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The "Vast and Terrible" Trauma: American Literary Naturalism, Ethics, and Levinas

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Tyler Joseph Efird entitled "The "Vast and Terrible" Trauma: American Literary Naturalism, Ethics, and Levinas." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Allen R. Dunn, Major Professor

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The “Vast and Terrible” Trauma:
American Literary Naturalism, Ethics, and Levinas

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tyler Joseph Efird
May 2014

DEDICATION

To my family – my parents and grandparents, who have made this work possible. Without your help, I would have died poor in a ditch a long time ago, another graduate student casualty. And to Kat, my beautiful wife. Your support has been my motivation. You, I love.

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ABSTRACT

In an 1896 essay, Frank Norris wrote that the reading world should abandon those “teacup tragedies” to which it had grown accustomed and embrace a new literature that would depict a “vast and terrible drama.” Realism, Norris claimed, could not be used to achieve an earnest portrait of the conditions that mark individual lives under capitalism. Instead, the world needed a romantic wrestling with the forces of existential inscrutability. Also, the perceived need for literature to depict a clear ethical system needed revising from the perspective of American literary naturalism, a school long denigrated for apparent moral vacuity. Through excruciating “drama,” naturalism therefore confronted the economic conditions that subject individual lives to the whims of a world wherein moral values seemed either the business of religious groups or of rationalist Enlightenment thinkers. The writings of Norris and Stephen Crane, as well as later naturalists like John Dos Passos and Nathanael West, refuse moral systematization and depict human beings in extraordinary predicaments that question reductive evaluations of human relationships. These traumatic encounters offered by naturalist fiction provide a route for us to think about the works of the French ethicist, Emmanuel Levinas. In Levinas, we find the ethical encounter traumatic, gut-wrenching, and overwhelming. No course of action is provided because every person demands of us a unique response that cannot be met. Levinas offers a means for us to expand our understanding of literary naturalism and think of its relevance in our own day, wherein value relativism makes moral response increasingly difficult. Such an approach allows us to find the similarities between such disparate authors as Norris and Crane, Dos Passos and West, all of whom find the ethical relationship troubling and painful. In naturalism's scenes of trauma, inarticulacy, and paralysis, we find the origins of a radical ethical alternative, one that does not deny ethical possibility in its refusal to systematize, but, rather, finds it in the the breakdown of language and cognition – in other words, the complete dissembling of the self and the familiar structures that tend to give it precedent in the ethical relationship.

“Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.”

- Immanuel Kant

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the dead of a Nebraska night, a young Swedish man falls lifeless in a saloon from the flash of a blade. Outside, the snow looms quiet and as lifeless and cold as a corpse. Just hours before, this youth, whom Stephen Crane refers to as “the Swede” in his “The Blue Hotel,” appeared before a hotel on the outskirts of town, wild-eyed and nervous, easy to excite and not far from a state of agitation. Slowly familiarizing himself with his fellow guests, the Swede is lured into a game of cards. The Swede soon becomes convinced that one of his competitors, Johnnie, the owner's son, is cheating, and aroused to anger, has no qualms about condemning his foe in front of the other contestants. This accusation, as if an act of fate, sets off a chain of events that leads to a seemingly irrevocable outcome, finally ending in the Swede's death. Overcoming Johnnie in a battle of man-against-man outside the hotel, in the freezing cold, as the other guests look on, the Swede storms off into the night, his sense of invincibility heightened by his victory. The Swede finally finds himself inside the saloon, where he drinks too much, makes oaths, and ends up on the wrong side of a knife. Most revealing, however, is the account that Crane leaves us with, months later, after the trial of the gambler (who stabbed the Swede to death), of the dialogue between the Easterner and the Cowboy, two of the participants in the card game that fatal night. The Easterner finally reveals to the still vindictive Cowboy (perturbed by the Swede's wild declamations that night) that Johnnie was indeed cheating but that he did not reveal this fact at the time because he was “afraid to stand up and be a man” (29). According to the Easterner, all parties involved in the card game were responsible for the Swede's outcome and not just the Swede himself. “We are all in it!” (29) he exclaims in a definitive summary of the event's outcome.

American literary naturalism not only makes us uncomfortable witnesses to the disastrous

(and often brutal) endings of characters caught in the vicious cycle of “dog-eat-dog” that characterizes a competitive modern world, it also implicates us, most importantly, in their agony and suffering. And while the Easterner's stark realization in Crane's story may be far more morally explicit than other examples of his work as well as that of his cohort, reading naturalism is, nonetheless, a process of locating our own complicity – our own responsibility – in the suffering of our fellow human beings. Conventional readings of naturalism, however, find it convenient to overlook this complicity. These readings typically assume that naturalism's harsh depiction of life offers no valuable statement on the seemingly significant tragedies we sometimes face, that there is no inherent value in life and that we must resign ourselves only to a passive acceptance. Many of these critiques claim that naturalism's unwieldy determinism underwrites a staunch nihilism that negates any real moral potential in naturalist texts. Certainly these critiques cannot be overlooked or easily cast aside. Claims like those made by Georg Lukacs¹, for instance, that naturalism's deterministic vision presents a world ruled by forces beyond our control and understanding, thus precluding meaningful political motivation, are legitimate recognitions of the problems posed by a naturalist ethos and must be confronted as such. Even so, I find in the determinism and seeming nihilism of the American naturalists the seeds of a radical ethical alternative. For the naturalists, the determinism that is so strongly castigated by the school's detractors does not necessarily deter social obligation; in fact, it holds individuals morally responsible for the suffering of their fellows. In the spectacle of suffering, naturalism finds the origin of an ethical responsibility that is unlike any other. Like the horrific events portrayed in the texts (which take us beyond any normal sense of the lives of others in their enormity), this obligation ravishes us and takes us beyond any ability to fulfill our duty to

1 “Realism in the Balance.”

the other – it exceeds everything we are capable of giving as moral subjects, and it is very uncomfortable. Ethics is traumatic, gut-wrenching, harsh, and even violent, a radically different way of thinking about the matter, and one that is best elucidated by the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that the experience of conscience “is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent” (84). According to Levinas, the self is caught in a stifling and intractable web of responsibility (subjectivity is already given over to and a product of responsibility), and ethics commands a supererogatory giving over of the self – a process that is “infinitely demanding,” as Simon Critchley² terms it, and brutally exacting. This is the discourse in which I would like to place the critical conversation of American naturalism. Rather than negating morality, naturalism's focus upon the seedy, the disturbing, and the seeming vacuity of existence highlights the extraordinary difficulty inherent in an ethics of trauma.

Naturalism remains the discontented proverbial “step-child” of the literary world. No one will completely have it, and yet, we aren't willing to completely cast it away either. Naturalism has possessed a precarious position in the American literary canon and still does. Whether neglected due to its admitted tendency towards the overbearing and the sensational, or valued mostly for its ability to tell harsh tales of the seedy and grotesque (but with no real philosophical implications, at least beyond determinism), naturalism has never had it easy. It has been picked on, picked at, and picked apart. And this makes sense, for naturalism should give us pause. After all, when we look at naturalism, we look at a movement that suggests that the world may not

2 *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance.*

function as neatly as we would like. It replaces our notions of an orderly and rational universe with what appears like a frighteningly uncomfortable vision of the human condition. Even today, its philosophical intractability and existential brutality trouble us as much as they did critics and readers of previous eras. For the most part, the study of naturalism has consisted of two divergent lines of thought, each with its own ideas pertaining to the ethical implications of the naturalist aesthetic. These forms of thinking about the genre should not be disregarded; in fact, they are all very much worth our study if we are to situate ethics accurately within a naturalist aesthetic, one that, I argue, encourages participation and action rather than passivity and despair. One of my tasks here is to place these divergent views, despite their tendency to elide naturalism's true potential, in conversation with an approach to the literary movement that locates an ethics of naturalism. Such an approach is essential because it not only claims an ethics for naturalism but demonstrates how the ethical principles of its aesthetic forbears triggered what is, in my opinion, a radical break in the form of naturalism.

In the study of American literary naturalism, one critical school tends to stress the genre's ties to realism while the other places naturalist writing in close proximity with romanticism; each school, however, acknowledges the astonishing difficulty of contemplating moral direction in the brutality depicted by naturalism. Significantly, both groups wrestle with the relationship between aesthetics and the philosophical implications of determinism. In other words, these critics often are very mindful of the manner in which determinism influences the naturalist aesthetic (form, character, and plot structure), many seeing this characteristic (when compared to the aesthetic construct³ of morality and responsibility in realism and romanticism) as a weakness and moral

3 When I reference aesthetics or, for instance, how morality is constructed in fiction, I mean those formal traits that create the narrative action and character in a particular genre. For instance, determinism frequently yields the

ingenuousness. What is most striking about these approaches is that they have been so persistent and have structured our arguments about naturalism since its incipience (Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, et al.) and through its current manifestations (Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon). Although one school may dominate the critical landscape at any particular moment in this time line, both have remained remarkably consistent ways of organizing our thoughts about the genre.

Realism seems indelibly linked to our studies of naturalism and rightfully so: Zola saw the aesthetic of the movement as closely aligned with scientific objectivity and rational observation (albeit of sometimes seemingly irrational subjects). Getting to the heart of the matter through a disciplined objectivity could lead to a supreme understanding of those conditions that create seemingly irrational behavior in human agents and society. For Zola, irrational actions really aren't that irrational after all – everything has an explanation, assuming we can manage to get to the bottom of things. Like Zola, realists ultimately want the truth of things. In a sense, one might say that the goal of realism is human freedom (just as it is in Zola). Realists want to write life as it is actually lived (at least according to our senses), to assign narrative action to human agents, and to thereby create a coherent vision of a rational world, a world that can be understood, organized, and molded according to a progressive vision. Senses and actions match up, this view concludes, and these actions ultimately make sense given their contexts. Howells, for example, believes that a careful analysis of things can yield clarity, coherence, and order. Realists profess that their craft can avoid an obfuscation of the natural world and of the behavior of subjects living in modern societies – in other words, there are explanations for our actions. Thus, humans are to be thought of as cognizant moral agents in control of their actions and

depiction of characters that are not as mentally complex as they may be in a genre like realism.

responsible for those deeds that are direct (and, in some cases, indirect) results of these actions. For these very reasons, when placed alongside realism, naturalism has received a mixed critical reception.

Howells is perhaps the first American critic to cite the ineluctable relationship between the two movements. As early as the 1890s, Howells already places the writings of Norris and Crane in dialogue with realist aesthetics, establishing a long-standing scholarly trend. These authors, while worthy of review, fail in Howells' mind to give an accurate assessment of conditions in a post-Civil War, industrialized society. According to J.C. Levenson, Howells “believed that accurate observation and literal representation would necessarily confirm that his [rational man's] truths were axioms of the universe, statements about the way things 'really' are,” (*The Red Badge of Courage and McTeague: Passage to Modernity*, *Cambridge Companion* 161). “Given this belief,” Levenson continues, “failure to come up with the right, reassuring conclusions resulted from technical error, from a failure to observe accurately and transcribe literally” (161). Howells constructs this new unconventional school of authorship as a naïve realism. Its inability to unify narrative action with rational explanation precludes insight into what Howells sees as the universal truths present in realist fiction. Realism, for Howells, gives the reader not only logical conclusions and outcomes but also a comprehensive representation of the world, a supreme understanding of human action (or, at least, a desire for such an understanding).

Howells' theory of fiction is heavily indebted to a desire for progress, and he thinks that realism is the proper literary outlet for reform. Similarly, Georg Lukacs thinks of realism as the measure for a fiction that not only accurately portrays life but provides the motivation for change. While Howells finds the impetus for progress in a conventional liberalism, Lukacs approaches

society and aesthetics with a much more radical vision. For Lukacs, Marxism is the answer, and only an art that can identify the reality of capitalist degradation and degeneracy, as well as motivate readers, will work. This motivation does not come in the seemingly harsh outlook offered in naturalist fiction, however. In “Realism in the Balance,” Lukacs defends the ability of realism to objectively portray the world as well as to identify those factors inhibiting social change. Within this portrait is the combination of the universal and the particular; essentially, the depiction of particular characters, places, and events gives the reader insight into universal truths⁴: the reality of life in capitalist economies. By those standards, Lukacs thinks that Zola fails because he is far too pessimistic and deterministic, lacking in objectivity and avoiding the truth of capitalism. That is, Zola conflates economic conditions with cosmic inevitability – he falsely thinks that those conditions that are actually produced by capitalist economics and material conditions (in Lukacs' opinion) are those created by human nature and societies. From this perspective, naturalism becomes an art of despair, ignoring what should be art's proper political imperative.

Even within the last few decades, realism remains a key force in conditioning our awareness of naturalism. Donald Pizer's work, among the most extensive collections of naturalism scholarship, largely represents a desire to refute many of the claims concerning naturalism made by critics like Howells and Lukacs. For Pizer, naturalism is not a deviant, nor is it a naïve, version of realism. “The major distinction between realism and naturalism, most critics agree, is the particular philosophical orientation of the naturalists” (9), he writes. “A traditional and widely accepted concept of American naturalism, therefore, is that it is essentially realism infused with a pessimistic determinism” (9). However, Pizer rejects such a formulation;

4 Obviously, Lukacs is not privy to poststructural historicism.

in fact, realism is guilty, in his eyes, of offering a distorted depiction of the world. Unlike in the criticism of Howells and Lukacs (both of which are fairly synonymous with conventional thinking concerning naturalism), realism, for Pizer, presents social experience through the lens of a moral idealism and a wealth of diverse experiences that often seem detached from the common experience of the reader. Realism “was neither unidealized nor – for the most part – commonplace” (8), he claims in *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Rather than offering readers an unadulterated image of social reality, realism gives an abstract depiction of relationships and experience. Such a view obviously conflicts with the traditional means by which we have organized realist texts. Instead of offering the reader a world in which human freedom is possible, realism actually elicits a much more narrow depiction of human interaction (even if amid a more broadly diverse set of experiences than can be accounted for by the so-called “everyday”).⁵ Naturalism, on the other hand, can give us a glimpse into the actual conditions that influence our lives. The genre refuses every attempt at being relegated to a naïve realism that is simply infatuated with a pessimistic brand of determinism. According to Pizer, naturalism “refuses to accept this formula...and so seeks a new basis for man's sense of his own dignity and importance” (11). Making sense of this basis means reconfiguring our understanding of naturalism, seeing present in its so-called “lowbrow” tragedies a social and philosophical complexity that escapes the purview of conventional scholarly frameworks.⁶

5 This, however, should not be mistaken with philosophical determinism, which is what influences how we approach naturalism. Rather, Pizer argues that realism, despite its claims, does not provide an objective portrait of the world. This portrait, instead, remains highly stylized and controlled.

6 The work of Lee Clark Mitchell maintains the preeminence of understanding naturalism through a working relationship with realist narrative. This is not, however, to say that Mitchell conflates naturalism with a “naive realism.” Crucial for Mitchell is an awareness of the ways in which naturalist authors refute the narrative constructs of their realist predecessors. Instead of forming a notion of individual responsibility through forestalled action and “scenes of deliberation, naturalism throws its characters into action, negating a conventional notion of agency and responsibility. I will have much more to say about Mitchell's argument below.

Unfortunately, while Pizer defends the truth of naturalism, he cannot fully articulate its moral implications. Not surprisingly, critics who see naturalism as an extension of romanticism have similar problems in their encounters with the fiction of authors like Norris and Dreiser. Along with realism, romanticism highly influences our study of naturalism.⁷ Although establishing a nexus between romanticism and naturalism seems secondary to critics like Howells and Lukacs (who see naturalism as a naïve and negligent form, respectively, of realism), such a connection can indeed prove fruitful. On the one hand, romanticism requires what seems like an organic mystification of nature: we observe nature in awe, yet our understanding of this response can be varied, and we are not quite sure how to proceed. Whether it be the seemingly friendly ruminations of a Wordsworth and Emerson, or the harsh brooding of a Poe and Melville, romanticism presents us with the enigma of existence, the intrigue of a metaphysics that is beyond any capacity of comprehending nature that we might possess – something that rings analogous with naturalism's questioning of those factors that bring suffering into view. On the other hand, the sentimental and sensational elements of romantic fiction seem to provide a key component to the naturalist plot. In fact, the critical neglect of this connection proves all the more befuddling given that the early naturalists often described their work in terms of romanticism or even formed their work through the romantic plot. Even Zola thought that the romantic plot could be valuable to that of the naturalist. The romantic plot, ironically, could offer

7 I should clarify my definition of romanticism. On the one hand, there is Romanticism proper: emphasis upon the individual amid a chaotic world (in which he or she may or may not always find a stable home) and the power of emotion, as well as the belief of the centrality of the relationship between humankind and nature. On the other hand, there are the subsidiaries of Romanticism, namely, popular sentimentalist and melodramatic fiction (romantic fiction) that also emphasize emotion but through much more regimented and formulaic plot structures. Although not all of the scholars whose works I examine share this understanding of romanticism (their work may favor one or the other definitions supplied here), my use of “romanticism” in this paper should be understood as referring to that fiction which describes the sensational and dramatic (in plots that are often very predictable). When specific characteristics and/or definitions of romanticism need to be clarified, I will do so.

all of the extremes of life – the jubilation and the triumphs. Although lacking sentimentalism's unabashed plea for sympathetic identification, Zola's *Nana* essentially resuscitates a sensational plot in the process of telling the life of the eponymous character, her journey from prostitution to social intrigue to disease – a structure similar to what June Howard calls the “plot of decline.” Norris, likewise, thought of his fiction in an 1896 essay as a departure from those “teacup tragedies,” but a departure that would offer the ordinary as “a vast and terrible drama.” Significantly, Norris finds naturalism “a form of romanticism,” instead of “an inner circle of realism.”⁸ The tragedy of the everyday had to be emphasized in romantic over-determination.

In Charles Child Walcutt, we find a reading of naturalism that cannot distance itself from an awareness of romanticism. With *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream*, Walcutt frames the trajectory of scholarly work on American naturalism and its indebtedness to romantic authorship and philosophy. In fact, while Walcutt is mostly concerned with the American naturalists, he shares Zola's vision of naturalism as an intellectual project for improving humanity. Walcutt claims that both naturalism and romanticism see an intimate connection between science and nature that precludes any possibility of separating scientific objectivity from larger spiritual truths. Human beings can approach truth not only through reason or intuition but also “through science, because every natural fact is a symbol of a spiritual fact and when penetrated by the mind will give up its ultimate spiritual meanings” (11), claims Walcutt. Remarkably, this sounds a lot like Zola, who believes that progress can be achieved through an understanding of nature and possibly even its subjugation – destroying the veil that hides nature can reveal universal truths. Not coincidentally, this also strikes familiar chords with Emerson, who thinks that “man's mind is an aspect of spirit, his body a fact of nature” (11). We see,

8 “Zola as a Romantic Writer.”

therefore, that naturalism may not be simplistically rooted in determinism, or even in a physiological determinism that provides no more insights than perhaps an explanation of why one mere creature chooses to eat an apple instead of an orange. Although a highly questionable understanding of the genre for its general optimism and meliorism, this view of naturalism posits that the body and nature can also help reveal more fundamental truths about human behavior, possibly allow insight into human societies and even offer the prospect of amendment and change.

Zola, Norris, and Walcutt are not alone in constructing naturalism in terms of the romantic. Charles Taylor makes a compelling argument for the historical and intellectual interconnections between Romanticism and naturalism in his erudite *Sources of the Self*. While Taylor sees naturalism as an inevitable outcome of Romantic thought, he tends to understand the genre as a veritable branch of realism, making Taylor's argument (although learned) yet another reduction of literary naturalism's complexity. For instance, he lumps the thought and writings of Zola together with those of Flaubert, although Taylor maintains a slight distinction between the two.⁹ Nonetheless, Taylor does well in demonstrating the philosophical affinities of Romanticism and naturalist thought. Ironically, unlike Walcutt, Taylor does not find any similarity between the ways the two schools define the relationship between nature and spirit. Although a controversial move, Taylor places literary naturalism, instead, in the tradition of Enlightenment philosophical naturalism, which finds no “spiritual reality beyond or behind things, and in particular...den[ies] all notions of a great current of nature” (430-31). Even so, literary naturalism's philosophical monism does not exclude what Taylor calls the Romantic

9 Zola's naturalism is considered a form of realism in Taylor. Realism, however, is seen as the natural progression from Romanticism in Taylor's mind.

epiphanic moment. In works like *Madame Bovary*, for example, the reality of our everyday lives is placed in such close (and often uncomfortable) proximity to the reader that we cannot help but be startled by the transfiguration of the mediocre. “There is a kind of transfiguration here,” he argues, “not the kind which reveals meaning, but rather that which gives the meaningless and banal unhappiness the closure and shape of fate” (431). In other words, Romanticism transforms the natural world into a spiritual revelation, while realism and naturalism put revelation into the everyday – how the banality of life not only characterizes our days but also determines our lives and shapes our fates. Taylor’s argument here is unique, but we still find a need for a more extensive and embracing concept of literary naturalism.

Unlike Taylor, Eric Carl Link finds the romantic influences present in naturalism aiding far greater in evincing a metaphysical inscrutability rather than shutting off meaning beyond materiality altogether.¹⁰ Link’s work stands as quite possibly the most well-articulated, nuanced account of the relations between naturalism and romanticism to date. Lacking Walcutt’s unqualified enthusiasm while also void of Taylor’s rigidity (his refusal to offer an extensive account of naturalism proper), Link’s *The Vast and Terrible Drama* refuses to reduce naturalism to a mere by-product of romanticism but, rather, finds the relationship between the two as palpable and productive. In other words, naturalism retains a unique identity but one that can be better understood through a conversation with romanticism. In particular, Link finds Zola’s *Le roman expérimental* less influential on American naturalism and, instead, the American romantic movement (found in Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau) far more powerful in determining the character of American naturalism. For Link, these writers and intellectuals set

¹⁰ Taylor’s argument, however, avoids nihilism. Realism and naturalism may isolate the meaningless but, for Taylor, the process of this transfiguration becomes meaningful as the ability to locate a perspective from which we can contemplate these things adds a sense of empowerment to our lives (431-32).

a tone for the movement of literary naturalism in America, a path that requires the supreme power of natural forces, albeit divergent and conflicting. These forces, according to Link, possess the power to induce preternatural experience beyond the realm of everyday “reality,” as well as the suspension of belief in any revitalizing qualities in the natural world. While Emerson identifies in the Oversoul the great forces powering the machine of life, Melville, upon scrutinizing nature, sees the power of blackness and the nebulous “pasteboard mask of nature” (91). Like Melville and Norris, Zola acknowledges the immense unknown that surrounds us; however, he believes the mask hiding nature can ultimately be removed. According to Link, this faith demonstrates that Zola, in employing the scientific method, has much more in common with what Link deems positive forms of romanticism and naturalism – those representatives that locate some sort of knowledge amid the immense unknown, rather than those forms that find an intractable mystery surrounding human endeavors and being, like what we find in Norris or much of Crane's work (indeed, the majority of the American naturalist school). This distinction not only pits “bad” and “good” (negative and positive) forms of romanticism and naturalism against one another but also places realism back into the discussion as well because all of these movements are profoundly concerned with our relationship with nature. Naturalists, as Link has it, grapple with things “beyond us” while realists grapple with “ourselves.” Realists want to understand what we can know about both human nature and nature itself through careful documentation and un-embellished study of behavior, culture, and psychology. Romantics and literary naturalists, however, want to gain access to nature and being by dissecting the relationship between human behavior and psychology (and the environment that influences these forms of behavior), while also desiring to understand those factors that affect our interpretive capacities for comprehending this relationship and its environment:

This “environment of forces” takes a wide variety of shapes, from Hawthorne's “truth of the human heart,” to Poe's glimpse of “supernal beauty,” to Melville's threatening visage behind the “pasteboard mask” of nature, to the natural laws of Dreiser, the brute within *McTeague*, and the blend of scientific and providential determinisms in Crane. (166-67)

For Link, positive forms of this intellectual phenomenon look at nature as a mystery that can be unlocked. We should think of this tendency as an ethical project steeped in the tenet that uncovering nature can reveal supreme truths. Negative forms, however, think that nature and supreme truth cannot be unmasked, and I would argue, that for these writers and thinkers (Melville, Poe, Norris, Crane, etc.), attempting to do so is actually an injustice that discredits the demands of existence and relationships. For these thinkers, mystery casts doubt about the adequacy of our metaphysics; in fact, mystery belongs to otherness because it balks every attempt we make at consuming what is around us. Certainly, given the seminal influence of the struggle of the individual and our emotional response (although this particular facet is highly contested among naturalist scholars) to this struggle, we cannot underestimate any relationship that naturalism may possess with romanticism and its various beneficiaries. For all his amazing insights, however, Link (like others) fails to fully examine what the implications of this mystery might be for approaching a naturalist ethics.

After briefly evaluating the critical history of naturalism, we've found two predominant schools of thought: one that places naturalism in conjunction with realism and one that cites romanticism (in some form) as preeminent in influencing literary naturalism. Both of these criticisms are indebted to an extreme anxiety over the relationship between ethics and literature, particularly how to reconcile a deterministic vision of the world with one that offers the prospect

of social amelioration. We are stumped by a deterministic vision of the world, social relations, and/or human biology. A working awareness of determinism is highly useful in evaluating the actions, behaviors, thinking (or lack of, as the case often seems to be), and destinies of naturalist characters, and while complicating our understanding of naturalism, I'm not certain that these questions are absolutely essential to finding an ethics here. In fact, such questions may even be a digression. Interestingly enough, Norris did not find determinism as a primary trait in defining the genre and delineating its distinct characteristics. Norris, even though highly familiar with the writings of Zola and other naturalists (particularly of the French/European school), "nowhere in his criticism...identif[ies] naturalism with a deterministic ideology" (8) states Pizer in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*. "Naturalism, to Norris," Pizer continues, "is a method and a product, but it does not prescribe a specific philosophical base" (8). Rather, naturalism is attractive, for Norris, "in its character as a sensationalistic novel of ideas flexible enough in ideology to absorb the specific ideas of individual writers – and this despite the efforts of several generations of later critics to attach an unyielding deterministic core to the movement" (Pizer 8). Nonetheless, the impetus for reading naturalism alongside nineteenth- and twentieth-century understandings of determinism cannot be cast aside in any honest account of the genre today. While often a reductive way of lending facile methods for categorizing and periodizing American literature, such an account can, ironically, help us in understanding how naturalism becomes widely received not only as nihilistic but potentially meaningful, according to some critics.

Determinism has played an understandably significant role in studies of naturalism, and these approaches cannot be ignored, nor are they uniform. Many detractors of naturalism resort to consolidating the movement through a determinist vision only as a reductionist move that

limits not only literary possibility but also human potential. Proponents of the genre, on the other hand, find determinism as a means of exploring ethical potential and as offering a literary richness. James T. Farrell may be the first critic/writer to find in naturalism's determinism some sort of philosophical ambiguity that frees the genre from oversimplification. In "On Naturalism, So Called," Farrell argues for a vision of naturalism that is materialist; this philosophical monism, however, does not mean determinism and does not negate the capacity for free will. Farrell has what essentially amounts to a compatibilist approach that finds free will compatible with the ability to assert some form of control over nature and the self. Similarly, John J. Conder provides what may be the critically richest estimate of determinism's role in literary naturalism in his *Naturalism in American Fiction: The Classic Phase*. According to Conder, naturalism¹¹ is unified philosophically through a deterministic outlook that pervades the happenings of texts and influences characters' lives. Like with Farrell, this fact need not conflict with a more optimistic evaluation of naturalist works in Conder's study. "Even if the questioning [of human freedom] leads to both determinism and freedom, no individual work studied here suffers from a logical contradiction as a result," he claims. "On the contrary, when these seemingly irreconcilable opposites appear in a work, its inner coherence is as strong as that of a work that is monolithic in its denial or assertion of man's freedom" (4). In this regard, Conder sets up a compatibilist approach that unifies Hobbesian causality and Bergsonian temporality. While critically useful, questions concerning free will and determinism are not essential for me, however, because such questions, from a Levinasian perspective, are irrelevant – ethics is before any notion of the will and subjectivity can only be responsibility. Looking at naturalism in such a way allows the

¹¹ Conder is hesitant to even use the term "naturalism" at times. Instead, his use of the term tends to be a convenient means of organizing previous scholarship.

possibility for alternative readings that open up entirely new manners of thinking about the movement most often held as the bleakest in American letters.

Whether a valid question or not, at the heart of all these evaluations (among naturalism's detractors and proponents alike) of the role of determinism in naturalist fiction is a severe anxiety over the potential of an ethics of naturalism, a crucial concern that I share and find still complicating our understanding of the movement today and still lacking in a systematic approach. Although Conder certainly stands as one example of a systematic critical examination of naturalist ethics, culling from Hobbes and Bergson in order to locate a specific idea of responsibility, naturalist scholarship has overwhelmingly failed to go beyond simplistic moral arguments that amount to more than essentially this: naturalism, good or bad. The arguments finding an ethical potential, while necessary and providing valuable steps for my own work as well as that of scholars yet to come, fail to take into account the full ethical nuances of the fiction. This is mostly due either to a frustration with the unwieldiness of naturalism's determinism or an unwillingness to fully engage its nihilism with any specificity. In addition, although the prospects offered by these thinkers are certainly worth our examination, we should not reduce moral responsibility to the hope of meliorism. For instance, Walcutt sketches together a rather hazy conclusion that amounts to an affirmative capacity present in naturalist texts to affirm hope and faith in humankind, even amid a world of degradation (29). Pizer's argument, as alluded to above, doesn't amount to much more, although Pizer certainly makes the humanistic tradition he sees present in naturalism a pivotal part of his scholarship. No one should confuse this for a systematic approach, though, one that lends ethical specificity to the movement. Elsewhere, in the tradition of Walcutt, James R. Giles observes that even the most pessimistic examples of the school have a reformist impulse. While characters may lack freedom, author and

reader can enact social change (*The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America*). In his *Determined Fictions*, Lee Clark Mitchell sees the moral possibilities in naturalist form and aesthetics but refuses to examine these due to what he finds to be not so much a repudiation of ethics out of philosophical principle on the part of naturalists but a shared frustration these authors possessed with representative forms (3).¹² So we see that frustration and lack of specificity, in particular, have hampered previous approaches.

Luckily, the recent ethical turn in literary criticism has enabled a resurgence in evaluating the naturalist movement and its various manifestations over the last century, a resurgence that, fortunately, calls for much more systematic approaches. Ian F. Roberts' "Determinism, Free Will, and Moral Responsibility in American Literary Naturalism" salutes Pizer but also takes him to task for representing a vague, "milquetoast humanism" in his understanding of both Zola and the American literary naturalist tradition. According to Roberts, Zola's truth is a deterministic truth and at odds with humanism, which, in turn, it should also be pointed out, is at odds with naturalism's de-centering of human freedom and cosmic significance (123). Instead of following any sort of humanistic ethics, Roberts thinks that naturalist studies may best be served by placing these in conversation with the ethics of John Stuart Mill. Mill's ethics support a compatibilist conception of moral responsibility. On the other hand, deontological ethics construe actions as inherently right or wrong and regard people as morally responsible in some metaphysical sense. Roberts, however, thinks we should look to Mill in our readings of naturalist fiction, a critical viewpoint that has largely been overlooked, so much so that Roberts wonders why literary critics continue to neglect a compatibilist coalition of free will and determinism even when, in his mind,

¹² I will examine Mitchell's argument concerning naturalist form below, because it possesses productive implications for my own argument.

science and philosophy have essentially come to terms with this understanding of human agency since Hobbes.¹³ In addition to Roberts' thinking about naturalism and ethics, Rick Armstrong's "First Principles of Morals: Evolutionary Morality and American Naturalism" offers nineteenth-century social and moral evolutionary theories as viable mediums for reading naturalist authorship. Social evolutionary ethics at the time saw moral and physical fitness as indistinguishable and intertwined. Such pseudo-scientists and philosophers as John Fiske, for instance, argued that moral unfitness should (and would be) punished by physical extinction. As Armstrong argues, characters like Dreiser's Hurstwood exhibit such traits in his moral unfitness, which, consequently, results in physical and financial degeneracy. Such a fate, as this particular philosophical outlook would have it, is the appropriate one. Nonetheless, the tragedy of Hurstwood (and similar characters) cannot be underestimated as his demise is complicated, and his failure should not necessarily implicate him for blame. Armstrong thinks that an evolutionary ethics can be productive for reading naturalist fiction, but may not explain the moral complexity of such texts. Similarly, Mary E. Papke thinks that looking specifically at nineteenth-century consumer culture can be a means of identifying the particular ethical concerns and potential present in naturalist fiction. According to Papke, we may view naturalism as a byproduct of commodity culture because it not only seems the end-result of such a historical development but simultaneously seems to offer a diagnosis. Naturalism, in fact, is capable of pointing to the ways in which our infatuation with commodity culture trumps "our having to think of..." our own "moral responsibility" (298). For Papke, studying the relation between naturalist fiction and earlier periods of consumerism brings naturalism out of the narrow confines of "the late

13 I find this a questionable statement. Although Roberts' view certainly finds nothing but respect here, I'm not so sure that the debate between free will and determinism has been settled, nor am I certain that philosophy at large, at least, has come to terms with compatibilism.

nineteenth century and into our own time” (303). Indeed, we are still struggling with the allure of this culture as it continues to inflict suffering upon those in its grasp. Naturalism should certainly be viewed as a diagnosis of life under unbridled consumerism, whether during the relative free market capitalism of the 1890s or the era of the transnational corporation and finance. And there's no need why this diagnosis should not offer a portrait of the ethical possibilities that can aid in ending (or at least tempering) this suffering.

No doubt there remains much room for an ethical reading of naturalism in the wake of such scholarship, and such a reading is what I intend to offer here. Naturalism takes human degradation and suffering as the preeminent problem facing society. Approaching this suffering requires an entirely new way of thinking about ethics. Generations of critics have attempted to dispel any real moral potential in the writings of naturalist authors, simply casting such texts aside as the product of an unprecedented historical skepticism. This, however, is in fact not the case, as these works offer an abundance of moral questions and dilemmas that cannot help but reward our discourse on the relationship between ethics and literature. In fact, naturalism offers the worst in humanity while it asks us what can be done to help. The answers to this question may not be so simple, but there is no doubt that naturalism seeks to improve our condition rather than leave us out to dry.

Specifically, naturalism offers us a literature relentless in deconstructing conventional ethics, whether those authorized by religion or Kantian (or other liberal forms of) rationalism or those instructed by mass ethics like popular sentimentalism or other popular rhetorical forms (nationalism comes to mind in an author like Dos Passos, for instance). These conventional forms held sway over (and still largely do) Western philosophy, politics, and cultural life in different capacities for generations. The naturalists offer an alternative view, a perspective from

which such ethics no longer seem viable and, in fact, seem counter-productive and possibly even harmful. For many naturalists, the problem with these ethical forms stems from an inability to diagnose the sincerity of the ethical relationship as well as an over-zealousness (unwittingly as the case may sometimes be) in eradicating the particularity of this relationship along with the particularity of the other. In other words, these ethics tend to abstract the ethical relationship and often place ethical action (the decision to act upon an ethical demand) on the part of the individual agent, on the part of the actor. Naturalism, on the other hand, finds ethics to be much more harsh, much more demanding, and much more out of the hands of the agent. Morality and acting morally are gut-wrenching and infinitely demanding obligations that take the agent to the point of an overwhelming trauma, which disrupts any notion of free will and freely-offered participation we may have of the ethical relationship. Just as “The Blue Hotel” points to our culpability and folly in human suffering, as well as the overwhelming presence of this suffering and the unreasonable demands it places upon us, naturalism also offers us the possibility of confronting this suffering on its own terms (and not that of a conventional approach) and locating ethical sincerity. According to the naturalists, one does not come to this relationship of his or her own accord; rather, we are commanded forward into action by the other (a unique kind of determinism, if you will), an individual who disrupts our capacity to assume what she needs. Instead, the other in naturalist fiction presents an enigma and one that cannot be easily consumed by all-embracing convention with pretenses to providing answers for every moral dilemma. Naturalism posits moral dilemmas as demanding on their own terms.¹⁴ This disruption of free will and universality, significantly, helps answer those concerns we understandably possess about

¹⁴ The fact that naturalism never offers clear-cut guides for moral action probably helps account for our willingness to avoid a real confrontation with the moral potential of the genre.

a literature that seems to bar any notion of significant human action with its staunch and seemingly dogmatic determinism. Such a disruption of the will, whereby naturalist characters seem commanded into their actions, accompanied by a construct of ethical dilemmas without readily-tailored answers, sounds strikingly familiar to the work of the late French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In fact, it is the work of Levinas that I am now offering as a crucial starting point for only beginning our task of unlocking the ethical potential of naturalism.¹⁵

Before I offer my specific justifications for the authors and historical periods (naturalism transcends the 1890s) I have chosen for this argument, I think it imperative to again turn to the demands that Levinas places upon us as moral beings and as readers. Levinas requires out of us a giving that is far beyond any sense of ethical duty we are familiar with – it disarms us just as naturalism implodes every capacity we have to think of ethics as conventional forms of self-sacrificing. In fact, we cannot escape ethics; it's already a fact of our subjectivity and being. We are commanded to the ethical relationship by the very fact of our existing, and this is also naturalism's argument about the self. Although his thought doesn't come to prominence until the late twentieth century, Levinas provides a way for us to understand better what I see as naturalism's ethics of trauma and vulnerability as characters are thrown into traumatic encounters with others, often with very little recourse to deliberation. For Levinas, subjectivity and ethics are a dynamic of trauma, meaning that others make demands upon the self that are already prior to my consent and are beyond my reach, my capacity to fulfill and satisfy. (This, however, does

¹⁵ I should go ahead and state here that I don't necessarily see all naturalism as lending itself to a Levinasian argument; however, a significant number of naturalists do seem appealing in a Levinasian reading. I will offer my specific justifications for the authors I choose to examine in detail below. Furthermore, and it should go without saying, my argument here is just a beginning. It is certainly not comprehensive, and there is far more room for other specific ethical examinations of the fiction. In particular, I see a lot of potential for Bergsonian readings of naturalism (Conder is a good start) and possibly some room for John Dewey as well. Stuart Mill, as Roberts points out, may also be a good direction, but such a reading, with due respect, is at odds with my own.

not minimize responsibility.) The subject falsely resides in what Levinas deems its “atheist separation,” comfortable within its isolation, enjoying its “promiscuous freedom,” where it feels no obligation to anyone else if the self doesn't immediately see how it may be responsible. Such a subject thinks that it comes to the other of its own volition. However, this notion of an autonomous, freely giving self proves fictive, according to Levinas, for subjectivity is borne in a chaotic confrontation of the self with the world of others that takes us out of the smug comfort of our felt sense of autonomy. The ethical relation calls the freedom of the I into question, commanding the I forward in order to account for itself before the presence of the other emanating from what he deems the “face.” “The way in which the other presents himself,” Levinas claims, “exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face.... The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea.... It expresses itself (*Totality and Infinity* 50-51). No matter how much I may desire, I cannot reduce the other into an idea that is familiar and comfortable to me – I cannot reduce him or her into an object that I command, so to speak, by disrupting the other's individuality and irreducible particularity. When, however, the self attempts to reach its ethical capacity (which is unreachable), it does so in a giving of the self that is a vulnerability whereby the I is completely exposed to the unbearable burden of the other. As Levinas emphasizes throughout his philosophical works, ethics is not an encounter of the self with the other in the manner of comfort and reciprocity, but rather, ethics is a traumatic event that completely displaces the self's familiarity and commands a supererogatory giving and suffering on its behalf. In fact, it is striking that Levinas bathes his ethics in metaphors and imagery not only pertaining to trauma but also to nausea, masochism, persecution, and guilt. We can never really give a full account of ourselves before the other who will command more from us than we

are capable of giving, nor can we even begin to defer our responsibility before the other; rather, we are caught in a matrix of responsibility that commands us forward without heed to our own volition and without recourse. Most importantly here, Levinas's ethics of trauma provides us with no systematic ethical code, no rules or standards to live by that will help us know whether we have done our duty or not. Instead, we must engage the other on his or her own terms.

This sounds strikingly like naturalism, which refuses to systematize the ethical relationship (perhaps explaining why so many critics have ignored the school's ethical potential) and gives its characters no simple guides for moral conduct when faced with inescapable crises. These similarities suggest that we can no longer read naturalism as amoral, as unaware of the import of the ethical relationship. Admittedly, naturalism's call to responsibility is nebulous, but the call is there nonetheless in the inability of characters to distance themselves from the suffering and demands of others. Interestingly, Levinas's desire to prevent the reification of the world, self, and ethics shares a lot in common, at least in intention, with Lukacs, perhaps the most avid opponent of literary naturalism. In Lukacs' mind, naturalism only lends to the reification of objects and human relations. How then can naturalism actually counter these things through a Levinasian reading? Levinas, like naturalism, constructs ethics as a traumatic encounter, involving the absolute giving over of the self to the other in a relationship that is asymmetric and non-reciprocal, thus making unstable a coherent notion of self as well as that of the other. For Levinas and naturalism, suffering is a part of being, and we cannot escape human suffering nor can we escape those conditions of subjectivity that confer ethical responsibility. Recognition of our moral responsibility is key, even if this responsibility is prior to deliberating on what moral action we should take. Levinas bars any codified ethical approach, and this refusal on his part and that of naturalist authors points not only to the ambiguity of "correct"

moral action but also signifies the singularity of moral response (there is no all-embracing answer to every moral problem; such a panacea would deracinate the personal, the human, from the ethical relationship). Such a singularity prevents any process by which the world and individual human beings may be reified.

While Levinas helps us read naturalism, the rationale behind both my selection of particular authors and my understanding of naturalism as a movement that escapes the confines of the 1890s may not be readily apparent. I think a justification of these decisions only necessary before moving forward. Furthermore, it is imperative that I also clarify how exactly I am defining naturalism as a unified literary movement in this dissertation. The former task means that we will first have to investigate those naturalists that anticipate Levinas in their preoccupation with the underside of modernity, its mechanization of humans and bodies into machine-creatures and beasts. These naturalists we count as the classical school of naturalism – Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. For my purposes, I will focus almost exclusively on Norris and Crane in regards to classical naturalism.¹⁶ After evaluating how moments in Crane and Norris anticipate Levinasian theory, I intend on also engaging Levinas with two naturalist authors of the 1930s, in John Dos Passos and Nathanael West. These two writers are concerned, among other things, with a mass rhetoric that shapes individuals into cogs in the system of capitalism and modernity. This is particularly striking as we know the role of mass rhetoric and propaganda in fueling the Fascist machine of the Thirties and Forties, a development that would not go unnoticed by a young Levinas. Such a critique, I argue, expands

¹⁶ I see Norris and Crane's works as lending themselves with most facility to a Levinasian reading. I think Dreiser may possess some potential here as well, but it is not as readily clear how so, and for the sake of brevity, I have decided to mostly avoid a full confrontation with Dreiser. Nonetheless, I think all four share some semblance of moral potential. I'll leave this task, however, to other scholars or even my own future endeavors.

our location of naturalism and those works that qualify as “naturalist” beyond the 1890s-1900s and offers a radically different way of thinking about the school's philosophical concerns.

Lastly, my understanding of naturalism here is twofold, but obviously interconnected. Basically, I have two distinct notions of naturalism: one is Naturalism proper (that collection of authors from the late 1800s to today that fall under a methodology of determinism as a response to realism and romanticism's respective plot structures); the other is naturalism as unified through ethical affinities (such a definition does not account for the entire movement), which is my primary definition here. The former is unified methodologically while the latter coheres philosophically. Although a good deal of naturalist writers largely seem fascinated with common philosophical issues (like agency, freedom, determinism [beyond form], and metaphysics), I agree with such critics as Pizer, who claim that the entire school cannot necessarily be unified philosophically (although philosophical determinism often seems to dominate). Instead, like Pizer, I find the school unified at large through methodology and form. However, while this understanding of Naturalism proper will also be critical here, I see a group of naturalist authors who are indeed united not only in their concerns with method in rendering the tales of human lives amid modern society, but also united in their moral outlook for humanity – an ethics of trauma best gleaned through an awareness of the Levinasian alternative. In fact, attention to form/method helps reveal these ethical inquiries in the texts and, as such, an awareness of naturalism's relationship with realist and romantic forms will be indispensable. Realist and romantic forms offer their own worldviews and moral prospects, whether through plot structure (or other aspects of form), through their respective constructs of the individual, agency, and the nature of human relationships, or both. These inform generations of naturalist authors, responding to what they see as flaws in their predecessors' (or peers', as the case may be)

structures and constructs. This approach aids a better grasp on naturalism's confrontation with conventional forms of morality, whether these be elements of Christianity, philosophical systems that depend upon rationalism and a humanist/liberal notion of self, or forms of nineteenth-century bourgeois meliorism, like the commercialization of emotional response we see in popular sentimentalism, for instance.

Sentimentalist literature, for one, will play a significant role in my next chapter, as we turn towards an examination of those historical factors and discursive cultural practices in 1800s America that helped create the naturalist moment, not out of solidarity but as a response to the horrors of unfettered capitalism (for instance) and the inadequacies of conventional forms of response. No account of naturalism and its ethical concerns should go without an acknowledgment of the adverse effects of free market capitalism and the competitive nature of a rising consumer society. Certainly, capitalism enables investment, job creation, and economic growth, while also often aiding increased wealth among members of any society, not just America for that matter. At the same time, there are negative effects, and it is these implications that create inequalities in human relationships that cannot be ignored. The authors that emerge during the mid to late nineteenth century, whether realist, sentimentalist, or naturalist, directly and indirectly respond to these particular economic and cultural developments. The key in Chapter One will be to identify how both historical developments in American society at this time and certain cultural and artistic practices set the stage for a reaction on the part of a generation of dissatisfied naturalist writers, disgusted at the inadequacy of previous artistic forms but mostly outraged by a society seeming to increasingly turn its back on the helpless and needy. Their diagnosis, as I argue, however, does not prove an easy or facile one. Thinking about ethics as trauma does not provide easy answers to the ills of nineteenth century American society. At

least a Levinasian reading can help us determine why these particular naturalist authors might have sought so intransigently to make us witnesses to human suffering and its unreasonable demands. In that regard, acknowledgment will also be given to how the same cultural and metaphysical forces weighing upon early literary naturalism also set the stage for an ethics like that of Levinas. The same conditions of possibility that enable the naturalists also enable Levinas and, as I will argue, it is not until Levinas that we find the naturalist perspective articulated.

II. CAPITALISM, COMMERCIALIZED DISCOURSE, AND THE NATURALIST MOMENT

Although a historical awareness is not necessary for understanding a Levinasian reading of naturalism (Levinas's ethics is ahistorical, at least from his perspective), it certainly provides a more informed approach to unlocking naturalism's response to capitalism and the various cultures of solidarity and consolation that spring from its disruption of traditional community. The single most important development affecting the moral outlook of American naturalists, in my view, is the arrival of capitalism and its culture of commodity ownership and consumption. Papke, for one, sees an examination of the naturalists' awareness of the cultural byproducts of capitalism – its wealth disparities, corruption in government and business, etc. – as crucial in unlocking the potential of naturalist texts and in expanding the margins of the historical accessibility of naturalism, making it clearer how the genre spans from the turn of the century to our own time, rather than losing stylistic and philosophical coherence (as well as cultural import) after the 1890s. Even while this may be the case, and a more extensive study should take into consideration transmutations of capitalism, I would like to focus the conversation now specifically upon mid- to late nineteenth century capitalism, which gave rise to the first wave naturalists of the 1890s.

Capitalism brings social forces into play that raise some very important metaphysical questions, questions that plague the first naturalist generation and their successors. As early as Pizer in the 1980s, the negative consequences of decades of poorly managed production and labor and an unchecked industrialization starting in the middle half of the nineteenth century are seen as very much influential in the response of the early naturalist authors, beneficiaries (if, oddly, we might call them that) of retrospection; however, the relationship still remains largely

unexamined. The mid-1800s saw a shift towards a largely *laissez faire* approach to economics, characterized by vacillating cycles of boom and bust; the period signaled remarkable economic growth and vast financial gains, expanding markets, and new opportunities at the same time it marked increasing discrepancies in wealth among American citizens. On the one hand, tremendous growth occurred in the railroad, banking, coal, steel, and oil industries, providing numerous jobs and an unprecedented spark to the American GDP. According to twentieth-century economist Raymond W. Goldsmith, the Rate of Growth of Reproducible Tangible Wealth (RTW) among the entire U.S. population (Total Wealth) grew by an average rate of 5.2 percent per year between 1850-1900 as opposed to 4.4 percent annual RTW in the half-century before (269). Other economists, including Milton Friedman, have noted that the 1880s, in particular, mark an inordinate rise in RTW and capital investment relative to any other decade, even during the latter half of the century.¹⁷ Obviously, this increase in wealth affected not only the wealthy but those seeking sustainable income, providing employment opportunities for a growing populace and the prospects for social mobility to individuals willing to work.

On the other hand, such opportunity often proved illusory and falsely optimistic. The economic climate beginning during the mid-century created countless social ills that would have far-reaching implications beyond the nineteenth century. “Because of its vastness, the richness of its resources, the lure of its opportunities,” Frank Browning and John Gerassi write in *The American Way of Crime*, “it [America] could not help but become a living, thriving experiment in social Darwinism” (204). The dramatic proximity of the poor and the wealthy in urban centers, for instance, facilitated class strife and antagonisms, frequently devolving into what might have

¹⁷ *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1963. Co-authored with Anna Jacobson Schwartz.

seemed a struggle for sheer survival for those at the bottom of the social ladder. Growing numbers of Americans wondered why they weren't allowed at the proverbial "table" while groveling with one another under detestable living conditions. By the late 1870s, for example, New York City had 25 percent unemployment and an estimated 30,000 homeless (Browning and Gerassi 226). The prospects for the unemployed were not much better nationally, with an estimated 3 million either out of work or unemployable out of a total population of 45 million (Browning and Gerassi 226). The cause of such high unemployment rates can be traced to the mismanagement of wealth by the U.S. and state governments and the corruption of big business leaders seeking favors from maleficent and dishonest politicians – mismanagement and corruption that led to frequent economic downturns like the Panics of 1857 and 1893, just to name a couple. Additionally, with little government regulation and with little cooperation between owners, on one side, and workers and union leaders on the other, labor grievances were not unfounded:

In the 1880s the average American worked 14 to 18 hours a day for subsistence pay. In New York City, bakers put in at least 84-hour weeks and 120 hours was not uncommon. And while the trusts consolidated their power, 5,183 businesses worth over \$200 million failed. Almost 2 million people lost their jobs.

(Browning and Gerassi 213)

Workers, strained by long workdays and dangerous work environments, demanded healthier working conditions and more favorable, sustainable wages – not an unfair asking price in light of the earnings procured by their corporate owners. “While workers starved or died on the job (in 1900, 2,550 railroad workers were killed and 39,643 were so badly injured they could not resume their duties; they were not covered by insurance), the rich of the Gilded Age...enjoyed their

wealth as never before” (Browning and Gerassi 213). The so-called “robber barons,” corporate pioneers of oil, coal, banking, and steel – men with the names of Morgan, Rockefeller, Gould, and Vanderbilt – built vast empires through means fair and foul. The wealth that the private sector accumulated during this period is unfathomable and had never before been witnessed. J.P. Morgan, as just one example, eventually controlled 60 percent of the nation's steel, according to Browning and Gerassi. His United States Steel Trust employed 170,000 workers and controlled over a thousand miles of railroad. By 1912, he presided over an empire that included 112 corporations and was worth \$22 billion (Browning and Gerassi 212).

No wonder, then, that left-leaning writers and intellectuals were concerned over the increasing gap between those with wealth and those who buttressed that wealth with the labor of their backs during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Numerous examples of fiction documenting the travails of the working class or the horrors of the expansive financial system emerged during this time. Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, for instance, critiques the imposition of Wall Street upon human relationships and interaction. While the lawyer is incensed and equally perplexed by the mysterious behavior of his scrivener, the reader gets the sense that what Bartleby is denying is a set of conditions and values that places men like himself into menial positions, separating them from non-professional forms of communion and from nature as well. Melville was certainly not alone in his critique. In *Life in the Iron-Mills*, Rebecca Harding Davis channels the disgust with such wealth disparity and deplorable labor environments in her writing of what may stand as the first indictment of American capitalist culture – its conscious “disarmament” of the common workingman or woman's means to improve their lives – by a “naturalist” author in the U.S., nearly thirty years before the arrival of the naturalist generation of the 1890s. In her tale, Harding Davis condemns those forces beyond his control that lead a

workingman like Wolfe to his ultimate demise. Wolfe is a lot like his tortured statue, the product of industrial debris and dwindling hope – in other words, the product of his environment (not unlike *Bartleby*). While the wealthy owners and investors can sojourn temporarily in this environment, observing his work, Wolfe inhabits this spot permanently, and his desperation can end in only one unfortunate result. Harding Davis, much like Zola, Norris, and Crane, wonders what are the conditions that produce Wolfe's death and how might we remedy such conditions.

If Harding Davis and Melville witnessed the beginning of the mid-century economic proliferation, then the later naturalists had even more material to work with after nearly half-a-century more of these traumatic economic booms and busts, coupled with the American government's persistence in siding with the forces of industry often at the expense of the worker. Furthermore, accelerated ethnic and cultural animosity influenced the general outlook of the latter part of the century, as many “Anglo-Americans” harbored animus towards the rising numbers of immigrants (men like Harding Davis's Wolfe), many of whom offered competition to the American working class's access to jobs. Nativist propaganda and sentiment, coupled with economic schizophrenia, only added to the general sense of unease looming as the country drifted in uncertainty towards the twentieth century.

Amid these ethnic tensions and the social inequalities of an unchecked expansion of capitalist economics was the sense shared by many intellectuals and everyday Americans alike that the world was becoming more and more a “smaller” place, one in which the comfort offered by traditional bonds of communal identification no longer held tight against things like existential doubt about humanity's place in the cosmos, secularization, and perceived intrusion upon conventional mores. The very idea of community itself comes under close scrutiny in modernity, wherein economic relationships seem to characterize social relations rather than

shared value systems or fellowship.¹⁸ Emile Durkheim thought this remarkable phenomenon, wherein the economic contract conditions the social relationships of individuals, the key problem facing modern societies.¹⁹ It's no wonder, then, that the first wave naturalists, such as Norris, Crane, London, and Dreiser, thought the late nineteenth century in dire straits, individuals constantly battered by and, as a result, detached from previous communal forms of comfort and identification offered by such sources as religion and integral shared social values like the integrity of individual choice, for instance. As a consequence, some writers sought new forms of social attachment and cohesion that could be harmonized with the socioeconomic dynamics of the capitalist market. In *Social Criticism and Nineteenth-Century American Fictions*, Robert Shulman makes the case that much of mid- to late century American literature, from Melville to Dreiser, is a direct response to this rift between individual and public largely created by the forces of capitalist culture. For Shulman, the capitalist model usurps previous models of human interaction:

Along with all the benefits of American capitalism, the underlying imperatives to expand, to maximize profits, and to commodify relations – to make consumer and commodity exchange relations the model for human relations – these powerful tendencies have fragmented American society, whose divisions often reappear as internal splits within individuals. (3)

The inevitable outcome of such internal division in the subject and in society becomes the source

¹⁸ Obviously modernity does not mark the death of traditional forms of community or conventional value systems. The Enlightenment, capitalism, and industrialization, however, are things that mark a fundamental shift in Western intellectual thought and culture, calling into question the ability of traditional values to consolidate communities without inherent problems.

¹⁹ Durkheim solves this problem through his notion of the “cult of the individual.” However, as the critic Adam B. Seligman points out in *The Problem of Trust*, Durkheim's solution here proves rather unsatisfactory. In fact, according to Seligman, Durkheim simply re-articulates the bonds of pre-modern society rather than embracing the difference of modernity.

of inquiry for such writers as Dreiser, for instance, who examines self-fragmentation through the workings of the market, where, according to Shulman, “the production and manipulation of consumer needs were becoming integral” in absorbing the nearly overwhelming explosion of goods (284). Pizer, for one, thinks naturalist fiction attempts to heal this fracture by drawing a continuum between humanism and modern selfhood; this, however, might be a simplification of naturalism's confrontation with capitalism, and it is not clear exactly how authors like Norris and Crane wed humanist selfhood to the implications of modernity. A better alternative to attempting to solve Pizer's dilemma might come in evaluating other responses to capitalism.

Responses to the problems mentioned above were not solely the domain of naturalism. In fact, the century or two leading up to the naturalist moment saw multiple attempts to revitalize conventional forms of identification in the wake of an increasingly fractured social world, where individuals no longer enjoyed what was thought of (perhaps too romantically at times) the relatively uniform social values of a pre-modern age. These attempts at consolidating the public sphere and repairing modern communities must be examined as well, if we are to comprehend fully naturalism's dialogue with ethical alternatives. Nineteenth century meliorism, often indebted to Enlightenment beliefs in the necessity of social improvement (emphasis on reason, effective modern governance, etc.), includes theories promulgating the bio-moral development and evolution of human beings²⁰ (and, by extension, communities) and discourses of bourgeois humanitarianism, predicated upon sympathy with those less fortunate. One example of such

20 By “bio-moral,” I mean those theories (influenced by pseudo-science) that often integrated what was thought to be the implications of Darwin's thought into a narrative of biological and moral betterment. In fact, a whole scientific and intellectual literature sprung up from such an outlook. Authors like Spencer and Stoppard characterize this group. Not coincidentally, perceived negative moral behavior was often attached to physical degeneracy at the time. The thinking is that higher physical types coincide with a developed moral sense. Guarding oneself against physical and moral degeneracy, then, could lead to an improved society, particularly in America, where racial and ethnic diversity could weaken the “American race” if left unchecked. Norris seems influenced by such theories at times in his texts, particularly in *McTeague* and *Vandover and the Brute*.

meliorism, in particular, is the capitalist byproduct of popular sentimentalism. By labeling this school as a “byproduct” of capitalism, I mean to suggest that the movement often makes a commodity out of emotion as a bid for making itself viable among an emerging middle class readership and public that values what proves to be simplified ethical portraits (not requiring too much out of the reader other than his or her sympathy and rewarding said reader for his or her sympathetic identification in the process), contrary to the aims of philosophical sentimentalism, which neither reduces moral response to a series of generic formulae, like weeping displays or meretricious scenes of suffering, for instance, nor seeks egoistic gratification like its popular counterpart. Ironically, popular sentimentalism plays a crucial role in shaping the aesthetics and moral outlook of the naturalist school and, while popular sentimentalism certainly possesses its merits,²¹ the naturalists found its narratives of suffering and moral triumph flimsy, a romanticization of ethics out of touch with real human problems. Perhaps no other popular discourse weighed heavier upon the naturalist imagination than that produced by the commodification of human relationships in popular sentimentalism. Even Harding Davis's early naturalist text seems precariously torn between naturalist determinism and sentimentality, for instance, obviously influenced by popular sentimentalism's attempt to resurrect traditional community (in a world marked by commodity consumption) not so much through shared cultural values as through the faculties of affect – those bonds that feel as if they connect us as human beings at an emotional (or even instinctual) level and, significantly, those bonds that can easily tug at the heartstrings of an emerging readership of middle class customers.

Before approaching popular sentimentalism and its various manifestations, it's important

21 Namely in its role in abolition and in exposing the plight of the urban working class. I'll discuss this in more detail below.

to note that sentimentalism is a multivalent discourse. While largely the product of an expanding market and bourgeois culture, popular sentimentalism owes much of its moral outlook to philosophical sentimentalism, although the two should not be conflated. Philosophical sentimentalism arose in the Enlightenment and, in the minds of some Western intellectuals, was a valuable way to counter two troubling developments: 1) the loss of social unity throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of modernization, and 2) the Enlightenment's overbearing emphasis upon rational actors and free will. By cultivating sensibility, a heightened ability to feel and to be affected, the individual could participate in a reinvigorated community which found social bonds in sympathy and solidarity rather than economic (or rational) transactions. One aspect of the Enlightenment, and the most well-known at that, was its emphasis on reason – the assumption that principled and rational reasoning could facilitate social bonds between human agents (fully aware of themselves and the world around them) and help build a cohesive, well-functioning civil society. Such a view construes reason as the basis for civic relationships and morality. Kant, for instance, thinks that the self can make judgments about universal rights and behave accordingly. Moreover, as John Rawls states in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, the social contract, for Kant, is a product of the “idea of reason and as such it is nonhistorical” (364). Although Kant is not representative of all Enlightenment idealists who stressed the potential of mind, we see how an emphasis on reason's perceived universality influences ideas about human relationships. There is another component of the Enlightenment, however, which was characterized by a reaction against the view that solidarity could be achieved only through appeals to the universal applications of reason. Although still empirical, this thought emphasized the principled use of our emotional faculties instead of relying purely upon reason as moral motivation. Thinkers like the Earl of Shaftesbury, for

example, stressed the integral role of the passions rather than the intellect in enabling affective kinship among disparate agents, each consumed with his or her diverse interests and aims. Later philosophers, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, take their moral cues from Shaftesbury, claiming that altruistic human relationships could begin with moral sentiments and observations, especially since, from this line of thought, reason alone cannot possibly serve as motivation to act ethically. From the perspective of sentimentalism, humans are emotional beings – emotion stands as our most basic reaction to stimuli and, for this reason, must possess some role in morality. Contemporary critic Joseph Duke Filonowicz maintains that this assumption is the product of observation and not without practical application. “[I]f self-convenience is the mold that forms the grand majority of human actions,” he claims, “and if helping behavior, altruism, if you will, does break the mold, however seldom or momentarily, then what motivates it must be something that can actually burst the bubble of self-absorption that we all seem to wear around our heads” (15-16). This “something” capable of bursting the bubble, for Filonowicz, is emotional response. Human relationships cannot help but require and strain our emotional potential and capabilities. “This is what appears to me to be happening when one individual pauses to help another for his sake” (15), he writes. Understandably, sentimentalism meets stiff resistance from those who think predicating ethics and moral response upon emotional impulse leads to an obfuscation of the ethical demands placed upon us by others. Furthermore, many of these same critics claim that sentimentalism is the product of an historically-conditioned consciousness, the product of an emerging marketplace and bourgeois culture with its seeming exaggeration of self-display. Filonowicz responds by pointing to the bias and naivety inherent in such criticisms, as well as the fact that these views cannot escape history either:

Modern diffidence toward these earliest Moralists' enterprise betrays a

phobia of antirationalism or subjectivism that is itself likely to be highly historically conditioned. It perpetuates a misunderstanding of their thought as well as an overly narrow and probably outmoded conception of the proper task of ethics. (45)

Obviously, we cannot simply cast sentimentalism aside for its philosophical methodology nor its far-reaching cultural influences, which made the cultivating of affect, from the perspective of the first wave Sentimentalists (like Shaftesbury who writes at the turn of the eighteenth century), a task of the utmost earnestness. In fact, the period between the mid eighteenth century and the mid nineteenth century was marked by so-called “cults of sensibility,” as men and women alike were encouraged to essentially “train” themselves to feel a heightened sense of things, to stir at the call upon the heart and to feel deeply the demands of others.²² “To be endowed with sensibility in its most attractive...form,” claims Andrew Burstein in *Sentimental Democracy: The Evolution of America’s Romantic Self-Image*, “meant to have an enlarged capacity to perform benevolent deeds, to show affection readily, to shed tears and empathize strongly with human suffering” (7). As Burstein notes regarding Shaftesbury's approach to the moral consolidation of the public sphere, “[S]ociety was made strong and cohesive through the cultivation of intimate connections, the natural, generous affections” (11). In a sense, sentimentalism is a practice that seeks to secure community in a world becoming increasingly divided by enabling the natural affections of human beings for society and charity, while also challenging those widening class divisions produced by capitalism. Even while sentimentalism recognizes such things as poverty, need, and social dissonance, the discipline cultivates the self as a moral foundation and center for

22 It's no accident that sentimentalism and humanitarianism develop largely in the middle class around the same time.

tackling such tasks, which can be dangerous and even subversive to its own project. Once brought into society as a general principle of proper living and conduct, fellow-feeling moved beyond a philosophical outlook and aspiration to become a cultural phenomenon and practice, encouraging sensibility and an aesthetics of the self perhaps at the expense of social action. It's not hard to see, then, how sentimentalism, a practice that calls for ethical motivation and self-display, can lend itself easily to commodification in a burgeoning consumer market at the time.

Perhaps no other literature did more to influence actual social change in America as well as elicit vitriolic detraction from its opponents than that of nineteenth-century sentimentalism. Popular sentimentalism responded directly to the crisis of capitalism by identifying class problems and divisions, condemning systems of slavery and free or low-wage labor, and exposing such ills as dangerous working conditions and child labor. In order to enable this critique, however, popular sentimentalism has been castigated for its aesthetic vacuity. The movement utilizes an entire series of codified plots, characters, and developments – hardly unpredictable and hardly original as the case most often seems. In fact, the genre's formulaic typologies also codify ethics into a series of visible sufferings (often highly noticeable) and appropriate responses that are either successful, or at least noble, on the behalf of characters seeking to help. (If a response is lacking, then the tragedy of the situation and of the individual weighs heavily upon readers' hearts and they feel the social failure that led to such a tragic outcome.) Despite this codification, popular sentimentalism possesses a real capacity to initiate social change and aid interpersonal interactions. We must not overlook the historical and cultural significance of a novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in American abolitionism, for instance, or countless others for educating the reading public about the woeful labor conditions of numerous American workers and the dire positions of their families. While recognizing the emotional

fabrication frequently present in sentimental scenes, Jane Tompkins thinks that we should not undervalue the impact of nineteenth-century popular sentimentalism. In *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, Tompkins argues that sentimental fiction possesses the potential to connect the reader with political and cultural reality:

Once in possession of the system of beliefs that undergirds the patterns of sentimental fiction, it is possible for modern readers to see how its tearful episodes and frequent violations of probability were invested with a structure of meanings that fixed these works, for nineteenth-century readers, not in the realm of fairy tale or escapist fantasy, but in the very bedrock of reality. (127)

According to Tompkins, sentimental fiction engages readers in both the moral dilemmas and social conflicts of the day, offering a system of codified approaches (an economical ethics, if you will) that even the most uneducated readers still might recognize as carrying the utmost cultural significance and, therefore, also recognize how to respond properly. For Tompkins, criticism that denies sentimentalism's moral and aesthetic potential falls prey to socially and historically contingent perspectives. "When critics dismiss sentimental fiction because it is out of touch with reality," Tompkins writes, "they do so because the reality *they* perceive is organized according to a different set of conventions for constituting experience" (159-60). As Tompkins continues, "The real naiveté is to think that that attack is launched from no perspective whatsoever, or that its perspective is disinterested and not culture-bound in the way the sentimental novelists were" (159-60). In other words, while detractors of sentimentalism find it limited by its historical myopia, these critics, too, fail to realize how such a discourse could prove valuable within its own time, even if it may seem weak and highly limited today.

Even so, opponents of sentimentalism have rightful cause in their argument with the

cultural form, and this attack is no product merely of twentieth-century irony and historicism. As early as Melville, some American authors and critics were identifying the inadequacies of sentimentalism as an authentic moral response to human suffering. As already discussed, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* attacks conventional forms of sympathetic identification on the part of readers with characters, claiming that the emotional basis of such a connection is often induced on false terms. One only has to look at the Lawyer's sense of charity and giving for Melville's opinion of a popular morality fueled by the emotional sentiments of the self. On the European side as well, authors like Gustav Flaubert condemn popular sentimentalism in its alliance with bourgeois consumerism and morality. *Madame Bovary* scathingly critiques attempts to put bourgeois sensibility and popular romanticism into fiction, often resulting in what Flaubert views as a warped sense of reality. Such views of sentimental fiction share much in common with more contemporary criticism. In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas argues that sentimentalism stands completely oblivious to numerous sociopolitical realities.

“[S]entimentalism might be defined as the political sense obfuscated or gone rancid,” she states; “Sentimentalism...never exists except in tandem with failed political consciousness. A relatively recent phenomenon whose appearance is linked with capitalist development, sentimentalism seeks and offers the distraction of sheer publicity” (254). For Douglas, sentimentalism is the product of a consumer society that places surface (physical display and personal possessions) above depth in not only its existential outlook but also in its art and cultural forms. As she states, “Involved as it is with the exhibition and commercialization of the self, sentimentalism cannot exist without an audience. It has no content but its own exposure, and it invests exposure with a kind of final significance” (254).²³ There is a certain level of performativity in the production of

23 In “What is Sentimentality?,” June Howard argues that we need to move beyond the so-called “Douglas-

sentimental characters, their acts the result of a mystification of real-world events in order to elicit certain reader responses; such performances, then, also ask readers (albeit perhaps indirectly) to exercise their performative capacities in response to the suffering of their fellows by which a degree of falseness and even moral hedonism attaches itself to sentimental response. The sentimental self is thus a performative piece, from such a perspective, and the extent to which we may engage with others using authentic emotional response becomes much more difficult when under the influence of a sentimental outlook. Although her criticism may at times unfairly ignore sentimentalism's significant social gains, Douglas condemns sentimentalism for its commercialization of human emotions in generic displays, which serves, in her mind, no other purpose but inauthentic moral indulgence or egoism.

Offering such a glimpse into popular sentimentalism, rather than some other version of nineteenth-century meliorism, may at first seem gratuitous, yet (while it may be no more exceptional on its own than any other meliorist discourse) sentimentalism stands as possibly the most significant aesthetic force in motivating the literary naturalists.²⁴ As discussed above, we already know how influential romantic fiction was in developing the aesthetic of Norris, in particular: those “vast” and “terrible” dramas that could shake us to the bone only by offering a melodramatic depiction of the human state. Looking at a novel like Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, we also see another example of the influence of romantic, popular, and sentimental

Tompkins” debate. For Howard, previous studies of sentimentalism have been reductive, frequently ignoring the “systematic distinction between sentiment and nineteenth century domestic ideology” (63). Furthermore, not only does our understanding of things like sentiment and sentimentality need a “transdisciplinary” approach, but we also need to rid our arguments of an inherent gender-bias, associating sentimentalism with the domestic fiction of some nineteenth century female authors. While I obviously see popular sentimentalism as misguided (although well-intentioned), my argument has drawn a distinction between eighteenth century philosophical sentimentalism and those popular discourses designed for marketable consumption by middle- (predominantly) and lower class readers.

24 My apologies to the realism school of naturalist studies.

fictions. Quite simply put, popular sentimentalism weighed preponderantly upon the figurative shoulders of the early naturalists and, while its aesthetic may have had varying degrees of popularity with individual naturalist authors, the significance of sentimentalism's moral outlook cannot be understated. In popular sentimentalism, the naturalists witnessed a fiction that completely denied the reality of social life under more advanced stages of capitalism, offering what the naturalists perceived to be false terms of consolation. It is not surprising, then, that, given readers' familiarity with such conventions and its cultural import, some naturalist authors would use the formal traits of such a fiction in order to turn it on its head and direct our attention to the actual implications of capitalism.

When we look at the work of Frank Norris and Stephen Crane, for example, we see how an awareness of sentimentalism influences their work and outlook. We tend to think of the break between naturalism and sentimentalism as complete, yet the line that divides the two schools is much thinner than we may think. We often think of sentimentalism as subjective and sloppy, naturalism as objective and deterministic, for example; however, the plot structures and techniques of each school are not so easily proscribed. Texts like *McTeague*, *Vandover and the Brute*, and *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* often blur the line between sentimental and naturalist fiction, much of sentimental literature's formulae serving to populate and animate the naturalist world. The tragedy of the burly, dumb dentist that makes us feel intensely the travails of home life; the plot of moral demise that spurs Vandover's life's direction; and the social isolation and death of the down-on-her-luck young prostitute all risk submerging naturalist narrative below the thin line separating it from the sentimental. Howard has discussed the affinities of naturalist and sentimental fiction at some length, particularly focusing upon the notions of "home" and "domesticity" in the two genres. In her opinion, both naturalism and sentimentalism share an

innate obsession with the domestic. This obsession encourages the centrality of family in sentimentalism but finds the family burdensome and overbearing in naturalism (178). Howard is right in this regard, but her analysis needs expanding. Although critics like Tompkins cite sentimentalism as a direct critique of capitalism (and, indeed, it's difficult to argue with her on that point), the difference between the two school's respective social critiques is one of degree and response. Unlike sentimentalism, naturalist authors share a suspicion of self-congratulatory beneficence and what may very well be sheer self-satisfaction garnered from the process of reading sentimentalist texts. What we find most shocking in sentimentalist literature naturalism amplifies. The extent to which the naturalists emphasize the brutality of capitalism, its culture(s) of false consolation (like sentimentalism), and our inability to find easy solutions overwhelms us as readers – not so much to trigger consolatory emotions but to leave us with a sense of abandonment as our previous moral and cultural discourses unravel. For writers like Norris, Crane, and Dos Passos and West later, popular sentimentalism and rhetoric offer marketable solutions, not real ones.

In the historical climate of late nineteenth century American capitalism – with its harsh work environments and degrading living conditions for the urban poor, its unprecedented obsession with commodities and fashionable consumer-display among an emerging middle class, and its commercialized artforms and ethical approaches – it's easy to see how the groundwork was laid for a new generation of authors and ethical thinkers in the literary naturalists. Changing historical circumstances warranted a new approach to what increasingly seemed outmoded moral systems. Meliorist discourses cannot be faulted for seeking human improvement and programs of social betterment, yet we can criticize these for the direction pursued in attempting to achieve such valuable goals. Furthermore, thinking about ethics from the perspective of the rational actor

after Darwin becomes exponentially more difficult. It may be that we cannot really come to terms with things like determinism (at least not on our own terms or principles); instead, we may have to pursue an ethics that doesn't necessarily posit humankind's betterment as a given but, rather, works with our actual conditions in order to improve our lot. We see now that the crisis of capitalism, indeed the crisis that is the late nineteenth century at large, stands as a crisis in morality, not altogether dissimilar from the moral crisis produced half-a-century later in the wake of our learning about such places as Auschwitz. While Levinas writes in the aftermath of the Holocaust – an era in which Adorno thought poetry now unthinkable, cruel, and barbaric – we see the moral groundwork for such an ethics in the earlier thought of the American literary naturalists, and both seem aware of the implications of popular sentimentalist thinking. In fact, Levinas, naturalism, and sentimentalism all see suffering as center to their morality. Social and existential conditions alike make life dangerous, traumatic, and harsh. Furthermore, all see human emotion as a useful (and unavoidable) tool – we are all capable of connecting on some emotional basis, and such a connection is not necessarily undesirable. We feel the tragedy of McTeague and the Swede, no matter how despicable they may be, just as we feel the horrifying shadow of the Holocaust in Levinas (and the desire to avoid such an event happening again) and the need for solidarity with fellow human beings suffering under the duress of slavery or harsh work environments in sentimentalism. Although this is the case, both the naturalists and Levinas posit a discourse like popular sentimentalism as fundamentally unsuitable, its universalizing of bourgeois emotion and selfhood eschewing the nature of human relationships. In fact, Levinas helps us explain the amplified difference between the naturalist understanding of human emotion and moral response with that of the sentimentalist. This need not imply a straight correlation between the two camps, that Levinas was directly influenced by literary naturalism or that he

read the aesthetic theory or cultural criticism of any one naturalist author; indeed, this is not what I intend to suggest. Rather, in the works of the first generation American literary naturalists, we find the origin of a unique ethical alternative that realizes articulation in Emmanuel Levinas, whose work is precisely the place I would like to now turn.

III. LEVINAS AND THE ETHICS OF TRAUMA

American literary naturalism asks something entirely different from its readers: it asks us to completely push aside our previous assumptions about ourselves and our actions and how these function together in the world. Sentimentalism, for instance, gives us a choice; it encourages us to act out of some innate sense of our own goodness or charity. It also enacts humanist and bourgeois precepts as universal law, and certainly there has to be fundamental flaws in any system that defines emotion and feeling through its own unique set of cultural principles, like Enlightenment or bourgeois sensibility. Not only does sentimentalism construct the self as central to moral response, it defines the self as coherent in the process. Perhaps the self as a unitary, fully-cognizant agent doesn't adequately describe our being, and because of this, perhaps the de-centering of the self that we see in naturalism, for example, calls for a new approach to moral conduct. If the self is no longer the key factor in moral duty and action – in other words, if we cannot rely upon the self any longer as a moral agent who freely comes to the ethical relationship and determines how he or she should proceed – then we should rightfully call for some sort of alternative. Indeed, naturalism makes such a radical and controversial move, and, while generations of critics have struggled to come to terms with naturalism's moral outlook, Levinas offers us a useful and appropriate route towards understanding the naturalist dilemma and unlocking its potential. Levinas may arrive as a theorist over half a century after the first generation of naturalist authors, but his ethics are nonetheless a harsh (yet promising) response to life in an age of modern turbulence and trauma, a fact that makes him directly relevant to any discussion of American naturalism.

As I suggested earlier, Levinas provides a way for us to harmonize determinism with responsibility, and this directly coincides with naturalism's construct of social obligation even if

characters may initially seem absolved of responsibility. According to Levinas, the suffering of others constitutes our own identity, making obligation inescapable; thus, ethics is the precondition of being and subjectivity. This is essentially what is meant by his famous mantra, “Ethics before ontology.” By my having been born and brought into relations with others, brought into society and, indeed, living in society, I am already given over to others: my subjectivity is already pressed upon by others and they call me to their aid, defense, and reckoning. Levinas is so persistent about the absolute demands placed upon us by subjectivity that Critchley depicts Levinas's construct of being as neuroses:

Levinas describes the relation of infinite responsibility to the other as a trauma....

In short, the Levinasian ethical subject is a traumatic neurotic.... The point here is that, for Levinas, the ethical demand is a traumatic demand, it is something that comes from outside the subject, from a heteronomous source, but which leaves its imprint within the subject. At its heart, the ethical subject is marked by an experience of hetero-affectivity. In other words, the inside of my inside is somehow outside, the core of my subjectivity is exposed to otherness. (61)

Levinas rejects the idea of a self-determining subject (one that traditional moral ideals are predicated upon). Instead, he insists we are the product of our relations with others, our indebtedness to our fellows as the basis of our being, our living in the world of others. While Levinas's notion of determinism may not be one that confirms conventional notions of social and biological determinism (for instance, Levinas thinks us still capable of actions that are intentional, of our own volition, rather than merely instinctual),²⁵ his notion of subjectivity positions the self in a

25 Even intention is something that Levinas occludes, however. We are granted our intentions, but these conscious actions are on the side of the self and not the other, according to Levinas. Intention doesn't matter so much in the

veritable matrix of impressions, words, and commands that others press upon us. This is a setting we cannot escape because it is the condition of our being and consciousness. Levinas's ethical approach therefore cannot start with the self. Levinas posits the ego as uncomfortable and unsettled in the ethical relationship. This is because ethics do not belong to the self, the "I," or the "Me," but, rather, belong to the other, the indescribable and mysterious.

Levinas's intellectual project is marked by an attempt to subvert what he sees as the impoverished trajectory of Western philosophy over the last century with its construct of Being. In particular, much of the epistemological and ontological conceptions of modern philosophy, according to Levinas, tend to favor a one-dimensional understanding of the self and its position in the world (one that positions the self as facilitator and arbiter), rather than one that finds the self's position far more precarious and complex, subject to the indelible impressions left by others. In his philosophical predecessors, most notably Husserl (transcendental idealism) and Heidegger (ontological hermeneutics), Levinas finds a neglect of proper metaphysics, leaving philosophy, according to Levinas, to misguided conceptions about the self's relations with others and avoiding the true extent of the self's vulnerability in the world. As Levinas claims, practices like Western ontology ignore the preeminence of the other in its relationship with the "I." Ontology, according to Levinas, consumes otherness into concepts that esteem the self and sameness above all – that is, the manner in which consciousness confronts the world and appropriates objects. For instance, in Levinas's mind, Husserl's phenomenology only approaches the world as an estimation of the self, rather than completely separate and invulnerable – an appropriating outlook that construes the self as the center of the epistemological, and even moral,

Levinasian formulation as what is required out of us by the other. Ethics starts with the other and not our own intentions. In fact, intention is antithetical to ethics in Levinas.

universe. “Ontology, which reduces the other to the same,” he states, “promotes freedom – the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other” (*TI* 42).

According to Levinas, consciousness and being cannot reach a point of objectivity (the goal of phenomenology, for example), a point from which the world may be subject to the self instead of the other.²⁶ Instead, the self is immersed in a dynamic world of otherness, of unfamiliarity and instability – a position that makes subjectivity precarious and demanding. I may think myself to be completely and literally “myself,” but I am not aware of the impressions left there by others or of the ephemeral nature of every attempt I make at extracting something from others, extracting some notion or concept that I can locate in order to make her more familiar and comfortable to me. In fact, the other calls me to approach her on her own terms. “A calling into question of the same,” claims Levinas, “which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other” (*TI* 43). For these reasons, Levinas thinks that philosophy, and ethics most importantly, has been too focused on the self rather than otherness, the acknowledgment of which should be the proper aim of morality:

We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (*TI* 43)

Ethics precedes ontology for Levinas. Ethics places the freedom of the I, the self that is at home in its comfort and “promiscuous freedom” (the *chez soi*, as Levinas calls it), under harsh scrutiny,

26 My use of the term “other” is not necessarily meant to place my work in conjunction with postmodern notions of selfhood and otherness, although “other” here does indeed suggest an “outside” of the self that is completely foreign, strange, and troubling to the so-called “integrity” of the self.

calling this freedom into question. Instead, the I must step forward in order to account for itself before another who totally breaks apart every notion of obligation and duty we may have previously possessed – the face of the other²⁷ that exceeds every capacity of my understanding. The other exceeds definition so much so that reaching a point from which I may feel satisfied in fulfilling my duty onto him is an impossibility in Levinas. The only means by which I approach him in earnest and responsibly is through the act of speaking, in what Levinas calls the “saying.” Giving signifyingness, as Levinas describes it, in the form of saying, however, requires a vulnerability and a passivity that strips the self of any authority, completely prostrating the self before the unbearable presence of the other. This ethical asymmetry places the other in a position that is far beyond any capacity the self may possess – it commands a supererogatory giving out of the self that establishes it firmly in a relationship marked by non-reciprocity.

Before we get too engrossed in the specifics of Levinasian ethical duty, we should back up to see exactly how he arrives at such a perspective. While Levinas's ethics may be tersely summarized as an infatuation with the preeminence of the other (an other-centric philosophy), there are two key traits of his thought that I see as indispensable if we are to fully come to terms with the precedent he sets for the other. Foremost, Levinas's ethics is haunted by the Holocaust. As a Jewish man who managed to escape murder in the camps and elsewhere during the war, Levinas never forgot those victims that passed in the name of a warped modern rationalism and, although he never directly refers to the Holocaust or its victims, we are aware of its implications in his use of metaphor and misdirection, that part of his ethical vocabulary distinguished by a

²⁷ Levinas cites the face as the finite manifestation of infinity and transcendence. While the face is human, it also belongs to the infinite, that which gives us our unique personality and humanity, none of which may be consumed by another. Levinas's ethics is often bathed in the language of mysticism and theology, a fact that owes much to his Jewish ancestry and religious upbringing.

resort to terms invoking trauma, suffering, and exhaustion. The second aspect, and one that is often overlooked, is the amount of attention Levinas devotes to subjectivity and the self in its vulnerability and exposure even though the other is given a superior position in the ethical relationship. This is a construct of subjectivity that cannot be neglected if we are to sincerely confront Levinas's argument concerning the primacy of the other.

Levinas finds the Good in subjectivity, in the obligation to the other that is a part of being and yet works against the subject's will and intention.²⁸ Before the I (as Levinas is sometimes given to naming subjectivity) can come to a recognition of this responsibility, however, it resides in a world of comfort, what Levinas calls its “promiscuous freedom” and “atheist separation.” Alone in its interiority (its sense of what is I from what is not-I), the self takes advantage of its “freedom” and separation, its break from participation with others. In the theological terms²⁹ to which he frequently resorts, Levinas describes this break as the work of the atheist subject who refuses (whether consciously or not) God and the Infinite. “One lives outside of God, at home with oneself,” he claims, “one is an I, an egoism. The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. By atheism we thus understand...the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I” (*TI* 58). For Levinas, “atheism” is not only a separation from God but also a separation from the world as inhabited by others; instead, this atheist separation provides the self with an inauthentic sense of wholeness and egoist freedom as the self resides within the *chez soi*, or the “home” seemingly

28 In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas claims that the Good authorizes not only subjectivity but freedom as well because the Good determines obligation to the other despite the self's will (10-11).

29 Levinas's use of theological language does not stand as a religious prescription or diagnosis however. Furthermore, I do not necessarily think that his understanding of atheism is purely theological or religious (in other words, meant to describe religious belief), although it is certainly indebted to such a notion of God and separation. Rather, atheism in Levinas describes the inherent condition of subjectivity that is a neglect of its responsibility to the other (and to God, since the other is a finite manifestation of Infinity).

offered us by notions like free will and conventional responsibility (the sense of only being responsible directly for one's own actions). According to Levinas, such a subjectivity approaches the world of others through a blindness that both appropriates otherness into the same (into concept through the work of consciousness) and prohibits the self from realizing the presence of otherness in being. Whereas being and consciousness may seem completely my own, I am not aware of the other that is always already before me, in my presence and an obstacle to my ability to gain leverage over the world and make it my own. In practical terms, the presence of other people in my life, the demands they place upon me and the inscrutability of their subjectivity, upset every capacity I may think I possess for making myself comfortable by extracting something from them (say, based upon their personal appearance or dialect) or avoiding obligation (even if it may not be immediately clear how I may be responsible for them). Despite every attempt I make at proscribing others with categories, with essence (essentialism), these individuals simply will not allow me. This disempowerment of my subjective capacities, while belonging to the authority the other wields over me, does not, however, completely isolate subjectivity from the Good or the Transcendent (as stated above). This cannot be reiterated enough: for Levinas, transcendence is “otherwise than being,” and subjectivity belongs to the otherwise than being in its responsibility for the other and inability to ascribe essence. Subjectivity is responsibility for the other; as promiscuity it is a rejection of ethics but as itself (in other words, what it really is), it is a complete disavowal of the self's powers. As an invitation from the other, it is a part of the Good.

The Goodness of my selfhood can come only in my obligation to others. This obligation, however, comes before any thought or intention I have given towards them. For this reason, Levinas claims that obligation is the pre-ontological, without origins, meaning that obligation

comes before being and intention – is is non-reflective and is always already present in my existence. In “Rethinking Justice: Levinas and Asymmetrical Responsibility,” Sara E. Roberts claims that the pre-ontological obligation of the Levinasian self is best understood as a position wherein “I find myself involved with others in the moment of finding myself.... [T]he self is best understood as a kind of responsibility to and for the other” (6). The pre-ontological condition of responsibility serves as the bedrock for Levinas's approach to ethics. The basis of our subjectivity is already an obligation to others that we do not arrive at on our own but to which we are commanded. It is therefore an obligation without origins, at least from a conventional perspective (e.g., utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, etc.). Levinas has the following to say about the pre-ontological, pre-original necessity of subjectivity and ethics:

The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory,'...from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the an-archival, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity. (*OB* 10)

Subjectivity is a product of Goodness, but it is also nullified in its promiscuity by the command of the other. “Goodness is always older than choice,” Levinas claims, “the Good has always already chosen and required the unique one” (*OB* 57). For Levinas, we cannot conflate intention and ethical commitment. The other determines our obligation, not us. What appears to be our own intentional action in the ethical relationship has already been mandated by the other. This

obviously sounds strange,³⁰ but Levinas's point is that our obligation has already been determined, and we are infinitely obligated – no single response to the suffering of the other can satiate all of the demands she places upon me. Because my subjectivity is defined in such a capacity, this means that I am extremely vulnerable and exposed; in other words, I stand naked before the presence of the other. My ethical relationship with the other cannot be deferred nor can it be satisfied. This relationship requires an obligation that is beyond any idea I may possess of commitment – it is a duty that points to the particularity of moral response, the fact that each need requires its own unique address and that each individual that needs me requires a particular response rather than one tailored through a systematic understanding of ethics. In “Ethics, Religiosity and the Question of Community in Emmanuel Levinas,” Thomas A. Carlson characterizes Levinasian obligation as a commandment that is addressed to us all but completely unique in its individual cases; we are all addressed but singularly, and each person that addresses us commands a different response. “Like my death in Heidegger,” Carlson states, “which no one can take over for me, my responsibility in Levinas signals what is most mine and what is mine alone. Insofar as I am responsible, I am singular, and, indeed, only insofar as singular can I be responsible” (60). This means that the self is engaged with the other in a capacity that cannot be represented nor can it be systematized. The Goodness of subjectivity comes in its inherent obligation to the other, a duty which cannot be represented by normative approaches to ethics; instead, an approach is required that demands the absolute degradation of the self before the presence of the other.

This approach to ethics may seem abstruse, obscure, and demanding. In fact, it is.

30 This, however, makes perfect sense as Levinas's project is to make ethics strange, to estrange us from conventional notions of ethical action.

Levinas balks at normative assumptions about the relationship between the I and the you deliberately in order to demonstrate the necessity for a radical revision of moral conduct. There is no moral regiment or code of conduct (an ought) that Levinas offers us. We have learned about Levinasian subjectivity and its centrality to his ethics; we have also found that his approach remains entirely unconventional. However, it remains to be proven how Levinas's ethics might be utilized. What is ethical experience according to Levinas, and how might we use it to address moral dilemmas? Most importantly, how can we, as individuals, utilize Levinasian ethics in a manner that can serve us in our day-to-day ordeals, those encounters we may face in practice and not simply in the theory of a philosophical treatise? The answer to these questions is not simple, nor is it completely definitive, although Levinas's response does provide us with an incomplete (and rightfully so) option³¹ that prepares us for the overwhelming demands of human suffering as well as the difficulty in preparing any sort of moral response to alleviate this suffering. This is, however, not to say that Levinas neglects suffering or its demands; in fact, he takes these things very seriously, which explains the difficulty he finds in addressing such matters. After all, any system that professes to understand human suffering completely and, most significantly, to offer us a solution to its alleviation – to offer a palliative of sorts – underestimates the extent of suffering from his point of view. Levinas's great achievement is his recognition of not only the extremity of human suffering but the overwhelming demands we place upon others through our infinite needs.

The experience of ethics in Levinas requires an absolute giving. In other words, what we

31 Levinas provides us with an option. What else would be the point of developing an ethics? However, this option is not one that provides us with definite answers and solutions to moral dilemmas. To provide such a response would be antithetical to his project, which seeks to refute those theorists who systematize ethics by developing codified solutions. Instead, Levinas' option is "incomplete," one that refuses systematization but also provides us some insight into our conventional notions of responsibility and action.

are to give according to Levinas is far more than what we could imagine; indeed, it is even more than what we are capable of giving. Despite what may seem like the obvious and justified critiques of this approach for its apparent impracticality, Levinas does not wish for this revelation to lead to despair. On the contrary, he hopes that such an ethics can lead to honesty as well as overcome what he considers the misdirection (those otherwise disingenuous ways in which “ethics” tells us we can address every moral question) of conventional ethical approaches. While traditional forms of response may command particular actions or approaches, frequently conflating normativity with obligation, Levinas tends to clothe his ethics in more ambivalent terms, ones that hopefully complicate our ability to summarize the suffering of the other into a universal solution. However, this does not mean that Levinas provides us with any gesture towards how we may derive some sort of proper action.

In Levinas, ethics originates in the fact of suffering. The experience of ethics (the dilemmas we experience and must act upon), on the other hand, is predicated upon the sense of one's own responsibility. In other words, ethics starts with the other, but action is commanded out of the self who owes a limitless amount. For Levinas, shame and guilt are the routes by which the self may come into the presence of the other denuded and willing to give. The experience of the self's conscience before the other is a movement of what Levinas calls “metaphysical desire,” a desire that wishes for more than anything than can possibly promise it completion (a notion similar to Lacan; however, its origins are not from any lack or need):

The metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves. The metaphysical desire does not rest upon any prior kinship. It is a desire that can not be satisfied. (*TI* 33-

Metaphysical desire seeks beyond the possibility of completion: it is a desire that recognizes the impossibility of completion and seeks that which takes the I out of its comfort zone. Such a desire can only be one that makes the I uncomfortable within its own home and alienates us from the *chez soi*. It is a desire that is spontaneous and insatiable – it does not belong to the I; it calls my freedom into question. Levinas claims that the other “is desired in my shame” (TI 84), a desire that is the experience of moral consciousness as well as a recognition of my freedom as an injustice. Moral conscience and desire for the other are thus a coming-into-awareness of my cruelty as an “atheist” subject. Levinas has the following to say about the experience of conscience:

Conscience welcomes the Other. It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent. (TI 84)

For Levinas, the freedom of the I is a perpetuation of injustice. Only when I arrive at a recognition of my freedom as an injustice can I begin to come to the other in a manner of giving and sacrifice. When I welcome the other in shame and guilt, I realize the violence perpetrated against alterity (otherness) by my freedom as the atheist *chez soi*. Levinas calls this welcoming whereby the self's freedom proves vulnerable “as-sociation.” According to Levinas, as-sociation is a non-a priori, or conceptless, experience of the other through conscience. “If we call a situation where my freedom is called in question conscience,” he argues, “as-sociation or the welcoming of the Other is conscience.... [I]n conscience I have an experience” of the other “that

is not commensurate with any a priori framework – a conceptless experience. Every other experience is conceptual, that is, becomes my own or arises from my freedom” (TI 100). My experience of conscience belongs to the other; it is an experience that exposes my injustice and a move that refuses to consume his or her particularity. The experience of my guilt and shame before another individual marks the power the other wields over me – I have no way to comprehend this power, nor any recourse for dissembling her strangeness. “The welcoming of the Other is ipso facto the consciousness of my own injustice – the shame that freedom feels for itself” (TI 86). Conscience proves the means by which the self comes to a recognition of its responsibility and its previous neglect of the other, but it is in the manifestation of the face of the other before the self that we must give an account and address our responsibility with what Levinas calls “signifyingness.”

The face, that image of absolute alterity that belongs to the other, calls me forward. The face belongs to the other as a “manifestation” of Infinity as well as institutes ethical interchange and communicative interaction. For Levinas, the face is the finite apparition of the Infinite. In *Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas*, Michael B. Smith has the following to say about the relationship between the face and Infinity, which Levinas characterizes as a relationship between the trace and presence:

The concept of the “face,” which indicates the presence of alterity, is the mediating concept by which the infinite is manifested in and to the finite. But the term “manifested” is not the proper term for any effect or action on the part of the infinite, since the latter is characterized by lack of manifestation. A demotion to the status of being would alter its quality of infinity. This is perhaps why Levinas develops the idea of “the trace,” a more discreet form of evidence of the presence

of the infinite within the finite. (35-36)

Perhaps it is best to think of the face as an apparition of the Infinite – Infinity is there yet not there. Nonetheless, the face is indeed *there*, right before us, physical, alone, and suffering. The most crucial encounter, according to Levinas, is that of “the face to face.” In this encounter, which presupposes language, an opportunity for communion is offered the self in her obligation and responsibility to the other. The face is already speaking to the self, already instituting discourse even before a word is spoken. “The face is a living presence,” writes Levinas, “it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse” (TI 66). The face already speaks and in its appearance refuses any capacity the I possesses for conceptualization, for converting the other into concept and form. The other disassembles conceptualization even despite the I's effort to convert him into theme in language. The face speaks through and beyond all forms that would otherwise attempt to limit its particularity and strangeness. Levinas characterizes the face and its powers as an “overflowing”:

The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face.... The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea.... It *expresses itself*. (TI 50-51)

This overflowing not only establishes the other as supreme in his radical alterity but exceeds even my capability for power. “The expression the face introduces into the world,” writes Levinas, “does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power” (TI 198). The expression of the face dissimulates any image or form I may possess that would aid me in my account, that would help me make myself more comfortable and at home in the ethical

relationship. In other words, the face that attends his own speech resists what Levinas deems “vision” – the desire of the self to locate the speaker, the other, in an image of familiarity. For Levinas, ethics is the opposite of home, of being at home – it is the strange, the unfamiliar, that which ravishes me. The presence of the face makes the world uncommon, un-homelike, according to Levinas, because it disrupts the self’s desire for sameness. “The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign,” he claims, “his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us” (TI 194). This expression, this epiphany, this alienation of the self from home: this is the burden that the encounter with the face institutes, and it demands the I respond as an ethical subject.

The face commands ethical response; it commands the I to approach the other in the capacity of a responsible speaking subject, as a signifyingness, rather than one that would defer this opportunity to means that avoid the gravity of the situation. In language, in the act of speaking, we offer something up – we push our chips forward, so to speak. The outcome of this gamble, however, is never certain and, for Levinas, there are proper ways to take our risks as well as those that, while perhaps offering us more security against our initial bets, only delay the inevitability of our losses. The work of metaphysical desire approaches the other through language, explaining precisely why our participation in language can be such a risky and dangerous ordeal. Arriving at an ethics of language in Levinas requires the establishment of a dialogic relationship, one that places us in a conversation that cannot be dissuaded by a third party, whatever that may be (rhetoric, sophistry, demagoguery, etc.). In *Altered Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence*, Brian Schroeder writes that language in Levinas “institutes the metaphysical (ethical) relation.... The ethical self is desirous of the Other, not for the sake of possession or dominance, but to formulate a *dialogical* relation” (108). According to Levinas,

metaphysical desire for the otherwise than being not only deracimates the self from its freedom but also makes the self open to the inquiry of the other. Language is one of the primary forces by which this dynamic happens. “The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics,” Levinas claims, “is primordially enacted as conversation [discourse], where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an ‘I,’ as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself” (TI 39). Language requires the self to give response, a response that is a giving over of the self as the other stands waiting; it is a giving over that cannot be deflected and one that places the self in conversation.³² As conversation, language takes the I out of its comfort zone as it firmly places him or her in a relationship that demands address:

Conversation, from the very fact that it maintains the distance between me and the Other, the radical separation asserted in transcendence which prevents the reconstitution of totality, cannot renounce the egoism of its existence; but the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing in the Other a *right* over this egoism, and hence in justifying oneself. (TI 40)

In conversation, we are addressed by another human being who, while retaining her particularity, demands of me a response, a direct engagement in the dynamism of the spoken word. This address, as I would argue, is not only the address that comes from the other in the greeting, in what Levinas calls the “Hello,” but is also the metaphysical invitation to consciousness and subjectivity offered to the I by otherness. In both forms of address, we are commanded to respond. As humans, we exist in a world that welcomes us, in the language of Levinas, to

³² Levinas distinguishes between two types of conversation: speaking and rhetoric. He also makes two distinctions in language: the said and saying. While conversation primarily preoccupies his study of language in *Alterity and Transcendence*, the said and saying do not take precedence until *Otherwise than Being*. I will have more to say about these distinctions below.

conscious experience. This is a coming-into-awareness through the dynamism of language and discursive engagement. “Discourse is not simply a modification of intuition (or of thought),” writes Levinas, “but an original relation with exterior being” (*TI* 66). Even though this engagement may be a welcoming or an invitation, as Levinas claims, it is nonetheless an encounter that requires an absolute giving over of the self, interlocution that demands my vulnerability and “nudity” as I have no recourse to a language or response that can thoroughly “speak” the other or fully resolve his needs. By speaking to me, my interlocutor disrupts whatever power I may possess towards mastery, enjoyment, or knowledge and understanding. And in responding, in my address to the other, I stand naked before them, absolutely devoid of any systematic approach³³ that might aid me and help solve his ills, a fact that, for Levinas, ironically makes ethics possible.

In language I am exposed to the blow of otherness, a hit that knocks me completely off balance. The other needs a response in which the I approaches in the manner of “saying,” or a sincere discursive encounter that engages the other's suffering. Attempting to circumvent such an obligation, however, takes language to the form of “the said.” Such language is a refusal of engagement and seeks to dislodge the self from the ethical relationship by resorting to statements that are declarative, “definitive,” and deflecting. In other words, language that avoids the sincerity of the ethical moment but also attempts to offer the self comfort by making the world familiar in the manner of totality (language or systems that consume otherness by avoiding otherness). As Schroeder explains, “The said is language which makes propositional statements or declarations about the truth and falsity of an event or thing” (111). The said is thus an attempt

33 Indeed, Levinas thinks the systematization of ethics, or its codification, a disingenuous regard for the demands other individuals place upon us.

at making the dyad that *is* the ethical relationship into a triadic (third-party) one; the said desires to avoid the dyadic and dialogic encounter between the other and the I by deflecting the energy of this dynamic into “dead” propositions (that expect reciprocity) or assumptions about alterity. As Critchley claims, deferring the dyadic relationship to the third-person disrupts the experience of the other in her alterity and is a move towards symmetry and equality, hiding from the asymmetry that is the relationship between the other and the I (59-60). In deferring responsibility, the said seeks to make the world common, to place a veil before the presence of the face and reinforce (albeit illusory) my sense of mastery, freedom, and knowledge. According to Levinas, the said is therefore aligned with Being. “The birthplace of ontology is in the said,” he states (*OB* 42).

With saying, however, we give an offering in the manner of speaking *to* and engaging with the other. Rather than making triadic statements about the world or our interlocutor, rather than speaking *about* otherness, saying is a direct response to the other.³⁴ Saying attempts to open up the world and open up to otherness in a speaking that unravels in time, making every effort of authentically responding to the other who constantly disassembles the image I have of him even as he stands before me. Saying is therefore multiplicity and movement, the “very signifyingness of signification,” as Levinas claims, the responsibility that “is put forth in the forward,” in the

34 Although saying is ethical language, according to Levinas, saying is teleologically directed towards the said. While this does not mean that the said takes precedent or priority over the saying, it does mean that, for Levinas, saying inevitably becomes the said. As soon as the act of speaking takes place, saying “is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it” (*OB* 7). In other words, saying attempts to engage with otherness in the particularity of the moment but in doing so cannot help but eventually lose traction, so to speak, as the demands that the other places upon the speaking subject will constantly be changing. I like to think of this concept as I would Heraclitus's example of the river that can never be stepped in twice. Even once the foot is in the river, the river has already changed and taken on an entirely new presence. Nonetheless, Levinas thinks that saying goes beyond essence and is bound with diachrony. The saying is aligned with diachrony in its resistance to history and memory – the desire for things like synthesis and the synchronization of the same. For Levinas, the diachronic nature of the saying is outside of being.

address (*OB* 5). Saying requires a giving signifyingness that, while an “unblocking of communication,” is the very vulnerability of exposure. “It is the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity,” Levinas writes, “the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability” (*OB* 48). Saying uproots the self from the comfort of the *chez soi* and places the self in a gut-wrenching interchange with the other that is a vulnerability unlike any other. “The one is exposed to the other,” argues Levinas, “as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter” (*OB* 49). The most passive form of passivity, in the words of Levinas, saying denudes the self before the unbearable presence of the other; saying is the “for-the-other” of speaking that seeks to give an account, that seeks to respond even under the extreme duress of ethical asymmetry.

Such a response and such an inequality in the ethical relationship point to the traumatic nature of ethics in Levinas. The ethical encounter is a violent one,³⁵ and the speaking subjectivity that comes to the other in the manner of saying is one that is very uncomfortable and unstable, one that is held hostage in his or her responsibility to the other. The notion that acting ethically can be violent, or describing responsibility in figurative language we might typically tend to only set aside for the most harrowing and traumatic events, takes Levinasian ethics out of any conventional moral framework we possess. In Levinas, responsibility and obligation are preeminent – these stand above any other characteristic of my subjectivity, above anything else that I am capable of delivering. This makes my duty unto the other excessive and the fulfillment of my ethical capacity a meaningless concept. For Levinas, ethics is supererogatory, a brutally exacting set of infinite demands that can never be fulfilled nor responded to quite appropriately.

35 The violence the I perpetuates against the other as a form of its atheist separation and freedom should not be confused with the violent nature of the ethical relationship. The violence of the atheist self is injustice, while the violence of the ethical encounter offers justice in the prospect of responsibility.

Spargo claims that this notion of duty points to Levinas's singularity in the world of moral philosophy. "In Levinasian responsibility, we venture outside the permissible limits of exteriority's obligating force (for instance, as Kantian duty) to find ourselves," he writes, entrenched in a obligation to the other that exceeds anything "we imagined, subjects suddenly not to obligations of our choosing but, rather, to what lies beyond our culturally self-limiting constructs of obligation" (17). Ethics, in Levinas, is a traumatism precisely because my duty to the other can never be fulfilled and every capacity I may possess for response is exceeded by her commands and needs. It is an asymmetry that cannot be renegotiated and defines the condition of ethical subjectivity. In a sense, ethics can be thought of as a mouse running the wheel and possibly thinking he's really going somewhere, or even Sisyphus endlessly pushing the boulder up the hill only to watch it roll back down over and over again. These are duties that are beyond any capacity the mouse or Sisyphus may possess for fulfillment. And such is ethics for Levinas. The ethical self is obsessed with alterity, an obsession that takes it to the brink of ethical neuroses, a "disorder" that is irrevocable and relentless. The self can neither be satisfied in its relationship to the other (the object of obsession) nor can it satiate those demands placed upon it by the other.

Thinking of ethical subjectivity and ethics as neuroses raises two key concerns, however. If subjectivity is defined in such a capacity, then perhaps there is no means by which the self is ever really *itself*. Perhaps we should even think of the self as the null-site of ethics in Levinas. This, of course, contrasts sharply with other approaches to ethics, wherein the self must be what we might call a negotiable presence – that is, a coherent, autonomous agent capable of rational decision-making and intentional action, a self that could be trusted in any so-called decent theory of ethics. Furthermore, one might wonder what options we might have for acting ethically in a

world where we seemingly have no answers, can never fulfill our ethical responsibility, and, indeed, this responsibility voids even the notion of free will and intention. What is the point of ethics in such a world, and how should we act? More pointedly, how can we act at all? Levinas's understanding of selfhood and ethics can understandably be highly frustrating; it is not only abstruse and enigmatic but leaves us with no moral plan, no systematic approach that can give individuals definitive guidance in a world marked by chaos and crises however small. While legitimate questions (and I think significant ones), these are really of no consequence for Levinas, whose other-centric ethics is marked by anti-presence (anti-Being). Such questions, according to Levinas, are nullified by the metaphysical relationship of the self and the I – the ethical relationship that calls me and makes me responsible even before my intention. Free will has no place in the Levinasian vocabulary: ethics come before ontology. We are not to designate one action as right or another as wrong, nor are we to think of our responsibility as something that can be addressed through the will. Further, Levinas offers us no systematic approach precisely because doing so would consume otherness and the absolute particularity of the ethical moment. Any approach to ethics that starts with a system starts with the self, according to Levinas, and such an ethics does violence against the other. People around me are constantly changing, constantly eluding my grasp. To think that I can grasp this image of otherness and keep it, commune with it, and address all its needs is a disservice to moral thought, in Levinas's opinion. While this may be disconcerting to many, Levinas's approach defines ethics as an exposure to extreme alterity, and the inability to act “appropriately” in any case retains the radical particularity of the other. Levinas does not offer us a plan because doing so would eliminate the other. We must understand that ethics is a process (and a gritty one at that) rather than Being. Although elusive and intentionally vague, perhaps Levinas's ethics is the only one suitable for a

modern world³⁶ marked by such things as capitalism, mass media and culture, and the Holocaust – in other words, a world marked by constant flux, inexplicable trauma, and relentless chaos.

In the ethical relationship, I find myself completely and utterly disheveled, an existential slop before the presence of the other whose burden presses down upon me unlike any other. Obligation, for Levinas, is infinite and overwhelming; it takes the self out of its comfort – it is the not-at-home. Like Levinas, literary naturalism often finds a self who is “not-at-home,” a self that is isolated, battered, torn, harried, discomfited, and inexorably confused by a world in turbulent motion. Rather than construe this deracination of the self from a world that ultimately makes sense as a denial of existential significance, we should interpret naturalism's anxieties as fertile ground for ethical potential. Levinas provides the clearest way for us to locate this potential. For naturalism, obligation and responsibility exceed any conventional notion of duty that we might possess as the ethical encounter provides us with no resort, no guide for how we should proceed. Neither naturalism's seeming deterministic vision nor its perceived misdirection in assigning actions to agents can detract from the sincerity that the movement lends to the ethical encounter. In the process of this critique, I do not wish to offer Levinas's idiosyncratic theology or his indebtedness to quasi-religious notions of Infinity, or even God, as the stuff of which naturalist ethics are made. These are claims on Levinas's part where I think he and naturalism may very well depart. I am, however, offering Levinas's ethical traumatism and theory of language and ethical discourse up for our consideration when reading naturalism. We can no longer think of naturalism as simple pessimism or, if placed in ethical terms, as a movement whose ethics are completely defined through a concern with such things as free will or determinism. In

36 Because thought can never be completely divorced from a cultural setting, I think Levinas's ethics are clearly the product of modernity – most notably those traumatic events like the Holocaust. Even so, Levinas thinks of his ethics as ahistorical and timeless. Subjectivity is always already obligated to the other.

naturalism, as in Levinas, ethics comes before ontology, before any concerns about intention. Ethics is a harsh business indeed, and in the following chapter, we will see how Frank Norris constructs both subjectivity and ethics as something beyond hardship – in fact, even beyond the traumatic. Norris and Levinas posit the self as an inarticulate one (who cannot account for its actions or those of other humans) in the presence of the inscrutable other, yet, nonetheless, the self is thrown into action and is called upon to speak. What the self does in such moments, however, points to the inadequacy of every approach we possess in actually addressing the needs of our interlocutor, and this is ultimately why subjectivity is inarticulate in Norris and Levinas.

IV. THE UNBEARABLE BURDEN OF THE OTHER: THE ETHICS OF INARTICULATE SUBJECTIVITY IN THE WORKS OF FRANK NORRIS

Frank Norris is not typically renowned for writing “morally sound” fiction; his racism has been documented well by both critics and biographers, and readers tend to interpret his novels of despair as public manifestos of existential abnegation. Some of this has merit, but how can these images or portrayals of Norris alone explain an episode like that of the sinking of the *Mazatlan* in *Vandover and the Brute* (1914)? The passenger steamer carrying Vandover and hundreds of other lives sinks off the coast of California, forcing crewmembers and passengers alike to take to available lifeboats. Vandover's lifeboat, built for thirty-five, is filled beyond capacity with forty passengers. Even so, the members of the boat, including Vandover, cannot easily ignore the desperate cries for help from a man drowning nearby. Vandover and others plea with the engineer in charge of the life raft to spare the man's life by taking him aboard; others aboard, however, including some women fearful for the lives of their children as well as the crew, fear taking on the man described as “the little Jew” will capsize the boat and endanger all lives already safe aboard. Despite the protestations to save the man's life, he is denied access and soon drowns, much to the frustration of Vandover. Arriving back in San Francisco after the harrowing ordeal, Vandover faces what might be described as persecution from beyond the grave. “ ‘Well, wait till I tell you,’ ” vociferates the bartender at Vandover's haunt, “ ‘the authorities here are right after that first engineer with a sharp stick, and some of the passengers, too, for not taking him in. A woman in one of the other boats saw it all and gave the whole thing away. A thing like that is regular murder, you know!’ ” Vandover can only “shut his teeth against answering.”

Vandover seems indicted in the death of the Jew, whose name we learn is Brann, but there are several ways in which to interpret this event. The engineer in charge of the small vessel

makes a good case for a utilitarian argument; the ship is already filled beyond capacity and taking on more passengers could risk sinking, endangering all those on board. Such an approach is not unfounded and is morally pragmatic. In a world where we might not have objective measures for determining what actions are good or desirable, why not accept a credo that guides our decision-making through rational, decisive steps for ensuring the greatest good? In principle, why would we not want to maximize what is desirable or good? And the engineer may very well have saved all lives on board by his actions. On the other hand, if we bring a sentimentalist perspective into view, the engineer's decision would be dramatized either as an existential necessity or as the end-product of a society marred by selfishness and greed. Brann's death would then call upon the reader's affective faculties, and we would feel the tragedy of his death as a personal enlightenment – yes, the world is dangerous and forbidding, but the exposure to tragedy can remind us of the good and can illuminate within us what we find desirable (i.e., a sensitive side). The problem with these two perspectives, which Norris appears to be examining, is that they give far too much precedence to the self. One assumes the self can be a rational arbiter in deciphering what is good both for it and for others (utilitarian) while the other assumes the self resides in a position from where it may judge others and extend appropriate responses accordingly – a sort of moral egoism, in a sense (sentimentalist). Furthermore, like any good naturalist who can pull his weight, Norris refuses to convert the death into an edifying readerly experience, although it is clear we should feel its significance harshly.

Naturalism reduces humanity to its most basic elements, portraying us as the product of seemingly meaningless circumstances beyond our control and knowledge – inarticulate subhuman particles battered about in a universe that remains silent. Indeed, if humans are mere machines, then why should any of us care about the suffering of others? Such a callous attitude

should create in us a sense of detachment from the suffering of characters portrayed in naturalism. The effect, however, is precisely the opposite; despite their reduced circumstances, these characters demand a response, and neither a sentimentalist response nor a utilitarian one will work. We do not feel ennobled by our empathetic condescension; we feel subjugated and persecuted by our care instead. Ethical normativity can't help either because the letter of the law reduces suffering to a problem that can be dissected and potentially solved. Norris admittedly retains a sentimentalist vision, yet he transforms this into a subjugating empathy rather than a condescending one. We are oppressed by our concern for the other, and there are no simple solutions or perspective points from which we can look in and determine how the needs of another can be met and satisfied. Like Levinas, Norris disrupts the power of the self in the ethical relationship and claims that in being made witness to the suffering of the other, we are somehow obligated, and this obligation is harsh, demanding, and insufferable.

Before looking further into *Vandover* and *McTeague*, however, I want to briefly reference Norris's attempt at detailing the moral degradation involved in the production and distribution of every American's food, a process that minimizes the suffering of the other in a system that otherwise erases the average man and woman who depend upon fair prices to feed their families. While a later tale, this account provides an interpretive shorthand for representing Norris's ethics – the inextricable link between our own lives and actions and the suffering of others – and clearly presents Norris as an ethical author, in case we need further prove. Norris originally intended for his account of the production, marketing, and consumption of American wheat to be told in three tales. He made it as far as *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), novels that concern the agricultural process of harvesting wheat and the troubles of bringing it to market in California as well as the trade and speculating of these farmers' products by Chicago operators, respectively.

The third installment of this *Epic of the Wheat* remained incomplete at Norris's passing in 1902. He leaves us another tale, however, that can just as easily serve as a veritable *Cliff's Notes* of the trilogy (at least thematically). In "A Deal in Wheat" (1903), Norris laid the groundwork for his great epic. Much of the tale, albeit imperfect as a literary work, was to serve as basis for his trilogy, and in the story, we essentially peer into the entire cycle of wheat Norris was hoping to demonstrate with his much more extensive work.

The narrative begins with Sam Lewiston, a Kansas farmer, worrying about the future of his family and small farm as he prepares his wheat for market. At the moment, the price of wheat is holding at \$0.66 per bushel. Lewiston can barely maintain his farm at that price, and he and his wife, Emmie, have apparently spent a good deal of the past night discussing their prospects. "For a long moment neither spoke," at Sam's departing for market, "They had talked over the situation so long and so comprehensively the night before that there seemed to be nothing more to say" (3). Arriving at the local purchaser, Sam is astounded to find wheat has fallen even further to \$0.62. A bear market has made it impossible for him to maintain his farm and, reluctantly, Sam decides it best to take a job with his brother-in-law in Chicago. Meanwhile, the speculators in Chicago deal and gamble with the price of wheat. Truslow, the Bear, has driven down the price to the point that farmers like Sam have been forced to sell their farms. The Bull boss, Hornung, however, intends on driving up the price in order to squeeze his competitor out of business. From this point forward, Hornung appears to have the run of the market, setting the prices of wheat higher and higher in increments, until a seller appears on the market that can offer an even lower price. In an effort to avert a fall in prices and keep the market steady, Hornung tells his brokers to "Support the market":

'Sell May at 'fifty; sell May; sell May.' A moment's indecision, an instant's

hesitation, the first faint suggestion of weakness, and the market would have broken under them. But for the better part of four hours they stood their ground, taking all that was offered, in constant communication with the Chief, and from time to time stimulated and steadied by his brief, unvarying command:

'Support the market.' (14)

As it turns out, Truslow is the secret seller: he has bought wheat at a lower price and shopped it around town on trains after the price has risen, after Hornung's speculative increases, meaning that Hornung has lost out on his own product. Once it becomes apparent to the Bull that something is amiss with the current market, a detective who has been on the case for some time alerts him that Truslow is actually the mysterious seller and has been buying Hornung's product at \$1.10 while charging \$1.50 for its purchase. In order to combat his counterpart's move, Hornung decides to raise the price of wheat from what he had intended in the coming days (\$1.75) to \$2.00 a bushel. Such a move, while making Hornung more money, proves to cost those needing wheat for subsistence, those down-on-their-luck such as Sam, who now stand in a Chicago bread line after having sold his farm. Having finally realized his part in the game as a mere pawn, Sam stewes over his current state of affairs:

He had seen the two ends of a great wheat operation – a battle between Bear and Bull. The stories (subsequently published in the city's press) of Truslow's countermove in selling Hornung his own wheat, supplied the unseen section. The farmer – he who raised the wheat – was ruined upon one hand; the working-man – he who consumed it – was ruined upon the other. But between the two, the great operators, who never saw the wheat they traded in, bought and sold the world's food, gambled in the nourishment of entire nations, practised their

tricks, their chicanery and oblique shifty 'deals,' were reconciled in their differences, and went on through their appointed way, jovial, contented, enthroned, and unassailable. (25-26)

“Lucking out” in gaining a low-end job in Chicago, Sam reflects upon the hand he has been dealt. Although Sam is luckier than most of his peers in the bread lines, like those around him, he is entrapped by a system that is constructed to obscure the needs of common men and women. In Levinasian terms, we could say that Sam is obliterated within a socioeconomic structure that refuses to recognize the face of the other, refuses to acknowledge need rather than desire. On the one hand, the depreciation of prices drove Sam to sell his farm in Kansas. On the other hand, the increase in the price of wheat (which could have benefited him as a farmer) turns him into a pauper, a man who has to stand in line for free hand-outs from the local bakery (which has to shut down after the price is raised to \$2.00). All the while, the great operators benefit and never once suffer, their minor market woes merely motivated by greed and desire unlike the needs – fueled by the hunger, the poverty, the homelessness – that drive those like Sam.

In a school of authors who we typically have enough difficulty reading as “moral” or “ethical,” Norris may be the most recalcitrant of the lot. “A Deal in Wheat,” however, firmly establishes Norris as an author who is very much concerned with people, their individual crises, and those factors that lead to their suffering. Link claims that Norris's career is marked by two distinct periods. Norris's earlier career, for Link, is one of pessimism and general disregard for any possible form of moral sustenance. His later career, though, marks a turn towards a much more optimistic outlook, according to Link. Link may very well be correct in assuming that Norris becomes a more explicitly ethical writer in his later career; however, Norris's literary career, as well as his life, was far too short, in my opinion, to make distinctions between “early”

and “later” periods legitimate. “A Deal in Wheat,” while published posthumously, firmly establishes Norris as an author preoccupied with questions of moral obligation and responsibility, questions that troubled him throughout his entire career rather than only one period. Norris wants to locate those forces that have brought such things as foreclosure, unemployment, and starvation into being in turn-of-the-century America, and the implication is that we are somehow involved. How can a reader with food on his table, for instance, justify something like the bread line or the foreclosure of farms supplying his meal? How can a reader, whether then or today, rationalize a system that is fundamentally constructed upon inequality and the neglect of those at the bottom? While “A Deal in Wheat” may be more conspicuously concerned with such things than his earlier work, we should not overlook Norris's previous texts for their perceived moral complexity and ambiguity. These texts are also very much indebted to anxieties about the role of socioeconomic and cultural structures in obscuring the humanity and needs of the other.

McTeague may be the most difficult work in Norris's canon and stands as the perennial undergraduate introduction to naturalist novels, *The Red Badge of Courage* aside. Via *McTeague*, we are introduced, for the first time as readers, to such things as raw sexual desire, unrestrained indulgence, and deleterious behavior that appears to have no explanation other than bad genetics. It is an eye-opening text that, not surprisingly, garnered much concern in its time over its appropriateness. It is orthodox, by naturalist standards, and it is cliché by those same standards – a lowly miner tries to make good in the city, yet money and competition become his undoing in a deterministic world that seems to provide no other opportunities. Nevertheless, *McTeague* may very well be the most significant example we have in our fiction of a literature that begs us to rethink our conceptions of human agency and responsibility, as well as interrogate the possibilities of a world that functions otherwise than that according to a comfortable and

coherent middle-class worldview. McTeague, the dentist, is a character whose honest animality seems to invoke the goodness of the primitive who walks outside civilization and balks against its complacency and triviality, yet he also points to the fear of an atavistic regression of individuals in modern society, who cannot progress as functional Anglo, middle-class citizens should (according to the nativist and racist discourses of the time) but find themselves relentlessly borne back into the cycle of violence, greed, laziness, and sloth from which they came. For Pizer, *McTeague* finds “tragedy...inherent in the human situation given man's animal past and the possibility that he will be dominated by that past in particular circumstances” (*Realism and Naturalism* 17). The study of Norris has been dominated by such criticism: we recognize the suffering present in naturalist fiction, yet we are unwilling (or lack the proper critical tools) to fully come to terms with this suffering. There are numerous ways in which to read *McTeague*, which probably explains, at least in part, its lasting appeal to generations of new readers, who find in its seeming moral confusion and ambiguity and its violent and horrifying episodes, the appeal of the grotesque, the sordid, and the strangely exotic. Yet Norris leaves us with a way to avoid pessimism in our approach, despite the novel's seeming capacity to pull us in different directions.

As I just alluded to above, *McTeague* begs some serious moral questions beyond its concern with agency and determinism. Although often manipulating romantic plot lines, the novel refuses the sentimentalization of the fact of human suffering, and so we feel the weight of McTeague's tragedy without a filter that places our response within a particular framework. Why do we feel this tragedy so deeply if Norris does not seem to provide us with any means of making sense out of McTeague's animal demise? The answer may lie in Norris's ability to salvage the distinctly “human” in his story, despite its formidable racism, which has been duly noted as

detracting from any moral concerns readers might find. We do not feel indifference or disdain towards McTeague; instead, we feel the brunt of the assaults upon his humanity. Despite McTeague's "racial flaws," despite his biological "deficiencies," we still relate to him as fundamentally human, as a man with a face, in other words.

While we must also understand race in Norris as yet another factor that – according to the author – threatens the humanity of his characters, admittedly, the presence of racism in Norris's text initially appears to detract from the immediacy of his ethical imperative. Zerkow, the Jewish junk dealer, for instance, may be one of the most anti-Semitic depictions in all American literature, an accomplishment which is no small feat when taking into account the history of ethnic and racial relations in this country. "He had the thin, eager, catlike lips of the covetous; eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx from long searching amid muck and debris; and clawlike, prehensile fingers – the fingers of a man who accumulates, but never disburses" (34), states the narrator concerning Zerkow's physical appearance. "It was impossible to look at Zerkow and not know instantly that greed – inordinate, insatiable greed – was the dominant passion of the man" (34). While Pizer by no means apologizes for Norris's ethnocentrism and racism, like any good naturalist scholar, he attributes much of Norris's negative views of non-Anglo Americans as largely a product of social climate. "It would be easy in Norris's case, given the range and consistency of his racial biases," Pizer argues, "to attribute this aspect of his beliefs to a personal flaw. But although there may indeed be a psychological misalignment in Norris's deepest nature...it is both more feasible and productive to examine the sources and nature of his anti-Semitism in relation to his distinctive historical moment" (*American Naturalism and the Jews* 15). Pizer clearly recognizes the stain such beliefs leave upon not only the fiction of Norris but of other authors of the 1890s, which makes the investment in human suffering that these

authors wager all the more baffling, if not altogether perturbing. “What is intriguing in any consideration of the anti-Semitism of these writers is the contradiction between the regressive nature of this belief, with its underlying atavistic hate and fear of the stranger/outsider,” he writes, “and the more enlightened character of their values, writings, and activities in many other areas” (ix). Certainly, Norris's ethnocentric sentiments and claims should give us caution when moving forward with any approach that seeks a progressive view of naturalism. Such ideologies only detract from whatever progressive values these authors may have possessed and certainly threaten something like a Levinasian ethics; for these reasons (among others), such harmful beliefs are inexcusable. Nonetheless, if we are to account for such detrimental elements present in the works of Norris (and other naturalists), elements which lend irony to his ethical project, we should take Pizer's advice and start with the historical climate of the 1890s.

Benn Michaels has discussed at length the “rising tide” of nativism in America between the 1890s and 1920s, particularly after the First World War. Racial and ethnic essentialism marked numerous cultural and intellectual responses to an increasingly pluralistic society. Perhaps even more aptly, June Howard's discussion of the impact of such discourses like late nineteenth century criminology upon the American cultural imagination informs our understanding of the portrayal of race, ethnicity, and social class in literary naturalism, particularly in Norris. According to Howard in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, the writings and ruminations of several contemporary criminologists may very well account for the construction of McTeague's “bad blood” and immoral behavior. Howard thinks that much of this thinking, as well as *McTeague*, is haunted by a fear of proletarianization, a fear that often results in the misrepresentation of the working class as brutish, dull, inarticulate, and ill-adapted. For Howard, such notions as autonomy, awareness, and control are the markers of

class privilege, and the middle class would have certainly found in the pages of a novel like *McTeague* a fair sense of validation and self-importance. We can only imagine the somewhat perverse voyeuristic pleasure (and fear) a late Victorian middle class reader would have taken in his or her reading of the bestial struggles of the burly dentist. Such constructs of the working class and of other so-called “primitives,” whether racially or ethnically, would have served a more “functional” and “coherent” sense of bourgeois self-identity, although this means that the “abnormal” obviously works to define what is considered normal and appropriate.

Ironically enough, these ideologies are quite possibly invested in an antiquated ethical paradigm, which positions such factors as race, ethnicity, and social class alongside physical and moral fitness – in other words, genetics match actions and actions match genetics. Although he claims naturalism's full endorsement of evolutionary ethics may be far more complicated than what we might be prone to think even in a novelist like Norris, for instance, Armstrong admits that the ethical model present in *McTeague* equates perceived inherent physical pathologies with moral degeneracy. In “'First Principles of Morals': Evolutionary Morality and American Morality in American Naturalism,” Armstrong argues that *McTeague*'s demise at the end of the novel points to a Lamarckian construct of adaptation, whereby the physically unfit (connected with *McTeague*'s Irish ancestry, Trina's German lineage, and lower socioeconomic origins/status) not only disintegrate morally but also become biologically extinct. For Armstrong, Norris reveals the consequences (perhaps unwittingly) of social evolution, reinforcing Le Conte's fear of amoral species development with no direction or purpose. So, we see that while an ethical reading of naturalism is by no means possible without due complications and anxieties, we should not simply divest our critical approach of the potential for more nuanced understandings of naturalism's ethical projects. *McTeague* may be a racist caricature of sorts, but we tend to care

deeply for his struggle and his humanity; we cannot remain indifferent. Furthermore, and perhaps most strikingly, racial stereotypes in the novel act as deterministic forces, bad genetics that contribute further to the question of responsibility. McTeague's heredity is no different than his social environs in this respect and, while this does not excuse Norris, it does help make more sense out of his ethical vision – despite all these deterministic factors, McTeague still emerges transcendent as distinctively “human” rather than a cipher. This deterministic vision forces us to see the novel's characters as products of grave metaphysical forces, yet tests our capacity to recognize their humanity despite the sense that we should otherwise be reconciled to the inevitability and hopelessness of their fate. The fact remains, however, that we are not resigned, and the characters that inhabit the world of *McTeague* are not merely reducible to such concepts or deterministic factors as race or such blind action as animality – they are something more and demand of us a response that acknowledges this. When we step outside of what Levinas thinks of as a triadic perspective (concerned as it is with free will, rationality, identity, etc.), we see McTeague as a human with needs, and we see ourselves implicated in his downfall as members of the system, of the forces that stand against him. Naturalist literature is definitely invested in suffering and in a desire – at the point of painstaking artistic effort – to find some way by which this suffering might be addressed, and Frank Norris is no exception.

McTeague, however, generally conjures images of the morally destitute and relentlessly pessimistic in our popular imagination. Unfortunately, this construct has preoccupied our scholarship as well, and we don't have to look too long or hard to figure out why. Greed, mistrust, fear, deception, hatred, violence, and the inability to communicate seem to characterize human relationships in the novel, and no one really seems capable of rising above the muck of such squalor. There is no doubt that *McTeague* often reduces humans to the level of the bestial.

In fact, dog imagery and canine hostility are interspersed throughout, sometimes standing in as metaphoric of human interaction and subjectivity – a component of the novel that complicates our ability to resuscitate anything “humane” from the text. In the yard directly outside the apartments that McTeague and Marcus Schouler inhabit, for instance, Alexander, Marcus's Irish setter, and a neighboring collie that resides on the other side of the fence separating the two's “territory,” explode in a vicious standoff: “Suddenly the quarrel had exploded on either side of the fence. The dogs raged at each other, snarling and barking, frantic with hate. Their teeth gleamed. They tore at the fence with their front paws. They filled the whole night with their clamor” (48). The dogs' hostility and suspicion towards one another does not relent, each afraid that the other poses a legitimate threat to his “rightful” territory, each afraid to give way or concede ground. These dogs act as is according to their “nature,” and we should expect nothing otherwise. The problem posed here, however, is if we should expect the same for human relationships, and to what extent might we exercise some control over our own nature?

More so than any other problem we encounter in a novel like *McTeague*, that of the amount of autonomy allowed to individuals seems to hold our critical attention nearly exclusively. Such a problem also begs the question of whether or not we can hold individuals morally responsible for their actions. Characters constantly appear subdued by their nature as men and women. Once sexualized, McTeague finally succumbs to his biological disposition as a man who can conquer his wife, Trina McTeague: “But he had only to take her in his arms, to crush down her struggle with his enormous strength, to subdue her, conquer her by sheer brute force, and she gave up in an instant” (69). Trina, likewise, cannot escape her own nature as a woman who identifies with material objects, most notably gold (one cannot forget the iconic scene of her wallowing in her gold), or as a woman sexualized through her submission to a

hulking example of masculinity in *McTeague*:³⁷

Suddenly he caught her in both his huge arms, crushing down her struggle with his immense strength, kissing her full upon the mouth. Then her great love for *McTeague* suddenly flashed up in Trina's breast; she gave up to him as she had done before, yielding all at once to that strange desire of being conquered and subdued. (142)

Although there is quite a bit of romantic posturing between the two throughout the novel, each with scenes that find him or her wondering if love indeed motivates their relationship, for the most part, a bizarre (and sexually-charged) game of domination and submission – rooted in nature – defines *McTeague* and Trina's relationship.³⁸ For this reason, Benn Michaels describes *McTeague* as the first work concerned with masochism in American literature, Trina not only tolerating “her husband's brutality” but also taking “an explicitly erotic pleasure in it” (*The Gold Standard* 119). In *McTeague*, men and women alike appear as productions of nature – raw, sexual, dynamic, incomprehensible, and unrestrained. Assigning responsibility seems an impossible task at first glance and, admittedly, Norris does us no favors. This, however, does not mean that Norris dispenses altogether of any sense of ethical subjectivity in the novel. Interestingly, while Trina and *McTeague*'s relationship proves perilous to say the least, we also see the origins of something morally significant (although brief and fleeting) enabled through this very relationship.

When *McTeague* walks about, he does so “moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes

37 Obviously, there's a good deal of gender essentialism in these constructs, which shares analogs with Norris's conceptions of race, ethnicity, and class.

38 This dynamic greatly resembles Norris's earlier work in the short story “Fantaisie Printaniere,” wherein the first appearance of *McTeague* and Trina (the story was to act foundational in the development of *McTeague*) finds Mac beating his wife, and Trina taking an ironic pleasure in these beatings when boasting to a neighbor.

of muscle, slowly, ponderously” (3). In order to extract “a refractory tooth,” McTeague often does so by placing aside his forceps and making use of the immense strength of “his thumb and finger” (3). His square and angular jaw resembles “that of the carnivora” (3) – hardly the appearance of a man nature might have endowed with those traits in which we might willingly desire to confide. From the very beginning of the novel, Norris characterizes McTeague's life through several weighty materialist terms that point to the highly corporeal nature not only of his physique and physical presence but also of his existence, one that does not entail a good deal of thinking; rather, sensual experience primarily informs McTeague's habits and desires. “It was Sunday, and according to his custom on that day, McTeague took his dinner at two in the afternoon at the car conductors' coffee joint on Polk Street,” the narrator begins; “He had a thick, gray soup; heavy, underdone meat, very hot, on a cold plate; two kinds of vegetables; and sort of suet pudding, full of strong butter and sugar” (1). Returning to his dental office, he makes himself comfortable and relaxes in his operating chair beside the window, “reading the paper, drinking his beer, and smoking his huge porcelain pipe while his food digested; crop full, stupid, and warm” (1). “By and by,” the narrator continues, “gorged with steam beer and overcome by the heat of the room, the cheap tobacco, and the effects of his heavy meal, he dropped off to sleep” (1). We get the sense that this Sunday in McTeague's life may very well be no different from any other and, indeed, we are correct: “McTeague looked forward to these Sunday afternoons as a period of relaxation and enjoyment. He invariably spent them in the same fashion. These were his only pleasures – to eat, to smoke, to sleep, and to play upon his concertina” (1-2). McTeague experiences and makes sense out of the world primarily through sensory and bodily evidence. Much like Eugene O'Neill's Yank a little over a decade later, he is

not a thinker, although it is imaginable that possibly under other circumstances he could be;³⁹ instead, things happen and McTeague responds. “McTeague's mind was as his body,” Norris writes, “heavy, slow to act, sluggish” (3). Whenever his one good friend, Marcus, would rant against the capitalist system, against those “white-livered drones” (a posing on his part often without much substance), McTeague routinely responds absent-mindedly and stupidly: “ ‘ Yes, that's it; I think it's their livers” (11). McTeague often seems much more like an automaton than a real man (perhaps even a capitalist production, as Benn Michaels has pointed out concerning naturalism's production of “unnatural” selves), although we are still not indifferent to him as readers since he appears to be the main character in whom we invest interest.⁴⁰

The only experience capable of disrupting McTeague's general physical indulgence and malaise is his encounter with Trina, which seems to make him aware of something other than himself. However, he arrives at even this awareness through sensation and raw emotion more so than through his intellect and, although Trina upsets McTeague's insularity (she forces him, unwittingly, to become aware of something above the level of the self), she remains an object that possesses a precarious position in relation to McTeague. “By degrees McTeague's first awkwardness and suspicion vanished entirely,” the narrator observes; “The two became good

39 McTeague's appreciation of his canary and delight in the playing of his concertina demonstrates an aesthetic awareness that takes him above the level of a mere animal and brute, no matter what his actions. McTeague may not be a thinker or have much in the way of intellect, but he does have some sort of faculty for the appreciation of beauty that, while sensory (the aural pleasure of the bird's voice and the concertina), functions above a base materialism. In addition, McTeague's desire for his gilded sign to hang outside his parlor demonstrates an ambition that rises above animality: “It was his ambition, his dream, to have projecting from that corner window a huge gilded tooth, a molar with enormous prongs, something gorgeous and attractive” (4). McTeague's idea of beauty and art may be amateurish and juvenile, but he can at least appreciate such things.

40 *The Gold Standard.*

On another note, while Marcus and McTeague's “discussions” concerning capitalism lack substance, we get a picture of two men who do not decidedly understand those forces that control their destinies and actions. Marcus comprehends that something is wrong with the system, yet his approach is ill-informed, and he is ineffectual. Similarly, McTeague, the son of a miner and once a miner himself, lacks the education and intellect proper to understanding how things like economics and politics may have great effects upon his life.

friends. McTeague even arrived at that point where he could work and talk to her at the same time, a thing that had never before been possible for him” (21). An entire new world begins to appear for McTeague, a world mysterious and unknown, yet one promising and inviting. “With her the feminine element suddenly entered his little world,” Norris's narrator claims, and “It was not only her that he saw and felt, it was the woman, the whole sex, an entire new humanity, strange and alluring, that he seemed to have discovered” (21). Awakened from something apparently resembling an existential slumber, McTeague sees “all at once...that there was something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer” (21). Although Trina appears to upset McTeague's world, disrupting his philosophical field of vision by introducing him to something transcending the self, his base ability to process her soon becomes mediated through a primal reaction and instinct that returns him to the level of a mere beast.

Towards the end of these operative sessions, McTeague discovers a deep cavity in one of Trina's teeth, which needs repair yet causes quite a bit of pain to her when he initially attempts a fix. Wary of the dangers of putting a patient under with nitrous oxide gas, McTeague opts for ether instead. Trina quickly succumbs to the anesthetic, assuming a pose of tranquil beauty in the dentist's eyes. “For some time he stood watching her as she lay there,” writes Norris, “unconscious and helpless and very pretty. He was alone with her, and she was absolutely without defense” (23). At this moment, those instincts and urges that were lying dormant just beneath his conscious level of experience begin to shake McTeague's pose of equanimity. With every fiber of his being that has somehow escaped the base and the bestial, he fights against himself, trying desperately to maintain his control. He is a self in turmoil, but clearly there remains some moral sense even in the brute. Unfortunately, Trina's innocence as she lies there in that unconscious state (as she loses her personality and individuality, although perhaps not her

humanity) proves far too much for McTeague to handle as he steals a heavy, “gross” kiss from her lips. This moment of weakness terrifies McTeague, who can hardly account for himself as he plunges desperately into his work in order to distract him from his momentary impropriety. “But for all that, the brute was there. Long dormant, it was now at last alive, awake. From now on he would feel its presence continually; would feel it tugging at its chain, watching its opportunity” (25), the narrator states. We are reminded that McTeague's indecorous action reflects the taint of his fathers, from his dad to his great-grandfather “five-hundred” times removed:

The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. *Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?*

But McTeague could not understand this thing. It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man; but its significance was not for him. To reason with it was beyond him. He could only oppose to it an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert. (*italics mine*, 24)

The discovery of his sexuality wracks McTeague to the bone, and nature has not equipped him with the proper material to make sense out of this awakening. McTeague may have limited intellectual resources, yet we identify with him nonetheless as a human plagued by the same ontological questions that trouble ourselves. “We are never completely one with McTeague,” Pizer states, “his brute strength and dull mind put us off. But because he is trapped in the universal net of sex, and because we recognize the poignancy of the loss of his world, we respond to him ultimately as a human being in distress, as a figure of some significance despite his limitations” (*Realism and Naturalism* 16). Even so, a new view of McTeague, the honest animal, emerges here, one that calls for a reexamination of our approach to morality and agency in the novel.

What we see here, despite McTeague's inability to rise above experience unmediated by the flesh, is something resembling a moral agent. The interior monologue of the above passage depicts a McTeague who has indeed somehow discovered something completely foreign, strange, and other – a McTeague who can contemplate not only his actions and decisions (and possibly their effects upon others), but also his self and such notions as blame and responsibility, although unable to comprehend those larger processes by which he arrived at his kiss (“it’s significance was not for him”). Although it may be difficult to assign something like blame to individual characters in *McTeague*, we cannot ignore the fact that Norris gives them some form of moral subjectivity, albeit rudimentary and often inarticulate. Maybe we should, therefore, stop discrediting any sense of ethical subjectivity in Norris despite the difficulty we have with him in assigning blame in a conventional sense. Concerning the scene above that gives us pause to consider McTeague's identity as a moral actor, Conder states that “Norris seemingly grants status to these concepts, all of which imply man's freedom, responsibility, and guilt; but he questions them, and the novel's determinism repudiates their adequacy for evaluating the world of *McTeague*” (71). Conder is right in the difficulty inherent in such an ethical approach that would assign responsibility, yet we must not forget the unavoidable exposure to something beyond the self here. An inarticulate ethical agent is one that is not fully aware of itself, in fact cannot possibly be fully aware of itself, but such a construct of the subject places him or her out of the fold and brings the other into the center. If we really want to unlock the moral potential of a text like *McTeague*, or a novelist like Norris, we must look at any approach that foregrounds the self (as the center of moral agency) with some caution and advance with an alternative approach that decentralizes the self instead. As Norris seems to suggest, if we are going to locate an ethics in a world wherein discourses like evolutionary science and capitalist economics make responsibility

an increasingly difficult notion to grasp, in a world where – much like McTeague – we cannot adequately give an account of ourselves, we would do well in finding one that does not rely so heavily upon the self for its moral universe.

The final scene of the novel may in fact point towards such an approach, rather than that pessimistic reading which consistently posits the desolation of the outcome of McTeague's fate. The image of McTeague handcuffed to the dead Marcus in the middle of Death Valley is desolate, no doubt, perhaps even morbid; however, this outcome suggests something other than mere tragedy or pessimism. “As McTeague rose to his feet, he felt a pull at his right wrist; something held it fast,” writes Norris, “Looking down, he saw that Marcus in that last struggle had found strength to handcuff their wrists together. Marcus was dead now; McTeague was locked to the body. All about him, vast, interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley” (347). The final scene of *McTeague* leaves us with an image of the absolute subjugation of the self before the other. McTeague has served his own immediate ends: he has beat his friend (who would otherwise arrest and turn him in) to death, thus sparing his freedom and future. McTeague's motivation is completely selfish and violent, yet seems to make sense in a world that threatens to reduce humans to caged beasts. In other words, human motivation (at least from a Hobbesian perspective) is self-preservation. Even in this enactment of self-preservation, however, McTeague cannot finally separate his victory from the outcome he has caused, from the implications of his actions – he cannot separate those actions (and even factors) that led to his temporary triumph over Marcus from his permanent fate there on the desert floor. McTeague attempts to cast Marcus aside, a mere obstacle hindering his escape, yet he finds placing the world of “things,” the world of others, out of sight and out of mind an impossible task. Marcus handcuffs McTeague, refusing to allow him to escape any of the actions that have led him to that

very moment. Rather than absolve him of any responsibility, Norris directly implicates McTeague in those actions and processes that have brought suffering into view. Understandably, we may have some anxiety about reading *McTeague's* episodes of violence and animality as separate from determinism, a fact that even Conder, for instance, a compatibilist critic, cannot look past when he claims that *McTeague's* “hard determinism” bars any sense of actual blame (70). Admittedly, we are on some very shaky ground here; however, we cannot continue to distinguish actions from responsibility in the novel. For Norris, as with Levinas, questions of freedom or agency are secondary to our responsibility. Even in the despair of this final scene, as we see McTeague unable to escape the inevitability of his actions, we still find something salvageable in his dire humanity, in his guilt and in his need. For Levinas, our vulnerability to death – a vulnerability McTeague now certainly faces – proves the ultimate guarantor of our humanity. Our vulnerability to death is the final line that divides the living and the dead; in other words, it is the final line that distinguishes the human from the mere object. McTeague is no inconsequential object, and Norris forces us to acknowledge him as the other that is more than nothing, that claims his humanity, regardless of his flaws and moral culpability.

The lasting image of the inarticulate McTeague handcuffed to Marcus's corpse on the desert floor certainly serves as one of the most iconic in all literature. Perhaps not strikingly, it conjures similarities to the final image in Norris's earlier work, *Vandover and the Brute*, a novel that remained somewhat unfinished even at his death. A ragged, motley Vandover assumes a position of complete degradation and submission before the presence of the contumacious boy, the harsh, unforgiving desert floor of *McTeague* replaced with the hard floor of a kitchen in which Vandover huddles, currently gathering his cleaning materials into a bundle: “As he finished, he glanced up. For an instant the two remained there motionless, looking into each

other's eyes, Vandover on the floor,...the little boy standing before him eating the last mouthful of his bread and butter” (591). Just as McTeague finds no sustenance as he gazes around him, nearing what will surely be his end, Vandover gains no sympathy or compassion from the little boy who polishes off his last bit of food rather than offer it to a man who is clearly in foul shape. But perhaps we can simply excuse this as the child's carefree nature, one of those cruel acts that mark all our childhoods at some point or another. Or perhaps Vandover finds himself at the lowest point in a world marked by asymmetry, where the one that stands before him refuses to offer any comfort or assurance.

While an earlier novel, *Vandover and the Brute* serves not only as a solid point for further evaluating Norris's earlier career but may also serve as Norris's greatest example of something that looks like an ethics of trauma. The novel was not published until 1914, well after Norris's death, although Norris worked extensively on the project throughout the 1890s, before he had even written a word of *McTeague*. Among his works, *Vandover* stands alongside *McTeague* as one of Norris's most notoriously obstinate texts, so much so in fact that astute critics like Link (no detractor of naturalist texts and their moral capabilities) see no progressive value in Vandover's physical and moral degeneration whatsoever. Although pointing to the philosophical complications in assigning responsibility and blame, Vandover's fall, according to Link, is another tale of descent, a provocative warning about the trajectory of American life amid a world of quack late nineteenth-century social evolutionists. “Unlike Presley in *The Octopus*, he [Vandover] has no final redemptive vision,” Link states, “no 'transcendental' or intuitive awareness that evolution and determinism may lead toward perfection, utopia, or the good; instead, there is the confusion and darkness of a 'spiritual death,' a de-volution, a dark and grotesque lapse into a brutish state without redemptive harmony” (90). While Link may find

some redeeming value in Norris's ultimate struggle with the intractable forces of life, Paul Civello takes the negative implications of Norris's literature even further by claiming that *Vandover* offers nothing but a no hope determinism. On the contrary, *Vandover and the Brute* is a valuable piece for evaluating Norris as an author indebted to drawing attention to the significance of human suffering and pain. We cannot dissect his literary career between moments that seem to have moral compunction and scruples and those moments that appear to scoff at such possibilities. In fact, there is no such divide in his works. Norris's texts remain (as a whole) indelibly linked to a legitimate concern about suffering, human relationships, and ethical possibility.

Like other examples from his *oeuvre*, *Vandover* follows what essentially amounts to a sentimental plot: from a youth full of artistic promise, Vandover slowly falls into whoring, drinking, and gambling, depicting that decline which seems to characterize the fall from grace in so many dramatic novels. Unlike the works of melodrama, however, Vandover's fall neither offers his redemption and rise from the ashes nor unequivocally condemns such a decline. After matriculating to Harvard as a result of his father's unwillingness to see him leave for Paris, Vandover and his cohort soon find themselves sinking into debauchery and college carousing. Vandover becomes inebriated for the first time after the Yale and Harvard football game. Although he does not completely lose his senses, Vandover is keenly aware that he is experiencing a new sensation, and one that he is not so proud of at the moment: "He was not so drunk but that he knew he was, and the knowledge of the fact so terrified him that it kept him from getting very bad" (296). Sleeping it off, however, Vandover finds himself nearly carefree the following morning:

In the morning he was surprised to find that he felt so little ashamed.

Geary and young Haight treated the matter as a huge joke and told him of certain funny things he had said and done and which he had entirely forgotten. It was impossible for him to take the matter seriously even if he had wished to, and within a few weeks he was drunk again. He found that he was not an exception; Geary was often drunk with him, fully a third of all the Harvard men he knew were intoxicated at different times.....Certainly, neither he nor any of the others drank because they liked the beer; after the fifth or sixth glass it was all they could do to force down another. Such being the case, Vandover often asked why he got drunk at all. This question he was never able to answer. (296-97)

Vandover slides into a life of debauchery, a life in which he eventually cannot avoid and for which he almost seems destined, much to the detriment of his art, grades, and emotional stability. After college, he and his Harvard friends, Dolly Haight and Charlie Geary, return to San Francisco, where Vandover's continuous decline only accelerates. While Haight and Geary participate alongside Vandover in late night "bacchanals" at The Imperial, drinking and taking up the company of local prostitutes, neither seems as grossly and ill-effected as Vandover (although Geary's greed will eventually result in his ruining Vandover by swindling him in the Wade lawsuit).

In fact, Vandover's fall is one so steep, dramatic, and, most importantly, animalistic that critics like Link have given serious consideration to the theme of lycanthropy in the novel, a tale which he sees as "[p]erhaps the clearest example of 'naturalist Gothic'...in which lycanthropy serves as a forceful symbol of the influence of Vandover's lower, brute nature" (152-53). As Vandover's life becomes increasingly complicated by his debauches and animal instincts, he reverts to a wolf-like state, given over to moments of growling, drooling, howling, and walking

upon all fours. Such a reversion signals, for some critics, an infatuation with primitivism on the part of Norris that makes his work incredibly difficult to read as optimistic or promising. For Gina M. Rossetti, *Vandover and the Brute* participates in a nativist discourse that warns against the prospects of a society “overrun” by the lower classes and the moral degeneracy of other social pariahs – a stern caveat that not only confirms the status of the lower class but also points to the inevitable future of the upper class and so-called “good Americans” if they do not insulate themselves from such personal vices and social contamination. Nineteenth century sociologists and pseudo-scientists like Lambroso, Giddings, and Sumner, advocated a view of the lower class and non-Anglo ethnicity as dangerous to American culture as well as argued for a biological and race determinism that laid much of the foundation for the growing nativist movement. For authors like London and Norris, according to Rossetti, the primitive became an ideal way of invoking a robust conception of American identity. Bad primitivism, like what we witness in *Vandover*, serves as a disturbing warning against the devaluation of good American stock. “Naturalism is not simply pessimistic determinism or a failed realist aesthetic,” Rossetti argues; “On the contrary, naturalism produces contradictory images about the primitive and the devolution of this particular character and all those...” he or she may encounter. “Naturalism rebukes the primitive,” she continues, “for his or her debasement. At the same time, however, it necessarily posits a privileged class and confirms that class's elite status” (5), something that distinguishes both *Vandover* and *McTeague*. Rossetti describes Vandover's specific condition and state of affairs as a “wanton crossing of class lines” that proves the danger entailed by an “unmediated contact with the primitive” (38), placing his animality witnessed here within an atavistic discourse that directly links Norris (and naturalism) to nativism. This factor obviously calls into question how we might think of a work like *Vandover* as a productive point from which

we might claim a naturalist ethics. Nativism is obviously counter-productive to pluralism and otherness, and the atavism invoked in a character like Vandover, or the racism and anti-Semitism we find in a novel like *McTeague*, for instance, certainly do complicate our approach. Even so, what remains evident is that *Vandover* is a novel very much troubled by notions of responsibility and obligation. Vandover, like *McTeague*, may be some sort of caricature, but Norris directly implicates him in the suffering of others, providing him with no moral compass or rational account to process this suffering.

Aside from concerns with primitivism and race degeneracy in Norris, Vandover's tale presents us with a couple of social and moral dilemmas as readers, dilemmas that I think make the foregrounding of Norris's less desirable personal characteristics as guides for interpreting his fiction much more difficult. One of these dilemmas I broached at the beginning of this chapter, and it concerns both the sinking of the *Mazatlan*, the over-booked, second-class steamer Vandover is a guest upon in a return trip up the California coastline, and Vandover's response during and after the sinking. "This homeward passage turned out to be one long misery for Vandover," states the narrator; "He had never been upon a second-class boat before and had never imagined that anything could be so horribly uncomfortable or disagreeable" (387). Born into a life of relative privilege and ease, Vandover finds himself appalled at the poor accommodations and the cramped living space aboard. The presence of his fellow passengers in the cabin, most of whom are members of the working class or lower middle class, proves upsetting for Vandover, so much so that his seasickness seems almost as much the result of their stifling presence as it does the result of the motion of the ocean's waves:

About two o'clock in the morning he woke up in this place frightfully sick at the stomach and wretched in body and mind. He had an upper bunk, and for a

long time he lay on his back rolling about with the rolling of the steamer, vaguely staring straight above him at the roof of the cabin, hardly a hand's-breadth above his face.... By and by, for no particular reason, he rose on his elbow and, leaning over the side of his berth, looked about him....

The cabin was two decks below the open air and every berth was occupied, the only ventilation being through the door. The air was foul with the stench of bilge, the reek of the untrimmed lamps, the exhalation of so many breaths, and the close, stale smell of warm bedding.

A vague murmur rose in the air, the sound of deep breathing, the moving of restless bodies between the coarse sheets, the momentary noise of the scratching of blunt finger-tips, a subdued cough, the moan of a sleeping child. (388-89)

Exposed to the unruly and suffocating presence of others, of the masses to which he has had little exposure, Vandover cannot neatly process his current environs and must abscond from the cabin for the deck so that he might gain the relief of fresh air. "The continued pitching, the foul air, and the bitter smoke from the saloonkeepers' cigars became more than Vandover could stand," Norris writes; "His stomach turned, at every instant he gagged and choked. He suddenly made up his mind that he could stand it no longer, and determined to go on deck, preferring to walk the night out rather than spend it in the cabin" (390). Making haste towards the deck, Vandover "was seized with such a nausea that he could hardly keep from vomiting where he stood.... He sank back upon an iron capstan with a groan, weak and trembling, his eyes full of tears, a bursting feeling in his head. He was utterly miserable" (390). Once on deck, Vandover finds the respite he wished to be offered by the night air short-lived.

Standing on deck, battling nausea and stomach sickness, feeling the weight of the world

upon his back, the deck literally moves beneath Vandover's feet, upheaving whatever ability he may possess to command his balance with facility upon deck. It had just occurred to him moments before that he could spend the rest of the night inside the smoking room, upon the cushions and away from the cabin below: "The deck was jerked away from beneath his feet, and he was hurled forward, many times his own length, against a companionway, breaking his thumb as he fell. A second shock threw him down again as he rose; everything about him shook and danced like glassware upon a jarred table" (391). Thrown to all-fours (a position which anticipates Vandover's lycanthropy), Vandover listens attentively to the sounds of the ship in the night. Once he realizes that the ship is sinking, he can think only about his personal safety and welfare: "Vandover's very first impulse was a wild desire of saving himself; he had not the least thought for anyone else. Every soul on board might drown, so only he should be saved" (392). Vandover's instinctual desire to immediately save himself at any cost is not unlike how many of us would act under such duress. After all, human existence would probably not have lasted as long as it has without such instinctual self-preservation (right or wrong as may be the case), a fact that Norris sees directly linking humans with their animal counterparts. Speaking of Vandover's initial reaction, the narrator claims, "It was the primitive animal instinct, the blind adherence to the first great law, an impulse that in this first moment of excitement could not be resisted" (392). If natural law determines such actions on the part of human beings, then the task of assigning any sort of moral blame to any of our instincts becomes an arduous one indeed. The implications of such actions as those expressed by Vandover here are clear: what prospects for negating our nature may we find? And if we and our actions are merely the results of factors beyond our control, then what hope might there be for a better society? As I've stated before, while compatibilist theories and those of soft determinism seek a way around such a problem, ethical

traumatism confronts the problem directly by making such questions, if not meaningless, at least unnecessary for locating an ethics. While we understandably maintain a fondness for agency, the will should not necessarily be looked upon as a necessity in answering moral questions and dilemmas. Vandover appears as an object of metaphysical forces beyond his purview or reach, yet this does not detract from his obligation; in fact, his subjectivity is his obligation. According to Levinas, morality should be viewed as a part of our subjectivity, rendering the will a non-factor in questions of responsibility, and this realization makes us moral agents, whether we act responsibly or not.

After a short time, Vandover collects himself along with his wits, gathering alongside the other passengers in awaiting their collective fates. In fact, the passengers, who moments before had rushed the deck in a giant surge of fear, reach a calm complacency upon deck. Although temporary composure seems to pacify those natural laws by which men and women are governed, the deck quickly becomes animated through “animal behavior” again. Dozens kneel down in prayer; the “Salvation lassie” enthusiastically declares her absence of fear, protected, as she claims, by a God of mercy; the “little Jew of the plush cap cries, “God 'a' mercy! God 'a' mercy!” (395). Although religious belief is not animalistic in itself, the invocation of humanity's primordial desire for self-preservation, however, can very well be. Shortly after, the boatswain's mate, a dignified older gentleman of stoic composure who had previously pacified the crowd with confidence and given Vandover inspiration, suddenly seems to lose himself and his resolve altogether, climbing over the rail and diving off the ship's tottering side: “Some strange reaction seemed to have seized upon him. Of a sudden he rushed to the rail, the starboard rail that was heaved so out of the water, stood upon it for a moment, and then with a great shout jumped over the side” (396). This action proves infectious as four men immediately follow the boatswain's

mate over the side while general unrest among the throngs on deck once again rules. The *Mazatlan* no longer seems a boat, “no longer a thing of wood and iron, but some strange huge living creature that was dying” directly underneath Vandover's feet, an “enormous brute that was plunging and writhing in its last agony” (397). Preparing for the final plunge of the ship into the sea, women and children are loaded into life boats, followed by the men.

The lifeboat in which Vandover takes sanctuary had apparently been built for only a capacity of thirty-five people. “[M]ore than forty had crowded into it, and it needed all prudence and care to keep it afloat in the heavy seas” (400). As the party in the lifeboat pull away from the wreck, the voice of a screaming and bewildered man reaches them from the rail of the steamer. The “little Jew,” thinking himself abandoned calls out to the party, his only chance left for salvation. The engineer in charge of the lifeboat gives orders: “ ‘Give way there!’ he commanded the men; ‘there's no more room’ ” (400). Desperate for life, the Jew plunges from the railing into the sea, emerging with deep gasps and grasping wildly for the oars of the lifeboat. Despite the pleas of some of the members of the party to draw the dying man in, the engineer holds steady. “ ‘It's too late!’ he shouted, partly to the Jew and partly to the boat. ‘One more and we are swamped. Let go there!’ ” (400). The argument that ensues between passengers and the engineer as well as passengers among one another points to a group of people directly encountering a dire existential battle between deciding the fate of another and possibly themselves:

“But you can't let him drown,” cried Vandover and the others who sat near.

“Oh, take him in anyhow; we must risk it.”

“Risk hell!” thundered the engineer. “Look here, you!” he cried to

Vandover and the rest. “I'm in command here and am responsible for the lives of all of you. It's a matter of his life or ours; one life or forty. One more and we are

swamped. Let go there!”

“Yes, yes,” cried some. “It's too late! There's no more room!”

But others still protested. “It's too horrible; don't let him drown; take him in.” (401)

The initial reaction of Vandover and some others is to help the Jew, who thrashes wildly in the open water, while the engineer and his cohort resist taking in the drowning man at all costs, urging his rowers to “[s]hake him off” the oars. While the Jew still holds on to the oar, however, the dire necessity of Vandover's situation inside the boat sets in for the eponymous character. In reaction to the engineer's persistence, “Vandover glanced at the fearfully overloaded boat,” the narrator states, “and saw the necessity of it and held his peace, watching the thing that was being done” (401). Once the Jew grabs the side of the boat and it careens to his side, we are left to assume that the rest of the party finally submits to the pragmatic thinking of the engineer and his mates. Women cry for the preservation of their children, one vociferously making it known that the only possible solution is to push the man away from the seemingly jeopardized boat. “It was the animal in them all that had come to the surface in an instant,” writes Norris, “the primal instinct of the brute striving for its life and for the life of its young” (402). After a few more moments of tussles and exclamations, the Jew's struggle for survival finally ends as he sinks beneath the tossing waves. Vandover cries out at the horror of witnessing a man drown and promptly vomits over the side.

Throughout the night, the party is battered by the waves, rain, sleet, and cold, most of the women with nothing to protect them from exposure with the exception of their bedtime garments. Vandover, having the good fortune of being clothed at the time of the ship's misfortune, apparently provides others in the party with some of his garments as well as a travelling-rug in

his possession. Looking at his counterparts, “Vandover could do nothing; he had *almost* stripped himself to help clothe the others. Nothing more could be done” ([emphasis mine] 404).

Vandover acts nobly, but has he acted enough? “Vandover himself suffered too keenly to take much thought for the sufferings of the others,” the narrator observes, “while besides that anguish which he shared with the whole boat, the pain in his broken thumb gnawed incessantly like a rat” (404). Although he does not act selfishly, at least beyond any normal conception of self-preservation, the narrative suggests that perhaps it is possible that Vandover could give more. He *almost* strips himself to clothe other passengers. Has he done enough? Perhaps he could use his own body's warmth to help warm others? Or maybe these are moot questions. Maybe Vandover should have offered his place to the drowning Jew in the first place. Regardless, the point is that more could be done, despite the defensive projections of Vandover's interior monologue (“Nothing more could be done”).

Arriving in San Francisco “desperately hungry,” Vandover takes his breakfast at the Imperial, nearly abandoned, as it is, at that early hour. Inside, he runs into Toby, a waiter from the night shift with whom Vandover is well-acquainted and who is just now about to leave the club. Absolutely staggered by Vandover's shabby and disheveled appearance, Toby asks him what has happened. Immediately upon Vandover's revealing that he has been in a shipwreck down the coast, Toby exclaims, “The *Mazatlan!*” Toby soon informs Vandover that twenty-three died in the sinking and among them was a victim of particular interest: “a little Jew named Brann, diamond expert; he jumped overboard and – ” (410). Here, Vandover interjects with revulsion: “ ‘Don't!’ ... ‘I saw him drown – it was sickening!’ ” (410). Perhaps talking a bit too much ahead of himself, Toby excitedly indicts those responsible for Brann's death: “ ‘Well, wait till I tell you,’ ” he exclaims, “ ‘the authorities here are right after that first engineer with a sharp

stick, and some of the passengers, too, for not taking him in. A woman in one of the other boats saw it all and gave the whole thing away. A thing like that is regular murder, you know' ” (411).

Not only has the previously abstract identity of the “little Jew of the plush cap” taken on an actual name and role (albeit economic: salesman and diamond expert), but Vandover has also been implicated in murder. The sense of guilt is palpable, but we can also understand the rationale of those on the overcrowded lifeboat, including Vandover, who may have faced imminent peril in hauling one of their fellows over the side into the boat. The drowning of Brann pits guilt and responsibility against a seemingly pragmatic preservation of the group. The engineer's utilitarian argument possibly saves the entire party aboard, and for this, it is difficult to fault him as a moral agent. However, we might ask numerous questions about his conduct (as well as that of others aboard). While an additional oar (Norris makes it clear they have no spares) could not be offered, could a hand have been extended to the man, allowing him to stick it out the best he could without risking capsizing the boat? Very risky business, and most likely improbable at best, but a question worth asking when one's life is at stake. Why did no one in the boat offer themselves, abdicating their place for that of Brann's? Once again, a most unreasonable request but one still worth asking? Although Vandover and like-minded others could not initially ignore the suffering of a fellow, making it clear they have some sort of ethical capacity and urges, once the reality of Vandover's situation sets in, he cannot easily dismiss his own preservation, even to the detriment of a man he had just recognized as his fellow and counterpart in suffering moments before. Obviously, nature seems to reign supreme in the chaos of the sinking of the *Mazatlan*, but questions of responsibility and obligation are not left without substance either.

Vandover's earlier relationship with Ida Wade also raises some key questions in the novel.

While no prostitute or woman of ill repute by any means, Ida apparently belongs to that class of women by which the reputation of a promising young man of the middle class might be compromised at best or perhaps even scandalized at worst:

Ida Wade belonged to a certain type of young girl that was very common in the city. She was what men, among each other, called “gay,” though that was the worst that could be said of her. She was virtuous, but the very fact that it was necessary to say so was enough to cause the statement to be doubted.... She loved to have a “gay” time, which for her meant to drink California champagne, to smoke cigarettes, and to kick at the chandelier. She was still virtuous and meant to stay so.... Only those – like Vandover – who knew her best, knew her for what she was, for Ida was morbidly careful of appearances, and as jealous of her reputation as only fast girls are. (338)

Apparently Ida is what some would consider “loose” or “fast,” a girl who makes for a good time but certainly not one with which any “self-respecting” and relatively leisured man would want to freely associate. Nonetheless, Vandover spends a good deal of time ducking in and out of reputable crowds with her as well as some moments in privacy, which results, not surprisingly for a naturalist novel, in Ida's pregnancy and eventual demise.

The prospect of being seen alongside young Ida Wade nearly obsesses Vandover, and yet he cannot willingly rid himself of her acquaintance altogether. Neglect seems to be the theme for the two's relationship, with Vandover constantly failing to communicate with Ida, to take her needs or situation seriously. Instead, outside of a night's romp, Vandover frequently ignores her to the point of neglect, most notably in the days after one particular encounter between the two. Bessie, Ida's good friend, informs Vandover that something is drastically wrong with Ida and that

she must speak with him immediately; her dire disposition points to the earnestness of Ida's need to speak with Vandover. Completely aware of the nature of the encounters Ida and he have had in the last few weeks, Vandover gives no value whatsoever to Bessie's pleas, or to those of Ida, for that matter. She is merely a far removed object that consumes no more of his time than a petty dalliance. Frustrated, isolated, abandoned, and altogether fearful for her future and reputation as a single mother, Ida finally commits suicide. Vandover never once bothers to see what may have been ailing her. In a hurry to make a downtown appointment, Geary stops by to inform Vandover that she has killed herself by taking laudanum and that he can learn more about it in the newspaper. Retreating to the bath, Vandover reemerges to pick up the morning paper and read more about Ida's death:

At first he could not find it, and then it suddenly jumped into prominence from out the gray blur of the print on an inside page beside an advertisement of a charity concert for the benefit of a home for incurable children. There was a picture of Ida taken from a photograph like one that she had given him, and which even then was thrust between the frame and glass of his mirror. He read the article through; it sketched her life and character and the circumstances of her death with the relentless terseness of the writer cramped for space. According to this view, the causes of her death were unknown. "It had been remarked that she had of late been despondent and in ill health." (369)

Pushed to meet a deadline, the journalist assigned to obituaries apparently weeds through Ida's entire life, cutting straight to the "important" details. Norris suggests that Ida's individuality is somehow lost; Ida's life is stuffed into a short and concise narrative for the papers, a framed

retelling of her life tailored to fit a 2” x 1” box that hardly does it justice.⁴¹ Moreover, despite its unavoidable flaws, if ever there was an obituary written indirectly to indict another, then Ida's obituary should suffice.

Vandover is clearly implicated in her death, and the fact that he had a hand in Ida's demise sets in immediately and weighs heavily upon him. Dropping the paper, Vandover realizes his guilt:

In a low voice under his breath he said:

“What have I done? What have I done now?”

Like the sudden unrolling of a great scroll he saw his responsibility for her death and for the ruin of that something in her which was more than life. What would become of her now? And what would become of him? For a single brief instant he tried to persuade himself that Ida had consented after all. But he knew that this was not so. She had consented, but he had forced her consent; he was none the less guilty. And then in that dreadful moment when he saw things in their true light, all the screens of conventionality and sophistry torn away, the words that young Haight had spoken came back to him. No matter if she had consented, it was his duty to have protected her, even against herself. (370)

The weight of his responsibility sinks in, and this realization is nearly unbearable. Always the man of a life of comfort, leisure, and ease, Vandover's world has been upturned. It is apparent that nothing will ever be the same again. Vandover alternates between moments of self-pity, guilt, compassion, and self-loathing. “At every moment now he saw the different consequences

41 The criticism of the obituary's shortcomings will find affinities with Dos Passos's and West's critiques of mass discourse as well. Specifically, each author condemns “mass-marketed” language as a stain upon being, attempting to represent life within the parameters of the market.

of what he had done,” states the narrator, “Now, it was that his life was ruined.... Now, it was a furious revolt against his mistake that had led him to such a fearful misunderstanding of Ida.... Now, it was a wave of immense pity for the dead girl that overcame him.... Now, it was a terror for himself” (370-71). Vandover decides to confess his sins to his father a couple of nights later, revealing the sordid details of his relationship with Ida and that his seduction and neglect are the causes of her death. Although Vandover's responsibility may no longer be at question, what remains unclear here, however, is his motivation for confessing. Norris does not make it explicitly clear whether or not this confession is the result of guilt and penitence or merely the product of a young man seeking any form of comfort and solace he may possibly find – in other words, someone trying to cope with the gravity of his situation.

Whatever the case may be for his confession, Vandover's guilt soon begins to manifest itself physically, in his pale and deathly appearance, his feverish starts, his nervous trembling. Most notable are Vandover's repeated episodes of nausea, sickness, hysteria, and paranoia, however. Hoping to run into someone he knows after his breakfast at the Imperial following his return from the shipwreck, a relatively smug Vandover chances upon Ida's mother, dressed for mourning. “It was like a blow between the eyes,” Norris writes; “Vandover caught his breath and started violently, feeling again for an instant the cold grip of the hysterical terror that had so nearly overcome him on the morning of Ida's death” (412). Later in the novel, upon learning that he has spent his entire inheritance, Vandover's waste immediately conjures the visceral sensations felt in his reactions to Ida's death. “The blow was strong enough, sudden enough to penetrate even Vandover's clouded and distorted wits,” the narrator observes; “His nerves were gone in a minute, a sudden stupefying numbness fell upon his brain, and the fear of something unknown, the immense unreasoning terror that” took hold of “him for the first time the morning after Ida

Wade's suicide came back upon him, horrible, crushing, so that he had to shut his teeth against a wild hysterical desire to rush through the streets screaming and waving his arms" (541). The sensations felt at these particular moments are short-lived but are not without precedent, nor are they isolated cases as Vandover's feelings of persecution and episodes of nausea and hysteria occur with regularity throughout the novel, often culminating in his dog "performances," which result in his complete debasement and loss of self altogether. In fact, the novel ends with Vandover's decay as the result, finally, of the imposition of the other. The cruel boy that looks down at Vandover does not merely point to some sort of pessimistic debasement of the self but, instead, signals the unbridgeable distance between the self and the other that cannot be maintained symmetrically nor accounted for.⁴² It is a refusal to harmonize the scrutinizing and commanding gaze of another with what we see as the extreme denigration of humanity in the form of the servant.

Vandover and the Brute's episodes of trauma and sickness point to a construct of subjectivity that is radically different from any other projected in nineteenth-century letters. While Norris's literary predecessors were often more worried about a clearly humanistic notion of responsibility and agency, whether characters are facing hardship or not, Norris sought a perspective from which the agent could be viewed as limited by a world of refractory obstacles, much like the world we are constantly battered with in our own lives – a world that seems to deter our efforts and which we cannot command, yet one in which we possess responsibility for

⁴² Sure, Vandover's degradation can be loosely accounted for through his proneness to drink, sex, and other vices, but this is really just a circuitous account. What sets Vandover apart from any other human being? Is he the only one given in to vices? Furthermore, and most importantly, what makes Vandover (or anyone for that matter) prone to these perceived moral flaws? Why do these even have to be moral flaws? In reality, the perception of Vandover's nature as morally corrupt is probably more the product of historical context and conditioning (on the part of the reader) than it is anything else. While we can account for Vandover's fall through vice, we cannot account for the mastery that others wield over him.

our lives and those of our fellows nonetheless. So much of Norris's writings stress the inarticulacy of individuals, their inability to communicate with one another as well as to express themselves and reflect. McTeague's ignorance and stupidity limit his ability to understand the conditions that determine his life and the lives of those around him. Vandover's loss of physical and mental functioning, likewise, keeps him from retaining his social position and acting in a manner that would signal a man not only in control of his self and faculties but also his relationships with others. What both lack is the capability to give an account of themselves before their interlocutors. Link thinks that the inarticulate nature of such characters (their inability to speak or act self-reflexively) underscores the fact of their abject subjectivity. "To limit self-awareness," he says, "is to increase the amount of seeming determinism, resulting in the naturalist 'brute.'"⁴³ While we may have difficulty in condemning such a figure who lacks self-control and self-consciousness, from my perspective the inarticulate "brute" is also an image of ethical inadequacy, his ability to confront relationships through his own liking or on his own terms completely nullified. In Norris, inarticulate subjectivity cannot explain itself and it cannot find answers or seek affirmative results but, most importantly, it cannot delimit others no matter how hard it may try. Dispossessed of the capacity to speak and to act, the inarticulate subject finds no safe home or ground from which to establish terms that will make the world of others somehow familiar.

Interestingly, such an approach risks obfuscation. Mary Lawlor thinks that we cannot justify a definitive ethical reading of *Vandover* and *McTeague* because the narrator (in each novel) seems "lost" and confused, incapable of offering any definitive moral statement. For instance, as Lawlor claims, in *Vandover*, the narrator takes "a position separate from that of

⁴³ Lecture given at the University of Tennessee, Feb. 27, 2013.

Vandover and yet” also shares Vandover's “murky and incoherent way of seeing the world” (62). Similarly, in the closing sections of *McTeague*, we see narrative voice frequently merge with McTeague's sensibility while he also seems to escape the controlling definitions of the narrator (witnessed earlier in the novel) the further he travels from San Francisco. According to Lawlor, narrative perspectives in Norris's “Western” novels are not unlike those of Crane, particularly in “The Blue Hotel,” which finds a narrator “as awkwardly situated as his central characters” (62). “In these and other ways, then,” Lawlor argues, “the narrators of naturalist Westerns appear nearly as vulnerable to epistemological and ethical confusion as the characters they describe” (63). I agree with Lawlor that neither Norris nor Crane, for that matter, offers a definitive ethical system, one that gives us a guide for moral and self conduct, and much of the confusion she finds present in narrative voice should point to the recalcitrance of these authors to offer such a definitive system. Such a refusal, however, does not negate the ethical sincerity of these novelists,⁴⁴ particularly Stephen Crane, whose narrators and characters, while often uncertain about events, should not be mistaken as evidence for Crane's merely casting human life “under the bus” of determinism.

44 I do not wish to imply by this that Lawlor thereby denies their sincerity. She acknowledges these concerns on behalf of the naturalists she mentions as explored very much in earnest. I simply wish to suggest that moral confusion in these authors should not be conflated with lack of any sort of statement about the nature of ethics, which is an unfortunate tendency we have had in our critical history.

V. STEPHEN CRANE AND INDISCRIMINATE JUDGMENT

If ever there was an author to completely dispel our pessimism and general ill will regarding naturalism, Stephen Crane is the man. To read Crane's works nowadays, especially his fiction, and to derive no moral substance whatsoever is akin to eating an Oreo, Vienna Fingers, ice cream sandwich, whatever delicious treat with center filling of your choice, and completely neglecting the appeal of the middle. The primary task with Crane is not revealing him as an author concerned about humankind's position in the cosmos or the individual's position in society (these things should be self-evident in his writing), but in coming to terms with Crane's ethics, which tend to be harsh and unrelenting. When Crane emerged in the literary market place in the early 1890s, he did so by striking the eyes of the literary world like a mysterious flash in the night: disruptive, chaotic, and gone before readers ever quite knew for certain what to make of him and his works, which represented a depiction of contemporary urban American life hitherto without parallel. Of course, Howells' and Garland's reviews could often be favorable and encouraging, as well as that of a good deal of other critics who thought *The Red Badge of Courage*, in particular, a remarkable achievement. Crane's relatively positive critical reception, however, was not always met with a similar popular reaction, with poor marketing returns before *Red Badge* and in the later part of Crane's short writing career as well. In fact, published in serialization, *Red Badge* was Crane's only market success; his fiction largely did not sell well, and his poetry was commercially disastrous. No matter what his reception at the time, though, Crane's (like Norris's) certainly marks one of the tragic literary careers in American literature, and today our national canon no doubt suffers from a life cut short by poor health and marred (at least publicly) through scandal. Crane's career lasted only six years or so (some of those years spent reporting internationally for various publications and newspapers), yet he stands as one of the most prolific

writers we have. Unfortunately, while an amazing and groundbreaking text, we often conflate his entire *oeuvre* with one novel: *Red Badge*. Since that's the case, however, *Red Badge* serves as an appropriate starting point for our discussion. The novel may not be Crane's best material for a Levinasian reading, yet, without a doubt, *Red Badge* firmly evinces the moral gravity of Crane's intellectual and aesthetic agenda, signaling Crane's difficulty with accepting any conventional understanding of the moral agent.

When the war bells toll for young Henry Fleming, he does not gain the reaction from his mother that he had hoped. “Long despair[ing] of witnessing a Greeklike struggle,” Henry cannot be any more excited at his departure for the Union army, a day he thought he would never see. Yet, there she was at his leaving, offering absolutely nothing of what he expects. Although two tears stream down his mother's face, “she had disappointed him by saying nothing whatever about returning with his shield or on it” (6). Henry's grasp upon battle here tends far too much towards the Greek, towards the time of Homer and Achilles, Herodotus and Leonides, a time unlike his own now that “[m]en were better, or more timid...,” their “throat-grappling instinct” effaced (5). Instead of offering him a platform upon which to give his heroic departure speech (the likes of which might not have been seen since Odysseus, we get the sense Henry thinks), Henry's mother only leaves him with advice and warnings, precautionary measures that she hopes will return her son to her one day, unharmed and unscathed. Henry, however, is not worried, as his confidence in his own fighting prowess seems to ensure both his safety and battlefield excellence.

Henry quickly learns that the actual field of battle inverts every previous estimate he may have possessed. At the first encounter of his regiment with Confederate soldiers, Henry notes how the men simply refuse to behave like those who would be conquerors. He looks up and

down his company's ranks to observe their striking mannerisms and behavior, noting the inability of his comrades to conform to the heroic and the Greek:

There was a singular absence of heroic poses. The men bending and surging in their haste and rage were in every impossible attitude. The steel ramrods clanked and clanged with incessant din as the men pounded them furiously into the hot rifle barrels. The flaps of the cartridge boxes were all unfastened, and bobbed idiotically with each movement. The rifles, once loaded, were jerked to the shoulder and fired without apparent aim into the smoke or at one of the blurred and shifting forms which upon the field before the regiment had been growing larger and larger like puppets under a magician's hand.

The officers, at their intervals, rearward, neglected to stand in picturesque attitudes. (29)

Not one of Henry's fellows acts as those statues of fortitude and strength that he has pictured in his naïve childhood. Pizer correctly identifies this baptism of fire in Henry's life education: war serves as a metaphor for the emergence of youth into knowledge, a violent process, which propels the adolescent into an awareness of the world that is somehow other than what he has previously known. Instead of the rational, men are controlled by the accidental and the unheroic.⁴⁵ Henry finds himself, unwittingly, somewhere between cognizance (of himself and his surroundings) and complete ignorance of the world and others. Even nature – that inviting offering in which humankind often finds recourse to comfort and emotional support – provides no solace or home for the young Henry. Given the bloodshed he has witnessed, Henry is simply astonished at the unwillingness (or inability) of nature to provide some sign of support or even to

⁴⁵ "Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism: An Essay in Definition."

offer some suggestion of the significance of the events he has just witnessed. “As he gazed around him the youth felt a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleamings on the trees and the fields,” Crane writes; “It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment” (31). Henry finds, to his amazement, an unyielding and callous universe, unsympathetic to the endeavors of “tiny” men lost in its maze. This first encounter with an obstinate world, however, does not keep him from placing his faith in a world that can somehow offer him and his fellows with some sort of outlet for comfort and a seal of guarantee for what it is that they are doing – for whatever goal they are expending their better years and risking their lives.

As Henry recovers from his initial battle experience and slowly realizes the gravity of his situation, his company continues on, into that vast, limitless space that exists as unknown yet to the youthful soldier. Henry has observed nature's indifference, has observed its seemingly unabashed resistance to those things that would seem meaningful and significant in human lives, yet he still clings to some ideal that might solidify his quest – provide his endeavor with a blessing. Turning away from the scene of battle, Henry's company marches on through those seemingly agitating stretches that, I'd imagine, have to mark the interstices of warfare. “This landscape gave him assurance. A fair field holding life,” states the narrator. “It was the religion of peace. It would die if its timid eyes were compelled to see blood. He conceived Nature to be a woman with a deep aversion to tragedy” (37). Wandering away from the field of battle, Henry attempts to make sense out of what he has witnessed by placing these images of violence and suffering within a discourse he understands – one that allows such suffering to bless human endeavors with meaning. “The youth wended, feeling that Nature was of his mind,” claims the narrator; “She reenforced his argument with proofs that lived where the sun shone” (38). Feeling

satisfied with himself, Henry nearly stumbles into the mud and murk of a swamp, paying no great heed to how his step may be impeded by the mire of that thick and heavy ground which he encounters:

At length he reached a place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel. He softly pushed the green doors aside and entered. Pine needles were a gentle brown carpet. There was a religious half light.

Near the threshold he stopped, horror-stricken at the sight of a thing.

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip. (38)

Moving through the shade of the trees, Henry suddenly finds himself paralyzed by the calcifying body of a dead Union soldier. Henry has no words for the encounter, which is beyond his limited field of experience. “The youth gave a shriek as he confronted the thing. He was for moments turned to stone before it,” Crane writes. “He remained staring into the liquid-looking eyes. The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look. Then the youth cautiously put one hand behind him and brought it against a tree. Leaning upon this he retreated, step by step, with his face still toward the thing” (38). For Henry, an entire world has been revealed, and not one that he might have expected. Hoping to penetrate into the inner being of nature, he pushes the limbs aside only to discover the abject wretchedness of the corpse. Crane extends himself here – he

goes beyond merely describing a shocking encounter that we might think a natural fact of war. He wants us to notice the abject suffering that is the waste of warfare, yet he also wants us to identify the manner in which mass suffering often reduces individual pain to inanimate “thing-a-fi-cation.” The soldier's body lies in repose, far away from the great scenes of battle that would make conquerors out of men. Yet, his body remains merely a thing, an untouchable object that neither Henry nor any other soldier can accept as the body of a fellow human being. The thing imposes itself not only as the morbid object of some sort of summer sci-fi film but as a real entity, devoid of any sort of markers of human identification. The thing is a thing, and nothing else can be said for it. And Henry has no mental resources to deal with it, quite literally.

The loss of the dead soldier's identity as a human being should not be mistaken as Crane's simply imposing upon Henry's misunderstanding of the world and of himself. The inability to recognize the dead soldier as something human here should signal the extent to which we often attempt to contain the suffering of individuals in narratives that are somehow larger than their individual parts, narratives that often take such horror for granted for the sake of nation, ideas, or any other mass ethic that tends to overlook singular suffering. Regardless of their dissension over Crane's moral outlook, critics have long noted his disregard for conventional morality in *Red Badge*. Taking what were for him erroneous symbolic readings of *Red Badge* as a “spiritual crisis...in a pattern of Christian symbolism and reference,” Walcutt argues that such a reading “is possible only to a reader who does not participate in Crane's passionate idealistic indignation with the hypocrisies of traditional public morality” (296). Walcutt continues by recognizing the development of moral relativism not only during the 1890s but even during a relatively conservative period like the 1950s (as Walcutt was writing). Such relativism, according to Walcutt, “is color-blind to the bright red flame of Crane's earnestness, and so it can read patterns

into his work that would never occur to one who felt the immediate shock of his true colors” (296). No doubt that nature's indifference in the text makes resuscitating any moral interpretations of *Red Badge* more difficult, and this indifference cannot be overlooked;⁴⁶ however, neither should we commit any oversights by eliding over the often neglectful role of public morality in the novel. Crane takes to task mass ethics like nationalism, patriotism, and even the redemptive power of Christianity (when used to rationalize violence), as Walcott suggests.

Conder thinks that Crane's condemnation of mass ethics signals the author's recognition of the social conditions of morality. For Crane, morality is socially-situated rather than given; in other words, Crane finds morality the product of social conditioning and historical factors rather than that of any Absolute, a fact that, in Conder's opinion, connects directly with Crane's determinism (54-55). Referring to Henry's memory of his mother's advice to him before his departure, Conder writes that “[t]he complex of attitudes that shape Henry's environment become instrumental factors determining his subsequent behavior, and the flashback is a central element of the novel's deterministic vision” because it reveals the “chain of causation” in events that lead from Henry's mother's advice to his panic at running and on to his ultimate guilt over his actions (54). As Conder offers, Henry's sense of morality, of right and wrong, is both the effect of his

46 The novel's ending, however, appears somewhat ambiguous about the text's previous infatuation with natural indifference:

He had rid himself of the red sickness of battle. The sultry nightmare was in the past. He had been an animal blistered and sweating in the heat and pain of war. He turned now with a lover's thirst to images of tranquil skies, fresh meadows, cool brooks – an existence of soft and eternal peace.

Over the river a golden ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds. (104)

While the one ray of golden sunlight breaking through the numbers of dark clouds in the distance does suggest hope or something like it, the implication also remains that these clouds possess the potential to burst again at some point in time, probably sooner rather than later (indeed, they had just minutes before). Perhaps the ending points more towards the continuous cycle of ups and downs that characterizes humankind's perceptive relationship with nature than to a future with unbridled optimism.

earlier behavioral training and the cause of his subsequent sense of fear and guilt. Thus, for Crane, “even morality” must be placed “within a behavioral rather than an ethical framework” (Conder 55). This ethical outlook in Crane, as Conder finds, cannot be divorced from his naturalism, a suggestion that would seem to make reading Crane as an ethicist, or *Red Badge* as a moral resource, for that matter, even more daunting.

If we cannot make some distinction between morality as an objective set of commandments and morality as a set of behavioral preconditions, or between acting “ethically” and acting as a social product, then how can we arrive at any conclusive understanding of proper conduct or even of human suffering? We might rightfully ask how we can arrive at any notion of ethics premised upon praise and blame, a category so seemingly essential for millenia of Western ethical thought. Response to suffering may merely be the enacting of our social roles and our historically-situated selves, rather than any really meaningful action that can be either validated or condemned. Donald B. Gibson, who takes a soft approach to Crane's determinism, offers that our imperfect knowledge of how these intricate processes work, our imperfect understanding of ourselves in the universe depicted by *Red Badge*, leads to our inability to gain any control over our lives or the suffering of others, an insight that directly echoes the moral anxieties of the earlier *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. This inability to gain control can only mean our lack of responsibility, Gibson claims; however, *Red Badge* also demonstrates the earlier optimism of a text like *The Sullivan County Sketches*, wherein humans are assumed “to be potentially free, though limited not by external forces, but by [their] own psychic being which until freed by conscious activity from the dominance of nature cannot exercise freedom of will” (89). Such a contradiction in philosophical outlooks quite possibly explains the inability of critics to arrive at a consensus over *Red Badge*, “even in the most basic terms” (89), Gibson resolves. The

challenge encountered here is that we know naturalists take the suffering of individuals very seriously, but it is far less clear how this necessarily translates into something like ethics, or even to a system that can inscribe an ethical language with familiar and comforting terms like right and wrong, praise and blame. Just as there's a real sense of loss and responsibility for the Swede on the behalf of the Easterner⁴⁷ at the ending of "The Blue Hotel," there remains a sincere regard for Henry's struggle in a world marked by fear and seemingly no recourse for help. Instead of dismissing suffering and dismissing ethics as the epiphenomenon of social discourses and practices, Crane thinks we can do better than what his critics have previously offered. Furthermore, thinking about Crane's ethics in a conventional language of determinism, or of accountability as well, is approaching Crane and naturalism in a manner that simply cannot do their ethics justice. Obligation and responsibility in Crane, as in Levinas, cannot be placed into a language of criteria or evaluation – a language of praise and blame, so to speak. We can never be truly "good" or truly fulfill our moral duty; there can be no degrees of moral fulfillment. Rather, our obligation is unconditional, a precondition of our subjectivity that helps explain naturalism's inability to separate moral action from non-rational subjectivity. Determinism in Crane does not limit our duty; however, it helps define our duty. The contradictions Gibson and others rightfully point out should therefore not limit our approach; instead, these may very well aid it. This challenge starts with Crane's disruption of Henry's moral self and character, which finds the disruption of our agency critical in the decentralization of rational selfhood and ethics.

Henry eventually recovers from his shock at witnessing the morbid curiosity inside nature's chapel, the dead soldier of the "liquid-looking eyes," and he moves on to experience

47 Despite Gibson's claim that Crane's portrayal of the Swede signals the extent of his contempt for the character (113-14).

other battles. While his previous unchecked faith has been shaken to the core by the horrifying and grisly scenes of battle, Henry still possesses an unwarranted capacity for rationalizing his fear and shortcomings: “His self-pride was now entirely restored. In the shade of its flourishing growth he stood with braced and self-confident legs.... He had performed his mistakes in the dark, so he was still a man” (68). Henry reflects upon his performance in battle and the capacity in which he left the terrifying scene:

He had been out among the dragons, he said, and he assured himself that they were not so hideous as he had imagined them. Also, they were inaccurate; they did not sting with precision. A stout heart often defied, and defying, escaped.

And, furthermore, how could they kill him who was the chosen of gods and doomed to greatness?

He remembered how some of the men had run from the battle. As he recalled their terror-struck faces he felt scorn for them. They had surely been more fleet and more wild than was absolutely necessary. They were weak mortals. As for himself, he had fled with discretion and dignity. (69)

Henry's inflated self-confidence easily runs hand-in-hand with his extreme fear and, in fact, is the result of this fear. His self-image does not coincide with his actual experience, no matter how hard he might try to convince himself otherwise. Mitchell thinks that the actions that change Henry result from nothing more than an uncontrollable series of disparate desires. “From our perspective, in fact, he appears fragmented by the very syntax of his presentation, leaving his emotions, thoughts, and behavior profoundly unaligned,” Mitchell attests. “Crane was aware of the powerful impulse (of readers as well as characters) to transform those contradictory impulses called 'Henry Fleming' into a moral agent” (xiv). Obviously, by novel's end, Henry has once

again returned to his previous self-assurance, although this time he seems much more tempered. Just as his relationship with nature appears cyclical in terms of whether nature should be perceived as inviting, indifferent, or even callous, Henry's consciousness follows a cyclical motion as well: at times he is confident, satisfied, and upbeat; other times he is alert, cautious, and unsure. No matter what the case may be, Crane spares no effort in demonstrating the role of fear in each of these cycles – that is, fear seems to influence all perception for Henry, and so it is difficult to take something like his moments of confidence, for instance, at face value. Rather, as Mitchell suggests, consciousness in Crane remains relegated to disorder and disarray, hardly the stuff of which a coherent moral agent should be made and certainly not one that any conventional systematic ethical approach would tend to construct. “The naturalists...denied any hope of...release from circumstance,” Mitchell argues, “by excluding the very category of the self, in the process making all questions of intention and subjectivity seem irrelevant....For them, one person's moral anguish differed little from another's craving for prunes, since all they needed to define a character was a certain sequence of actions” (15). According to Mitchell, quite possibly naturalism's greatest achievement “was to estrange us from the very notion of a self” (32).

Mitchell has the right idea here in that “questions of intention and subjectivity”⁴⁸ are essentially nullified by naturalism. What Mitchell lacks, though, is a proper framework from which we can work with this nullification yet still understand “one person's moral anguish” as a far greater matter than “another's craving for prunes.” Levinas provides us with such a framework, whereby matters of intention or rational selfhood have no bearing really upon ethics or ethical subjectivity (which, for Levinas, is not rational and is far from a coherent or unitary state of being). Naturalism's scenes of abjection both challenge and affirm our vulnerability to

48 By “subjectivity,” I interpret Mitchell to mean the self as a coherent, rational agent – the self of realism.

the power of the other. While other critics (like Mitchell) have noticed the disruption of selfhood by experience in naturalism, we have as of yet to make a connection with this alterity, its deconstruction of the self, and the possibility offered here for a new approach. Although *Red Badge* may be a difficult place to begin with demonstrating Crane's construct of responsibility (and how the disruption of our every intention plays a role in this responsibility), other Crane texts provide us with sufficient grounds for such readings.

The Red Badge of Courage destabilizes conventional subjectivity and public morality, identifying a world wherein the self is bombarded by chaos, motion, and instability, much like the world of battles and obstinate nature/matter that Henry observes. We see the origins of these concerns in the earlier *Maggie*, where Crane also examines the role of public morality (particularly Christian discourses and those of bourgeois civility) as well as that of capitalism in shaping the lives and destinies of his characters. Here too people die, not from wounds sustained on the field of battle but from the abject conditions located at society's margins and from the neglect of that same bipolar society that tends to strand lost selves somewhere between Christian or civil fellowship and consumer desire. Such a position can be found in the slums, somewhere in that New York Bowery that Crane so intensely describes and to which he feels so intimately devoted. As early as Hamlin Garland, Crane's affinity for the slums, for the abject and the outcast, was noted as a decisive trait of the young author's personality and artistic ambition. In his review for *Arena*, Garland writes that *Maggie*

is of more interest to me, both because it is the work of a young man, and also because it is the work of astonishingly good style. It deals with poverty and vice and crime also, but it does so, not out of curiosity, not out of salaciousness, but because of a distinct art impulse, the desire to utter in truthful phrase a certain

rebellious cry. It is the voice of the slums. It is not written by a dilettante; it is written by one who has lived the life. The young author, Stephen Crane, is a native of the city, and has grown up in the very scenes he describes. His book is the most truthful and unhackneyed study of the slums I have yet read, fragment though it is. (38)

Garland most likely intentionally exaggerates the exploits of Crane's early years as "one who has lived the life," yet his point here does not go without some merit. Although Crane by no means is the first to speak to the seedy side of life, Garland most certainly gets it right when he claims that Crane is among the first American authors to take the life of the slums seriously and also treat his material with an artistic depth and stylistic complexity that moves beyond previous examples of slum fiction. We know Harding Davis was a pioneer in the genre, examining the depths of life and the negative consequences under a rapidly developing industrial economy, yet Crane's fiction represents a step forward, at least in moral complexity, possibly even aesthetically as well. Keith Gandal claims that the "traditional novel of the poor was centered around a moral struggle and transformation" (40). According to Gandal, "The slum novel is often elaborate in its description of moral transformation. The exploration of the experience of sin and remorse is exhaustive; the lesson is not to be missed" (42). Crane, on the other hand, offers a departure from what basically amounts to a simplified moral argument in an author like Harding Davis, for instance (40-41). In Crane, "the aesthetic and ethnographic stake goes beyond the intermittent pursuit of picturesque and exotic sights and becomes a holistic project" that offers a complexity that cannot be reduced to any simplistic moral tale (40-41). "The experience of Maggie," Gandal argues, "the protagonist of the novel, includes no moments of traditional moral drama or transformation" (52). For Gandal, the conventional slum novel often tends to be crafted (and

judged) by middle-class standards that, not coincidentally, eschew the reality of working-class life, molding the world of the poor and the slums into a narrative that much more seems to fit the moral universe of those privileged enough to afford things like learning and self-development.

Crane refuses to judge the slums, whether those of the Bowery, or anywhere else for that matter, by the standards of middle class morality and regenerative social and personal narratives. At the time that Crane was searching for a publisher for his first novel, conventional slum novels found the market fairly favorable. The fact that Crane was rejected by some publishers before *Maggie* finally found serialization is proof alone, for Gandal, that the predominant aim of Crane in writing the text was to defy a relatively simplistic middle class worldview and its expectations (39). “Crane never judges his characters in terms of middle class morality,” Gandal states, “rather, they are in part defined by their relations to its code” (53). As Gandal claims, characters in *Maggie* are not defined by the ethical and social codes of the middle-class but by the environment of the Bowery, an environment that defines morality in a completely different manner – an environment, for instance, wherein a girl becomes attracted to a man not so much for his means or money but for his reputation as a street tough (50-51). Admittedly, the book opens upon a scene that establishes the trend of the novel, that being the fight of the isolated and singled out individual for his or her survival in a world that constantly thwarts their every effort to climb ahead:

A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley. He was throwing stones at howling urchins from Devil's Row who were circling madly about the heap and pelting at him....

The little champion of Rum Alley stumbled precipitately down the other side. His coat had been torn to shreds in a scuffle, and his hat was gone. He had

bruises on twenty parts of his body, and blood was dripping from a cut in his head....

From a window of an apartment house that upreared its form from amid squat, ignorant stables, there leaned a curious woman. Some laborers, unloading a scow at a dock at the river, paused for a moment and regarded the fight. The engineer of a passive tugboat hung lazily to a railing and watched. Over on the Island, a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a grey ominous building and crawled slowly along the river's bank. (3-4)

As little Jimmie defends his honor and that of his street, the rest of the world stands by idly watching the spectacle, either passively disinterested or unable to help (though we gather the impression that it's the former).⁴⁹ We also quickly learn how Jimmie has developed his violent nature from the interpretive signals offered us from his father, who promptly delivers Jimmie a good swift kick. Following his father home, they “entered into a dark region where, from a careening building, a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter” (7). Jimmie was once such a babe, given over to “the street and the gutter,” now enacting that developmental environment in the violent battles of Bowery childhood. While Gandal's estimate that Crane's characters are primarily products of the Bowery and its ethical code by no means strays from the truth, they are, however, also products of society at large – products of discourses of middle class civility and its attendant culture of bourgeois consumerism. In other words, Maggie, Jimmie, their mother, Pete, and other denizens of the novel are all creations of

49 Gandal claims that a dynamic of spectacle and spectatorship structures much of the novel. Spectacle works as a diversion, according to Gandal, for the poor. Whether street or bar fights, or Maggie's fascination with the theater, the ethics of spectacle and diversion distracts the lower class from its actual situation. Certainly, Gandal is right that the novel often seems oddly fascinated with voyeurism and exhibitionism, watching and performing. Gandal calls this an “ethics of excitement.”

middle class ideals, horribly gone awry of course, but, most importantly, are constantly at the whim of these same ideals which have been inculcated into the collective cultural unconscious of the neighborhood.

Maggie takes the street scenes of the day-to-day life of the urban American working class as the grounds for the exploration of some sort of existential or moral drama, yet the influence of bourgeois cultural standards and pursuits looms large. The novel mostly uses these standards, though, as a critique of contemporary mainstream America and its attendant values. *Maggie* pokes holes in the logic of these values, exposing both the hypocrisy of these social mores and their far-reaching effects upon those who somehow fall between the cracks, particularly regarding sexuality and the regulation of the body. After Pete and Maggie have sex, the entire neighborhood is alerted to the matter with the cohort of women residing at Maggie's tenement expressing their beliefs with one another that they knew she would come to this all along: " 'I could a' tol' ye's dis two years ago,' said a woman, in a key of triumph. 'Yesir, it was over two years ago dat I says teh my ol' man, I says, "Dat Johnson girl ain't straight," I says' " (47). A culture of repression ironically creates the very product of castigation, labeling Maggie as somehow other for enacting human nature. Gandal claims that the novel depicts some elements of Bowery life that open space for alternative ideas regarding pre-marital sexuality (in which bodies are not so strictly regulated), yet I would argue that Maggie's "slut-shaming" essentially manifests the middle class attitudes of respectability in terms of the sexual practices of her community at large, a fact that cannot be avoided, no matter the outlook of specific sexual enclaves. Furthermore, her mother's hypocritical remonstrations over the behavior of her daughter throughout the novel, especially at the realization of her daughter's sexuality, additionally repeats this pattern. Maggie often seems a character harried by two tensions: the

necessities of the Bowery and the unrealistic morality of middle class respectability that somehow seems to render judgment. Ultimately, this cultural attitude determines Maggie's fate and her identification as a prostitute. The entire community becomes implicated in her struggle and demise, and Crane's critique of the middle class here directly links cultural repression with individual alienation.

Crane's invective toward bourgeois morality does not stop with sexual mores and norms, however. Maggie falls victim to consumer culture in her fascination with popular ideals of romance and sensibility. While the stage performances we see her attend in the novel, as well as her popular romantic ideals, may be below the appropriate purview of the middle class, these certainly do project the influence of bourgeois moral narratives and an expanding market for consumer "goods," whether personal possessions or aesthetic products marketed for mass consumption. Unlike her brother⁵⁰ and parents, we learn early on that Maggie is endowed with a heightened sensitivity, however naïve, to the world around her, as well as an imaginative capacity that often transcends the degrading reality of her environs. Enraptured by Pete's street charms, which Maggie mistakes for "aristocratic" and world sophistication, Maggie dreams of Pete as one would a lover directly from the pages of the nineteenth-century popular romance. "Maggie perceived that here was the beau ideal of a man," the narrator observes; "Her dim thoughts were often searching for far away lands where, as God says, the little hills sing together in the morning. Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover" (25). For the girl who "grew up in a mud puddle," Maggie wants so much more, blissfully ignorant to her

50 Even definitively stating that Jimmie has no aesthetic sensibility, though, is difficult. His by no means is as acute as Maggie's, yet Crane suggests even one like Jimmie can appreciate something greater than the self and the degradation of his immediate surroundings: "Nevertheless, he had, on a certain star-lit evening, said wonderingly and quite reverently: 'Deh moon looks like hell, don't it?' " (21).

world: Maggie knows that the conditions she lives in are not good, yet she thinks herself (and even others) somehow capable of transcending these conditions. “She reflected upon the collar and cuff factory. It began to appear to her mind as a dreary place of endless grinding,” Crane writes. “Pete’s elegant occupation brought him, no doubt, into contact with people who had money and manners. It was probable that he had a large acquaintance of pretty girls. He must have great sums of money to spend” (27). While her sensibility makes Maggie stand out from her fellows, causing us to pause, her ignorance and inability to “read” people (which are tied to her sensibility) make her the product of her environment, of lack of access to education and of constant exposure to a masculinity that can provide her with no higher moral or personal examples. Crane stresses Maggie’s naivete not for the sake of portraying a girl out of step with her surroundings but for exposing the significance of such a naivete. No more than a bartender and a tough, Pete cannot provide her with any of the wealth she envisions him possessing, nor can he provide her with any emotional substance. Maggie’s fantastical sentiments and naivete position her firmly within the world of the Bowery, as well as that of nineteenth-century America. As her impossible image of Pete grows even more vivid in her mind, Maggie begins to despise her dresses and wonder what her potential could be if only she could dress like the women she sees out on the avenues. “She began to note, with more interest, the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved those adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women,” the narrator states, “Studying faces, she thought many of the women and girls she chanced to meet, smiled with serenity as though forever cherished and watched over by those they loved” (35). Given the consumption-minded cultural products offered her (and her peers), as well as an expanding marketplace for consumer goods in the nineteenth century

directly linked to the emerging urban middle class, it's no wonder that Maggie falls for the latest fashions and whims of her society, regardless of the limitations of the Bowery.

Before progressing further, I should offer a word of caution. Crane clearly wants us to sympathize with Maggie and place some of the blame for her circumstances on her cultural and economic environment. In doing so, Crane risks subverting his own argument – that ethics and responsibility are unconditional. While we should be sensitive to Maggie's plight as well as her positive attributes, we cannot confuse her sweet temperament and desirable personal qualities with her humanity. Crane risks turning Maggie into the “hooker with a heart of gold,” the young female misfortunate who, despite hard times, retains her good nature and, therefore, proves worthy of our approval and sympathy. Such a characterization of her humanity proves contingent on performance, eliciting our judgment rather than our obligation. By performing a role we might find culturally recognizable and morally desirable (troubled woman with dark past but of outstanding virtue), Crane turns Maggie's humanity into a concept rather than a product of our fundamental obligation. As with Levinas, we cannot distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving, or the virtuous poor and the wicked poor in this case. Each and everyone is deserving – a product of obligation rather than cultural production, sympathy, or even rational intention. To this extent, Crane weakens his own argument, but this should not negate his emphasis upon our complicity in Maggie's plight or in that of others. Indeed, one of Crane's primary objectives is to force us into a recognition of our guilt regardless of how far removed from a specific moral dilemma we may seem. For Crane, this guilt resides in our participation in society – an inescapable fact.

Consumerism, as just one example of this guilt, shapes much of Maggie's understanding of romantic relationships and gender roles in the novel; it also greatly determines much of her

moral outlook and worldview. Throughout the novel, Maggie and Pete attend several popular stage performances. As noted by a few critics of the era, most notably the British intellectual A.R. Orage, these mass theater productions often served mostly as a diversion for the working class, rather than providing them with anything mentally stimulating or meaningful, which, for Orage, meant disrupting the class system and the capitalist class ownership of artistic production.⁵¹ In *Maggie*, these productions inculcate a feel-good sentimentality and bourgeois moral ideals regarding the relationship between wealth and human character:⁵²

Evenings during the week he [Pete] took her to see plays in which the brain-clutching heroine was rescued from the palatial home of her guardian, who is cruelly after her bonds, by the hero with the beautiful sentiments. The latter spent most of his time out at soak in pale-green snow storms, busy with a nickel-plated revolver, rescuing aged strangers from villains.

Maggie lost herself in sympathy with the wanderers swooning in snow storms beneath happy-hued church windows. And a choir within singing “Joy to the World.” To Maggie and the rest of the audience this was transcendental realism....Viewing it, they hugged themselves in ecstatic pity of their imagined or real condition.

The girl thought the arrogance and granite-heartedness of the magnate of

51 Orage served as the editor for the modernist little magazine *The New Age* from 1907-1924. Many of his editorials expounded his ideas about socialist economics as well as railed against mass culture, particularly in Britain; however, aside from other British artists and intellectuals, like George Bernard Shaw, Ezra Pound served as one notable American contributor for some time around the pre-war years.

52 The Alger myth may be the best popular example of this relationship. The truly upright and honest, no matter how destitute their origins, will rise above their situation with hard effort and honorable behavior to ultimately attain wealth. It is not difficult to see the connection between such a myth and the bogus ideologies of late-nineteenth-century sociology and pseudo-science, which placed class, ethnicity, and race in direct correlation with morality and behavior.

the play was very accurately drawn. She echoed the maledictions that the occupants of the gallery showered on this individual when his lines compelled him to expose his extreme selfishness. (37-38)

The sweeping moral drama enacted before the audience's eyes, including Maggie, takes them out of the banality of their day-to-day lives and offers them a picture of the universe supposedly at harmony within itself – a world capable of setting wrongs right. Significantly, the performance invokes bourgeois economic and moral ideals in the embodiment of its hero. No matter how hard his path (in fact, the harder the path, the better), the hero's moral integrity leads him to riches and social prominence. “In the hero's erratic march from poverty in the first act, to wealth and triumph in the final one, in which he forgives all the enemies that he has left,” writes Crane, “he was assisted by the gallery, which applauded his generous and noble sentiments and confounded the speeches of his opponents by making irrelevant but very sharp remarks” (38). In the path of the virtuous hero from poverty to wealth, the (otherwise poor) audience participates in the triumph of industriousness over indolence, of good over evil. They are reminded of the gains to be had from the sweat of their brow and the callouses of their hands. The performances paint such an illustrious picture of good work ethic as to make Maggie contented with the possibilities of the world of right and wrong, possibly even contented with her own world provided she can find a way to get ahead:

Maggie always departed with raised spirits from the showing places of melodrama. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and the virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked. The theater made her think. She wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated, perhaps grotesquely, by the heroine on the stage, could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house

and worked in a shirt factory. (38)

Maggie realizes that there must be some difficulty in a woman of her stature achieving the status of the play's heroine. Even so, such a world as the one offered by the stage appears within the realm of attainment, and wealth even seems desirable (although the poor are to be sympathized with) – if only one works hard enough or feels sensitively enough the depth of human emotion, if only one proves his or her human worth, he or she can ultimately find a social status unparalleled by his or her peers. The sense is that moral uprightness, allied with mental fortitude and rich emotional faculty, can achieve wealth, happiness, and security. Maggie's capacity for imagination, her sense of self, and her limited awareness of the world, set her apart from the others who inhabit her community, and while these set her apart from her fellows, these also often appear at odds with the conditions of her poverty.

Even the final scene of the novel – wherein Maggie's mother performs what essentially amounts to a role straight from popular sentimentalism to impress her fellow tenants (and, typically, what would be an act to impress the reader) with the depth of her grief – inverts the conventions of melodrama. We witness the falsity of the performance as a mere spectacle, and Crane gives yet another statement on the sensational, on art that does not serve any useful sociopolitical purpose. In *Maggie*, people participate in mass culture not so much to be enlightened, educated, or even entertained; instead, they tend to participate because consumer art offers them a diversion from the suffering of their daily lives, from the negative effects of class relations, labor, misogyny, and violence. According to Gandal, *Maggie* is one of the first novels depicting people stupefied by mass culture and its formulaic entertainment offerings. “Crane is of course sardonic about the rabid pleasure-seeking of his Bowery characters,” he writes, “and *Maggie* might be described as one of the first novelistic renditions of individuals essentially

stupefied by mass-culture entertainments” (84). Crane may not be as critical of his characters, like Maggie, in their pursuits of entertainment options as Gandal suggests, though; instead, his invective appears more directed towards the options that these individuals are left with, options that ironically may aid in repeating the cycle of violence and suffering these people endure because of a refusal to confront these realities, opting, instead, for diversionary stupefaction. In *Maggie*, Crane takes on the brunt of mass culture and its reification of human relationships and society, determined to expose the inanity of art provided to those of little options, without heed to the adverse effects this could have for his publishing career.

The critique of bourgeois culture and morality also provides an outlet into Crane's examination of other conventional forms of public morality and social attitudes. Before he becomes a truck driver, in charge of a team of horses (perhaps one of his sole labor responsibilities transcribed in the text), adult Jimmie exists mostly as a street idler, contemptuously observing the ways of men and women, of privileged life passing him by:

On the corners he was in life and of life. The world was going on and he was there to perceive it.

He maintained a belligerent attitude toward all well-dressed men. To him fine raiment was allied to weakness, and all good coats covered faint hearts. He and his order were kings, to a certain extent, over the men of untarnished clothes, because these latter dreaded, perhaps, to be either killed or laughed at.

Above all things he despised obvious Christians and ciphers with the chrysanthemums of aristocracy in their button-holes. He considered himself above both of these classes. He was afraid of neither the devil nor the leader of society. (18)

Capitalism, consumer culture, and Christianity all appear aligned in this passage. In nineteenth-century American culture, we know that class frequently tends to be aligned with Christianity, at least in the giving of charity and other public religious displays. Public religious functions often provided a means for the middle class and those above to not only establish themselves in society but also to ingratiate themselves with the masses as well as demonstrate their relative wealth and ability to give monetary sums to those less fortunate. As Jimmie loafs about the street corners of the world, he observes such figures and, while Jimmie's worldview appears much more jaded and bitter than that of Maggie's, we should not take his observations for granted.

Crane takes fairly substantial measures to critique conventional forms of mass religion, especially taking aim at the moral hypocrisy and insubstantial moral rationalizing,⁵³ that some forms of Christianity can sometimes perpetuate. Early in the novel, Jimmie, an atheistic figure,⁵⁴ happens “hilariously in at a mission church where a man composed his sermons of 'yous' ” (17). Most of the patrons are there only for the warmth provided by the mission's stoves and the physical nourishment provided by its dollars, not spiritual nourishment or proselytizing. The mission preacher, however, admonishes the downtrodden patrons that there is a higher calling, one in which they currently fall short: “While they got warm at the stove, he told his hearers just where he calculated they stood with the Lord. Many of the sinners were impatient over the pictured depths of their degradation. They were waiting for soup-tickets” (17). “ ‘Where's our soup?’ ” is the only response they can muster under their breaths when the preacher reminds them they are damned (17). The preacher acts as moral arbiter, in a sense, almost as God, decidedly

53 By moral rationalizing, I mean to suggest some versions of what amount to “God's will” arguments: something bad or good happens; therefore, God has shown his presence (his will) in the world.

54 “He studied human nature in the gutter, and found it no worse than he thought he had reason to believe it. He never conceived a respect for the world, because he had begun with no idols that it had smashed” (17).

assure of who among them has garnered the Lord's favor. Unwilling to concede to the needs of the flesh, like hunger or warmth, the preacher thinks the needs of the spirit are what they really need and what they should focus upon. In this case, charity cannot come without an ulterior motive; giving cannot come without conversion and the reciprocation of others – the people giving back. A certain reciprocity is required out of the whole game, and we might even say that the ethical subject (in this case, the preacher) refuses to meet the masses on their own terms, instead establishing what will only be his.

Elsewhere in the novel, the language of religious moral rhetoric comes under fire. Turned out of her home by her own mother, Maggie wanders the streets in search of help. She finds a kindly-looking man, well-dressed, and who she quickly feels confident can help. “The girl had heard of the Grace of God and she decided to approach this man....,” the narrator states, “But as the girl timidly accosted him, he gave a convulsive movement and saved his respectability by a vigorous side-step” (74). The gentleman cannot place his reputation on the line for another; the social backlash might be stigmatizing at best, ruinous at worst: “He did not risk it to save a soul. For how was he to know that there was a soul before him that needed saving?” (74). In yet another scene after Maggie's apparent death, Mary (Maggie's mother), encouraged by others, deigns to forgive her lost child in a language bathed in corrupt religious principles and moral hypocrisy. Although Mary has consistently neglected her maternal duties throughout her children's lives, Maggie's sins are portrayed as spiritually deleterious by Mary and those around her:

The woman in black came forward and again besought the mourner.

“Yeh'll fergive her, Mary! Yeh'll fergive yer bad, bad chil”! Her life was a curse an' her days were black an' yeh'll fergive yer bad girl? She's gone where her

sins will be judged.”

“She's gone where her sins will be judged,” cried the other women, like a choir at a funeral.

“Deh Lord gives and deh Lord takes away,” responded the others.

“Yeh'll fergive her, Mary!” pleaded the woman in black. The mourner essayed to speak but her voice gave way. She shook her great shoulders frantically, in an agony of grief....Finally her voice came and arose like a scream of pain.

“Oh, yes, I'll fergive her! I'll fergive her!” (85-86)

Crane indicts Mary and those around her as nothing but hypocrites; furthermore, their beliefs are found morally incomprehensible, incapable of applying for each and every one of us, assuming we're even able to fully live up to these moral standards. Mary and her fellow tenants manipulate a religious narrative that utilizes ideals of fate and forgiveness, still placing Mary in the position of the injured (or abandoned) party. Only Mary looms as the one capable of forgiveness to a perceived injury committed upon her by Maggie. Perhaps the only other soul in the tenement capable of something like solidarity or fellowship (despite her obvious flaws⁵⁵) is one of Maggie's neighbors, an aging woman who possesses a music box: “ 'So,' she cried, ' 'ere yehs are back again, are yehs? An' dey've kicked yehs out? Well, come in an' stay wid me teh-night. I ain' got no moral standin' ' ” (70).

Crane raises some very important questions about class and public morality in *Maggie*. Quite often, class position and moral perspective run hand-in-hand, delimiting one's ethical

55 Although the old woman has no moral qualms, she is by no means representative of right action. One scene depicts her stealing.

options through trite, formulaic cultural productions (whether these be bourgeois sentimentalism, for instance, or something like conventional forms of middle-class Christianity). Crane condemns any form of public morality in the novel while he also inquires into personal responsibility. Aside from Maggie (and whether or not she has any control over her own fate), perhaps the best characters by which to evaluate Crane's stance on the individual and his or her moral responsibility come in the figures of Jimmie and Pete. Even broke and without social options (for mobility), Jimmie carouses about town, taking up the company of women of misfortune. Once it comes to his attention that his sister might also be one of these women, Jimmie has to pause and consider how he would feel knowing that one of "his" women might also be a sister to another man like himself. "Again he wondered vaguely if some of the women of his acquaintance had brothers," writes Crane. "Nevertheless, his mind did not for an instant confuse himself with those brothers nor his sister with theirs" (59). Although a moment of revelation seems briefly possible, Jimmie proves himself incapable of sympathizing with his peers (who commit similar acts) and his sister. Instead, Jimmie opts to condemn his sister, dissociating himself from her perceived sins:

Of course Jimmie publicly damned his sister that he might appear on a higher social plane. But, arguing with himself, stumbling about in ways that he knew not, he, once, almost came to a conclusion that his sister would have been more firmly good had she better known why. However, he felt that he could not hold such a view. He threw it hastily aside. (60)

Jimmie comes very close to understanding the grave situation his sister is in; however, this cognitive moment of aid (one of his few, at least in relating to others) lasts only briefly. We gather, also, that Jimmie's treatment of Hattie does not stray at all from Pete's treatment of

Maggie, something Jimmie heavily criticizes. Following him, wondering how he might help, Hattie falls upon Jimmie like a ghost from the past. Jimmie, unwilling to help, only dismisses her pleas. “Jimmie turned upon her fiercely,” Crane writes, “as if resolved to make a last stand for comfort and peace” (68). Jimmie wants to live only in the present; he does not wish to remember the past. Similarly, Pete treats Maggie as a simple object of possession, one that can easily be cast aside, provided Pete might have other interests or pursuits. “Pete did not consider that he had ruined Maggie,” observes the narrator; “If he had thought that her soul could never smile again, he would have believed the mother and brother, who were pyrotechnic over the affair, to be responsible for it” (71). In a scene similar (perhaps not coincidentally) to that involving Jimmie and Hattie, Maggie attempts to gain Pete's respect and help; Pete can only defer. When Maggie asks Pete what her options are now that he and her family have abandoned her, Pete can only respond angrily. “The question exasperated Pete beyond the powers of endurance,” writes Crane; “It was a direct attempt to give him some responsibility in a matter that did not concern him. In his indignation, he volunteered information. ‘Oh, go teh hell,’ cried he. He slammed the door furiously and returned, with an air of relief, to his respectability” (73). Although lacking in social dignity and class position, Pete acts very much like the “respectable” middle-class man of “chaste black coat,” who parries Maggie's requests directly after her encounter with Pete. Neither Jimmie nor Pete can totally distance themselves from the troubling reminders of their past and of their present obligations in Hattie and Maggie.

One of the most striking features of *Maggie* is Crane's refusal to lend individual need to discursive structures that would consume particularity. Even so, numerous questions remain concerning our ability as readers to render any type of judgment upon individuals here. Conder admits that the novel often parodies the conventions of melodrama, yet refuses to submit to its

morality; instead, only the environment can be judged morally in Crane. “He [Crane] suggests that people are so much a part of their environment,” writes Conder, “that only the environment, not the individual, can be judged morally. His determinism does not destroy a moral vision of a corrupt environment” (45). According to Conder, Crane does not necessarily prohibit free will in the novel; however, while Maggie may largely appear the product of her environment, relieving her of our moral judgment, the novel does allow us, Conder claims, to condemn those who constitute Maggie's environment and deny her any other alternative. Gibson, likewise, thinks that Crane does not want us to judge Maggie but her fellows instead. Unlike Conder, however, Gibson does not see free will present in *Maggie* and, for this reason, any kind of moral judgment fails in the novel. According to Gibson, Crane falls into his own trap by abnegating Maggie's responsibility and transferring all guilt to those around her, an unfair move, in his mind. In making his characters products of their environment and nature, Crane “relinquishes his prerogative as author to judge them,” Gibson argues. “If Maggie is simply a victim of her environment, then so are all of the other characters and so is the rest of society. Nobody is to blame for anything and we cannot help but cringe when Crane attempts with irony to condemn Maggie's fellow victims” (27). Admittedly, Gibson has a point: if we are to sympathize with Maggie's plight as a product of her environment, then we cannot possibly exclude her responsibility from our condemnation of those around her; they are equally products of this same environment. For this reason, we might rightfully agree with Gibson in his claim that the novel is an imperfect and inadequate tale. Perhaps the key here, however, is not to delineate between environment and individual; maybe we should conflate the two. Obviously, Conder and Gibson acknowledge the social conditions of subjectivity in Crane, but neither acknowledges how such conditions may bestow obligation rather than erase it. In Crane, there really is no distinction

between one's milieu and one's own self. Contrary to absolving individuals of their responsibility, however, Crane thinks our responsibility a product of our subjectivity, which is indelibly linked to our social relations with others. We cannot have society without responsibility; therefore, to distinguish between the two (society/environment and individual) seems absurd and useless. Likewise, questions of free will and praise and blame are also misdirected. For Crane, there is no graduated scale for evaluating moral behavior; instead, there is only a supererogatory obligation that we cannot divorce from our being, whether we wish to or not.

If Crane's novels provide numerous dilemmas for readers, his short stories certainly add on as well, yet these also offer useful points from which to attempt to come to terms with these questions as well as Crane's Levinasian construct of responsibility. Crane's short stories are some of the finest in our American tradition, especially in describing the often dire situation of the individual amid a world where nature and society tend to be indifferent. "The Open Boat," in particular, may very well be Crane's widest-read short story, as well as his greatest commentary upon the capability of community in times of need. Published in 1898, the story begins *in media res*, the four survivors from the steamer *Commodore* afloat upon the turbulent seas of the mid-Atlantic. We don't know what happened; we have no backstory that helps explain what went wrong and how these men got here. All we know is that the men are thrown into a situation that requires of them a suppression of their sense of self-importance and an acknowledgement of their unconditional obligation to their fellows aboard the lifeboat, which threatens to sink at any wrong step or hasty judgment. Every movement within the cramped boat becomes a world and a lifetime within itself. The bond the men (the cook, the oiler, the correspondent, and the captain) forge with one another under their common duress goes beyond simple self-interest, or even a

sense of common interest, for that matter. Their bond is a sincere bond, and it is one that recognizes the humanity and specificity of every other human being:

It was more than a mere recognition of what was best for the common safety.

There was surely in it a quality that was personal and heart-felt. And after this devotion to the commander of the boat, there was this comradeship, that the correspondent, for instance, who had been taught to be cynical of men, knew even at the time was the best experience of his life. But no one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. (727)

Even the correspondent, who has been taught by his profession to mistrust the self-presentation of others, cannot help but recognize the gravity of the moment and the sincerity of his fellows in the small boat. Outside of society and its numerous forms of propriety, the men encounter one another as they really are: humans with needs, with life – individuals with faces that call out for recognition. The face-to-face encounter of these men with one another, however, does not diminish the danger of their situation. “It is fair to say here that there was not a life-saving station within twenty miles in either direction,” the narrator offers, “but the men did not know this fact, and in consequence made dark and opprobrious remarks concerning the eyesight of the nation's lifesavers” (729). Nonetheless, we might say that in Crane even the fact of our limitation squares soundly with our unique being, our incomparable particularity. The men's limited knowledge of their situation as well as the world around them coincides with their recognition of one another as “faces,” as their isolation and singularity within the cosmos becomes even more evident, leading them (whether unconsciously or not) to a greater sense of the worth of each man. As in other works of Crane's, this is not necessarily a bad thing; in fact, our “aloneness” in Crane often signals our individuality and particularity, our existence as one who cannot be appropriated

through narrative and discourse, or even by the larger world that threatens us.

“The Open Boat” does not, however, construct individuality as infallible or preeminent to our communal obligations. Instead, individuals are highly limited and very much out of tune with the actual workings of the world around them. The inability of the men at sea to communicate with the man on shore at the island resort, the assurance of a safe harbor – that someone will be looking for them – over every horizon, the mystery of the sea creature that seems to stalk them for a while, all these things point to the limitations of our being and the inadequacy of consciousness. While the individual may be limited, his responsibility for and dependency upon others are not. As the story moves forward, the crew increasingly recognizes these limitations and how these command them forward to action on the part of their compatriots: in a personal moment that defies the anxieties of self-preservation, the cook asks Billie, the oiler, “ ‘what kind of pie do you like best?’”; the correspondent thinks back to his childhood and his inability to truly identify with the hypothetical Legionnaire who lay dying in Algiers, something he now seems capable of in a mournful note, especially given the current state of him and his fellows; and the captain instructs them all onward, fully aware of the disastrous implications of his potential missteps, yet remaining confident in his men. “ ‘Billie! - Billie, will you spell me?’,” asks the cook. “ ‘Sure,’ said the oiler” (736). All finally make it ashore alive with the exception of the oiler, who drowns in the crew’s great attempt to overcome the breakers that risk capsizing the boat as it approaches shore. The individual is limited and alone, but he is also very much a part of a significant community, one that requires his absolute suffering and his unconditional giving, even at his own expense.

In *The Monster*, published one year after “The Open Boat,” the unconditional giving of the self results in individual isolation, a fact that disallows any attempt to neatly convey personal

suffering into some sort of utilitarian argument or other ameliorative narrative. The consequences of our actions are not weighed according to the overall health of a community; instead, these are weighed according to our relationships with others, as individuals who are somehow obligated to one another and according to the needs of others. Henry Johnson, the Trescotts' black stable hand ostensibly escapes race limitations temporarily in his conversion into a "gentleman," a faux position for sure, yet one that reconceives social parameters and expectations of the relationship between race and class, if only in terms of outward appearance. Nonetheless, Henry's class "pretensions" (in fact, he simply wants to look nice for his sweetheart) only help isolate his racial otherness for the townspeople of Whilomville who ridicule him and his attire, reducing him to a mere cipher. "'Hello, Henry!,'" say members of one of the town's more profane groups, "'Going to walk for a cake tonight?'" (434). Henry may take himself seriously, but it is clear that his fellow citizens do not.

Although Henry's social position stands as a precarious one in his community, he proves his mettle and his dedication to his employers in the fire at the Trescotts' home. While Dr. Trescott is temporarily away, his house catches fire, taking his wife and Jimmie, their son who is trapped in his bedroom upstairs, by surprise. Henry, among some other neighbors, is around to offer aid, a call to which he responds quickly. Mrs. Trescott calls for him to rescue Jimmie, and Henry responds by fighting his way upstairs to continue the search for the child. "Henry pawed awkwardly through the smoke in the upper halls," writes Crane; "He had attempted to guide himself by the walls, but they were too hot. The paper was crimpling, and he expected at any moment to have flame burst under his hands" (440). Calling for the child, Henry finally finds him in his room, unconscious from the smoke of the conflagration. The fire, however, traps him and Jimmie from an easy escape back down the same route he took in arriving. Instead, Henry

must carry Jimmie down a private backstairs escape that he happens to remember belonging there: “He had been perfectly familiar with it, but his confusion had destroyed the memory of it” (441). Henry and Jimmie peer down the backstairs towards safety only to find this exit as nearly fraught with peril as the other. Smoke immediately meets Henry when he descends the passageway, further disorienting his senses and burning his lungs. “Johnson halted for a moment on the threshold,” the narrator observes. “He cried out again in the negro wail that had in it the sadness of the swamps. Then he rushed across the room” (442). The private passageway is revealed to be Dr. Trescott's laboratory and there are numerous chemicals obviously stored. A vial explodes in the encroaching fire, releasing what must be some type of acid; Henry falls to the floor unconsciously as the fire overwhelms his exit:

Johnson had fallen with his head at the base of an old-fashioned desk.

There was a row of jars upon the top of his desk. For the most part, they were silent amid this rioting, but there was one which seemed to hold a scintillant and writhing serpent.

Suddenly the glass splintered, and a ruby-red snake-like thing poured its thick length out upon the top of the old desk. It coiled and hesitated, and then began to swim a languorous way down the mahogany slant. At the angle it waved its sizzling molten head to and fro over the closed eyes of the man beneath it. Then, in a moment, with a mystic impulse, it moved again, and the red snake flowed directly down into Johnson's upturned face. (442)

Somehow, Henry and Jimmie are pulled from the house; both live, yet Henry emerges grotesquely disfigured, presumably from the acid that dropped upon his face as he lay there in the laboratory: “[A] young man who was a brakeman on the railway, and lived in one of the rear

streets near the Trescotts, had gone into the laboratory and brought forth a thing which he laid on the grass” (444). Henry, the thing, has lost his selfhood – he has been de-faced, quite literally.

There is a very odd communal process involved in this whole ordeal. For one, Whilomville's racism taints the tragedy in its interpretation among the locals. Throughout the fire, townspeople gather to witness the event, some of them referencing Henry's race as a factor in the incident. Perhaps he has inadvertently caused the fire due to the natural clumsiness of his race, or so some think. Even the narrator clothes his observations in racist terminology, a fact that complicates how we read Crane.⁵⁶ Racism is both perpetuated and enabled by the tragedy; it offers a route for race to determine blame, at least from the distorted perspective of Whilomville society. The tragedy, in a sense, almost seems to enable communal fraction while it also binds diverse individuals together; it points to the underlying rifts present in an otherwise healthy community. Delighting in the spectacle of the fire, boys from around the town gather outside the Trescott home, each defending the honor of his neighborhood's fire station. The rivalry spills over, even among the firefighters themselves, who seem to realize that the situation puts their company and neighborhood pride on the line. Regardless of Whilomville's racism and competitive neighborhood rivalries, the townspeople still unify behind Henry (who emerges as a “posthumous” hero, if you will) while it is thought among the crowd outside that he has died in the fire. “In the breasts of many people was the regret that they had not known enough to give him a hand and a lift when he was alive, and they judged themselves stupid and ungenerous for this failure” (446), writes Crane. While the community mourns the tragedy, Bella Farragut also

⁵⁶ Crane, like any author of his time, cannot escape the cultural discourses of a racist society. The amount of attention given, however, to the matter of race and how a judgmental and often caddish white society responds should give us pause before we rush to judgments about Crane as a writer and human being. *The Monster* appears to take racism to task, although there are understandably questions that remain concerning the narrator.

reveals later on that day that she and Henry had been engaged. In fact, even though it is soon discovered that he is still very much alive, Henry's remaining residence in the community is as one who has ceased to exist as a human being, as one no longer alive.

Henry's existence as the thing places numerous burdens upon Dr. Trescott, not to mention others. The bandages on Henry's face allow only one unblinking eye to be viewed, a certain visual candidness that seems to "speak" to Judge Hagenthorne when he pays a visit to Trescott, transforming the original intent of his business there (to convince Trescott of the need to do something about Henry's situation, involving possibly moving him outside the town or even euthanasia). Speaking to Trescott about Henry's condition, the judge immediately appears uncertain. "Afterward he evidently had something further to say," the narrator suggests, "but he seemed to be kept from it by the scrutiny of the unwinking eye, at which he furtively glanced from time to time" (447). Later, after Henry is temporarily moved to the judge's, Hagenthorne feels compelled to confide in the doctor his serious anxieties about and aversion to keeping the disfigured man for too long. "At dinner, and away from the magic of the unwinking eye, the judge said, suddenly, 'Trescott, do you think it is – No one wants to advance such ideas, but somehow I think that that poor fellow ought to die' " (447). Away from the presence of the eye, the judge can speak to Trescott of such dire matters, yet Trescott remains vehemently opposed to such suggestions:

The doctor made a weary gesture. "He saved my boy's life."

"Yes," said the judge, swiftly – "yes, I know!"

"And what am I to do?" said Trescott, his eyes suddenly lighting like an outburst from smoldering peat. "What am I to do? He gave himself for – for Jimmie. What am I to do for him?"

The judge abased himself completely before these words. He lowered his eyes for a moment. He picked at his cucumbers....

“He will be your creation, you understand. He is purely your creation. Nature has very evidently given him up....”

“He will be what you like Judge,” cried Trescott.... “He will be anything, but, by God! he saved my boy.” (448)

Trescott refuses to give up Henry's life; he feels obligated to a debt that, in some regards, he cannot repay: Henry risked his own life and health in order to save his son, while Trescott only risks some money and social image. And so he keeps Henry on, whether or not the decision is a humane one from our individual perspectives:⁵⁷ “ ‘Well,’ said the judge, ultimately, “it is hard for a man to know what to do” (449). Trescott clearly faces the ultimate humanitarian dilemma in whether or not to allow a man to die quickly with dignity or to keep him alive as a monstrosity.

The rest of the community obviously feels the weight of this dilemma, albeit for different reasons and motivations. Alek Williams, Henry's proposed black caretaker (the white community in Whilomville, not surprisingly, appears resistant to permanently taking in a black man, especially a grossly disfigured one) reacts in horror when he first sees Henry. Deciding that Henry's repulsive figure and agonizing wailing may require of him and his family more emotional and mental resources than anticipated, Alek asks for more money to act as Henry's caretaker. Alek is not the only one to treat Henry as an object of appropriation or even one of pecuniary gain. After Trescott has a new house built, inviting Henry back into his home, even Jimmie offers Henry as an “odd” spectacle for the amusement of his friends and for his own

⁵⁷ Obviously, the humane decision here can take either side. According to one view, the humane decision would be to let Henry pass, while another view would posit the human act as any that allows Henry to live out his days, only subsiding in the natural course of death.

social standing among his peers. Not long after, Henry temporarily escapes the Trescott grounds, inadvertently startling his community, almost to the point of something akin to DEFCON 3. Winter, a man in town, even decides Trescott is responsible for his daughter's recent sickness,⁵⁸ a result of her having to witness the odious offense of Henry's ambulation about town. He and Trescott exchange heated words over the matter. Elsewhere in Whilomville, the men at the barbershop discuss Trescott's dilemma, mostly sympathizing with his current state of affairs in regards to Henry's well-being, yet unable to really communicate to one another what the other means. While one man suggests that perhaps the doctor may be sorry for making Henry live, another responds that they should all put themselves into Trescott's shoes – a point to which the others present agree:

“You would do anything on earth for him. You'd take all the trouble in the world for him. And spend your last dollar on him. Well, then?”

“I wonder how it feels to be without a face?” said Reifsnyder, musingly.

The man who had previously spoken, feeling that he had expressed himself well, repeated the whole thing. “You would do anything on earth for him. You'd take all the trouble in the world for him. And spend your last dollar on him. Well, then?”

“No, but look,” said Reifsnyder; “supposing you don't got a face!” (456)

The men in the barbershop are most likely well-intentioned, but the fact remains that none of these men can place himself in either Trescott's or Henry's respective positions. In fact, there may even be some rhetorical posturing and back-and-forth (rather than a sincere response to the

58 There is, however, some doubt thrown upon this claim. According to Martha, a neighbor, Winter's daughter has been commuting to school every morning since the supposed incident that sparked Winter's ire.

question at hand) going on here between these men, each trying to prove a point, yet none honestly listening to the other.

Finally, the judge, accompanied by other local men, visit Trescott in order to talk with him, hoping a definitive conclusion can be resolved on Henry's fate. The men attempt to convince him that it is time to move Henry to a secluded cabin away from town. Trescott's business has taken a severe hit, patients refusing to visit his home and his practice; even so, Trescott does not budge. The story ends with Trescott returning home in the snow, entering the house to find fifteen cups placed around the table positioned near the stove, a sign that the townspeople have most likely completely ostracized the Trescotts. Trescott himself cannot stop counting the cups over and over, silently in his head. Perhaps he is having second thoughts? Has he made the right decision to keep Henry here with him and his family? Was it right to preserve the life of a man who has become a thing and a monstrous obstruction to his community? On the other hand, how could he have acted otherwise, any other way? Trescott must answer not only to Henry but to the community at large – he has obligations to both sides. We don't really know the answers to the problems posed by the story, but Trescott's dilemma does give some glimpse into the hard questions that must be asked when we consider such notions as duty, obligation, and responsibility. These concepts are far more complex than most conventional narratives often allow.

Like *The Monster*, “The Blue Hotel”⁵⁹ isolates the responsibility of individual actors amid a culture of deference (one that consistently deflects responsibility unless it can directly, or even legally, be proven) while also aligning social environment and individual duty together (similar to *Maggie*). Although the individual is a product of society, we cannot necessarily defer

59 “The Blue Hotel” first appeared in 1899 in *The Monster and Other Stories*.

individual responsibility and place it solely on environment; instead, it is precisely the individual's emergence into and residence within society that bestows his or her unique responsibility and further perpetuates this obligation, which by no means weakens or lessens its individual significance in one's life, especially from a Levinasian standpoint. Residing in society, according to Levinas, is like residing in a home that is no home, no refuge, a place of residence but one which dissembles every notion we have of something like home. In "The Blue Hotel," in particular, we see how such a notion of social residency reflects our inability to inscribe responsibility into a reductive line of causality. In Crane, as in Levinas, linear constructions of causality and obligation ("this happened because of this alone," a formula often simplifying the ethical relationship) eschew the culpability of moral agents and society at large.

Patrick K. Dooley offers one of the more insightful readings, I think, of "The Blue Hotel" in his *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane*. According to Dooley, the Swede is the cause of much of his downfall in the story; this does not, however, detract from the obligation the others at the hotel possess. "The fact that the manic Swede is himself the cause of much of his own trouble makes the lack of response from Johnnie, the cowboy, and the easterner understandable," Dooley argues, "but it does not change the nature of their moral obligation to respond to another human being's needs" (90). For the others, the Swede is just far too strange, and they do not know exactly what to make of him or his half-crazed, paranoid antics; instead, they find comfort and stability by solely paying heed to the rules of the card game. "The Swede is strange enough that other human beings avoid interacting with him on a personal, moral level," Dooley continues. "They play games with him instead of responding to his human needs" (91). Admittedly, Scully does claim some responsibility for the Swede's viewpoint and condition, yet he also allows his son, Johnnie, to resort to fisticuffs with the young Swede after the latter has

accused him (and rightfully so it turns out) of cheating at cards. For Dooley, “The Blue Hotel” invokes similar conclusions as *The Red Badge of Courage*. The group at the Palace Hotel refuses to acknowledge and address the psychological suffering of another just as Henry refuses to submit aid to the tattered man who suffers from physical trauma. In each case, significant human needs are selfishly and unjustly ignored (Dooley 92).

While offering significant insights, Dooley thinks Crane's ethics largely hackneyed and orthodox. The greatest feature of Crane's thought that does, however, set him apart is his reluctance to offer a firm consensus on what is good or bad, right or wrong. “Crane's depictions of human excellence embrace a transcendent moral character,” writes Dooley; “Although his ethical norm, the unselfish response to a human need, is orthodox and unoriginal, his firm grasp of the ethical dimension of situations is a significant contribution” (93). This “firm grasp” comes in Crane's ability to recognize ethical action as contextual rather than dogmatic or universal. According to Dooley, “[A] rational and defensible process involving evaluative calculation is involved” rather than adhering to any definitive, pre-ordained answers (95). Dooley certainly understands Crane's non-universalist morality – Crane refuses to systematize the ethical relationship. However, I'm not so positive that Crane permits us the privilege of “rational...evaluative calculation,” which still often undercuts the particularity of an individual in need. Furthermore, while astute, it's not clear from Dooley's argument how exactly we are obligated in Crane. Certainly, reason cannot be what binds us together, for ethics in Crane are visceral and often tend to work on an authentic emotional level as well. Even negating such a point, though, would still not answer the question of obligation in Crane. This, then, is why Levinas proves so useful in reading the fiction of Crane.

Unlike, say the community of Whilomville in “The Monster,” which allows

discrimination and biases to determine its worldview, moral responsibility and judgment are without bias and without discrimination from Crane's point of view. Not only are the individuals who have some direct stakes in the lives and destinies of others placed under conviction but the society that creates such individuals and their victims is as well. Crane refuses to think of obligation or duty as many of his nineteenth-century peers did; instead, he opts for a notion of responsibility that refuses simple linearity and chronology. Even if my obligation to the other cannot be traced along reductive lines of cause and effect, this makes me no less responsible for his outcome. Being a part of society in Crane is a coming-to-terms – it is subjectivity as a reckoning. We must realize that we play some part, often larger than we may think, in the outcome of individual lives, despite our inability to always account for ourselves and the neat linearity of our responsibility and guilt. Like Levinas, Crane finds the social site of interaction as the space where justice and responsibility are made possible, not through fulfillment of our duty unto the other, but through the call to commune with my fellow and my recognition of his irrevocable imposition upon me. To be a part of a community (however one desires to define such a term) automatically means obligation from such a perspective. It is precisely these terms that the Easterner finally comes to grip with at the end of “The Blue Hotel.” If we expect to find justice (that can account for all parties involved) in a court, or in some other notion of rational aggregation, then we are looking in the wrong place. Instead, justice comes not only in fellowship but in our recognition of the “stacked deck,” of the failure of subjectivity to fulfill its obligation to the other – to walk with him, greet him, and account for our shortcomings before him.

VI. SURFIN' U.S.A: JOHN DOS PASSOS, PROMISCUOUS DISCOURSE, AND THE WAR ON TOTALITY

In the closing pages of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A* trilogy, a young vagrant journeys down a stretch of highway, the road itself a sign of American economic progress and advancement. "The vag," as Dos Passos calls him, obviously stands as an ironic figure in this landscape, a walking contradiction in the land of the American Dream. As his "[e]yes seek the driver's eyes" of each vehicle speeding past him, the young man's "[h]ead swims, belly tightens," and "wants crawl over his skin like ants" (448). No amount of patriotic rhetoric, tales of American exceptionalism, or political wordplay can take into account exactly why this young man has fallen from the graces of the American middle class, of comfort and success. For Dos Passos, the vag indicts middle class comfort and success and exposes the inadequacies of the American system, but, most importantly, he exposes the inadequacies of codified ethics, of thinking that we can somehow understand this man and address exactly what he needs. In a world that would otherwise erase this man's identity into a narrative of moral or economic failure ("Why don't you just get a job, you bum" thinking), the vag asserts a strong, undeniable claim upon us. The young man's eyes search for recognition from others and, in this search, we sense the guilt weighing upon all of us for his condition. And at 55 mph, we flee desperately.

For some reason, our discussion of naturalism seems to take quite a turn when looking at authors arriving after the turn of the century. We tend to recognize certain authors as "naturalist" or "naturalistic" in nature. John Steinbeck has certainly been read in such a manner, most notably by Pizer.⁶⁰ James T. Farrell,⁶¹ Norman Mailer,⁶² Don DeLillo,⁶³ and Cormac McCarthy⁶⁴

⁶⁰ *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism*.

⁶¹ See above footnote.

have also been read in terms of naturalist fiction and criticism, but the glaring problem remains, it seems to me at least, of how exactly these authors fit into a naturalist literary framework beyond mere perceived pessimism or deterministic philosophical outlooks. Certainly, these factors have tended to draw literary scrutiny for the sins of naturalism, and a determinist vision of the universe generally stands as a good indicator of naturalist tendencies. Regardless, there are several ways we can connect the work of some of those naturalists writing outside the 1890s, and the 1930s fiction of John Dos Passos is a very good place to begin that task, particularly if we think about its confrontation with the effects of mass rhetorical forms upon individual lives.

One immediate characteristic that distinguishes the naturalist authorship of the Thirties from that of Crane, Dreiser, Norris, and London is the political leanings of many of these writers. Indeed, Pizer thinks that the main factor setting the naturalism of the 1930s apart from that of the first generation naturalists is an invested political interest, especially one that is left-centric and even Communistic. Moreover, although 1890s naturalism retains a circular narrative pattern (e.g. McTeague returns to the mountains and his animality), according to Pizer, that of the 1930s moves to understanding and a promise for the future. This is a valid observation: certainly both the arrival of Tom Joad as folk hero and activist, along with the maturing existential and social awareness of the anonymous first-person “Camera Eye” narrator demonstrate Pizer's point (*Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism* 16). Authors like Steinbeck and Dos Passos may realize the revolutionary potential (beyond a generalized critique of capitalism, as in the 1890s) of what is thought of as a failing American society more than their predecessors, attacking

62 See above footnote; Yarnoff, Charles Samuel. *Norman Mailer and American Literary Naturalism*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1977; and Berg, Odean Ellsworth. *Naturalism in the Novels of Norman Mailer*. Mankato, MN: Mankato State College (Minnesota State University), 1966.

63 See Civello, Paul. *American Literary Naturalism and Its Twentieth-Century Transformations*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1994.

64 See the work of James R. Giles.

those conditions of a capitalist society that have not only worked against the workingman and woman but have also set them up for failure, yet Pizer's inquiry leaves us with some crucial questions. While Dos Passos does appear more politically motivated than previous naturalists in his early support of socialist economics, I think that Pizer's distinction can be further tailored. As I pointed out earlier in the first chapter, critiques of capitalism seem integral to naturalist fiction, though I suppose that capitalism and naturalist critique don't necessarily need to go hand-in-hand. What is distinctive about the naturalist authorship of the 1930s, however, is not only political interests but a growing concern with mass forms of public morality and communication, especially given the developments in radio and cinema after the First World War. Obviously, both Norris and Crane were concerned about public and conventional forms of rhetoric as well, namely forms of public morality like sentimentalism, simplified examples of Christianity, and other bourgeois ethics and civics. Nonetheless, the emergence of radio and provocative forms of mass communication and advertising in the post-WWI period make the naturalism of the 1930s much more preoccupied with how forms of public discourse and rhetoric may affect moral behavior and beliefs as well as erase specific, individual needs. In Dos Passos, especially, we find a writer who seeks to preserve our awareness of the unique tragedy of individual lives against the threat of "massification," or reification. Dos Passos is concerned not only with politics but the moral distortion propagated by the mass media. Locating an ethics for Dos Passos, then, proves a matter of preserving the particularity of individual existence and, perhaps even more importantly, the particularity of individual relationships (in all their nuances and diverse needs and inquiries) against the effacement of particularity within the "market" of mass cultural discourse. Such an approach will take us directly to the thinking of Levinas, especially his thoughts about language and rhetoric (much of which has previously been discussed in

Chapter Two). Before we arrive there, however, we must understand how Dos Passos's approach points us towards a traumatic (or anti-universalist)⁶⁵ concept of ethical relations.

There are three notable theoretical and philosophical influences upon the naturalist fiction of John Dos Passos, from my perspective, and these include modernist filmmaking, socialism, and a somewhat distinct form of individualism (due to its confluence of liberalism and what might be considered, appropriately, an “American” ideal).⁶⁶ While film may influence Dos Passos's aesthetics far more conspicuously than the other two, it's crucial that we mark the tension between his socialism and individualism. The montage elements of his aesthetics, along with his individualism, parry the systematizing tendencies of socialism. As has been noted, Dos Passos's modernism stands in stark contrast to socialism's desire for political and historical totality. Clearly, he is a artist grappling with the deficiencies of his own politics. In the works of Sergei Eisenstein, the Soviet filmmaker that Dos Passos was privileged to meet while in the Soviet Union, he learned the art of montage and fragmented form – the ability to reconfigure conventional notions of time and space that would help disrupt the totalizing effects of systems

65 By “anti-universalist,” I suggest those ethical relations that avoid universal conception (or obfuscation). Particularity is meant to invoke those relationships that bypass our preconceived notions of how to act or proceed. Instead, these are relationships that defeat our previous understanding and demand of us something that we are unsure of quite how to deliver. By these means, if not used in a cosmopolitan sense, one can make the argument that anti-universalism naturally entails some form of “trauma,” though that understanding might be different from one like Levinas's.

66 By “liberalism,” I mean to suggest those Enlightenment (and even post-Enlightenment) democratic ideals that cite the individual as the center of the political universe. In my estimation, Dos Passos unites such an ideal with an American ideal of “unfettered” individualism, which romanticizes the individual who, against all odds, refuses to surrender his or her individual ethos to a group ideal that would otherwise ruin its independence. On another note, I do not use the term “rugged individualism” due to its connotations of free market capitalism and self-reliance. The Dos Passos of *U.S.A.* is certainly in favor of a governmental system that seeks to help the downtrodden through a reorganized market approach (although by no means should this be considered wanton welfare), while preserving their individuality (perhaps something similar to Jack London's “superman socialism,” at least in principle, if not in philosophy) amid the waste of 1930s economic decay and encroaching mass discourses; however, by the end of the trilogy, we witness a Dos Passos who is increasingly skeptical of any political system in maintaining the individuality of its constituents. And perhaps this is the most “American” characteristic of the trilogy.

like capitalism and socialism.⁶⁷ In “Figuring the Financier: Dos Passos and Pierpontifex Maximus,” Michael Wainwright states that Dos Passos's “The House of Morgan” section “work[s] toward a major aim of montage: a physiological reaction from the reader. This is the distinctly Pavlovian essence of Eisenstein's theory.... To produce revulsion in the face of unbridled greed” (88). Justin Edwards also discusses the influence of filmmaking upon Dos Passos's narrative, identifying the significance of not only an Eisensteinian approach upon his work but also that of another Soviet in Dziga Vertov as well as the rather notorious American, D.W. Griffith. Edwards' article, “The Man with a Camera Eye: Cinematic Form and Hollywood Malediction in John Dos Passos's *The Big Money*,” like that of Wainwright, identifies the significance of montage and depictions of time in Dos Passos. Given Dos Passos's spatial and temporal maneuvering in *U.S.A.*, with characters' narratives frequently bumping and colliding, we see the significance of his friendships with 1920s-30s Soviet filmmakers along with the importance of early cinematic developments.

Although the influence of film in the trilogy may not be immediately discernible, certainly no one reading *U.S.A.*, even for the first time, can deflect its investment in socialism or its passion for capitalist critique. Much has been written on Dos Passos's socialism, so I do not wish to dwell upon the topic too long; however, any study that seeks to make a statement on Dos Passos's ethical approach cannot ignore the subject. The novelist's ethics clearly stand at odds with the theory of Marxism popular in Dos Passos's day; rather than a codification of ethics and politics, such as Marxism seems to require, Dos Passos wants a politics that is also capable of

67 Pizer reserves two terms for describing Dos Passos's narrative techniques in *U.S.A.* “Interlacing” refers to the appearance of characters in other characters' narratives, while “cross-stitching” signals the specific historical events that connect individual narratives. According to Pizer, these devices allow for a form that emphasizes the inseparability of individuals lives in one nation - in other words, the unity of national life (*Twentieth-Century* 42).

recognizing individual needs rather than that of an abstract worker. As a young journalist for the left periodical *New Masses*, Dos Passos became more despondent over the living and labor conditions of America's working class. In fact, his stint at *New Masses* gives us some of the earliest extant examples of Dos Passos's socialist writings, wherein he envisions a socialism that is not so indebted to Communist or party dogma, a view that engendered considerable animosity between Dos Passos and the periodical's editor, Mike Gold (Nanney 171). Such an approach would soon become integrated into Dos Passos's fiction, setting him apart from other so-called proletarian fiction. Leo Gurko thinks that, while Dos Passos and the authors of proletarian fiction share a similar social vision, their artistic approach is much different, Dos Passos's being far more pessimistic and far less supportive of his fiction acting as a form of propaganda. For the proletarian authors, according to Gurko, "art for art's sake" was a motto of decadence and bourgeois elitism; art must serve as a vehicle of social reform. However, Dos Passos's approach is much different. "Dos Passos, even at the height of his social consciousness," Gurko writes, "never equated art and propaganda, nor did he ever waiver in his conviction that *his* writing should express *his* vision of things, not the state's, not the party's, or the revolution's" (47). The regard Dos Passos gives to the individual defines much of his work and, not surprisingly, leads to a difference in ideology between himself and conventional socialist thinking. Upon visiting the Soviet Union, Dos Passos began to realize the inadequacies of the socialist project that had informed his philosophical vision as a left-leaning young author during the Twenties and early Thirties. Either the unwillingness or the inability of conventional socialist approaches to enable individuality (and real ethical encounter – an ethics of the dyad, or the face-to-face) led to an ideological conflict with the party establishment that could not be resolved for Dos Passos, and this conflict is eventually revealed in *U.S.A.* as the novels move from a celebratory (but perhaps

cautious) tone to one of pessimism regarding socialism.

Obviously Dos Passos's socialism clashes strongly with the robust sense of individualism that permeates the trilogy. For Dos Passos, democratic systems, whether they be socialistic or capitalistic, have not currently enabled an authentic understanding of human ethical encounter. Where American democracy has gone wrong, according to Dos Passos, is in abandoning its democratic ideal that allows the individual to flourish through his or her own labor and rational decision-making in favor of a capitalist model that actually suppresses the individual through market control and the language of consumerism, making the democratic self an inauthentic one instead of free and independent.⁶⁸ Lisa Nanney offers that such a desire to preserve the individual acts as “the deep concern from which the trilogy emanates” (177). “[H]ow can the common individual,” she asks, “prevail against the massive systems of industrial capitalism that have turned the promises of the American dream into a lie?” (177).

Perhaps the most influential event in shaping Dos Passos's emphasis upon the individual in *U.S.A.* was the much publicized 1926-1927 trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.⁶⁹ Like many other left-leaning writers and intellectuals of the day, Dos Passos found in Sacco and Vanzetti's plight a direct threat to the viability of American idealism and democracy. Dos Passos covered the trial for *New Masses*, actually meeting with the two men while on assignment. For Dos Passos, the treatment received by the two immigrant anarchists was a direct result of negative cultural discourses (like nationalism and nativism) colluding, unfairly crowding out freedom of thought and the particularity of each man in the process, thereby creating bias in their trial. Dos Passos

⁶⁸ I will speak more on this subject below.

⁶⁹ According to Pizer in *Dos Passos' U.S.A.*, the years of 1926 and 1927 were highly formative in Dos Passos's plans for writing the trilogy. These were the years when the idea for the novels was first starting to come together for him (Pizer 27).

wrote several essays appearing in *New Masses*, including “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “Sacco and Vanzetti,” depicting the trial as not only prejudiced but also a struggle for the survival of the individual and justice.⁷⁰ The jury's verdict of guilt and the subsequent execution surely served as a crushing blow for the young journalist and no doubt acted as a major impetus in shaping the philosophical direction of his later ambitious literary project in the trilogy where defending the individual against the lingering prospect of systematization may have become Dos Passos's greatest goal.

Examining Dos Passos's journalistic history seems to aid us in understanding how his notion of individuality informs both his naturalism and ethical project. As pointed to earlier, growing pessimism (probably largely the result of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial and Dos Passos's socialist disenchantment) characterizes the movement of the trilogy as characters appear to lose the capacity of self-determination and social forces gather to prohibit freedom and democracy.⁷¹ Furthermore, many of the narratives in *U.S.A.* follow a plot of degeneration when concerning the lives of individual characters (although Mary French's growing ethical awareness seems to offer some moral alternative coming into being). Unlike his naturalist predecessors, however, the focus on those larger forces that control and shape human beings shifts more to a questioning of language and rhetoric rather than biological determinism (although this does not mean that both

70 “Any man, I suppose, is capable of any crime, but having talked to Sacco and Vanzetti themselves it's impossible for me to believe they could have committed that particular crime” (from Dos Passos's *The Theme is Freedom*; rpt. in Landsberg 136).

71 Even his good friend Edmund Wilson criticized Dos Passos for his determinist approach, finding *U.S.A.* lacking due to what Wilson perceives as their speaking mostly in clichés (Ludington 37-38).

Concerning Dos Passos's determinism, Townsend Ludington claims that, while characters such as Mac and Charlie Anderson seem the products of “forces beyond their control,” other characters and biographical subjects like Moorehouse, Morgan, Hearst, and even the sympathetic Debs and Wright “are forces in a nation moving toward monopoly capitalism, not merely victims of the times” (39). While Ludington's statements may be somewhat reductive, in my estimation, in their elision of those forces that make such historical movement possible, I do agree with his overarching approach that places Dos Passos into the conversation of romanticism, which posits the individual in a struggle against inscrutable forces.

the earlier naturalists and Dos Passos are not concerned about these other forces). As in the case of Norris and Crane, however, Dos Passos's obsession with these particular forces that seem to control human action and movement should not be mistaken for moral abdication.

In fact, Dos Passos finds in the spaces where conventional cultural and moral discourses fall apart the possibility of a new moral language, one that can acknowledge the specificity of individual need. To what extent this ethical alternative may be possible amid a culture of decay is certainly debatable, but the need for such an approach is not lost on Dos Passos. Referring to specific passages from "The Pit and the Pendulum," Thomas Strychacz discusses the significance of language in Dos Passos's universe:

Systems of words signifying systems of power infiltrate every aspect of this society [a society capable of convicting Sacco and Vanzetti], forming interlocking hierarchies of wealth and class: an Anglo-Saxon supremacy whose members enunciate with a "broad A" lest they lose their status to "men who spoke broken English"....; anarchists who lie losing out to the police who lie about them more powerfully; witnesses who swear they saw Vanzetti elsewhere at the time of the robbery but whose testimony is discounted by the judge because of their alien culture and language.... Language, as much as people, must be annexed, regulated, and controlled according to the "lexicon" by those in power. (118)

Although morality doesn't specifically concern Strychacz, his analysis naturally lends itself to an approach that seeks to address such questions, especially through the relationship between the individual and language that Dos Passos sees in need of repair in American society. Strychacz thinks Dos Passos lacking in a definitive social outlook that offers one solution as preeminent over the other. And rightfully so. However, for Strychacz, Dos Passos's indecision leads to

conclusive readings on the part of his critics that may detract from the author's intent. “Oddly, Dos Passos's refusal to offer final and authoritative statements in *U.S.A.* works to make critical readings of it all the more certain and secure” (144), claims Strychacz. I think Strychacz's reading valuable; however, I cannot agree with this particular view. Furthermore, Dos Passos's refusal to definitively support one social or moral viewpoint only lends itself further to a construct of Dos Passos as an anti-universalist, a man who cannot think of morality as a product of systematic thought or dogma. As an overwhelming number of critics point out, Dos Passos objects to institutional forms of discourse, particularly in capitalism and socialism. Each one of these possesses a language that – when used to make assumptions about the nature of the world and the self – breaks down in the estimate of Dos Passos. Systematic thought, be it of a capitalist, socialist, or other brand, cannot provide us with the answers we need in a society that is constantly and relentlessly changing. Strychacz may be right in his assessment of Dos Passos, and his argument points to our agreement in the need for an approach that seeks reinvention and reorganization in our moral language, but the author's refusal to offer a definitive critique should not be construed as closing the discussion, as Strychacz seems to suggest. Instead, Dos Passos's refusal to offer a clear critique or response points to his hope. Hope, for Dos Passos, as it turns out, means a deflection of any systematic or conventional thinking (capitalist, communist, socialist, or any other institutionalization of democracy, politics, or ethics) that deflects the ethical relation of a you-and-I, that relationship that basically amounts to the face-to-face in Levinas.

As with other 1930s naturalists (West included), for Dos Passos, locating such an ethics is a matter of interrogating language. Before we look at how the interrogation of language and discourse works specifically in *U.S.A.*, I would like first to briefly revisit Levinas. Earlier, I

referred to his conception of language as working in two capacities: the said and the saying. For Levinas, the said not only institutes language as an entity foreign to our humanity, but it also besmirches ethics in the process – it robs us of a moral language, if you will. Instead, ethical encounter occurs in the saying, that space that attempts to recognize the humanity of each speaker. This dyadic concept of language runs counter to those discourses that essentially attempt to pervert ethics into a triad like nationalism, for instance. So, getting to the human, approaching the other as a person with needs that demand a response, is a question of diverting the interests of a third party; it is to recognize the particular individual that cannot be de-faced by language or third-party appeals.

The general movement of *U.S.A.* is characterized by a questioning of public and mass forms of rhetoric, politics, and morality – third party discourses. By the end of the trilogy, even socialism, in its harm to interpersonal relationships and individuals (it possesses the same abstracting force of capitalism, for instance), does not escape unscathed from Dos Passos's critique. In examining these texts, I would like to first look at *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) and *1919* (1932). Each of these serves the critique of the nationalist, racist, and popular forms of 1930s capitalist discourse that is finalized in *The Big Money* (1936). While the earlier novels offer an introduction to such a critique, the final novel serves as Dos Passos's most emphatic statement on the nature of discourse and ethics. In *The Big Money*, Dos Passos gives us a more thorough depiction of his moral outlook, although the previous novels certainly aid his conclusions. For this reason, I would like to focus primarily on the last novel, although examining the earlier texts first helps us position our approach and see how Dos Passos's inquiry here extends itself throughout the collective works.

In *The 42nd Parallel*, the characters of Mac, Janey, Joe, Ward, Eleanor, Eveline, and

Charley make their first appearances, although Joe and Eveline do not take preeminence until the next installment of the trilogy, where we meet such characters as Dick, Daughter, and Ben as well. While these novels introduce us to a good deal of Dos Passos's kaleidoscope of characters and his innovative four narrative modes, they most importantly introduce us to a world ruled by systematic (and often non-negotiable) forms of thought, limiting civic and political participation and producing what Dos Passos thinks is an inauthentic or delimited form of selfhood. Such a world smothers the socialist impulse of the earlier novels, and Dos Passos is keenly aware of this. As I see it, the socialist vision of the author is limited primarily by two forms of cultural discourse and social rhetoric in the novel, which Dos Passos points to as so common as to be sublimated into national life and interiorized: nationalism/patriotism and racism/ethnocentrism/nativism. The two distinctions are actually fairly congruous, and each essentializes selfhood and identity; however, I am making this distinction for the following reason. Although nationalism and racism/nativism, for instance, can go hand-in-hand, this doesn't necessarily need to be the case – racism does not require nationalism and, indeed, in U.S.A. Dos Passos often draws a distinction between the two (although not always). Similarly, nationalism does not require a racist component, and America (with its racial and ethnic diversity) stands as a perfect example of a nation that would suggest this. Also, nativism generally carries connotations of nationalism but, for our purposes here, I am associating nativism mostly with a construct of the world in terms of race, ethnicity, genealogy, and even social class. This last distinction may be somewhat arbitrary, but I suppose the notion of “blood” and lineage is just as significant to nativist discourse as any other motivation and, certainly, nativism carries with it ideas of Old World lineage (i.e., Anglo-Saxon racial identity). So, it is with these two rhetorical branches in mind that I would like to start examining both *The 42nd*

Parallel and 1919 with attention not only to how these parry Dos Passos's hopes for a unifying socialism but also his understanding of morality and moral duty.⁷² Like his naturalist cohort, Dos Passos thinks a reexamination of conventional ethics and discourse necessary if we are to locate an appropriate alternative that can meet the demands of increasingly diverse modern societies.

Understanding how nationalism functions as an impediment to progress proves most essential to the socialist and moral arguments of the author; however, I would like to start first with the issue of racism in the novels. Admittedly, racism seems secondary to nationalism by far in the the trilogy, but Dos Passos sees it as quite an obstacle to social action nonetheless. Racial identity itself is not a problem for the novelist; what is troublesome is the capacity in which we place racial identity into words and actions. For example, the young Janey of *The 42nd Parallel* is scolded by her mother for bringing home a black friend:

“Jane, I want to talk to you about something. That little colored girl you brought in this afternoon...” Janey's heart was dropping. She had a sick feeling and felt herself blushing, she hardly knew why. “Now, don't misunderstand me; I like and respect the colored people; some of them are fine self-respecting people in their place... But you mustn't bring that little colored girl in the house again. Treating colored people kindly and with respect is one of the signs of good breeding....

[B]ut you must never associate with colored people on an equal basis. Living in this neighborhood it's all the more important to be careful about those things...

Neither the whites nor the blacks respect those who do.” (107)

The remonstrances of Janey's mother may seem like the racist banter of a woman whose social

⁷² These two forms of popular social discourse and their relationship to socialism, in Dos Passos's thinking, will also play a role in my analysis of *The Big Money*.

position is confirmed by her racial identity and, indeed, it is. But there is far more here. Dos Passos thinks that participation in such discourse denies any in-roads into worker's rights that may be gained for a multiracial society (like America) through the cooperation of the entire working class, black, white, or otherwise. Later, in *1919*, Janey's brother, Joe, refuses the advice of fellow bar patrons to join the I.W.W. if he truly is fed up with his state of affairs as a sailor: "Joe said that stuff was only for foreigners, but if somebody started a white man's party to fight the profiteers and the goddam bankers he'd be with 'em" (132). The conversation about worker's rights quickly escalates to a heated exchange, nearly reaching fisticuffs. Joe expresses the opinion that only Caucasians can be good Americans, and good Americans, in his mind, should not associate with foreigners, communists, or the like. In fact, much of Joe's tale is that of a man whose socioeconomic position stifles his intellectual capabilities and social conscience, keeping him from understanding the similarities between his own frequently detestable living conditions and those of other members of the working class. Joe cannot peer through the cloud of racism that subjects him and others like him to systemic control, and he cannot even begin to realize how cooperation with other members of his class, regardless of race, may help his situation. He is not exceptional by any means; Dos Passos uses him as a representative figure of the white lower class, a laborer suckered by the racist rhetoric that is determined by the white social elite and perpetuated by a white working class that will do anything within its capacity to gain some sense of social mobility and privilege, some sense of social superiority, albeit illusory and completely detrimental to their economic and political advancement.

Racist thinking can be witnessed in all three novels and, as with Joe's narrative, we get the overwhelming impression that such discourse comes at the expense of the poor and the powerless. One figure that provides some hope in this regard, however, is Ben Compton. His

narrative seems to offer some sort of route out of conventional racist thinking. On the one hand, a character like Joe would have his suspicions confirmed by a labor advocate like Ben, which would associate the labor movement with a Jew – a perceived “foreigner” and outsider, from the perspective of nativist thinking. On the other hand, the association of a Jew with the labor movement, on Dos Passos's part, would seem to defy conventional racist stereotypes, ones, for instance, that associate Jews with finance and the control of capital. In fact, Ben's class consciousness supersedes his racial and ethnic identity. “ 'I'm not a kike any more'n you are...I'm an American born...and I'm goin' to stick with my class, you dirty crook,' ” Ben says in response to a boss's insult that a Jew striking “with a lot of wops” was perhaps the silliest thing he had ever heard (343). Throughout his narrative, Ben proves that neither lineage nor ancestry, stereotype nor generalization, can account for his actions. He is involved in people and believes in his work. Although Dos Passos wants us to see Ben as American, defying our nativist concepts of origins and values, Ben stands as a figure who transcends national identification as well. In his investment in Russian politics and the labor movement in Europe, Ben finds something of value that extends itself beyond national borders. His identity as a Jew, a “notorious” transnational figure, may also solidify this consummation, enabling identification with others beyond reductive national markers.⁷³ Most importantly, however, Ben is a figure – regardless of his background – who can look beyond and disrupt simplistic identity boundaries, like race and nationality.

All four narrative modes in *U.S.A.* interrogate nationalist rhetoric in some capacity.

Nationalism often tends to be aligned with the current condition of American democracy in Dos

⁷³ By this statement, I do not wish to imply that Jewish (or any other) identity is essential to a transnational project; however, Ben's Jewish identity not only defies racist conceptions in the novel but also carries a symbolic history.

Passos, and nationalist discourse frequently attempts to define the nature of democracy. Rather than enable democracy, however, nationalism only works towards its demise, according to the author. Nationalism not only serves to subjugate the working class in his estimate, thereby truly curtailing the possibilities of American democracy, but it also acts as a powerful and coercive barrier against morality. Even the speeches of Woodrow Wilson that would seem to promote world peace and international cooperation are seen as mere political posturing in the interests of capitalism, the wealthy, and an increasingly nationalist construct of democracy. Wilson's brand of nationalist rhetoric is not one of vitriol or virulence in the novel but one that comes in the guise of American exceptionalism⁷⁴ following the legacy of John Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill," an illusion to American right action emulated by other presidents (including Reagan) throughout the years.

Wilson's hypocrisy in *1919* extends from his broken promises for peace and strict pacifist policy to his rhetoric of brotherhood in championing the cause of the League of Nations. "*We are witnessing a renaissance of public spirit, a reawakening of sober public opinion, a revival of the power of the people the beginning of an age of thoughtful reconstruction...*," he claims in a pre-war speech (194). The pressures of finance (and not the voice of the common person) motivate Wilson's final decision to draw the U.S. into war:

First it was *neutrality in thought and deed*, then *too proud to fight* when the
Lusitania sinking and the danger to the Morgan loans and the stories of the British
and French propagandists set all the financial centers in the East bawling for war,

⁷⁴ This is a complicated subject when approaching the Wilson presidency as well as 1920s isolationist America. Obviously, Wilson initially sought a policy of neutrality for much of the war; however, Dos Passos points out that once Wilson commits himself and his country to the Allied effort (under the influence of American financial pressure), he immediately assumes the role of American liberator, a man who will help restore democracy in Europe and free those enslaved by the tyranny of Axis monarchical rule. In the opinion of Dos Passos, this role influences much of Wilson's approach to the League of Nations.

but the suction of the drumbeat and the guns was too strong; the best people took their fashions from [sic] Paris and their broad “a’s” from London, and T.R. and the House of Morgan. (194)

Only five months after running a reelection campaign promising to keep America out of the war, Wilson “pushed the Armed Ship Bill through congress,” declaring the U.S. now at war with the Central powers: “*Force without stint or limit, force to the utmost*” (194). Political and economic pressure aside, Wilson fails to deliver on his initial promises to the American people, instead forcing millions of American men to a foreign battlefield in a war that was largely seen among the left as an elitist one to determine who would ultimately consolidate political and economic power and control access to particular resources for capitalist growth.

Dos Passos masterfully dissects Wilson's own use of language, creating a narrative in “Meester Veelson” that moves from the promise of Wilson's ministerial upbringing to the out-of-touch grandiosity of a trained politician. Later in the novel, a Newsreel section includes what can be inferred only as a montage of the culture of Wilsonian “intelligence”:

declares wisdom of people alone can guide the nation in such an enterprise
SAYS U.S. MUST HAVE WORLD'S GREATEST FLEET *when I was in Italy a little limping group of wounded Italian soldiers sought an interview with me. I could not conjecture what they were going to say to me, and with the greatest simplicity, with a touching simplicity they presented me with a petition in favor of the League of Nations.* (321)

The excerpt concerning the League of Nations is taken directly from a presidential address relating Wilson's time in Europe as he was attempting to garner support for the international organization. Although Dos Passos does not include more of the address in *1919*, I think it worth

while to consult the text in its entirety. Wilson continues, claiming, “Their wounded limbs, their impaired vitality were the only argument they brought with them. It was a simple request that I lend all the influence that I might happen to have to relieve future generations of the sacrifices that they had been obliged to make” (Swindler 243). A language of sympathy and humility marks his encounter with the Italian soldiers, not an unsurprising step for twenty-first century readers familiar with contemporary presidential debate “shout-outs” to, say, Edna in Ohio (who has lost her job at the steel plant and whose luck has taken a turn for the worst) in order to create an emotional connection with the audience. What's truly striking, however, is the willingness of the once isolationist Wilson to align the cause of these wounded men and the cause of the League with an American imperative. “God give us the strength and vision to do it wisely!,” he exclaims, “God give us the privilege of knowing that we did it without counting the cost and because we are true Americans, lovers of liberty and of the right!” (Swindler 244). The isolationist, the pacifist, the man who had once run for and won the position of the President of the United States of America on a platform of keeping America uninvolved in affairs that did not immediately concern it, had now become an unabashed participant in America's self-proclaimed project to guide the world to a better and brighter day.⁷⁵ Unfortunately for Wilson, U.S. membership in the League never came to fruition, mainly due to congressional refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and the official return to an isolationist policy shortly after the war. Nonetheless, Wilson's vision stands as a precarious alignment of American nationalism with a sense of international brotherhood and moral obligation. Such a pairing sounds odd, but it is not

⁷⁵ I think it would be foolhardy on my part not to acknowledge that Wilson's desire here has some legitimate and useful aims. Where Wilson goes awry, according to Dos Passos, is in the negation of his former promises to the American people and in his perceived service to the capitalist class and elite. From Dos Passos's perspective, moral action cannot be guided by such motives.

the last time that Dos Passos interrogates such a notion of ethical duty in *U.S.A.*

Numerous examples of the language of nationalism limiting worker solidarity and American advancement, from Dos Passos's perspective, abound in the earlier novels of the trilogy; however, as witnessed with Wilson, actual historical figures appearing in the novel often provide outlets for the most intensive critiques of nationalism. Eugene Debs' biographical sketch, for instance, may serve as the most morally significant in this regard. "Lover of Mankind" portrays the socialist thinker and campaigner as a true man of the people, a man that Dos Passos thinks perhaps the closest example we have possessed of a political idealist whose words and actions actually served his fellows. Debs' story in the novel basically follows the history of America and the workingman, from immigrant origins to hard labor in the service of an industrializing nation and on to the maturity of political empowerment and knowledge of those conditions that seem to determine the lives of the working class. Born into an immigrant family from humble origins, Debs moves from the "weatherboarded shack" of his youth in Terre Haute, Indiana, to a life of the workingman, serving as machinist, locomotive fireman, and clerk. As eventual secretary for the local chapter of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Debs made his entrance into politics and "traveled all over the country as organizer," using "a sort of gusty rhetoric that set on fire the railroad workers in their pineboarded halls" (19). While Debs may have been a sharp-witted politician and rhetorician, Dos Passos thinks that his words are not those of the manipulator or an authority; rather, Debs' words demonstrate that he wanted the world of the people, "a world brothers might own/where everybody would split even" (19).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Obviously, even the system that Debs advocates distorts the reality of human relations; however, the Dos Passos of *The 42nd Parallel* is not quite ready to admit this potential completely yet, although some suspicion lurks. Nonetheless, Debs is certainly a sympathetic figure in the trilogy, and I don't think Dos Passos's final conclusions and disenchantment with socialism would necessarily dispute that.

Dos Passos relates some of Debs' words:

I am not a labor leader. I don't want you to follow me or anyone else. If you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of the capitalist wilderness you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, someone else would lead you out. (20)

Debs' words are significant here and his reference to Moses particularly fascinating. Debs desires not to institutionalize his leadership, or that of anyone else, for that matter. Instead, his vision is non-hierarchical, limiting the centralization of power and opening up participation and input from all workers. Moreover, Moses ushered in the era of Mosaic law and the Torah – what can be construed as the institutionalization of Jewish law, morality, and culture. While Debs is most likely not critiquing the Judeo-Christian tradition, his words do have significant implications. Unlike Moses, Debs does not wish to translate politics and morality into a dogma that may avoid actual needs and, if he were to gain them the promised land, “someone else” would emerge to lead the people out, be it a Debs who has neglected his idealistic approach or someone else who surely would. Debs appears as a politician and thinker capable of adjusting to people's needs rather than the other way around. In the vision of worker solidarity and non-hierarchical political participation⁷⁷ espoused by Debs, Dos Passos points to the potential for organizing all workers and not just the railroadmen, from whom Debs came – something fundamentally different from the reality of turn of the century America. All workers should organize and gain some say in the socialist project as well as those decisions that directly affect their wages and their lives. In trade unionism, Debs apparently saw a discrepancy in his vision

⁷⁷ Admittedly, given his candidacy for president on the Socialist Party of America ticket several times, such a notion of non-hierarchical politics becomes a bit complicated; however, that should not necessarily discredit this notion.

for a worker's state. Instead, workers should unite across crafts, trades, and guilds in a particular industry.

Significantly, Dos Passos uses this project in order to magnify Debs' loss and isolation when his language of fellowship was spurned by the very people whom he had sought so vigorously to help and unite. "But where were Gene Debs' brothers in nineteen eighteen when Woodrow Wilson had him locked up in Atlanta for speaking against war?," Dos Passos writes (20). "Lover of Mankind" portrays an entire nation, working-class and those in power alike, that has turned its back on a compassionate friend who could have changed its destiny and, for Dos Passos, this nullification can be directly traced to the deleterious nationalist rhetoric that had gained hold of America during and immediately after the war. Now brought back home to Terre Haute as an old man, eliminated from the politics game and therefore rendered harmless, the people think fondly of Debs "as an old kindly uncle who loved them, and wanted to be with him and to have him give them candy" (21). But they are also terrified of him, "afraid of him as if he had contracted a social disease, syphilis or leprosy, and thought it was too bad,

but on account of the flag

and prosperity

and making the world safe for democracy,

they were afraid to be with him,

or to think much about him for fear they might believe him." (21)

According to Dos Passos, Debs is essentially a figure of anti-totality. He represents Dos Passos's attempt to circumvent the systematizing effects of nationalism, capitalism, and even socialism, and to locate the individual. This, however, cannot work according to the powers that be. For the sake of a fabricated and overbearing notion of nationhood and American cultural existence,

an ethics like that of Debs', one that requires the diminution of the self in the presence of even the feeblest workingman or woman, doesn't seem desirable. Instead, the nation must project an image of strength, and such notions as "international solidarity" and non-hierarchical politics are found harmful if these stand in the way of national interests and that of our leaders in whom we place our faith.

While national identity may play a key part in our current moral and political outlooks, ethics and nationalism cannot be confused in Dos Passos's mind.⁷⁸ A world where commitment to our national identity (or racial, for that matter) determines our moral outlook is not only undesirable, it potentially negates that which makes the preservation of all human life possible. Whether influencing our sense of international duty (Wilson) or circumscribing such obligations (reaction against Debs), nationalism risks something like moral turpitude. It places an immediate stain upon our relationships with others, that is, if we approach communion as a thinker like Levinas does. Language as mass discourse (nationalism and racism, for instance), language which makes assumptions about the world (the said and rhetoric in Levinas), according to Dos Passos, represents that which does not speak and is incapable of speaking – it is dead and refuses to allow both self and others to live and commune. It is indeed a barrier to communication, to our ability to commune with others as speaking subjects, to attempt to gather and meet their actual needs and demands, no matter how mightily we may fail.

Communication seems a primary theme in *U.S.A.* From the author's point of view, we tend to lack the ability to understand what makes us human. Dos Passos often goes out of his way to isolate and scrutinize our inability to talk with one another. Quite often, Dos Passos's

78 This helps explain the sympathetic portrayals of the transnationalism of Randolph Bourne and Paxton Hibben in the novels.

characters have difficulty in forming coherent and sustainable relationships. Dick Savage admires Daughter's beauty and youthful exuberance, yet he abandons her and his unborn child. Joe and Janey attempt a conversation, yet fail miserably:

Sundays he played baseball in Maryland. Janey would sit up for him, but when he came she'd ask him how things were going where he worked and he'd say "Fine" and he'd ask her how things were going at school and she'd say "Fine" and then they'd both go off to bed. Once in a while she'd ask if he'd seen Alec and he'd say "Yes" with a scrap of a smile and she'd ask how Alec was and he'd say "Fine."
(42nd *Parallel* 114)

Joe and Janey's inability to converse can be traced to our empty language, according to Dos Passos. As with nationalist and racist language, there are no linguistic resources beyond platitudes that the two can pull from. Both Joe and Janey seem a part of a society wherein language and the need for open and honest communication has gone dead. Continuing with the theme of communication, Mac is refused by his fellow workingmen, even though he desires to help. " 'You blokes'll keep quiet with that kinder talk if you know what's 'ealthy for ye' " (42nd *Parallel* 56), they tell him in response to his socialist agenda. Dos Passos's emphasis on the inability to speak to and understand one another proves just one part of his concern with inauthentic relationships, and it also introduces us to his construct of the self. For Dos Passos, the self is a production of social relationships. Acculturated in an early twentieth-century American society lacking the lexicon capable of a moral language, the self, in Dos Passos's estimate, is a product of consumer culture and desire.

The questioning of the relationship between culture and selfhood continues in *The Big Money*, where I think Dos Passos really places his moral stakes as a matured author. The sense

that we gain from this novel, as with the previous two, is that the self is a construct, battered around by cultural discourse and expectations. However, Dos Passos's narrative here offers more avenues for exploring the key moral questions he introduces in the previous novels but doesn't address as thoroughly within the course of narrative action. For certain, the questioning of our cultural discourses and moral language preoccupy him here as it does throughout the trilogy (and I will address this in due turn); however, perhaps a question that is introduced in the earlier novels, but examined to a far lesser extent, is that of the nature of the self's existence under capitalism as we experience our relationships with and engage with others. Specifically, because Dos Passos isolates capitalist selfhood largely as a social construct (clearly he believes in some core, however, or else he would not champion individuality), the self functions as a veritable performance piece. In *The Big Money*, role-playing, identity shifting, and performativity⁷⁹ function as nearly impregnable barriers that protect the self in order to avoid the exposure received from radical otherness. In the lives of characters like Charley Anderson and Margo Dowling, for instance, we see role-playing as a means to extract the self from the precarious encounters that one might face, therefore insulating and protecting the self from unwanted intrusion or otherwise uncomfortable interactions. Essentially, such an act is a method of coping, and while ethics in Levinas is risky business, requiring the self to be made vulnerable, coping is precisely the existential approach to the world that Levinas warns us against as harmful to finding an appropriate approach to morality.

Role-playing and performance take precedence in Margo's narrative, notably in her

⁷⁹ I use the term "performativity" to designate the condition of selfhood as performance. This has numerous connotations of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other cultural factors/conditions. Dos Passos also uses this concept of the self – one that performs its socially-determined roles, although often Dos Passos places many of these performances (whether erroneously or not) under the umbrella of capitalism and consumer culture (i.e., Hollywood).

history of stage acting and her experiences and travails in Los Angeles; however, there are other suggestions that Dos Passos sees performativity as antithetical to ethics. Charley, for one, experiences a myriad of dysfunctional romantic and sexual relationships, which is certainly not unexceptional for a good deal of the characters in the trilogy. His relationship with Doris Humphries, for example, whose sexual abstinence and recalcitrance frustrates Charley, drives him to seek the carnal comforts of a prostitute as a surrogate. In the encounter, Charley forces the prostitute to assume the identity of Doris, while he takes her as he wishes to take Doris, finally consummating their relationship (at least in his mind, as long as this performance continues):

“Hello, dearie.” He hardly looked at the girl. “Put out the light,” he said.

“Remember your name's Doris. Go in the bathroom and take your clothes off and don't forget to put on lipstick, plenty lipstick.... Now come in here, goddam you. I love you, you bitch Doris.” The girl was trembling. When he grabbed her to him she burst out crying. (163)

Charley attempts to settle the girl down by offering her liquor, but this only “started him off again” (163). Mrs. Darling, the brothel madame visits with Charley the following day, convincing him to seek the prostitute in question for company again. “When she came he tried to explain to her that he wasn't crazy,” the narrator observes; “He woke up alone in the bed feeling sober and disgusted” (164). The prostitute is explicitly made to act a performance she finds disturbing (but perhaps necessary if she is to be retained). Yet Charley also assumes an identity that is not authentic in that his role as Doris's sexual and physical conqueror is clearly the stuff of fantasy. In a sense, both are made actors in a sexual game that becomes highly uncomfortable for the prostitute and unsatisfying for Charley. The act is obviously a sham and a disappointing one

at that, but Charley finds (at least temporarily) in the act an outlet that helps direct his frustrations and angst – an outlet that allows him to avoid momentarily the reality of his relationship with Doris, although the reality of their relationship remains present and rudely intrudes upon the performance.

Charley's marriage to Gladys later in the novel also proves unsatisfactory, ultimately ending in divorce after Charley's significant losses in the market. Initially, it seems that his romance with Margo will offer him some escape and maybe even the personal validation he has sought in his relationships but not found. Interestingly, their chance encounter in a Florida “lunchroom” soon devolves into another game of pseudonymous role-play outside, albeit the seemingly silly flirtation that might mark the first meeting of a woman and man mutually attracted to one another. As they step into Charley's car for their departure to Miami, the two (still) strangers joke: “She wouldn't say what her name was. 'Call me Mme. X,' she said. 'Then you'll have to call me Mr. A,' said Charley” (255). The playful game continues as they make their way down the Atlantic coastline. In Daytona Beach, they stop momentarily for a swim. “‘And me thinkin' you was an elderly sugardaddy in the drugstore there,' ” Margo retorts to Charley's protestation that his leg will heal in due time and that he is no less a man (despite the shame he feels at his limp, pale skin, and noticeable belly). “ 'I think you're a humdinger, Mme. X' ” (255), he replies. After dinner, the two continue the last leg of their journey south, Margo resting her head on Charley's shoulder, and Charley feeling profound satisfaction at his sense of resurrected vitality. Charley asks Margo, whose identity is still unknown to him, where he might find her when he calls again:

“Sure, you can see me any night at the Palms,” she says, “I'm an entertainer there.”

“Honest...I knew you were an entertainer but I didn't know you were a professional.”

“You sure did me a good turn, Mr. A. Now it can be told...I was flat broke with exactly the price of that ham sandwich....”

“Tell me your name. I'd like to call you up.”

“You tell me yours.”

“Charles Anderson. I'll be staying bored to death at the Miami-Biltmore.”

“So you really are Mr. A.... Well, goodbye, Mr. A., and thanks a million times.” (255-56)

As Charley claims earlier, Mme. X is a “professional,” evincing the sense in which their communication thus far has been at least somewhat of an act rather than innocently casual or honest. While Margo doesn't reveal her name, she has made it clear where she may be found, and her final statement here proves more than ironic: Mr. A may be Charley Anderson, but he is not the same “person” as Charley Anderson. The two are not the same, contrary to appearance. Mr. A is an assumed identity that – by its very nature of anonymity – already projects a communicative barrier. The pseudonym each offers the other establishes a false sense of identity, obviously, but the real intrigue of this performative foreplay, in a sense, is how this episode of role-playing establishes the tone of their relationship, which requires each partner's investment in his or her own security. “Mr. A, as she called him, kept offering to set Margo up in an apartment on Park Avenue,” writes Dos Passos, “but she always said nothing doing, what did he think she was, a kept woman?” (261). In fact, Charley even becomes Mr. A from the ironic perspective of the narrator at times: “Mr. A sat down grouchily on a dusty velvet modelstand”; “Mr. A had let his cigar go out”; “Mr. A said...” (265). Clearly, Margo seeks her independence but at times still

acts mercenary. Charley, on the other hand, seeks a woman he hopes he can keep through his charms and money. Each seeks a means by which a good firm grasp on his or her life and the surrounding world can be maintained. Meanwhile, as we see above, the narrator is witness to this act, and he does not let it slide by our attention.

The relationship sputters on for a while but, like most of Dos Passos's depictions of romance, comes to an untimely (and unsurprising) demise. Coincidentally, on one of Margo's and Charley's more notable outings, Charley commissions a young photographer, named Sam Margolies (whose surname is interesting, if taken literally), to take some fashion photos of the aspiring actress. This meeting later proves pivotal, but before addressing its implications, I would like to move back just a bit in order to discuss Margo and her acting history. Questions about selfhood mark much of Margo's narrative, and performativity is inextricably linked to this inquiry. Although he still desires an authentic form of self-identification, Dos Passos anticipates a poststructural notion of selfhood in the "emptying" out of any authentic core under capitalism, and while his construct of the self may be historically contextualized (as opposed to Levinas's ahistorical self), he shares with Levinas the position that the self cannot be the locus for either rational or ethical decision-making. Keeping this in mind, Margo's narrative offers some very critical steps in the direction of deciphering a Dos Passosian self further.

Margo's narrative begins with a sense of her guilt. Agnes reminds Margo of her mother's death in childbirth, a fact that never appears completely lost upon the young girl and perhaps explains some of her susceptibility to adult pressures (like Frank's advances). Similar to the Kid from McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Margo almost appears born under a bad sign, a self with origins in guilt and suffering (or, in the Kid's case, mostly just suffering). And like the Kid, Margo adopts a role suitable to coping with the society she must inherit, and no other role but

that of an actor could be more appropriate to coping in twentieth century America. Early in her narrative, Margo performs with The Musical Mandevilles, a New York City troupe composed of herself and her adoptive parents, Frank and Agnes Mandeville. It is partially from this experience that she learns to act so well as a social front, but what might be even more striking is the relationship between performativity and sexuality that her time with the Mandevilles seems to build (a fact that, as already mentioned, informs her relationship with Charley). One day, an adolescent Margo and Frank are left in the house alone. Desperate for work, Frank has just signed what he considers a contract beneath himself and one sure to relegate the troupe to burlesque in his mind. Margo attempts to provide some solace to the nearly disconsolate Frank. She sits by his side, joking with him and stroking the hair off his forehead. The older man soon takes her into his arms, kissing her relentlessly and demanding she give herself over despite her protests. Forcing her down on the bed, Frank rapes the girl. While she attempts to fight him off, lashing out with fists and nails, she is no match for the much stronger man, and “[s]he didn't dare yell for fear the people in the house might come” (144), the narrator offers. Margo is made helpless not just because inferior physical strength against her attacker, but perhaps also because of social norms that unfairly dictate attitudes towards women who are sexualized outside of marriage or acceptable cultural parameters. “When it was over,” the narrator continues, “she wasn't crying. She didn't care” (144). To cover up his indiscretion and crime, Frank threatens Margo and concocts an alibi for Agnes, who has just returned home, explaining their frenzied state by his having to punish Margo for reading “trashy magazines.” Understandably, Margo has a visceral reaction to her frightening ordeal and to Frank's accusation: “Margie was trembly like jelly inside. She felt herself breaking out in a cold sweat. She ran upstairs to the bathroom and doublelocked the door and stumbled to the toilet and threw up” (145).

With this experience, Margo adopts the persona of the slut or fallen woman (an act akin to bad faith), and she performs this socially-determined (and arbitrary) role decidedly well.⁸⁰ At Christmastime, “She almost got caught with the boy who played the Knight doing it behind some old flats when the theater was dark during a rehearsal” (145), Dos Passos writes. Later in the winter, she takes up with a man professing in Eastern medicines and healing, who offers free treatments to Margo, although she only kids him. “Then one day,” states the narrator, “she went into the office when there were no patients and sat down on his knee without saying a word” (145). However, the narrator informs us that “the boy she liked best in the house was a Cuban named Tony Garrido” (145), whom Margo later marries and absconds with to Cuba for a brief time before their unmalleable differences make their relationship itself a mere sham, ending ultimately with Tony's death.⁸¹ Ironically, in order to gain Garrido's hand in marriage, Margo resorts back to an appearance of virginal innocence, claiming that she “wouldn't let him [the Eastern quack] touch her not if he was the last man in the world” (146) and refusing Tony's premarital sexual advances so as not to risk compromising her image in his eyes (as a fallen woman) and to obtain his hand.

In Hollywood, the association of performance with selfhood persists, although the role of sexuality in this game is not immediately transparent. Out West, Margo and Agnes happen upon Sam Margolies again, now a Hollywood big shot of sorts who has acquired “a strong foreign accent of some kind” in the interim and is looking for a fresh face for an upcoming film project.

80 Clearly nothing should be wrong with the expression of female sexuality. We know, however, that such expressions (particularly in the wake of Victorian sexual mores) would not be socially approbated.

81 Garrido serves as an interesting figure in this discussion as well; the man is feminized in the narrative at times and, as the novel implies (not too subtly), possesses some form of non-heteronormative sexuality. Nonetheless, Tony must serve a heteronormative role in their relationship (we know that not many other options were available to alternative sexualities at the time), obviously a primary factor in its demise. For criticism of misogyny and homophobia in Dos Passos, consult Nanney, p. 181-88.

Margo soon believes that the chance occurrence may reactivate her stale acting career and spends considerable time with Sam and his Hollywood cohort, among the celluloid backdrop of lavish offices and apartments decorated with Chinese paintings, gothic furnishings, and zebra and lion skins, for instance. Sam offers her a role in a period film as the jaded daughter of “a French or perhaps a Spanish general” who seeks escape from “the giddy whirl of the European capitals” and falls in love with a young American off to the foreign legion, who later risks it all through the blockade to save her father's life (329). Even Sam admits the nonsensical nature of the role and the artificiality of their surrounding social environment, yet the narrative seems to suggest that his casting her may be another performance piece:

When Margolies put her wrap around her he let his hands rest for a moment on her shoulders. “There's another thing I want you to let sink into your heart...not your intelligence...your heart.... Don't answer me now. Talk it over with your charming companion. A little later, when we have this picture done I want you to marry me. I am free. Years ago in another world I had a wife as men have wives but we agree to misunderstand and went our ways. Now I shall be too busy. You have no conception of the intense detailed work involved. When I am directing a picture I can think of nothing else, but when the creative labor is over, in three months' time perhaps, I want you to marry me.... Don't reply now.” (329-30)

The romantic advance seems perfunctory, witty, and almost routine, perhaps merely a satiric expression of social expectations (dare we even say media expectations) that would develop from the inability to fight mutual attraction between a man in a position of power and a woman he employs. Their relationship reads something like another Hollywood plot, and this segment of

Margo's narrative is a conspicuous commentary upon the American culture of celebrity that has made figures like Margo, void of real talent (beyond the visual) and the product of “a shift in the American economy” (252), as Justin Edwards writes, that refuses to recognize critical potential in favor of mindless diversions and wonders. The reader may rightfully wonder what remains of the core self in the trilogy given the synthetic culture of contemporary America. Dos Passos defines not only aesthetic taste but even selfhood as a product of mass manipulation, a self that is subject to the oscillation of the marketplace, and if we cannot access a comprehensible self, then numerous moral questions must be raised.

With such a definition, it is obviously difficult to critique moral behavior. How can we condemn action that may be the product of metaphysical forces beyond our control? Dos Passos clearly depicts humans as subject to culture and societal influence, so much so that even a notions like free will or rational action seem contestable. Why, then, should we give serious consideration to ideas such as accountability or blame? Admittedly, Dos Passos gives us a conflicting view of subjectivity. We are but mere pawns in a world that transcends our imagination and mental grasp, yet we should find the ability somehow to take control of those forces which shape our political destiny as desirable, the latter a central concept for Dos Passos's unwaning individualism. Such a political goal is hardly achievable given this bifurcated construct of humanity, however. (After all, any good classical communist desires the workers' revolution, which is forged in the willingness of the working class to drive historical change and socioeconomic transformation.) We can justifiably call Dos Passos out here.

Yet, even given Dos Passos's dyadic representation of the self, we find that escape from bifurcated constructs of being are necessary to a moral vision that would seek an individualized approach to every question and address – in other words, a Levinasian move that posits moral

action as decidedly indecisive. The “Mary French” section, for example, implores for the need for escape from a polarized understanding of human relations and politics. As previously discussed, Dos Passos once thought socialism a political panacea to the ills of capitalism, the latter seeming to proscribe selfhood and nature, for instance (i.e., Dos Passos's notion of performativity); however, we see even in his grappling with socialism, Dos Passos's disgust with any vision that would determine the world so easily through universal moral lenses. Real ethical potential resides in Mary French's and Ben Compton's (who also appears in her narrative as both lover and colleague) struggle with socialism and their increasing sensitivity to the distortion of the lived social world resulting from the dogmatism of their peers and the moral language that narrates their worlds. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the novel ends with the two's disenchantment with the socialist power structure, the narrative's political heterodoxy challenging such threats to an alternative ethics as rigid authority, systematization, and a perverted public moral language (e.g., nationalism). Moreover, in the character of Mary French we find an ethical conscience that can no longer cope with trauma or the extreme corporeality emanating from the presence of the other in the facile manner that conventional morality and language might offer.⁸²

Ben's fractious relationship with the party establishment and subsequent alienation from the party line serves as one of the novel's primary turning points in a growing dissatisfaction with socialism as a sociopolitical and moral ideology. Throughout the trilogy, Ben is an idealistic socialist, believing in Marxist doctrine and expressing faith in the soviet projects in Russia, for instance. Attempting to put principles into action, it is Ben's ambition to act as a leader in a strike of rayonworkers in Bayonne, New Jersey. Before the strike, however, AFL leaders from

⁸² We will see coping and extreme corporeality (or particularity) emerge as highly significant themes in West's fiction, which makes the Levinasian affinities of both Dos Passos and West quite striking.

Washington, dressed “in expensive overcoats and silk mufflers” (360), take its organization out of his hands. Understandably, Ben is upset with this development, one that he thinks the result of inefficacy on the part of the left, and he expresses his frustration to Mary later that night. “He was cold and bitter and desperate. He sat for hours on the edge of her bed,” the narrator informs us, “telling her in a sharp monotonous voice about the sellout and the wrangles between the leftwingers and the oldtime socialists and laborleaders” (360). He also expresses disappointment that these same leaders will be seeking workers' dues (which Ben has previously expressed as often difficult to collect due to low wages and harsh living conditions) to hire attorneys for his defense against contempt of court, the hope being that these same workers' wages will help free other labor activists should Ben's defense prove successful, yet he consents almost as if it is but historical necessity:

“I feel so bad about spending the workers' money on my defense.... I'd as soon go to jail as not...but it's the precedent.... We've got to fight every case and it's the one way we can use the liberal lawyers, the lousy fakers.... And it costs so much and the union's broke and I don't like to have them spend the money on me...but they say that if we win my case then the cases against the other boys will all be dropped....” (360)

While Ben's language appears to express some sincere doubt about the labor movement (it certainly reveals rifts in the relationship between the establishment and its constituents), it also possesses a consolatory and apologetic tone, one counter to that of the narrator, who is already beyond displeased with party leadership as is evident in his negative descriptors regarding the labor establishment. Ben has become disillusioned by the left, by the dogmatism and interests of its various factions that deflect the rightful project of helping those at the bottom of the economic

base, but, unlike the narrator, he has not (as of yet) perpetrated any actions that would suggest he is willing to assault this dogmatism. His expulsion from the party later in the novel, however, suggests that his willingness to do so arrived soon after.

Like Ben, Mary also questions the party line and the direction of the labor movement, its real motivations and aims:

“It's funny, Don,” she was saying, “I always go to sleep when you talk about party discipline. I guess it's because I don't want to hear about it.” “No use being sentimental about it,” said Don savagely. “But is it sentimental to be more interested in saving the miners' unions?” she said, suddenly feeling wide awake again. “Of course that's what we all believe but we have to follow the party line. A lot of those boys...Goldfarb's one of them...Ben Compton's another...think this is a debating society. If they're not careful indeed they'll find themselves out on their ear...You just watch.” (428)

While Don Stevens' retorts elide the import of Mary's questions, her inquiry suggests a desire for real answers, and this behavior is by no means out of character for her. At Eveline's party later in the novel, Mary is interrogated by George Barrow about the motives and practicality of the movement, Mary emphasizing that she is “ 'not a partymember.' ” “ 'I know..., ' ” he says, “ 'but you work with them.... Why should you think you know better what's good for the miners than their own tried and true leaders? ' ” (441). “If the miners ever had a chance to vote in their unions you'd find out how much they trust your sellout crowd” (441), she replies.

Despite the protests of her leisured mother, from childhood Mary seeks the best interests of the poor, be they immigrant miners or urban laborers. When she moves east, she directs her charitable ambitions towards labor activism and journalism, dealing on a daily basis with union

organizers, strikers, workers, and activists. The inability of the socialist project, in her mind, or any available moral language for that matter, to accommodate individual needs rather than sublate them into abstract ideas (like “the struggle” or the “worker's state”), eventually becomes apparent, though. In that same encounter with Don, the two lovers return to their apartment. Exhausted, Don falls upon the bed and drifts immediately into sleep; equally fatigued by the day's events, Mary cannot. Lacking an interlocutor, she takes off Don's shoes, places a blanket over him, and climbs into bed. Mary experiences a restless night, thinking of all those she must help:

She was staring wide awake, she was counting old pairs of trousers, torn suits of woolly underwear, old armyshirts with the sleeves cut off, socks with holes in them that didn't match. She was seeing the rickety children with puffy bellies showing through their rags, the scrawny women with uncombed hair and hands distorted with work, the boys with their heads battered and bleeding from the clubs of the Coal and Iron Police, the photograph of a miner's body shot through with machinegun bullets. She got up and took two or three swigs from a bottle of gin she kept in the medicinecloset in the bathroom. The gin burned her throat. Coughing she went back to bed and went off into a hot dreamless sleep.

(428)

For her cohort, the lives of the working class are the stuff of political narrative, and their needs are of no demanding consequence beyond the goals of the party or labor movement at large. For Mary, though, those whom she has encountered in her work have needs that exceed ideology; they also have needs that must be met in a face-to-face encounter – a meeting that requires more than a standard act of charity or aid. These people refuse to be forgotten and to have their needs

subsumed by institutionalized language or deflection. Mary's agonizing thoughts are full of highly corporeal images, the imagery of clothing and injury reanimating those who might otherwise be lost (or abstracted) through "the struggle." Although perhaps silent or silenced, those who demand her help find voice in Mary's haunted subjectivity, which cannot escape the presence of another that begs for more than she is able to give. In a narrative ploy that will ring loudly when we arrive at West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Mary realizes her abject inadequacies, and so the bottle proves a useful measure in assuaging her concerns, at least for the night.⁸³ Mary French may be the novel's redeemer, but even she is woefully inept. Most importantly, though, with the "Mary French" narrative, we find the disruption of binarism and absolutist thought, a narrative that disrupts the authority of discourse and language.

The vag wanders the American wasteland in the closets of the trilogy. Mary's thoughts and suffering weigh immediately upon our mind. The materialist language of her tortured reverie buffers the isolation of this man:

The young man waits at the edge of the concrete, with one hand he grips a rubbed suitcase of phony leather, the other hand almost making a fist, thumb up that moves in ever so slight an arc when a car slithers past, a truck roars clatters; the wind of cars passing ruffles his hair, slaps grit in his face.

Head swims, hunger has twisted the belly tight,
he has skinned a heel through the torn sock, feet ache in the broken shoes,
under the threadbare suit carefully brushed off with the hand, the torn drawers have a crummy feel, the feel of having slept in your clothes; in the nostrils lingers the staleness of discouraged carcasses crowded into a transient camp, the carbolic

83 My intention is for the discussion of coping in West to elucidate this particular example of coping.

stench of the jail, on the taut cheeks the shamed flush from the boring eyes of cops and deputies. (446)

The language describing the vagrant as he walks the highways of America sounds quite similar to that articulating Mary's thoughts, terms drawing our attention to his body, pain, hunger, and clothing. Above him, a transcontinental flight passes over head, its passengers preoccupied with finance, transactions, and luxury. Cars zoom by on the road, headed to countless destinations, their drivers speeding past the raised thumb:

Eyes seek the driver's eyes. A hundred miles down the road. Head swims, belly tightens, wants crawl over his skin like ants:

went to school, books said opportunity, ads promised speed, own your home, shine bigger than your neighbor, the radiocrooner whispered girls, ghosts of platinum girls coaxed from the screen, millions in winnings were chalked up on the boards in the offices, paychecks were for hands willing to work, the cleared desk of an executive with three telephones on it. (448)

As with the unknown soldier, this is one of Dos Passos's more remarkable and unique biographies. If the marketplace of 1930s America has produced incoherent and performative subjects, incapable of allowing us to think of the self as the rational locus of ethical action, it has also produced figures like the vag. We are all implicated in his wandering, his wants and needs. Ethical action cannot be rational (or at least possess a fully rational base) under such conditions because a de-centered self expands our responsibility beyond linear causality (ex.: I did this only, therefore I am responsible for this action only). For both thinkers, the self is thought of as far distinct from the one of Enlightenment liberalism, for instance, and should not be thought of necessarily as a rational moral agent, although Dos Passos is clearly more reluctant to annihilate

conventional selfhood than his moral successor in Levinas.

Dos Passos's montage presentation is often jumbled and, as I have enumerated above, many critics have claimed various motivations for this approach in his fiction. We should now add moral motivations as well. Like Dos Passos's style, his understanding of morality refutes clear, concise definitions and responses to suffering. Tuning in and out of numerous narratives, Dos Passos escapes conventional notions of time and space and refuses standard representations of such notions, his novel defying not so much coherence but systematization and scheme. Similarly, morality in Dos Passos and Levinas escapes reification at the hands of authoritative structures, whether these be binarist (like Dos Passos's understanding of nationalism and racism) or normative discourses. Each thinker obviously believes ethical interaction cannot occur through universal or systematized responses, and this accounts for their attack on rhetoric and the need for ethics to occupy the interstices where rhetoric falls apart and no longer works.

In the closing pages of *1919*, "The Body of an American" biography tells of an unknown soldier brought back in the aftermath of the war to be commemorated at Arlington before an audience of Washington politicians and national media. "John Doe" is picked from countless other anonymous soldiers and unclaimed body parts, but a "body" must be located, and it might as well be an "American" one: "Make sure he aint a dinge, boys, / make sure he aint a guinea or a kike" (375). Both the media and President Harding co-opt the story of "John Doe" into a national narrative of sacrifice and democratic tribulation. "The day withal was too meaningful and tragic for applause," writes one reporter. "Silence, tears, songs and prayer, muffled drums and soft music were the instrumentalities [sic] today of national approbation" (376). Similarly, the president talks of the patriotic mission of "John Doe." "[A]s a typical soldier of this representative democracy," Harding says, "he fought and died believing in the indisputable

justice of his country's cause" (377). Harding and the media want "John Doe's" death to buttress (and compensate for) the expenses, especially in lives, of the war. According to them, somehow these losses all make sense and, regardless of whether or not they currently do, most certainly will in due time.

"John Doe," however, refuses the gross generalization of national powerbrokers that would otherwise obfuscate the deaths of numerous unidentified American men. Instead of abstract universality that can be easily relayed in a speech or broadcast, "John Doe" possesses specificity and multiplicity simultaneously:

John Doe was born (thudding din of blood in love into the shuddering soar
of a man and a woman alone indeed together lurching into
and ninemonths sick drowse waking into scared agony and the pain and
blood and mess of birth). John Doe was born
and raised in Brooklyn, in Memphis, near the lakefront in Cleveland, Ohio,
in the stench of the stockyards in Chi, on Beacon Hill, in an old brick house in
Alexandria, Virginia, on Telegraph Hill, in a halftimbered Tudor cottage in
Portland the city of roses.... (376)

Multiplicity in Dos Passos escapes rationalization and signals the refusal of customized narrative. It repudiates centralization (troublesome to Dos Passos in both capitalism and socialism) with a multiplicity of selves as well as a social diversity in which disparate members do not facilitate nationalist engineering. Similar to the manifestations of Mary's inner conflicts and the vag's physical suffering, "John Doe," whoever he may have been, claims back a body that would otherwise be lost in the president's speech. "John Doe had a head / for twentyodd years intensely the nerves of the eyes the ears the palate the tongue the fingers the toes the armpits, the nerves

warmfeeling under the skin charged the coiled brain with hurt....,” the narrator writes. “John Doe's / heart pumped blood: / alive thudding silence of blood in your ears” (378). If we were to speak in Levinasian terms, “John Doe” is the other who possesses his own body and refuses narrative. Harding attempts to draft him into a story, while the narrator suggests the multiplicity of “John Doe's” identity, not authoritatively, but in a manner that might offer the proverbial “wiggle-room.” Dos Passos realizes the inability to speak the particularity of individual existence into being; instead, it goes unspoken, and this refusal of language might be his most identifiable legacy for the mid twentieth century that writers and intellectuals like Levinas would inhabit.

VII. THE TRAUMA OF ADDRESS: NATHANAEL WEST'S *MISS LONELYHEARTS* AND WRITER'S BLOCK

Although it should be pointed out that Nathanael West often doggedly retains a perspective of political apathy in his texts,⁸⁴ both he and Dos Passos are sincerely concerned with the interpersonal implications of capitalism and 1930s commodity culture. This concurrent stream of inquiry runs through both authors' works and obviously informs their respective ethical projects. For West, in particular, not only does *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933) address this culture of degradation and complacency, but so too do later novels like *The Day of the Locust* (1939). As with *The Big Money*, *Locust* imagines a Depression-era Hollywood producing exchangeable selves, ones that achieve higher exchange value on the marketplace through their ability to perform multiple roles which might make them more desirable, whether to the film industry or to others. In the process, we see an image of destabilized subjectivity, wherein autonomy and rational decision-making are questioned. If selfhood is free-floating and largely a product of unstable social signifiers, then, certainly, we must wonder what prospects are reserved for social cohesion beyond mere facade. Further, the novel also points to the tensions between our moral character and violent nature in Tod Hackett, who fantasizes about empowerment through rape⁸⁵ yet is also one of the few characters in the novel who attempts to communicate with those around him. *Locust* asks if ethics will inevitably end in violence, which persists as a common concern on the part of West and advances the ethical preoccupations of the earlier *Miss Lonelyhearts*,

84 West was not completely apolitical in his personal life, however. He was known to attend socialist rallies from time to time. Unlike Dos Passos and Steinbeck, though, he largely keeps these interests out of his fiction.

85 In "Nationalist Ideologies and New Deal Regionalism in *The Day of the Locust*," Geneva M. Gano cites Tod's rape fantasies and "misogyny as a symptom of antimodernist nostalgia for the good old days that may be detected in much of the period's regionalist writing" (45). Gano continues by claiming that the novel "offers a compelling critique of the regional mode as it appeared in the era of the New Deal, indicating that it was undergirded by a seductive nationalist appeal that championed the simple, insular, and narrow in a world that was complex and fundamentally expansive" (45).

which is where I would like to devote the attention of this chapter. Admittedly, a more expansive inquiry should examine *The Day of the Locust* in far greater detail but, for the purposes of this project, I am reserving my primary concern to *Miss Lonelyhearts*, which stands as West's most compelling case for an alternative morality.

If ever there was a naturalist text tailored for a Levinasian critique, it is *Miss Lonelyhearts*. As with Dos Passos's refusal to abstract the unknown soldier's identity into national or sentimental narratives, his contemporary's eponymous advice columnist experiences frequent bouts of writer's block in attempting to respond to the countless abject masses who read his column. A heretofore pathological hack, Lonelyhearts can either continue writing his column, offering his readers the clichés and trite combinations of a morally defunct mass language (like that found in popular sentimentalism), or he can claim his obligations to his readership by attempting to give them something new and inspiring that actually addresses their needs and individual tragedies. Lonelyhearts desperately wants to help his readers but finds this task more of a challenge than he is capable of meeting, often reverting back to the language of sentimentalism, Shrikean irony, or religious fanaticism, all of which West constructs as consolatory mechanisms meant to insulate and protect the self from the world of engaged relationships – in other words, a world like that found in Levinas. In fact, Lonelyhearts's struggle is avoiding the insularity and comfort offered by coping and engaging the trauma of interaction with others. While we often think of coping as a positive strategy for gaining better psychological health both in the fields of medicine and popular pseudo-science, neither West nor Levinas thinks of moral interaction as a therapeutic process. This would be to ignore the demands that are placed upon us by the other who instills obligation in our subjectivity. We must embrace the trauma of our obligation and, for West's flawed protagonist, this mission begins with

avoiding coping strategies and overcoming the threat of moral egoism. Lonelyhearts never finds the answers when called to address, but it is within those moments when language breaks down and he loses his conventional moral orientation – in those moments of writer's block (both figuratively and literally) – that we find something meaningful and the grounds for a radical re-imagining of ethical responsibility.

When we first encounter Lonelyhearts, he sits at his desk, pondering how to answer his correspondents' various problems just minutes before his deadline. So far, all he has managed is yet another form of mass-marketed feel-good sentimentality. “'Life is worthwhile,'” he writes, “‘for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar’ ” (59). Stumped by this particular batch of letters, Lonelyhearts can initially only resort to what he knows – a conventionalized public rhetoric that has become so entrenched in our moral language, both because of its simplicity and its ability to gratify the ego of the moral agent and perhaps even the addressee as well. In addressing his correspondents, he has offered an abstract solution to real, concrete needs. And it is hard to ignore the sincerity and morbid suffering of his readers in their letters, all of whose identities are mediated through pen-names. “Sick-of-it-all” writes Lonelyhearts about her husband's callous persistence she keep having children although her bodily pain and failing health suggests that another childbirth may kill her. What should she do?:

“I am in such pain I don't know what to do sometimes I think I will kill myself my kidneys hurt so much. My husband thinks no woman can be a good catholic and not have children irregardless of the pain. I was married honorable from our church but I never knew what married life meant as I never was told about man and wife.... I have 7 children in 12 yrs and ever since the last 2 I have

been so sick. I was operated on twice and my husband promised no more children on the doctors advice as he said I might die but when I got back from the hospital he broke his promise and now I am going to have a baby and I dont think I can stand it my kidneys hurt so much. I am so sick and scared because I cant have an abortion on account of being a catholic and my husband so religious. I cry all the time it hurts so much and I don't know what to do.” (59-60)

“Desperate” also consults the advice columnist, a teenage girl with a congenital physical defect and wondering how she might have a normal, fulfilling life like any other girl her age:

“What did I do to deserve such a terrible bad fate? Even if I did do some bad things I didn't do any before I was a year old and I was born this way. I asked Papa and he says he doesnt know, but that maybe I did something in the other world before I was born or that maybe I was being punished for his sins. I dont believe that because he is a very nice man. Ought I commit suicide? (60)

Neither “Sick-of-it-all's” nor “Desperate's” respective morality seems capable of addressing her specific problems and, indeed, faced with such a dilemma, what prospects do they have, to what may they look forward? While many readers have apparently found some sort of consolation in Lonelyhearts's institutionalized forms of emotional support, he no longer finds his approach viable.

About to “bless” his correspondents with another rhetorical sleight-of-hand, Lonelyhearts cannot persist in his trivialization of the letters any longer: “[H]e found it impossible to continue. The letters were no longer funny. He could not go on finding the same joke funny thirty times a day for months on end” (59). His difficulty in meeting this particular deadline is the result of his growing concern for the letters but, most importantly, the people and faces behind them; he now takes these letters seriously and cannot continue using them as the subject of office jokes like his

editor, Shrike, who takes pleasure in effacing the letters and mocking their authors as pathetic examples of “humanity.” Unlike Shrike's enablement through his sense of irony, Lonelyhearts finds dissatisfaction with the letters since they are unable to provide him with any sort of egoistic sustenance or parodic games for fun. “Miss Lonelyhearts no longer finds the letters funny,” states Jeffrey L. Duncan, “because he refuses to consent to this displacement, to bless this annihilation with a laugh. He looks over or through their words to their writers, as he imagines them: profoundly humble, genuinely suffering, terribly real” (120). Shrike's game now spurs Lonelyhearts to move beyond laughter to a sincere recognition of suffering and, since we know he has participated in this game, we also understand how he can now approach the other only with a relentless sense of guilt and persecution as he stares blankly at his unfinished column. For Lonelyhearts, suffering and guilt are two indissociable experiences.

As he pauses within this moment of writer's block, Lonelyhearts experiences his guilt and shame in what Levinas would describe as his “egoist enjoyment,” which only defaces the other that stands before him (through the letters). Lonelyhearts's writer's block disables language and cognition, breaking down his capacity for conceptualizing his audience and moral response in the process. His experience of moral conscience, as Levinas suggests, gives a glimpse into an ethical subjectivity rejecting its insularity, comfort, and irresponsibility. According to Levinas, our shame and guilt experienced as an ethical subjectivity intimates the presence of the other who initiates our obligation and is already present within our selfhood as we come into consciousness. Similarly, for West, the experience of ethical subjectivity is the refusal to resist or efface the other who possesses infinite demands and calls us to address our guilt and sense of responsibility. In this light, then, we see Lonelyhearts's shame as a recognition of not only the suffering of others but his own complicity in that suffering and the demands this places upon him. Writer's block

indicates a guilt that simply cannot be assuaged and an obligation that seems beyond satiation; it also draws attention to language and institutionalized practices of sympathy like what we find in the language of the advice column, practices that are incapable of acknowledging the gross particularity of individual suffering.

I have already discussed in some detail with Dos Passos how rhetorical publicity functioned as a form of traditional community-reparation in modernity. Mass discourses, like nationalism and sentimentalism, for instance, function to cohere communities (from the local to the national) that seemed increasingly slipping into ethnic, racial, or moral differences. Here, more to the point, popular sentimentalism works to fill the vacuum of advice that might be created by the economic, cultural, and familial turmoil of the Depression. The newspaper's rhetoric of sentimentality, its network of commodified and "branded" terms, however, vanquishes the specific needs of its individual readers, consuming their individualized suffering and its complexity into a tidy, concise narrative that seemingly makes good sense. Although, unfortunately, he will persistently grapple with sentimental rhetoric and its ego-gratification (particularly in his Christ-performance), Lonelyhearts confronts the potential for violence against the other in the very nature of "ethical" response. The moral language endowed us simply will not work. As Justus Nieland writes, "[W]hile each letter-writer's pain in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is 'singular' and material in its extreme physicality, these pains are only legible through the specific conventions of the advice column to which the sufferers submit" (68). Nieland continues by claiming that using this language, "subjects access through processes of self-abstraction and disembodiment – the signatories...abandon their marked particularity and effectively name their typicality," oscillating between "affective particularity and embracing putative universals" (68). Mass publicity and sentimentalized language annihilate the nature of real suffering and, as

Nieland would most likely agree, are antithetical to Westian ethical responsibility. Nieland continues, “Given his thorough cynicism about the possibility and desirability of such totalizing feeling, West's gambit is to maximize the particularity of the social as it suggests itself in the” pleas for help jumping off the page of his correspondents' letters, “epistles that bear witness to suffering of such a freakish degree that Lonelyhearts's sentimental project can only fail” (67). Correspondents like “Sick-of-it-all” and “Desperate” frustrate every capacity for what Rita Barnhard characterizes as “a kind of pseudo-spiritual feel-good poetry” (53) to come up with the answers and truly address their needs. Indeed, it is this “feel-good poetry” that Lonelyhearts must continually reject if he is to embrace the fleshy particularity, the down-and-dirty needs of his readers. For this reason, West forces him out of the comfort zone established by the dissociated environs of the newspaper office and into a grotesque world inhabited by others, a world inhabited by people just like Lonelyhearts's readers.

In physically encountering his readership, Lonelyhearts plunges into the midst of Shrike's “pathetic humanity,” and the encounters prove traumatic, painful, and even horrifying. Although the letters place the same ethical demands upon Lonelyhearts, the one-on-one encountering of the public invokes a radical materiality that cannot be so easily disembodied or deferred through any available moral catalog or language (like sentimentalism). Lonelyhearts's experience of the public's overwhelming “fleshiness,” its grotesque singularity, makes him “dangerously” uncomfortable and places him on a track that will reveal the supererogatory character of obligation, constantly upsetting his capacity to behave as ethically responsible.

Everything about Lonelyhearts's material encounters with others is disorienting. When he meets Fay Doyle, for instance, Lonelyhearts is overcome by what Nieland describes as “her corporeal thingliness” (70). Her voluptuous ham hocks, as we are informed, overwhelm his

conceptual understanding, and their sexual encounter is marked by something akin to the moaning of a great, dying beast. While not characterized by nearly as many markedly corporeal terms as Fay, Betty also lays siege to Lonelyhearts's consciousness. In "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Fat Thumb," the increasingly paranoid advice columnist thinks Betty is laughing at him, so he searches her face and actions for the typical signs of cultural familiarity:

On the defense, he examined her laugh for "bitterness," "sour-grapes," "a-broken-heart," "the devil-may-care." But to his confusion, he found nothing at which to laugh back. Her smile had opened naturally, not like an umbrella, and while he watched her laugh folded and became a smile again, a smile that was neither "wry," "ironical" nor "mysterious." (71)

Lonelyhearts can search Betty's face all he desires, but she will yield nothing. Her laugh, smile, and gestures all confound those cultural signifiers that enable the newspaper business. In a sense, Lonelyhearts wants his cake and wants to eat it too. "Lonelyhearts's quest to love the whole world with an all-embracing love," according to Nieland, "is thus comically confounded by both the uncertain ontological status of reified matter itself and by the affective particularities of the social – the eaches and everys of feeling" (67). Therefore, it is "precisely these moments of emotional uncertainty, interruption, or incompleteness," when Miss Lonelyhearts is suspended between emotional particularity and the abstraction of his readers and social interactions, "where West frustrates sympathy's violence towards the affective complexity of the social" (74). Lonelyhearts finds the complexity of the lived social world standing fast against his previous ability to assimilate this world into sympathy, phrases, and clichés. The encounter with flesh reveals a Lonelyhearts deluded by a sense of ego mastery, a Levinasian ego at work, desperately attempting to curtail alterity's control upon its consciousness. Still, even though Lonelyhearts

finds himself much more comfortable with abstractions, it is clear that he wants to break through to the flesh, to the face (what Levinas calls the finite manifestation of the Infinite) that expresses beyond form.

The encounter with the Doyles in “Miss Lonelyhearts and the Cripple” and “Miss Lonelyhearts Pays a Visit” prove to be among the novel's most revealing and violent, deracinating Lonelyhearts from the comfort of the ego and *chez soi* with the apparition of the face that infinitely demands. Power-tripping on his great sense of humility and moral pride at this point (Lonelyhearts has begun adopting a pious Christ-persona), Lonelyhearts sits inside Delehanty's bar alongside his newspaper cohort. Lonelyhearts is in fact so enraptured by his own humility that he creates a barrier between himself and Shrike's ironic diffidence that mocks his advice columnist's new-found piety. Soon, however, a customer unfamiliar to the group approaches them at the bar. He possesses a displeasing countenance, a clubbed foot that drags painfully, and a diminutive stature. The cripple, Peter Doyle, appears as a pathetic form of humanity, and the group is taken aback by this grotesque manifestation of the paper's readership. “He [Doyle] used a cane and dragged one of his feet behind him in a box-shaped shoe with a four-inch sole,” the narrator observes, “As he hobbled along, he made many waste motions, like those of a partially destroyed insect” (109). Attempting to ingratiate himself with the group as a comrade-in-arms, Doyle jokes and participates in their games; Shrike, on the other hand, sees Doyle as cannon fodder. Once it is clear, though, that Doyle can survive Shrike's ironic game and is not necessarily reducible to a pathetic piece of humanity,⁸⁶ Shrike departs, denied his fun. Shrike views Doyle and his wretched appearance as the kind he can easily victimize, while

⁸⁶ Doyle, a meter inspector, jokes that it is the meter men of the world who have overtaken “the iceman in the stories” (109).

Lonelyhearts thinks Doyle deserves his sympathy and pity.

Doyle presents quite a challenge to Lonelyhearts's moral egoism. His initial reaction is to respond to Doyle's appearance with revulsion; however, Lonelyhearts quickly composes himself in order to make an attempt at sympathetic identification with the cripple. The hope is that extending Doyle pity will show solidarity with a social underling as a comrade but also somehow negotiate Doyle's extreme otherness. After Shrike's departure, a clearly agitated and confused Doyle turns to Lonelyhearts:

The cripple was confused and angry. "Your friend is a nut," he said. Miss Lonelyhearts was still smiling, but the character of his smile had changed. It had become full of sympathy and a little sad.

The new smile was for Doyle and he knew it. He smiled back gratefully.

(109-10)

Lonelyhearts pities Doyle and hopes that he can offer him friendship and camaraderie, yet, while his smile may be touching, it is markedly apparent that he has not humbled his ego. As James F. Light claims, "Though Miss Lonelyhearts 'wants to lick lepers'..., he finds it difficult to attain sufficient humility. Rather than uniting himself to the unfortunate, he pities them" (92). West seems to suggest that neither the newspaper's approach nor the language of religious hystericism that Lonelyhearts has recently adopted offers a sympathy that is a non-voluntary giving. Lonelyhearts's expression of sympathy here does not involve him with Doyle; instead, his sympathy appears condescending and distant, allowing Lonelyhearts to feel comradeship with Doyle but not be fully embroiled in his struggles. His sympathy appoints Lonelyhearts to a position of distance that still offers him comfort, neglecting the asymmetry of this ethical relationship.

Shortly, thereafter, Doyle informs Lonelyhearts of his and his wife's intentions to have the columnist over for dinner that evening. "Miss Lonelyhearts was busy with his smile," claims the narrator, "and accepted without thinking of the evening he had spent with Mrs. Doyle. The cripple felt honored and shook hands for a third time. It was evidently his only social gesture" (110). The two relocate to a table in the back room, Doyle feeling blessed and Lonelyhearts tremendously pleased with himself. Something happens, however, to Lonelyhearts's pious power-trip while in the back room of Delehanty's: his egoistic "self-mastery" begins to unravel before the presence of Doyle, once again forcing him into a chaotic and unfamiliar world (quite similar to his attempt at locating Betty's "laugh"). Lonelyhearts sits staring into Doyle's face across the table:

The cripple had a very strange face. His eyes failed to balance; his mouth was not under his nose; his forehead was square and bony; and his round chin was like a forehead in miniature. He looked like one of those composite photographs used by screen magazines in guessing contests. (110)

Doyle appears as an inverted image, disorienting and the stuff of guesses. Lonelyhearts appeals to familiar cultural images to help him interpret Doyle's face (miniature and composite photographs), yet even these don't lend him complete understanding or control over the encounter. Doyle's radical materiality, his grotesque otherness, further unsettles Lonelyhearts:

They sat staring at each other until the strain of wordless communication began to excite them both. Doyle made vague, needless adjustments to his clothing. Miss Lonelyhearts found it very difficult to keep his smile steady.

When the cripple finally labored into speech, Miss Lonelyhearts was unable to understand him. He listened hard for a few minutes and realized that

Doyle was making no attempt to be understood. He was giving birth to groups of words that lived inside of him as things, a jumble of the retorts he had meant to make when insulted and the private curses against fate that experience had taught him to swallow. (110)

Lonelyhearts finds it difficult to maintain his smile while the awkward silence initially seems to demand someone say or do something. When Doyle does, however, language (at least as a communicative process) completely breaks down, only “giving birth to...a jumble of...retorts.” Doyle reveals his ugliness, as well as all the pain and frustration that has perhaps brought him here to Lonelyhearts; he also reveals his nakedness. Both souls sitting at the back room table are miserable, suffering, and vulnerable. Doyle spills forth his guts, compromising and unveiling himself before Lonelyhearts but simultaneously challenging his none-too-loquacious interlocutor, who cannot so easily pause and recollect as he would before his typewriter.

What Lonelyhearts has just experienced is the revelation of the face before which he possesses no precedent; he possesses no knowledge, concept, or pretense of understanding that may assist him in confronting Doyle. As Levinas argues, the face does not only belong to the Infinite in its infinity, in its incomprehensibility, but also expresses the Infinite as a finite manifestation.⁸⁷ The face is beyond flesh and beyond finite comprehension, incapable of subjective delineation; it stands over and eludes, transcending every intellectual or sensual faculty we may possess for knowing the multiplicity behind it. The face belongs to something that recalls an infinite series of historical processes, conscious impressions, and emotional states

87 Although born into a Jewish family, by most accounts, West was non-practicing. Certainly, an atheistic strain seems to run through much of his literature, although the loss of religion seems to weigh heavily upon his respective narrative worlds. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, religion appears incapable of delivering a message that might heal the modern masses. Regardless, when I speak of Infinity here, it is not to place any religious affiliations upon West or to connect him to Levinas's idiosyncratic Judaism; rather, Infinity (or infinity) for West is the multiplicity and incomprehensibility of the other that transcends all of our intellectual and sensual faculties.

of being, an ontological nebulousness in which no single part can be truly understood (let alone this entire series), yet it also reinstates the materiality of the other, the flesh. The face is transcendent as a metaphysical revelation, but it also belongs to the material world of the senses, where it emanates before the self as a demand. Both Levinas and West think of the other's particularity, their singular and irreplaceable existence, as the expression of the face – the uncomfortably “human” that cannot be eluded by simplistic, half-hearted responses. West portrays Doyle's physical and emotional states as repugnant and monstrous, adjectives that attempt to describe the grotesque and overwhelming character of subjectivity and ethics, respectively. Ethics is gut-wrenching, intolerable, and anything but pleasant or fulfilling; to put it another way, if ethics were a mythological character, it would be some sort of bizarre Prometheus and Tantalus lovechild – one man who would be hero and steal fire (and be eviscerated daily), coupled with another who must constantly keep in pursuit of his unattainable goal.

Lonelyhearts's viewing of Doyle is an experience of revulsion but so too is the experience of ethics, which places demands upon us that cannot be avoided, much like Doyle's repulsive mug. As Levinas argues, the face testifies beyond any capacity I possess towards proving otherwise; it signifies above and beyond what is knowable – in other words, what might be reified being. The face roots the I up, out of its interiority, and takes it to a mystifying locus that transcends the desire for comfort and satiation. Ethics is a taking of the bread out of one's own mouth for offering to the other; it is self-deprivation multiplied by infinity. We might justifiably ask at this point how one might ever respond to another in a responsible capacity. Furthermore, if fulfilling ethical duty exceeds our ability, what is the value of ethics? As Lonelyhearts's experience suggests, the answers to these questions are not readily available, if they are at all.

Immediately after Doyle's jumbled utterances, he presents a letter addressed to

Lonelyhearts. Suddenly, much to our relief, we seem to stumble upon familiar territory once again – a letter. Lonelyhearts has read numerous letters and, despite horrors that are sure to abound, perhaps this letter will be like the rest, allowing Lonelyhearts some distance in a moment wherein Doyle is becoming unbearably close. Perhaps the language of Shrike, or art, or religious hysteria, or any other countless modern pseudo-spiritual ideal can work? Something about Doyle's letter, however, is different from the others. Doyle presents his letter in person, and he also signs it "Peter Doyle." He is an inarticulate subject, much like those Norris writes about, but he is willing to face his existential and spiritual needs head-to-head, without guile, anonymity, or irony. Struggling mightily to rearticulate the inarticulate, the letter posits an honest inquiry, not concerned with what actions he or Lonelyhearts might take to mitigate his suffering but, instead, asking what value he can find in his own suffering? What is it all for?

"What I want to no is what in hell is the use day after day with a foot like mine when you have to go around pulling and scrambling for a lousy three squares with a toothache in it that comes from using the foot so much. The doctor told me I ought to rest it for six months but who will pay me when I am resting it. But that aint what I mean either because you might tell me to change my job and where could I get another one I am lucky to have one at all. It aint the job that I am complaining about but what I want to no is what is the whole stinking business for." (111)

Although he may not be the most intelligent individual Lonelyhearts has come across, Doyle makes it a point to avoid those questions which might elicit simplistic responses (get a new job, for instance); instead, his question requires an address that cannot so easily elide the problem at hand – what is the point of his suffering? What is the significance of his life? As John Keyes

argues in “ ‘Inarticulate Expressions of Genuine Suffering?’: A Reply to the Correspondence in *Miss Lonelyhearts*,” Doyle's letter does not seek simple solutions to personal problems or predicaments but, rather, seeks existential value. “Doyle is not searching for solutions – economic, political, domestic,” Keyes writes; “he is asking Miss Lonelyhearts ‘what is the whole stinking business for.’ The focus is existential” (20). In reading Doyle's letter, the crippled meter man becomes human for Lonelyhearts and for West's reader; he is no longer merely the bizarre molecular collection of “waste motions.” As Lonelyhearts sits in Doyle's presence, “puzzling out the crabbed writing” (111), his shield of moral egoism begins to weaken:

Doyle's damp hand accidentally touched his under the table. He jerked away, but then drove his hand back and forced it to clasp the cripple's. After finishing the letter, he did not let it go, but pressed it firmly with all the love he could manage. At first the cripple covered his embarrassment by disguising the meaning of the clasp with a handshake, but he soon gave in to it and they sat silently, hand in hand. (111-12)

Doyle's “damp hand” points to a man in complete distress, the anxiety of his denuding before Lonelyhearts obviously making him excited and frustrated. Lonelyhearts's clasp upon his hand is initially humiliating. Likewise, Lonelyhearts feels the embarrassment of the moment, quickly withdrawing his own hand from the accidental encounter with Doyle's beneath the table. His initial revulsion to Doyle resurfaces, yet he overcomes this repugnance and reaches back out. The experience of suffering in the flesh has humbled Lonelyhearts's ego; he has experienced the face-to-face.

The advice columnist's humility quickly goes, however. Doyle and Lonelyhearts leave the speakeasy together, “both very drunk and very busy; Doyle with the wrongs he had suffered

and Miss Lonelyhearts with the triumphant thing that his humility had become” (113). The irony is thick and heavy: Lonelyhearts takes egotistical pride in avoiding the ego, moral pride in overcoming the immoral. In fact, both characters seem to have already reverted to a previous stage of their relationship, Doyle preoccupied once again with the personal “wrongs he ha[s] suffered” rather than the much larger question of suffering. Regardless, the crisis encountered in the Doyle household will once again shake the two men to the core.

Preparing for dinner at the home, Lonelyhearts sits reticently at the dining table while Faye's flirtatious knees wonder beneath the table, at work upon him. Lonelyhearts, however, is in no mood for romantic dalliance; he sits there desperately trying to recover that unique, ineffable sensation he experienced in locking hands with Doyle at Delehanty's. The fact that he cannot, though, troubles him greatly. Agitated and perplexed, but also realizing the chance for assuaging the pain of others this dinner at the Doyle's has afforded him, Lonelyhearts wonders if he can offer some sort of message. “Miss Lonelyhearts made no attempt to be sociable,” the narrator observes, “He was busy trying to find a message. When he did speak it would have to be in the form of a message” (114). Much like the culture of degradation that exists in the office and at the bar, however, balking his attempts at sincerity, Faye's provocations and Doyle's self-effacement challenge Lonelyhearts's attempt. Lonelyhearts's piety and humility come under attack in the DoYLES' degrading games, and he cannot be taken seriously like he so desires:

The cripple started a sigh that ended in a groan and then, as though
ashamed of himself, said, “Ain't I the pimp, to bring home a guy for my wife?”
He darted a quick look at Miss Lonelyhearts and laughed apologetically.

Mrs. Doyle was furious. She rolled a newspaper into a club and struck her
husband on the mouth with it. He surprised her by playing the fool. He growled

like a dog and caught the paper in his teeth. When she let go of her end, he dropped to his hands and knees and continued the imitation on the floor.

Miss Lonelyhearts tried to get the cripple to stand up and bent to lift him; but, as he did so, Doyle tore open Miss Lonelyhearts' fly, then rolled over on his back, laughing wildly. (114)

Lonelyhearts recovers from Doyle's mockery, and he realizes that now is the time – now is the time for him to do something. Now is the time for him to act: “He had not yet found his message, but he had to say something. 'Please don't fight,' he pleaded. 'He loves you, Mrs. Doyle; that's why he acts like that. Be kind to him'” (114-15). Strained by the import of the moment, Lonelyhearts delivers what seems like a sincere, honest response. He pleads for understanding between the Doyles and for reconciliation in their marriage. In not knowing what to say, he has actually avoided formulating a “message,” which would only pervert the current crisis into the language of the advice column. Rather, his cognitive instability enables an entirely new route here as Lonelyhearts actually attempts to speak to the other, to say instead of participate in the said.

This experience of ethical response proves ephemeral, unfortunately, and Lonelyhearts soon regresses to once again being the “Miss Lonelyhearts of the *The New York Post-Dispatch*.” After responding to the Doyles' game, Lonelyhearts approaches Peter and takes his hand again. The two stand together, “smiling and holding hands” (115). The greeting ends, however, upon Faye's reentrance into the room. She makes light of their embrace and mocks their sexuality, suggesting the two share a mutual desire. Infuriated by the defamation of his character (and perhaps that of Lonelyhearts as well), Doyle positions himself threateningly, as if to strike his wife. His sincere delivery just moments before now held hostage, Lonelyhearts knows that he

must once again act; his previous response was not enough, and the gravity of the moment calls for something more:

Miss Lonelyhearts realized that now was the time to give his message. It was now or never.

“You have a big, strong body, Mrs. Doyle. Holding your husband in your arms, you can warm him and give him life. You can take the chill out of his bones. He drags his days out in areaways and cellars, carrying a heavy load of weariness and pain. You can substitute a dream of yourself for this load. A buoyant dream that will be like a dynamo in him. You can do this by letting him conquer you in your bed. He will repay you by flowering and becoming ardent over you...” (115)

The language of Miss Lonelyhearts is rearing its ugly head in this “message.” Mass publicity and rhetorical strategy is once more inserting itself in Lonelyhearts's speaking, and he realizes he must find another route:

With the first few words Miss Lonelyhearts had known that he would be ridiculous. By avoiding God, he had failed to tap the force in his heart and had merely written a column for his paper.

He tried again by becoming hysterical. “Christ is love,” he screamed at them. It was a stage scream, but he kept on. “Christ is the black fruit that hangs on the crosstree. Man was lost by eating of the forbidden fruit. He shall be saved by eating of the bidden fruit. The black Christ-fruit, the love fruit...”

This time he had failed still more miserably. He had substituted the rhetoric of Shrike for that of Miss Lonelyhearts. He felt like an empty bottle,

shiny and sterile. (115)

Before speaking, he already knows how preposterous his statement will sound, yet it appears as if there are no other resources available. Lonelyhearts has found his “message,” but it belongs only to the empty rhetoric of the advice column and the hystericism of his “Christ-complex. In telling the Doyles to become ardent, to fulfill their marital problems through sexual healing, in the words of Marvin Gaye, he has reiterated Shrikean irony. In telling them about the “bidden fruit” of Christ that heals, he has offered the language of hysterical piety, which detaches itself from the specificity of needs by addressing them all with the same simple solution. West asks his reader if all we have are empty moral responses. Is empty rhetoric avoidable? Can we address the needs of the face without escaping into those of the abstract?⁸⁸ Even when we attempt the sincere, we sink into the pretentious. Nonetheless, West makes us painfully aware that Lonelyhearts has indeed been hurt by his inability to respond to his fellows: “He felt like an empty bottle, shiny and sterile.”

Lonelyhearts's desire to connect personally with his interlocutors becomes further complicated when Doyle leaves the house for a bottle of gin. The ensuing action asks of us once

88 The tension between actually involved dialogue and distanced rhetoric is never lost within the text. Several critics have noted how this tension shapes many of the novel's incidents as well as shapes our understanding of the world that these characters inhabit. Duncan reads a Lonelyhearts that is constantly battered by speeches rather than linguistic sincerity:

Miss Lonelyhearts deals primarily not with people, but with letters, with various orders and disorders of words. In his personal relations he is not engaged in dialogue, the language of spontaneous give and take, nearly so much as he is confronted with speeches, with words as deliberately composed as those of the letters, if not more so. (117)

And Lonelyhearts is not capable of abstaining from this rhetorical practice and posture as well. Indeed, he does not seem capable of ever fully escaping this linguistic malaise as he constantly reverts to speech-making himself.

Furthermore, this expressive predicament permeates the entire Westian world. As Barnard claims, the masses lack any sense of dialogic function and expressive potential. She points towards the zombie-esque crowds of Miss Lonelyhearts's “dreamlike violence” sequence. According to Barnard, “‘[T]he zombie-like crowds...have torn mouths,’ a symbolic detail emphasizing the alienation of the masses even from any expressive capacity” (49).

again if ethics and violence seem inextricably linked. After Doyle's departure, Faye attempts to seduce Lonelyhearts, hoping to rekindle their previous flirtation. Lonelyhearts is taciturn and uninterested; he is far too preoccupied with his moral failure and with the suffering of his cohort. He will have none of Faye's advances. When the situation finally reaches a boiling point, Lonelyhearts strikes out violently. "He struck out blindly and hit her in the face," states the narrator. "She screamed and he hit her again and again. He kept hitting her until she stopped trying to hold him, then he ran out of the house" (116). In attempting to avoid adultery, sin, and betraying Doyle's trust, Lonelyhearts reacts violently. Ethical frustration replaces ethical frustration, and the inevitable outcome of moral concern seems to be violence. Indeed, ethics isn't fair (as Levinas claims), and the ethical relationship proves traumatic and unsettling. Significantly, we witness Lonelyhearts attempting to cope with ethical reality through his violent frustration as well. Finding the nature of moral response too demanding and grotesque, Lonelyhearts flees his inadequacies by resorting to a coping mechanism instead. Finding the suffering of his readership far too overwhelming, he instinctively lunges out in a futile attempt to counteract the pain of his burden. In the failure of Lonelyhearts's interaction with the Doyles, we are made witness to three of the most demanding problems facing each of us in moral response: how to challenge our own moral pride, put ethics into language and action, and understand ethics as asymmetrical persecution rather than bilateral justice. West suggests that we may respond to these ethical imperatives either by coping – that is, ignoring or fleeing the commands of the other – or by embracing the trauma, confronting ethics as a traumatism rather than a symmetrical experience of give-and-take. The novel interrogates both of these assumptions in painstaking detail.

The capacity to cope is precisely what can be fulfilled in *Miss Lonelyhearts* – it is simple

and easy. Ethics, on the other hand, is not. Lonelyhearts finds several outlets for his ethical frustration, not only including the ones we have already observed – the sentimentality of the letters, violence, and moral egoism – but also physical withdrawal from participation in the world of others. As suggested above, Lonelyhearts has a severe “Christ-complex.” He takes the advice of Dostoyevsky's Father Zossima in loving the world and God with an “ ‘all-embracing love’ ” (67); however, he misinterprets Zossima and reduces both the advice and the power of divine love to an egoistic message. “It was excellent advice,” he thinks; “If he followed it, he would be a big success. His column would be syndicated and the whole world would learn to love. The Kingdom of Heaven would arrive. He would sit on the right hand of the Lamb” (67). The ego parries real humility, and it also acts as a protective distance – it is a non-involvement that desires to be blind and deaf rather than actively alert. Lonelyhearts, through his egoist work, separates himself from God and others (from the Infinite and its finite manifestation) in construing himself a divine messenger of the Word. His religious delusions only isolate him from the world and, in fact, seem mostly an escape mechanism within the “sanctity” of his apartment. For Janet St. Clair, however, “Miss Lonelyhearts' withdrawal is paradoxically most nearly complete and most communally and spiritually productive when he takes to his bed to recover from the shocks of the world” (158). According to St. Clair, “[h]ere he is free to imagine order, to dream in the living symbols of mythic imagination, to assume a measure of mastery and control over the chaotic elements that threaten to erode the respect he is determined to accord human experience” (158). St. Clair is certainly correct in suggesting that Lonelyhearts's withdrawal gives him some sense of mastery, but this mastery is illusive rather than communally productive. In his delusion and sickness, Lonelyhearts dreams in cultural symbols that now seem archaic and out-of-touch; they provide no sustenance for the world portrayed by the novel.

Instead, his withdrawal isolates him from the contemporary world he inherits and, for this reason, only diverts his attention from its demands as well as his real ethical project. Further proof that West's stance against Lonelyhearts's retreat and false mastery comes in Lonelyhearts's inability to make objects cohere:

For a little while, he seemed to hold his own but one day he found himself with his back to the wall. On that day all the inanimate things over which he had tried to obtain control took the field against him....

He fled to the street, but there chaos was multiple. Broken groups of people hurried past, forming neither stars nor squares. The lamp-posts were badly spaced and the flagging was of different sizes. Nor could he do anything with the harsh clanging sound of street cars and the raw shouts of huskers....

He stood quietly against a wall, trying not to see or hear. (70)

Neither ritual nor symbol functions as vectors of social continuity; neither seems capable of addressing the real needs of the masses as well. “Stars” and “squares” seem a desire for ritualistic shape in a world that refuses such continuity and coherence. Even the physical world of objects deconstructs both his sense of subjective mastery and the power of symbol, and the demands placed upon him by his fellows are even more harsh, as we have seen.

Lonelyhearts, however, is not the only character in the novel who finds resort to a coping imperative. As we have previously witnessed, Shrike finds therapeutic solace in the comfort of his irony. Beverly Jones describes Shrike's ironic diffidence and cynicism as a systematic order he can obtain only through nihilism:

As the modernist antihero, Shrike has his own system of order to shore against ruin, an uncompromising cynicism made all the more impenetrable by the

fact that there is nothing arcane about its major tenet. There is no meaning in anything, especially suffering, and there is no escape from it in this or any other life. (197)

Unlike Lonelyhearts's seeming antiquated religiosity, Shrike's nihilism appears much more suited to the turbulence and upheavals of an increasingly secular, capitalist society. Shrike's irony ensures his psychological survival and wholeness in an inhospitable world that refuses value; in fact, it too negates the very possibility of value. According to Jones, and other critics who find Shrike the essential hero of the book, Shrike exposes Lonelyhearts and his religious project as both hypocritical and hysterical, resulting only in violence, disorder, and death; Shrike's ironic cynicism, on the other hand, allows him to function in a disenchanted world, making him the agent of an unassailable order (196). Granted, these critics are certainly entitled to read *Miss Lonelyhearts* in such a manner; after all, Shrike's fate seems preferable to that of Lonelyhearts's. But Shrike's approach is one merely of survival, of coping with his given conditions rather than confronting them in hopes of improving the lives of those around him – a trait that West clearly finds reprehensible if still pragmatic. His moral recalcitrance eschews intersubjective involvement, thereby only adding to the suffering of his fellows, and he resides within a “promiscuous freedom” that takes no responsibility for itself or for others. Even Shrike's game with the letters is a conscious, public recognition of private suffering, both his own and that of others. Unlike the inept Lonelyhearts, though, Shrike chooses to make no attempt at involvement and no attempt at connecting the cynicism of his game with the suffering of these inarticulate authors (in fact, it is a similar attitude on the part of those around them that is the source of their pain).

Betty may not participate in Shrike's game, but she does have her own holistic approach

to suffering. She escapes the actual world through an idealistic understanding of nature and rural life, a utopian bucolicism that imagines both the natural world and the countryside as therapeutic agents, capable of restoring physical and mental health. As Conroy claims, “Betty has already made a cliché of nature, one which has been parodied by Shrike. Nature as an imagined scene of plenitude is a figure of cultural fantasy” (15). Betty's imagined world is one of cultural production, the stuff of mass media and its romanticization of nature as an escape from urban decay and communal alienation. Out here, in nature, in smalltown America, all troubles – personal and social – are vanquished. Like Shrike's irony, however, Betty's well-intentioned naivete ignores the real world inhabited by those around her. Furthermore, Betty is convinced that conventional medicine can be used to heal sickness and disease. Attributing his psychosomatic malaise to the ills of urban life as well as his job, Betty recommends a therapeutic regimen of swimming in ponds in rural Connecticut, dining upon warm soup, and taking quality doses of aspirin, to which Lonelyhearts can only respond in panicked disbelief. “'Wife-torturers, rapers of small children, according to you they're all sick,'” he exclaims. “'No morality, only medicine. Well, I'm not sick. I don't need any of your damned aspirin. I've got a Christ complex. Humanity...I'm a humanity lover'” (72). Lonelyhearts's illness cannot be defined through Betty's distorted worldview, nor can her “medications” provide any relief. The root of his suffering is in his involvement with the world inhabited by those whose excruciating pain cannot be mollified by the quack rationalizations made by the self concerning their needs. Inversely, Betty isolates herself from this world and this notion of suffering. “Her world was not the world and could never include the readers of his column,” the narrator ruminates. “Her sureness was based on the power to limit experience arbitrarily. Moreover, his confusion was significant, while her order was not” (71). One can take this as Lonelyhearts making his own

rationalizations (the narrative voice is ambiguous), but what is evident is that West thinks there is something unique about his advice columnist's suffering and moral confusion. Betty's holistic approach obscures the actual demands others place upon us – it cannot account for infinite needs with natural invigoration or aspirin. According to Light, “For Miss Lonelyhearts, Betty's order is a false one. It excludes not only suffering but also the spiritual needs of man. It degrades man to a mere body and assumes that all his ailments can be cured” (88). The chaos of Lonelyhearts's ethical engagement posits the needs of others as inexorably demanding and meaningful, and a cure is precisely what cannot be found. Suffering, by its nature, is limitless; we know this from our observations and our own experiences. Response should therefore be limitless as well.

In West's fiction, the ethical subject finds him or herself stranded between what amounts to the annihilation of the lived world (that of the other) that coping provides and embracing the trauma of moral engagement. Lonelyhearts's most tumultuous crises – those moments he feels personally obliterated and overwhelmed, when he desires retreat – come at the hand of the other who places a stamp upon his being that cannot be dissociated. His trip to El Gaucho, alongside Mary Shrike, serves as one of the novel's most pivotal scenes, dispelling any doubts concerning West's argument. Lonelyhearts, once again riding upon the coattails of his egoistic “victories,” is immediately made uncomfortable by the restaurant's décor and atmosphere, marked by the stuff of celluloid cultural fantasy and personal desire:

But the romantic atmosphere only heightened his feeling of icy fatness. He tried to fight it by telling himself that it was childish. What had happened to his great understanding heart? Guitars, bright shawls, exotic foods, outlandish costumes – all these things were part of the business of dreams. He had learned not to laugh at the advertisements offering to teach writing, cartooning,

engineering, to add inches to the biceps and to develop the bust. He should therefore realize that the people who came to El Gaucho were the same as those who wanted to write and live the life of an artist, wanted to be an engineer and wear leather puttees, wanted to develop a grip that would impress the boss, wanted to cushion Raoul's head on their swollen breasts. They were the same people as those who wrote to Miss Lonelyhearts for help. (83)

The emotional needs of twentieth-century America seem engineered and pathetic, yet Lonelyhearts is still alert to the suffering that can result from personal inadequacies and the inability to “fit in.” This misery, no matter how contemptible, produces yet another wave of sickness and nausea (reminiscent of Vandover) for Lonelyhearts:

“I like this place,” Mary said. “It's a little fakey, I know, but it's gay and I so want to be gay.”

She thanked him by offering herself in a series of formal, impersonal gestures. She was wearing a tight, shiny dress that was like glass-covered steel and there was something cleanly mechanical in her pantomime.

“Why do you want to be gay?”

“Every one wants to be gay – unless they're sick.”

Was he sick? In a great cold wave, the readers of his column crashed over the music. Over the bright shawls and picturesque waiters, over her shining body.

To save himself, he asked to see the medal. Like a little girl helping an old man to cross the street, she leaned over for him to look into the neck of her dress. (83-84)

Mary recognizes the inauthentic nature of the restaurant; still she finds a home (of sorts) here –

the dream industry of a mass-market culture providing her with some solace for the upheavals of contemporary life. Her desire to be “gay” is a longing for happiness and pleasure but, even more so, it is a longing for comfort and escape (a desire manifest in coping). Lonelyhearts may be masochistic; in fact, he seems to possess an attraction for the uncomfortable and the horrifying. His conscience is besieged by the overbearing burden of want and need. He is caught up in the characteristically human, a “lover of humanity,” as he says at another point in the novel. The memory of his correspondents once again makes him uncomfortable, these individuals “crashing” against the garnishments of the restaurant. West emphasizes the inability of the self to stabilize the face-to-face relationship; the self cannot be “gay” in the ethical relationship. Ethical conscience is equivalent to the experience of illness for Lonelyhearts and, realizing evasion may be easiest, he wishes to escape the persecution extended from cultural memory. Lonelyhearts is a man embattled upon multiple fronts – his correspondents “attack” him while his surrounding social environs pick him apart. Mary simply wants happiness from this experience, but Lonelyhearts comes under attack: his correspondents will not allow him to enjoy the restaurant's fabricated joviality, refusing the anonymity offered by the cultural fantasyscape of El Gaucho. In West's world, to be made “gay” in the ethical relationship is the equivalent of mending fences, doctoring the structure of protective barriers while refusing to communicate with neighbors. Lonelyhearts realizes the pressures of avoiding moral gaiety, if you will, and Mary's medallioned bosom provides a temporary exit.

The harsh extent, however, to which the other persecutes Lonelyhearts and resides like a plague upon his conscience presents a radical reevaluation of ethical experience and subjectivity. Later in the novel, in “Miss Lonelyhearts in the Dismal Swamp,” the advice columnist becomes sick once again and is forced back to his bed. Betty visits him, accompanied by her utopian

remedies of soup and chicken. As was true earlier, though, what Lonelyhearts has, Betty possesses no cure for:

He knew that she believed he did not want to get well, yet he followed her instructions because he realized that his present sickness was unimportant. It was merely a trick by his body to relieve one more profound.

Whenever he mentioned the letters or Christ, she changed the subject to tell long stories about life on a farm. She seemed to think that if he never talked about these things, his body would get well, that if his body got well everything would be well. (99)

Significantly, Lonelyhearts's sickness appears as the result of the suffering of others. The manifestation of this obsession into physical form in his present sickness acts only as a symptom of his "disease," of an overbearing obligation. His physical ailments merely mask the more significant moral ailments that burden him. Greenberg suggests that this suffering is "related to, amplified by, and perhaps even produced from the suffering of those around" Lonelyhearts (594). Sickness is not only a revealing motif in the novel, emphasizing the harsh reality of ethical interaction for West, but is also an uncompromising metaphor for subjectivity. Like in sickness, where the agent of illness, be it viral or bacterial, exists outside the intended host yet penetrates the body's boundaries to "traumatize" within, the other produces an unparalleled sense of suffering and guilt in Lonelyhearts. He cannot escape this burden, this illness, and remains completely powerless to disrupt the demands of ethical trauma.

The role of the other in producing the self's suffering and responsibility strikes an obvious harmony with Levinas's construct of non-intentional ethics. Moral duty cannot be chosen; rather, ethics chooses us and permeates our entire being. The self may be "free" to do whatever seems

pleasing or desirable in both West and Levinas, but this is a negligent illusion. Regarding Levinasian ethical responsibility and sincerity, Spargo claims that the subject's intentions cannot be used as measurement; instead, these intentions are anterior to our own choosing:

Ethical sincerity does not designate the choice to abide by an obligation or to represent oneself straightforwardly or even to do what is best by the other...

Denoted only as an inability to get out of the way of the other, Levinasian sincerity entails an absence of choice, the impossibility of beginning from any point other than the self as a site of vulnerability already signified as being-for-the-other. As soon as one joins sincerity to intention..., one introduces a symbolism that deflects the ethical meaning of the other. (97-98)

According to Levinas, the subject does not approach the other in a capacity of his own choosing. Questions regarding intention or the will are irrelevant from this perspective. One no more chooses his obligation than he does his eye color. For Levinas, responsibility is “a response answering to a non-thematizable provocation and thus a non-vocation, a trauma” (*OB* 12). “The-one-for-the-other” directionality of responsibility, Levinas claims, is not commitment, which presupposes a consciousness that freely consents to come to the other (136-37). Responsibility then is a negation of voluntary moral subjectivity – it is persecution and oppression, the inability to decide for oneself what constitutes justice before the presence of the other. In fact, only through this negation may justice properly be enabled. “To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself,” Levinas argues in a Heideggerian flourish, “is to take the bread out of one's own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting” (*OB* 56).

Similarly, in West, Lonelyhearts simply cannot “get out of the way of the other,” to use

Spargo's phrase. "Being-for-the-other" is a form of being that recognizes the other in her supremacy, as the very constitution of my being; therefore, there is no way around her – her needs cannot be circumvented no matter my rationalizations. By being exposed to the other in her suffering, I am already obligated regardless of whether or not I had a direct hand in this suffering (e.g., I willfully and maliciously stole someone's money). This manner of being, this exposure, as previously discussed, posits subjectivity as subjugating by its nature. Coming into moral awareness, to be sure, is an invitation to even further suffering, perhaps explaining Lonelyhearts's affinity for pain. "Turning back to his desk," the narrator observes, "he picked up a bulky letter in a dirty envelope. He read it for the same reason that an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain" (104). If Lonelyhearts is at least willing to embrace this trauma, and it is obviously an inept attempt, it is a significant ineptitude nonetheless, for West points to our absolute inability to get ethics right (even if we want).

In "Miss Lonelyhearts and the Party Dress," Lonelyhearts's ego assumes nearly epic proportions, his identification with "the rock" inspiring almost impregnable oblivion. As "the rock," he thinks he has insulated himself from the guilt of ethical demands. "He did not feel guilty," West writes; "He did not feel. The rock was a solidification of his feeling, his conscience, his sense of reality, his self-knowledge" (123-24). Whereas the disorderly world of others and objects previously resisted his proclivity for its annihilation through abstraction, it now seems to lend itself freely to this impulse. Lonelyhearts abstracts himself and Betty in the midst of what should be a serious confrontation regarding her pregnancy and their future:

When she was quiet, he asked her to marry him.

"No," she said. "I'm going to have an abortion."

"Please marry me." He pleaded just as he had pleaded with her to have a

soda.

He begged the party dress to marry him, saying all the things it expected to hear, all the things that went with strawberry sodas and farms in Connecticut. He was just what the party dress wanted him to be: simple and sweet, whimsical and poetic, a trifle collegiate yet very masculine. (123)

Lonelyhearts reduces himself to “the rock,” a de-personalized robot who performs the role he thinks Betty, “the party dress,” expects out of him. In doing so, he attempts a deconstruction of her being, a reduction of the other and communication to the level of concept and essence. Here, we are not only witnessing the rejuvenation of the “Miss Lonelyhearts” who makes fodder out of his correspondents like Shrike but are peering in on conventional morality at work. In his comfort and command of the confrontation, Lonelyhearts establishes his freedom by usurping the supremacy of the other. Just as the forms of conventional morality we have examined thus far (sentimentalism, utilitarianism, etc.) institute the self as the center of moral arbitration (although the motivation may be different), Lonelyhearts decides which of Betty's needs must be addressed.

When we arrive at the final chapter, “Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience,” Lonelyhearts becomes so insulated in his egoist enjoyment that he identifies with God – he speaks for God in a delusion that might bring stable value to his world. “He immediately began to plan a new life and his future conduct as Miss Lonelyhearts,” the narrator claims. “He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought” (123). When Lonelyhearts finally has to account for his violent reaction to Faye's sexual advances, he mistakenly believes Doyle has come to him as a result of God's grace; Lonelyhearts thinks he now has the opportunity to perform a great miracle. Unfortunately for the erratic Miss Lonelyhearts, he misinterprets Doyle's shout and conflates it with the voices of all

his correspondents: “He did not understand the cripple's shout and heard it as a cry for help from Desperate, Harold S., Catholic-mother, Broken-hearted, Broad-shoulders, Sick-of-it-all, Disillusioned-with-tubercular-husband. He was running to succor them with love” (126). Lonelyhearts cannot break with his egoist participation and finds it entirely too difficult to escape the abstracting impulse of interpersonal interaction. The absolute particularity necessitated by the ethical relationship proves an impossible demand. For Lonelyhearts, ethics is destructive, even deadly. Strikingly, West suggests that even the death Lonelyhearts presumably suffers might just be preferable to the duty that ethics places upon us. No doubt this is a morbid assumption, but it is one that finds a natural analogue in the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

As I have suggested above, Lonelyhearts proves an unmistakable moral failure; however, this failure is significant nonetheless. It is of a far different order than the moral failure of the world around him, with its culture of degradation and inability to take human needs seriously. Lonelyhearts's failure is not necessarily one of refusing sincerity; it is a failure precisely because it cannot be otherwise. It is an indictment – Lonelyhearts, just like each of us, possesses no capacity whatsoever to satiate the oppressive needs belonging to another human being. Our obligation is therefore infinite and insatiable. Lonelyhearts's chaotic ordeals place him within a drama of traumatism that transcends ordinary notions of obligation, ones, for instance, that find X desirable to the other and Y (or Z, for that matter) the route necessary for the subject to achieve X. And while he eventually flees back to the temporary solace of abstraction from which he came, his path ironically illuminates the way for us. For West and Levinas, it is the moments when obligation most burdens and overwhelms us, when we are embroiled by the trauma of exposure and unmasked by the other, that the way becomes evident.

Such moments belong to Lonelyhearts's writer's block – the refusal to annihilate the other, coupled with a taking of responsibility for our duty and moral ineffectiveness. In its silence, writer's block identifies the problem of address. We are called upon by the other, and we have to give an account. How can we, though? How can we address the other in a capacity that is giving, that belongs to justice? Writer's block speaks, even through its silence. Those times when Lonelyhearts doesn't know how to proceed or respond to the suffering of others – when he is most traumatized and overwhelmed – instantiates the ethical moment. As ephemeral as this moment may be, within its enlightenment, Lonelyhearts experiences the trauma of ethical asymmetry: the other occupies a position in the ethical relationship that transcends himself and anything he may offer. What Levinas calls metaphysical desire seems to be at work in these incidents of writer's block. Cognitive gaps in our thinking and conceptualization of the world breakdown the interiority of the self, revealing the freedom of the I as belonging to the other (in other words, illusory). Writer's block, according to West, debars the annihilation of the other in mass discourse and conventional forms of morality alike. Levinas argues that this giving (in our ability to see rhetorical address for what it really is) brings us to justice, which can only belong to the other's mastery:

Justice consists in recognizing in the Other my master.... Justice is the recognition of his privilege qua Other and his mastery, is access to the Other outside of rhetoric, which is ruse, emprise, and exploitation. And in this sense justice coincides with the overcoming of rhetoric. (*TI* 72)

Justice, or writer's block in this case, refuses the exploitation of rhetorical formulae. Although his address is silent, he nonetheless comes forth as a signifying responsibility. Writer's block works as saying even without saying a word – it is the vulnerability of exposure rather than a call

to retreat. According to Levinas, this exposure “is thus exposing of the exposure, saying, saying that does not say a word, that signifies, that, as responsibility, is signification itself, the-one-for-the-other” (*OB* 151). In Levinas and West, ethics is a dangerous game indeed and helps us account, in part, for the inarticulacy of naturalist characters, who, overwhelmed and obviously burdened by others, simply can't find a suitable means of address.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Naturalism suggests that we shouldn't care. When reading these naturalist texts, we become witnesses to suffering and violence that is distanced from our own lives, either by time, place, experience, or social status. Its sometimes nearly unconscionable scenes of degradation, which challenge our humanity, threaten to make our responsibility tenuous at best. At worst, naturalism's determinism bars our responsibility; it says that we should not care if we are in fact not capable of action. What's the point, one might reasonably ask. If there is suffering that we are not responsible for, then naturalism appears to depict it. This suffering appears inevitable, perhaps even necessary in such a world, the end-game of forces that are far beyond anyone's control. We experience a critical detachment of sorts that seems to absolve us of any responsibility. But it is in naturalism's scenes of "abject irresponsibility" that we find ourselves somehow responsible nonetheless. We cannot divorce ourselves from the suffering of others; we cannot buttress a detachment, for we find ourselves caring and involved. Detachment fails in the texts I've examined – the more we read and become involved in characters' lives, the more we realize that we do indeed care despite ourselves and despite conventional ethical viewpoints. We cannot explain our attachment or our obligation, but we sense these are present in our reading and are not dependent on reason, sympathy, or conventional standards of obligation. Most importantly, our inability to "garnish," or wiggle around, our unconditional responsibility when it confronts us with brute force in our readings suggests that we are already the subject of some irrevocable, overwhelming force that positions us as "human" and as uncompromisingly obligated.

No question, however, that this argument requires us to acknowledge and confront its nuisances. For instance, the position of the naturalists, from an opposing perspective at least,

appears reductive. Why should we pretend we are responsible if incapable of action?

Additionally, if neither the naturalists nor Levinas can provide us with a codified approach, then one might rightfully ask what motivation we may have to act. If we cannot rationally or morally determine good or bad, right or wrong action, then why should we act at all? What, therefore, is the basis of moral action and responsibility, and how may we begin to know how to address the other's needs? One might say that an approach like that of the naturalists and Levinas not only risks masochism but also dangerously flirts with something that resembles ethical resignation. If we are deterministic objects at the whim of the cosmos, then what purpose can our actions serve? And how would we even begin to describe these actions as “moral” or “immoral,” for that matter? If freedom or autonomy are false, then “moral action” may very well be a delicate dressing that hides the otherwise unsavory taste of a bland salad. As with Levinas, naturalism's scenes of trauma and degradation seem to hazard an ethical masochism that makes any ethical action seem useless and undesirable. Miss Lonelyhearts's willingness to endure the other's suffering, for example, risks a masochistic pleasure that may not in fact be responsibility but is, instead, an indulgence in self: “He read it [the letter] for the same reason that an animal tears at a wounded foot: to hurt the pain.” Similarly, one might interpret Vandover's constant guilt (strongly associated with grotesque physical sickness) as some sort of bizarre ethical “erotics.” Both naturalism and Levinas understandably present numerous questions.

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler identifies what may be the masochistic currency of Levinas's thought. Calling attention to Derrida's claim that attempting to “respond to every Other can only result in a situation of radical irresponsibility,” she continues by asking,

[I]s it really possible to sidestep self-preservation in the way that Levinas implies?

Spinoza writes in *The Ethics* that the desire to live the right life requires the desire to live, to persist in one's own being, suggesting that ethics must always marshal some life drives, even if, as a super-egoic state, ethics threatens to become a pure culture of the death drive. It is possible, even easy, to read Levinas as an elevated masochist. (140)

Much like Nietzsche, Butler asks, essentially, does sacrifice and altruism even make sense apart from a drive towards egoistic pleasure? In other words, can we think about a subject capable of completely dismissing (or “sidestepping,” as Butler puts it) the egoistic drive? If Levinas is indeed some sort of moral masochist, then his ethics – contrary to his claims – do not avoid egoistic pleasure. Continuing this critique of Levinas, Critchley speculates about the implications of such an ethical project for the subject:

Might one not wonder whether Levinas's ethics condemn us to a lifetime of trauma and lacerating guilt that cannot – and, moreover, should not – be worked through? Doesn't Levinas leave us in a situation of sheer ethical overload where I must be responsible even for my persecutor, and where the more that I am just the more I am guilty? If so, then such a position risks amounting to nothing less than a rather long philosophical suicide note or at the very least an invitation to some fairly brutal moral masochism. (67-68)

As Critchley aptly identifies, in Levinas, once we have done the “right” thing (justice), we already owe exponentially more – that is, we are more guilty the more just we are. We can never do the “right” thing *ipso facto*. The “right” thing does not manifest itself in Levinas's ethics and, therefore, we can never bring ethics to closure.

A reasonable person might rightfully ask, then, if we are not duped by morality. Does it

even make sense to talk about ethics? During another of her “therapy” sessions with Miss Lonelyhearts, Betty suggests that it is his job which is affecting his physical health and brusque behavior (ironically, she is right). Leave the job, according to Betty, and Miss Lonelyhearts's troubles will leave him. However, as Miss Lonelyhearts claims, the job can never leave him:

“You don't understand, Betty, I can't quit. And even if I were to quit, it wouldn't make any difference. I wouldn't be able to forget the letters, no matter what I did.”

“Maybe I don't understand,” she said, “but I think you're making a fool of yourself.”

“Perhaps I can make you understand. Let's start from the beginning. A man is hired to give advice to the readers of a newspaper. The job is a circulation stunt and the whole staff considers it a joke. He welcomes the job, for it might lead to a gossip column, and anyway he's tired of being a leg man. He too considers the job a joke, but after several months at it, the joke begins to escape him. He sees that the majority of the letters are profoundly humble pleas for moral and spiritual advice, that they are inarticulate expressions of genuine suffering. He also discovers that his correspondents take him seriously. For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lives. This examination shows him that *he is the victim of the joke and not its perpetrator.*” (94, emphasis mine)

Miss Lonelyhearts is not quite the delusional dummy readers often make him out to be. He is aware of the extent to which his ethical project may just be a meaningless game in which he is participating.

Neither naturalism nor Levinas, however, makes sense if these don't help identify and

accentuate our profound moral confusion. Ethics isn't worth it if it doesn't make moral masochists out of us all. In the experience of the other in his or her transcendence, we experience the abject confusion that is ethical action, and this confusion takes us beyond the brink of what is conventionally accepted as rational behavior. According to Steven Hendley in *From Communicative Action to the Face of the Other: Levinas and Habermas on Language, Obligation, and Community*, “[I]t is the other person's unconditional importance *to us* that gives us a *reason* to be moral, a reason to suppose we are not duped by morality when we give the other...consideration not strictly entailed by the intelligent pursuit of our self-interest.” He continues by stating,

Insofar as we are communicatively bound to one another as interlocutors, we find ourselves called to an unconditional sense of our importance to each other, a sense of moral solidarity with each other that is knit into the very fabric of human intercourse with one another.... The “height” or moral authority of the other person only “comes to pass” in my relationship to the other, as I attempt to articulate the sense of unconditional importance of the other to which I find myself called in my communicative proximity to the other. (166-67)

We might say, simply put, that ethics is in the experience of the other before whom we attempt to reveal ourselves. We need not, then, speculate what the significance is of either moral action or of the other in-themselves, respectively – at this point, we are already separated from ethical experience, we are “duped by morality.” We are in the notorious and dangerous triad. Instead, we locate ethical value within the experience of moral action, wherein talking about ethics or asking why we should care simply doesn't make any sense whatsoever. And this, as I suggest, is just one contribution that an argument like that of Westian writer's block or that of Levinasian

traumatism or that of Vandover's inability to escape the suffering of the Jew offers to the reevaluation of ethical philosophy in modernity. A dissenter might object that Levinas and naturalism lead us to some sort of bizarre moral masochism, some unnecessary expenditure of the self, but Levinas and naturalism would say, "Precisely. So stop whining."

Naturalism does not make sense without this Levinasian model of primitive obligation. This kind of responsibility is unconditional and not of our choosing; it cannot be calculated nor can it be rationalized. If we indeed possessed these abilities, then naturalism would rightly be criticized as a caricature of morality. But this model denies these capacities. According to naturalism, we cannot understand our obligation unless we realize that it (as well as the other) exceeds the formulations found in ethical systems and conventional morality. From this perspective, it doesn't make sense either to ask how naturalism's determinism may allow for action. It is precisely the inability to choose that acts as a guarantor of our obligation. While naturalism's scenes of degradation threaten to obscure our humanity, we find what is most "humane," what is most good about ourselves, preserved in an uncompromising argument: what is most good about ourselves is our unconditional responsibility – we can't help but be obligated despite ourselves or, in fact, because of ourselves. Any notion that we actually have a choice – that is, any notion that we can sit back and pick and choose what we deem ourselves responsible for or how we should act – belies our humanity, that which makes us fundamentally human and fundamentally good.

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