not. In her analysis of the book *Astoria*, Stephanie LeMenager notes that most of Irving's dissatisfaction with the economic situation in the West—alternatively attributed by him to rampant opportunism or to a distrustful Native population—stems in fact from a nostalgia for the apogee of the British mercantile system. “As usual,” LeMenager writes, “British precedents beckoned to Irving, and he yearned for the controlled internationalism of the old British companies, the Hudson Bay Company and the North-West, with their lengthy apprentice systems and stable hierarchies.”⁷⁴ Irving, LeMenager argues, is part of a greater trend of writers who saw the West bringing about new modes of production and trade, setting the stage for the opportunistic industrialization that would spread rapidly across the United States in the following decades. So much then for the synchronic moment of Western economic paradigms in literature.

Returning to the two scenes from *Butcher's Crossing*, we see something akin to Irving's anxiety regarding new modes of production, only now there is something anachronous in it, greatly emphasized by the use of “automaton” to describe both Miller and Andrews. Williams' frontier still serves as the point in which a burgeoning economic system crystallizes, only now it is not 19th century industrial capitalism so much as a machinic, autonomous 20th century Fordism, a detached repetition of activity divorced from a belief in the completed product. In

⁷³ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 153.

⁷⁴ Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 105.

essence, Miller's goal is production for the sake of production, a wholly irrational ideological imperative to kill (produce) until there is nothing left to kill. The irrationality of this approach soon becomes clear. Rather than take the hides the party had already procured and return to Butcher's Crossing to sell them, Miller insists upon staying in the valley until all the buffalo have been killed—"[Andrews knew] that Miller would not willingly leave the valley so long as a single buffalo remained alive."⁷⁵ This decision, Schneider repeatedly tells Miller, is ridiculous on two fronts: on the one hand, the group already possesses far more furs than they can take back in a single trip, and second, that before long the seasons will change and the group will be wintered in.

Inevitably, this is precisely what happens, and the party is forced to spend the entire winter in the valley, their exit blocked by snow. The coming of winter, however, brings to light the peculiar sort of temporality which has settled upon the party. Prior to the winter, amidst the endless repetitive actions of the four characters, notions of time and place gradually shrink and dissolve. Andrews measures time by the size of the thinning herd, not by days, and imagining the point at which they will actually leave the valley, he comes to the shocking realization that

the world outside the wide flat winding park hemmed on all sides by sheer mountain had faded away from him; he could not remember the mountain up which they had labored, or the expanse of plain over which they sweated and thirsted, or Butcher's Crossing... That world came to him fitfully and unclearly, as if hidden in a dream. He had been here in the high valley for all of that part of his life that mattered; and when he looked out upon it...he could not think of himself outside of where he was.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 160.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 160.

Returning then to the meditation upon temporality which began this chapter, we see clearly in this quote the sort of suspension of time that occurs within the realist zone. We can read Williams' question—What would happen if Eastern Emersonianism was forced to engage with the *real* West?—as one example of the Jamesonian subjunctive that gives rise to realism. If Andrews' philosophical beliefs are to be challenged, it must be within the near vacuum created by the realist zone, largely unmediated by the world outside.⁷⁷

When winter arrives in the form of a massive blizzard, we see Andrews' second moment of oblivion, a total loss of self that severs him entirely from his past. Forced to seek shelter in an improvised sleeping bag of buffalo hides under steadily piling snow, Andrews spends almost three days in total darkness and solitude. Here, attempts to invoke his own past as he once did in Butcher's Crossing are unsuccessful: "He half remembered the comforts of his home in Boston; but that seemed unreal and far away, and of those thoughts there remained in his mind only thin ghosts of remembered sensation."⁷⁸ For the remainder of the winter Williams employs similar sentiment when describing Andrews. Andrews "came to accept the silence he lived in," he "was unable to view himself...as if he were a stranger," and he "had no sensation of passing time, nothing against which to measure the coming thaw of spring."⁷⁹ Todorov's notion of duration again becomes relevant during these pages. Where the onset of the snowstorm, like the killing of the first buffalo, is afforded lengthy descriptions and given numerous pages, the following days, weeks, and months of the winter begin to accelerate at the textual level, until

⁷⁷ Here, some lines from Lukács seem especially relevant. "The basic solitariness of man must not be confused with that individual solitariness to be found in the literature of traditional realism...Beside and beyond their solitariness, the common life, the strife and togetherness of other human beings, goes on as before. In a word, their solitariness is a specific social fate, not a universal *condition humaine*" (*Realism in our Time*, 22). Lukács draws a distinction between solitariness as an individual social fate against the backdrop of totality (which he associates with realism) and solitariness as a human condition (which he associates, unfavorably, with modernism). *Butcher's Crossing's* ending, with Andrews once again embracing solitude, falls ambiguously between these two poles.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 182-83.

⁷⁹ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 201-203.

months pass in the span of a single sentence. As time grows more unreal for Andrews, any moments of particularity are excluded from the text, and almost the entirety of the six months the men spend in the camp go unremarked upon.

There is one final thematic thrust of *Butcher's Crossing* that must be addressed, and that is the relationship between the zone of realism and the outside world, for although the valley fosters a sort of suspended timelessness, the world outside it progresses normally, though in a way that dimly mirrors the party's exploits. If we look, first synecdochally, at the slaughter that takes place in the valley, we see the logic at work which ultimately undermines the entire hunting expedition at the end of the novel. Namely, Miller is not alone in his autonomous overproduction, and in the same way that, in the valley, this irrational desire nearly leads to the collapse of the expedition, in *Butcher's Crossing*—and indeed, the United States more generally—it is precisely this capitalist imperative to generate more which has caused the hide economy to collapse. “The bottom's dropped out of the whole market,” McDonald tells the party upon their return, “the hide business is finished, for good.”⁸⁰

There is a second, more gradual relationship that occurs on the journey between the zone and the world. Although Andrews has been severed from his past during the winter, Williams refuses to allow for any sort of meaningful transformation to occur in his character, something that can be read as a final strike at Emerson. As the party leaves the valley, disaster strikes. In a plot structure seemingly parallel to the dehydration that nearly befell the group on their way to the valley, on their way back, while crossing a stream made much deeper and faster by the snowmelt, Schneider and his horse are struck by a log, and in the carnage that follows he, his horse, the wagon, and the hides are lost. Returning to *Butcher's Crossing*, Andrews has nothing

⁸⁰ Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*, 247.

to show for his expedition—he has not become a hunter, nor has he made any money, nor has he found nature to be anything other than an uncaring and oppressive space in which idealism is rendered impossible. The last consolation, that there remain thousands of hides in the valley that the group were unable to bring back on the wagon, is rendered meaningless by McDonald's news. Hutchison notes the way that the end of the novel gives rise to two versions of naturalist fatalism, writing that the "impersonal economic elements can be said to mirror that experienced by Miller's hunting party at the hands of natural elements over the course of their snowed-in winter."⁸¹ McDonald's misfortune with his property investments ("It was coming, if I'd been back east, I would have knowed it") mirrors Miller's own ("You're just about seven months too late. If you had got back when you was supposed to, you would have got your money"), and points to what might be considered the singular through line in the novels of John Williams, namely, that we are always too late to the present moment, that we are unable to deal in any predictable way with an endlessly random uncaring universe, whether it be in the form of cryptic market forces or the violent material reality of nature.

By the end of the novel Andrews, like those around him, has become totally ruined. He is without a past, present, or future and haunts a Butcher's Crossing that no longer remembers him. In a final moment of negation, Andrews, seeing a large fire in the distance one night, finds a crazed Miller on horseback, burning all of McDonald's now-worthless hides. Like the hunt itself, burning the hides cannot be explained through economic motivations. Instead, what we find is Miller coming to terms with his own oblivion, destroying the symbols that have until then shaped his life in a final gesture of cancelling himself out. Andrews, similarly, finds himself totally adrift, unable to "recall the force of that passion which had impelled him halfway across a

⁸¹ Hutchison, "Young America," 251.

continent into a wilderness where he had dreamed he could find, as in a vision, his unalterable self.” Instead, he finds the nihilism at the heart of the anti-Western, the intractable meaninglessness of the real:

It was that nothingness of which McDonald had spoken back in the sleeping house as he stood beneath the lantern that flickered weakly against the darkness; it was the bright blue emptiness of Charlie Hoge’s stare, into which he had glimpsed and of which he had tried to tell Francine; it was the contemptuous look that Schneider had given the river just before the hoof had blanked his face; it was the blind enduring of Miller’s face before the white drive of storm in the mountains; it was the hollow glint in Charlie Hoge’s eyes, when Charley Hoge turned from the dying fire to follow Miller into the night; it was the open despair that ripped McDonald’s face into a livid mask during his frenzied pursuit of Miller in the holocaust of the hides; it was what he saw now in Francine’s sleeping face that sagged inertly on her pillow.⁸²

If *Butcher’s Crossing* is anti-Emersonian, it is because no philosophical system that espouses more than the material world can survive within its cold, almost nihilistic system. The ideal, the promise of a future, self-discovery—all survive only until contact with the destructive real.

⁸² Williams, *Butcher’s Crossing*, 272-73.

CHAPTER 3: ZONES OF REALISM II, *STONER* AND INTERRUPTED TOTALITY

In comparing *Butcher's Crossing* and *Stoner*, John Williams' 1965 campus novel, one is immediately struck by the ironic difference in premise. In the first, published five years earlier, we find a protagonist seemingly at odds with the collegiate institution, hypnotized by the promise of natural experience as a means of self-discovery, only to find an uncaring West that breeds disillusionment and solipsism. In *Stoner* we see precisely the opposite: William Stoner, the novel's protagonist, begins his life within the material reality of poverty, of self-sufficient labor with the land. In the brief amount of time the novel devotes to Stoner's childhood, we get the indication that he holds no strong beliefs whatsoever, that what little drive he has is aimed merely at continuing indefinitely the menial occupations involved in maintaining the family farm.⁸³ "When he finished high school in the spring of 1910," Williams writes, the extent of Stoner's plans for the future are "to take over more work in the fields."⁸⁴ In contrast to Andrews' heroic flight from the classroom, Stoner's entrance into the University of Columbia is characterized by a dispassionate ambivalence, the choice to attend being made by his father. And yet, despite their inverse beginnings, these two novels embody the same negative signatures: a collapse of time, a shrinking of the world into the self, and a naturalism that borders on fatalism, presenting external influences in all of their random oppressiveness. In this light, *Stoner* differs from *Butcher's Crossing* only with regard to the amount of time spent within the zone of realism. Andrews enters it and, after leaving and finding only void, re-enters it; we must assume that

⁸³ This distinction is an important one, as it reveals the broader implications of the sort of negativity described in this paper. It is perhaps easy to trace the negative eruptions of realism in *Butcher's Crossing* because we are dealing with a naïve protagonist who from the beginning purports a philosophical system which the novel clearly attempts to refute. In *Stoner*, however, there is no such initial condition. Instead, we see the gradual construction of an ideological system which is simultaneously eroded. Thus, if our approach is applied to other "anti-Westerns" such as those by Cormac McCarthy in which there is certainly no trace of idealism (this logic follows for any sort of existentialist novel), we still find zones of negativity.

⁸⁴ John Williams, *Stoner*, (New York Review of Books, 2003), 5.

Andrews' choice is based upon a preference for explicitly apparent negativity rather than a hidden, abstract one. *Stoner*, upon entering the zone, resides there until his death.

A brief note on both the date of publication, as well as *Stoner*'s genre, is important before delving deeper into the novel. By the mid-1960s, Williams' terse, unadorned prose style was already something of a rarity in literary circles, especially when compared to his more famous contemporaries—Jorge Luis Borges, Samuel Beckett, John Barth, and Vladimir Nabokov had already begun to garner international fame, and only one year after the publication of *Stoner*, Thomas Pynchon would publish *The Crying of Lot 49* while Barth would publish *Giles Goat-Boy*, this latter of particular relevance to Williams' novel. What then, are we to make of a novel like *Stoner*, published only one year before 1966, the year which, as Brian McHale has famously argued, serves as a sort of “Year One” of the postmodern aesthetic?⁸⁵

One approach to this question is through an analysis of genre. As has already been mentioned, *Stoner* is, at heart, a campus novel.⁸⁶ By this criterion alone, the novel is placed alongside its immediate precursors and successors, such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), and Fariña's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* (1966). Similarly, following Robert Scott's survey of the genre, we can extract some salient features of the campus novel, such as their focus on “the absurdity and despair of university life; the colorful, often neurotic personalities who inhabit academia; and the ideological rivalries which thrive in campus communities.” Further, Scott writes,

⁸⁵ Also of note is the fact that in 1966 Williams himself founded the *Denver Quarterly*, a literary journal dedicated explicitly to experimental prose and poetry, while a member of the faculty at Denver University.

⁸⁶ Jeffrey Williams, in “The Rise of the Academic Novel,” makes a convincing argument for the distinction between the campus novel (which is primarily from the student perspective) and the academic novel (which is from the faculty perspective). In this light, *Stoner* would certainly be categorized as an academic rather than a campus novel, though the subtleties of such an argument are beyond the scope of this paper and largely irrelevant to the argument at hand.

because these works tend to dwell upon the frustrations that accompany academic existence, they often call attention to the antagonistic relationships that exist between mind and flesh, private and public needs, and duty and desire. As a result, despite their comic tone, most campus novels simmer with barely concealed feelings of anger and even despair as protagonists frequently find themselves caught between administrative indifference on one side and student hostility on the other.⁸⁷

There are two points to extract here. First, the university serves as a site of antagonistic conflict—the zone of realism that begins to emerge from this point will be dealt with extensively in the rest of this chapter—and second, the wild oscillation between anger and despair that marks the campus novel. Before dealing with this first point, a few words should be said about the second, as it allows for a wealth of comparisons between *Stoner* and the other novels previously referenced.

In the sort of fiction which concerns us here, the campus often fosters a unique sort of radicalism, both emotionally and politically. The minutiae of departmental politics and interpersonal relationships become grand conflicts with seemingly life-altering stakes, and there is no better example of this than the comically paranoid scene in *Pale Fire*, in which Kinbote describes finding in his coat pocket “a brutal anonymous note saying: ‘You have hal s real bad, chum,’ meaning evidently ‘hallucinations,’ although a malevolent critic might infer from the insufficient number of dashes that little Mr. Anon, despite teaching Freshman English, could hardly spell.”⁸⁸ The obvious word, halitosis, is completely misinterpreted by Kinbote, turning a slight (and perhaps even well-meaning) dig into one more manifestation of his paranoid mania, a

⁸⁷ Robert F. Scott, “It’s a Small World After All,” (*The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 2004), 82-83.

⁸⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, (Vintage Books, 1989), 98.

schizophrenic representation of the sort of tensions which arise within the academy. Fariña's novel, similarly, in its depictions of student uprisings and its scenes of revolutionary Cuba, seems to portend the vast international unrest of 1968.

The takeaway from these comparisons, then, is how seemingly anachronous Williams' interpretation of the campus novel is. If anything, Stoner's University of Missouri exists as a shelter from the politics of the outside world and from the drama of interpersonal relationships, and as such throughout the novel we find a protagonist fighting to avoid radicalism of any sort, his achievements merely being the instances in which he can successfully withdraw into his private self. The novel's setting, between 1910 and 1956, similarly allows Williams to avoid the sort of themes found both in the campus novels of his time and in the university itself. Asquith notes a sort of classicism that permeates *Stoner*, which posits "a nostalgic separatist ideal" of the university as "a rarefied institution worth saving."⁸⁹ In Stoner's mind exists a Platonic ideal of what the university is and should be that is never put into question; if he finds fault with anything that occurs within the groves of Academe, it is merely a deficiency on the part of the individual who has failed to keep with the standards of the hallowed institution.

Here a problematic begins to form. If we follow Lukacs, one of, if not *the* most reliable distinctions between "proper" realism and modernist anti-realism is whether solitariness is presented as a "a specific social fate" or as a "universal *condition humane*." Lukacs distinguishes, then, between novels which depict solitariness "merely [as] a fragment, a phase, a climax or anti-climax in the life of the community as a whole" and those in which man "is by nature solitary, asocial, [and] unable to enter into relationships with other human beings."⁹⁰ Even if we choose to break with Lukacs' specific formulation of realism, the question of which sort of

⁸⁹ Asquith, *Reading*, 93.

⁹⁰ Lukacs, *Realism in Our Time*, 20.

solitariness prevails is an essential one in understanding the role of totality in the novel, and its answer resides in the role of the university vis-à-vis Stoner.

What is frequently made clear in the novel is that the university, at least to its inhabitants, exists independently of the world around it. Early on, when Stoner eschews the agricultural degree he had entered college for in favor of humanities courses, Archer Sloane, an English professor who in turns terrifies and captivates the young student, inquires about Stoner's plans for the future: "Are you looking forward to the day when you can emerge from these cloistered walls into what some call the world?" "No, sir" is Stoner's answer, and already we see the image of the university as a sort of sanctum beginning to form—the university is something "cloistered" which one "emerges" from, and Stoner's decision to stay there for graduate school (and eventually to remain as a faculty member) signifies a clear desire to remain outside of the world at large. Later, in a conversation with Dave Masters and Gordon Finch (the only two friends Stoner makes in the novel), Masters argues that the university is "an asylum...a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent." "Providence," he says,

or society, or fate, or whatever name you want to give it, has created this hovel for us, so that we can go in out of the storm. It's for us that the university exists, for the dispossessed of the world...But as bad as we are, we're better than those on the outside, in the muck, the poor bastards of the world. We do no harm, we say what we want, and we get paid for it.⁹¹

⁹¹ Williams, *Stoner*, 30-32.

Though Masters' view is more overtly exclusionary and isolationist than Stoner's, it becomes clear that he has hit on some truth, and we are told that Stoner remembers the words for years after.

With the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and the onset of World War I, Stoner faces the first of many threats which will challenge his comfortable seclusion. For the majority of the war, both prior to and during United States involvement, Williams alternates between descriptions of the general mood at the university and the stolid indifference of Stoner himself. Following the assassination, as students "wondered about the part America would eventually play [in the war]," Stoner thinks only of his "certain and unchanging" future:

He saw it, not as a flux of event and change and potentiality, but as a territory ahead that awaited his exploration. He saw it as the great University library, to which new wings might be built, to which new books might be added and from which old ones might be withdrawn, while its true nature remained essentially unchanged. He saw the future in the institution to which he had committed himself.⁹²

The text here operates on two levels. In the literal sense, Stoner has made the decision to spend his life within the university, a decision which is remade over and over again in the novel, most pertinently in his decision not to enlist in the military with Finch and Masters. In the second sense, a strange anthropomorphism occurs when the university becomes conflated with Stoner the individual. What Stoner posits here is the belief in a life which can withstand any minor variance while maintaining a largely selfsame, consistent essence, a position only tenable if it coincides with the belief of some prevailing ideal form. This is, in fact, the philosophical tenet which guides Stoner throughout the novel: His infatuation with academia and literature is not

⁹² Williams, *Stoner*, 25.

motivated by a naïve enjoyment of the material realities of the university, but by a belief in some greater properties embodied by each. His career arc, for example, is outstandingly bleak throughout the novel, and yet he takes few, if any, efforts to revolt against the forces that oppress him, satisfied only to remain close to the university (here the question of agency arises). Similarly, Stoner's enjoyment of literature and particularly poetry stems from its ability to exist outside of time as something greater than a temporal object, a belief that we can trace to a single moment when, in a survey of English literature, Sloane says to the young Stoner: "Mr. Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr. Stoner; do you hear him?"⁹³ This becomes the position that Stoner maintains throughout his life, and thus we find, at the end of the novel, Stoner on his deathbed contemplating the only book he had published in his lifetime: "It hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use...a small part of him that he could not deny *was* there, and would be there."⁹⁴

What Stoner desires is permanence; though his life prior to the university was shaped around the uncertainties of agricultural seasons, academia provides an almost religious alternative that guarantees a future and an ideal. In this system, the university becomes a closed totality, a self-sustaining world in which one can reside indefinitely among the idols of some immutable idea that must be preserved. Further, just as Stoner imagines his future through a conflation of himself and the university, anything outside of his closed totality is immediately translated into a more localized version. After the United States enters the war, he discovers "within himself a vast reserve of indifference. He resented the disruption which the war forced upon the University."⁹⁵ This "closed totality" is the primary theoretical problem in analyzing

⁹³ Williams, *Stoner*, 13.

⁹⁴ Williams, *Stoner*, 277.

⁹⁵ Williams, *Stoner*, 33.

Stoner, and a series of thorny questions arise in its wake. We must ask, first of all, whether such a closed totality can exist at all, either diagetically or literarily. Second, the relationship of the supposed closed totality to some actual totality must be considered, if only to heighten the Elean paradox that underscores such a relation. Inextricably tied to these two broader focuses are the notions of agency—the determining factor of Lukacs’ dichotomy—and the zone of realism itself.

So far, the world outside the zone has been described as incomprehensible and void of meaning. Meaning of course exists, as does totality, but it is nearly impossible to grasp in a meaningful way, and precise causality between events as well as the reciprocal relationship between base and superstructure appears random, disconnected, or impossibly abstract. Returning to *The Magic Mountain*, we can recall the way that, almost immediately upon leaving the sanatorium—the ordered, dialogic zone—Hans Castorp is swept away in World War I and almost certainly killed, with the distant and ambiguous prose of the scene reflecting the confusion of the events themselves. In *Stoner*, similarly, we learn that Masters, who once propounded the notion of the university as a sanctuary or, rather, an asylum, is killed in conflict almost immediately upon reaching the front in France. It becomes clear at this point that Stoner has adopted Masters’ position, and that for him it is only the small world of academia that can be made sense of. As he reflects upon Masters’ death, he realizes that

when he had thought of death before, he had thought of it either as a literary event or as the slow, quiet attrition of time against imperfect flesh. He had not thought of it as the explosion of violence upon a battlefield, as the gush of blood from the ruptured throat. He wondered at the difference between the two kinds of dying, and what the difference meant.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Williams, *Stoner*, 41.

Masters' death at the hands of complex global conflict is impenetrable to Stoner who, characteristically, spends the months following the news reading medieval and Latin poems about death, wondering at the ease of the former and the bitterness and terror of the latter.⁹⁷ The university becomes the solution to Stoner's problems. Later in the novel, as his marriage rapidly deteriorates, he resigns himself first to a home office and, when that is taken away, to his office on campus.

And yet this solution comes at a cost. In associating himself with the university, in attempting to erect a closed totality that can translate the absolute, exterior one in comprehensible ways, Stoner is forced, over and over again, to leave something of himself behind. After Sloane's death, Finch, now back at the university as a faculty member, drives Stoner home after the funeral. As Stoner watches Finch drive away, "he felt the keen knowledge that another part of himself, of his past, was drawing slowly, almost imperceptibly away from him, into the darkness."⁹⁸ This scene is mirrored a short time later when, attending his mother's funeral, Stoner reflects upon the earth which will slowly take his parents, "consuming the last vestiges of their substances. And they would become a meaningless part of that stubborn earth to which they had long ago given themselves."⁹⁹ At this second funeral, Stoner expounds a metaphysical proposition that follows from the earlier anthropomorphic conflation of the self and the university, namely that the individual aligns themselves to an object which then subsumes them. His parents who had given themselves over to the land, by this logic, were thus naturally bound to it until they became indistinguishable from it. This, then, is the constructed idealism which we hinted at earlier. Stoner sees himself falling into the same process his parents

⁹⁷ Williams, *Stoner*, 41.

⁹⁸ Williams, *Stoner*, 90.

⁹⁹ Williams, *Stoner*, 108.

underwent, though his tomb is to be the university, not the earth, and his passage into being of the university must necessarily be marked by repeated deaths, each one fracturing off a piece of his life which cannot be incorporated into this narrow totality.

The implications of such a logic are overwhelmingly solipsistic, and we must again address Lukacs' distinction between the two sorts of solitude. A charitable reading would perhaps run as thus: Stoner is deluded in his attempt at constructing a closed totality for himself, succeeding only in constructing a plane of subjective isolation which, in turns, gives rise to further isolation. In this line of thinking, the closed totality is little more than the zone of realism, misapprehended by Stoner. Just as Andrews chooses to remain in the west out of a preference for the immediacy of negative signatures, so too does Stoner prefer to translate the world into his immediate surroundings, where death becomes poetic death instead of incomprehensible death, and the self, which was once the unfinished, burdened self becomes the absolute, essential self. In taking such a stance, we would have to concede in other words that the unfurling negative of the realist zone is largely of Stoner's own doing, that his hamartia is precisely his impossible desire. In believing he has constructed a closed totality, Stoner in turn misrecognizes the negative signatures that arise around him, and rather than allowing them to alter his ideological convictions as Andrews did, he is content merely to live through countless small deaths in the belief that they are moving him toward some ideal goal. The parallel of this characterization of Stoner would be if, in *Butcher's Crossing*, Andrews had never given up on his Emersonian convictions, instead viewing each violent encounter with an uncaring natural world as necessary prerequisites to the romantic oneness with nature he first sought. Andrews' most heroic moment, of course, is when he does precisely the opposite by embracing his position as one who does not

and cannot belong to nature, and it is precisely this awareness which allows him to stay in the west.

There is a second reading which does not mitigate the effect of the realist zone in the novel but does place *Stoner* in an oppositional position to Lukacs' criticism. It seems very natural to argue that *Stoner* is an excruciatingly fatalistic novel, and that what it propounds is an inherently naturalistic determinism that *Stoner* cannot possibly control. In Lukacs' words, this is the solitude as a *condition humane* posited by modernism. When *Stoner's* brief affair with a colleague, Katherine Driscoll, comes to light, he is forced to broach the subject with Finch, now departmental dean. Calmly confronting *Stoner*, Finch remarks:

"In theory, your life is your own to lead. In theory, you ought to be able to screw anybody you want to, do anything you want to, and it shouldn't matter so long as it doesn't interfere with your teaching. But damn it, your life *isn't* your own to lead. It's—oh, hell. You know what I mean."

Stoner smiled. "I'm afraid I do."¹⁰⁰

Both characters seem here to tacitly acknowledge a lack of agency, whether it be a universal one or one imposed upon them by the university itself. However, we can certainly imagine a causal sequence within the novel that birthed precisely this problem and gave rise to precisely this feeling of powerlessness. Depending on the depth of our timeline, we might point to things like *Stoner's* rash marriage, his lack of social experience and social circle, his eagerness for affection of any kind, and his tendency to make enemies in the department as all being direct causes for his given situation, and again we are on the side of socially imposed solitude.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *Stoner*, 107.

Bolstering this reading is the fact that the couple's relationship is often described using the vernacular of totality, seemingly indicating that she, in some oblique way, exists to Stoner as a means of achieving his own closed system. Their secret affair

was a world of half-light in which they lived and to which they brought the better parts of themselves—so that, after a while, the outer world where people walked and spoke, where there was change and continual movement, seemed to them false and unreal. Their lives were sharply divided between the two worlds, and it seemed to them natural that they should live so divided.¹⁰¹

Here again we see Stoner infatuated by the notion that he can create a private life and yet, as we have just mentioned, this is one which will be intruded upon as well, and any false sense of totality will necessarily be fractured by external sources. The moment Stoner is confronted about the affair by Finch, he knows “that a part of his life [is] over, that a part of him [is] so near death that he [can] watch the approach almost with calm.”¹⁰² The language here is almost identical to the previous funeral scenes. Slowly more and more pieces of Stoner die until, at the end of the novel, his body falls away as well leaving only his book behind.

Whether Driscoll represented for Stoner a new, more tender closed totality apart from the other he had attempted to create at the university or whether he had attempted to accommodate her into his already existing one is of little consequence, since what is clear is that the construction of such a totality was always fated to be impossible. However, the explanation of this impossibility is not a recourse to naturalism, but rather it is the intrusion of the real which makes such a closed totality impossible. To once again compare the novel with *Butcher's Crossing*, we can recall the way in which, despite their isolation in the valley and despite an

¹⁰¹ Williams, *Stoner*, 210.

¹⁰² Williams, *Stoner*, 213.

apparent disconnection from the world at large and from any meaningful sense of time, the party still embodied in a metonymic way not only the world at that diegetic time, but also of Williams' own time, and thus we saw dueling modes of production and virtual logic play out in a seeming, though not entire, vacuum. Once we have created this distinction between closed totality and the metonymic zone, we can begin to unravel the mysteries of Stoner's world. The university envisioned as a metonym provides the non-naturalist explanation for the constant intrusions upon Stoner's closed totality, because rather than it being the hand of fate which consistently strikes him down and provides a cosmic solution to the problem of agency, we can shift our perspective and state that what occurs is actually a confrontation with negativity, the exact same we would expect to find in any other realist zone. We might dare to make a similar statement about *Stoner* as we have with *Butcher's Crossing* and note that the character of Stoner exists within two ideological timeframes. On one hand, we have the classicist Stoner who, in addition to a fetishization of forms (and specifically forms associated with the academy, itself the ultimate form) seems resigned to the classical notion of fate as incontrovertible, and on the other we have a Stoner who seems, if anything, ahead of his (diegetic) time, ideologically speaking. In this second sense, Stoner embodies the postmodernist subject, entrenched in solipsism and overcome with the ecstasy of subjective experience. Rather than see the real degrade the possibility of an ideal as we did in *Butcher's Crossing*, *Stoner* shows the experience of one who refuses to recognize the real in front of them.

CONCLUSION

No doubt by now a reference to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) is long overdue. Based on the 1972 science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic*, the film takes place in a future that in most ways resembles the present, the sole exception being that at some point some sort of alien interference occurred which created the Zone, a heavily defended region of landscape filled with ruined buildings slowly reclaimed by nature. In the Zone, the laws of physics cease to apply consistently, and any activity within carries the risk of spontaneous, unexplainable danger. However, within the Zone lies a room with the purported ability to grant one's deepest desire—meaning, importantly, that what occurs is not *mere* wish-fulfillment, and that the thing which will be granted by the Zone is impossible to know, as the individual does not truly understand their own desire. Those who make a living smuggling visitors through the Zone are called Stalkers, and the film focuses on a Stalker leading two men—a scientist and a poet—to the room. If it initially seems counterintuitive to search for realism in science fiction, this is only because of the great weight that has been placed on the traditional, mimetic definition of realism. If, however, we find realism in the accumulation of negativity within a work, realism becomes a substance which can be traced across genres, and we could very well identify realism in writers as diverse and seemingly incongruous as Borges or Thomas Pynchon. In *Stalker*, then, amidst the random flux of alien science and the eerie abandoned wilderness we find something not dissimilar to the arc of *Butcher's Crossing*. The two men enter the Zone with the desire for some wish to be granted, but at the threshold of the door are unable to enter the room, suddenly aware of their lack of awareness with regard to that which they desire. As Slavoj Žižek points out, the Zone itself is “the void which sustains desire” so long as one is still moving through it, but the moment one is confronted with the room itself, the Real object of desire, they experience total

disorientation, unable to assimilate the intrusive reality. “The Zone,” Zizek writes, “is thus not a purely mental fantasmatic space in which one encounters (or onto which one projects) the truth about oneself, but the material presence, the Real, of an absolute otherness incompatible with the rules and laws of our universe.”¹⁰³ The “real” of realism is this confrontation with the alien unknown which disrupts ideological commitment and reveals the falseness of the object of desire.

What the room requires is unquestioning fidelity—total, innocent faith—otherwise the visitor experiences only an overwhelming existential anguish at the realization that he does not know himself and that his desire has no true object (or, what is functionally the same, that the object is actually unknown to him). This is precisely what happens in *Butcher’s Crossing* where, entering the West, Andrews finds no trace of Emerson; he is in a way ideologically “reset,” no longer able to be driven by the named desire because that desire was revealed to have been aimed at something which did not exist. There is also, however, a fundamental difference in emphasis between the internal and external in *Stalker* and *Butcher’s Crossing* which is crucial to grasp, as it reveals the way that realism of the sort being discussed differs from theories of naturalism more generally. Although *Butcher’s Crossing* depicts nature as a totalizing force which acts arbitrarily and often violently upon us, the realism in the novel lies in what occurs *because of* that imposition. What readings of *Stalker* and *Stoner* illustrate is that realism is not inexorably tied to predetermination, at least not any external sort. The negative which arises in both of these texts is primarily an internal one (and as such we could imagine a point at which Stoner realizes the uselessness of his pursuit and the falseness of his desired object) and yet the results are the same.

¹⁰³ Slavoj Zizek, “The Thing from Inner Space,” (*Angelaki*, 1999), 227.

Linda Hutcheon, in her groundbreaking inquiry into postmodernism, discovers something very similar to this realism. Addressing the “apocalyptic” rhetoric surrounding postmodernism by Arthur Kroker and David Cook—“Ours is a *fin-de-millennium* consciousness which...uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay”—Hutcheon argues that such claims, if true at all, are hardly remarkable, and that they “grant to the present a status that almost any past age could also have argued for itself, if it tried.”¹⁰⁴ Rather than this revealing the fault in Kroker and Cook’s characterization of the postmodern moment, however, we should read both the claim and the rebuttal in conjunction, with each revealing some aspect of the broader literary tradition itself. It is true that postmodernism uncovers decay and disintegration, just as it is true that romantic poetry or Victorian realist novels—each with their own set of ideological opponents—do precisely the same. All that shifts in each iteration of the realist impulse is the intended target of negativity which is itself sociohistorically conditioned. Thus, as Hutcheon argues toward Baudrillard,

the postmodern art works to contest the ‘simulacrizization’ process of mass culture—not by denying or lamenting it—but by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of all reality, and by therein suggesting the potentially reductive quality of the view upon which Baudrillard’s laments are based ... Not the degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what ‘real’ can mean and how we can *know* it.¹⁰⁵

That the question at hand in postmodern art pertains to the distinction between the real and the simulacrum is merely the result of the rise of the postmodern condition; in other words, it is only *now* a relevant question. But it is realism itself which allows these questions to be staged, which generates zones in which ideology can be scrutinized and confronted with negativity. Hutcheon’s

¹⁰⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, (Routledge, 1995), 223.

¹⁰⁵ Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 223.

argument also implies something that has been lacking in this paper thus far, which is the notion that negativity in fiction, with its ability to question the reductive forms which serve as the basis for understanding reality, holds a great deal of positive, constructive potential.

This notion of the productive capacity of literary form is one of the central tenets behind the recently growing new formalist movement which, as Marjorie Levinson describes in her exploration of the trend in 2007, can largely be divided into two: The first, which she calls “activist formalism,” takes a materialist approach to formalism which attempts to retain the value of reading a text historically, while the second, “normative formalism,” seeks to “bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form the prerogative of art.”¹⁰⁶ It is of course the first which concerns us here, and this historically conscious theoretical approach has received a great deal of scholarship recently, notably, as we have already mentioned, from Kornbluh, and also from scholars such as Caroline Levine, who uses the concept of *affordances* to posit the latent possibilities inherent in any given form. In this view forms are constraints, but they are also dynamic, transferable, and able to be frustrated when confronted with alien forms: “New encounters may activate latent affordances or foreclose otherwise dominant ones. Forms will often fail to impose their order when they run up against other forms that disrupt their logic and frustrate their organizing ends.”¹⁰⁷ These affordances mean that the sorts of forms found in the literary work can have direct relevance in the social sphere, where the same tools of literary formal analysis are repurposed into varieties of social critique. If we follow Levine, then the discovery of the failings of a given literary form—which as this paper has described, is precisely embodied in realism as such—might then be applied to non-literary, cultural forms.

¹⁰⁶ Marjorie Levinson, “What is New Formalism,” (*PMLA*, 2007), 559.

¹⁰⁷ Caroline Levine, *Forms*, (Princeton University Press, 2015), 7.

Kornbluh, on the other hand, notes the way that literary analysis reveals not only the latent potentialities of already-existing forms, but literature's unique capacity to posit new forms as "the imaginative projection of spaces." Literature is, then, a space where "very form is open to deployment, debate, and deformation; every form is open to the promise of building differently."¹⁰⁸ If realism so far described has been a largely negative system which focuses on deformations of the text, of disintegrations of meaning, it is perhaps resurrected through precisely this notion that something will take the place of that which is consumed. Describing the Bakhtinian forces which act upon the literary center and deform it, we noted that each text carries within it the entire literary tradition, and yet this is only part of the picture. With each addition to the canon some small void appears which generates the necessity for future texts; we might say, with Hutcheon, that literature creates problems for future literature to resolve, and then we might add that these solutions, in turn, generate their own problems. Negativity is thus the motor of an endlessly productive process which, in light of new formalism, potentially need not reside entirely within the abstract realm of literary theory, but that could be employed materially. Don Adams describes an alternative model of realism based on the idea that "we live simultaneously in two real worlds, the world as given and the world as desired," and it is in literature that we find methods to bring about the desired from the given. Here the mimetic "single-realm materialist worldview" is eclipsed by the "dual-realm actual-virtual worldview," and it is only by revealing the fraught relationship between the actual and the virtual that the real can be brought to the fore.¹⁰⁹ Although the emphases of Adams, Kornbluh, and Levine differ with relation to the temporal plane of realist discourse—Adams and Kornbluh, for example, see

¹⁰⁸ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms*, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Don Adams, *Alternative Paradigms of Literary Realism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

form as inherently anticipatory—each writer points to a potential method of reading texts necessitated upon negativity, conflict, and difference, if only as the prerequisite for the positive.

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