

# **A Thing Made of Words: The Reflexive Realism of Richard Yates**

**By Leif Bull**

**Student no. 33073581**

**Goldsmiths College**

**PhD English**

## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Leif Bull

## **Abstract**

This thesis is a study of the work of American novelist and short story writer Richard Yates. Taking as its starting point the consensus view of Richard Yates as a realist operating during a period of strong anti-realist currents in American literature, the thesis seeks to complicate this notion, arguing instead for a reading of Richard Yates' work as a mode of realism that could only have emerged after modernism, a realism that focussed on a number of concerns and problems regarding representation and interpretation shared with literary postmodernism, and which anticipates recent and current trends within American literary fiction. Its main areas of investigation are Yates' take on everyday language as a site of entropy; his use of intertextuality, in particular in relation to the short story; tensions between realism's claim to cognitive/visual authority and epistemological uncertainty; concerns and anxieties around masculinity within American realism; his use of autobiographical material in relation to the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott; the impact of media saturation on subjectivity, with particular focus on cliché.

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## ***Introduction***

In an introductory essay, Richard Ford writes of the standing Richard Yates' debut novel enjoys among fellow writers:

We marvel at its consummate writerliness, its almost simple durability as a purely made thing of words that defeats all attempts at classification. Realism, naturalism, social satire – the standard critical bracketry – all go begging before this splendid book. *Revolutionary Road* is simply *Revolutionary Road*, and to invoke it enacts a sort of cultural-literary secret handshake among its devotees.<sup>1</sup>

And so, through a simple act of misquoting, this thesis gains its title. The motives behind choosing this title are legion: by referring to his work as ‘a thing made of words’ I frame it within discourses of constructedness and self-conscious artifice; by evoking Ford, I also seek to elaborate on his argument that the term ‘realism’ is in need of problematisation when describing the formal characteristics of Yates’ novels and short stories; and finally, I have misquoted Ford as a nod towards the many misunderstandings, misreadings and misappropriations that govern the lives of Yates’ characters.

The practically unanimous categorization of Richard Yates as a realist – and a realist operating at a time in American literature widely defined by its scepticism towards the tools of realist writing, to boot – has come with a simultaneous lack of interest in the formal aspects of his work;<sup>2</sup> his was a body of work supposedly untouched by ‘the stylistic and intellectual fire baptism of the 1960s’; the work of a writer ‘living in the stylistic past’.<sup>3</sup> Having established his position as a realist, for most critics, no further explanation has proven necessary. Yet this categorisation remains unsatisfying. Is it not possible that a realist emerging in the post-war period, having read and admired Joyce, Proust, and Nabokov, would somehow re-imagine

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1 ‘Introduction’, in *Revolutionary Road* (New York: Little, Brown, 1961; repr. London: Methuen, 2001), pp. xiii-xxiv (pp. xiii-xiv)

2 One notable exception is found in the work of Jerome Klinkowitz, whose *The New American Novel of Manners: The Fiction of Richard Yates, Dan Wakefield, and Thomas McGuane* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986) reads the work of Yates through the prism of semiotics.

3 David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf, *Richard Yates* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), pp. 5-6

and reform realism?<sup>4</sup> That the vicissitudes and anxieties of the period would manifest themselves formally, as well as in the stories being told? From five different angles, this thesis will investigate the ways Richard Yates' work poses a challenge to orthodox understandings of the aims and strategies of literary realism in the second half of the twentieth century. Whether the focus is uses of language, generic convention, masculinity, or autobiography, the core of the argument remains concerned with the issue of realism. The purpose is not to deny Yates' position as a realist. Rather, I wish to suggest that the label, in Yates' case at least (and in the case of his influences), refers not to a fixed, stable state, but to a dynamic, ongoing process of reflexive negotiation. Rather than view Yates' formal mode of writing as essentially of the past, I wish to suggest it emerged as a consequence of modernism which parallels that offered by postmodernism; that the two constitute a forked path onward. While Yates' aesthetic debt to a realist like Flaubert is beyond question, his is a voice that could only have reached its distinct pitch in the second half of the twentieth century.

### ***Realism: Definitions, accusations, and defenses during postmodernity***

‘Poor old realism.’<sup>5</sup>

The decades that saw Richard Yates write and publish his novels and short stories – the 1950s to the 1980s – were not a great time for realism in America, or in the Western world more generally. During this historical moment we may refer to as postmodernity, and within that set of aesthetic conventions and concerns we may refer to as postmodernism, realism was reduced to a ‘whipping boy’ by scholars and critics.<sup>6</sup> During this time, the structuralist appropriation of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of language as a system of differences between arbitrary signs with no natural link to reality,<sup>7</sup> gained widespread currency within literary study and practice. It is a

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4 Yates referred to these writers, and many others, in DeWitt Henry and Geoffrey Clark, ‘An Interview with Richard Yates’, *Ploughshares* 3.1 (1972) <http://www.pshares.org/issues/article.cfm?prmArticleID=128> [accessed 4 October 2009].

5 Rachel Bowlby, ‘Foreword’, in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. xi-xviii (p. xi)

6 Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 6.

7 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. by Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p. 69

theory highlighting the way language is set apart from, even hinders access to, reality, and as such, any literary movement trumpeting its commitment to reality, and to everyday language as a suitable tool with which to engage with reality, would appear to set itself up for attack. The (occasionally contradictory) accusations have come thick and fast – indeed, during this time and within this school of thought, ‘an impatient or apathetic attitude to realism [has come to] seem acceptable’;<sup>8</sup> it is ‘a predominantly conservative form’;<sup>9</sup> regardless of subject matter, it ultimately provides a ‘reassuring’ reading experience due to its reliance on recognisable patterns of causality, relationships and values; it ‘offers itself as transparent’,<sup>10</sup> all the while performing the work of ideology in representing a world of centred subjects from which meaning, knowledge and action all originate, and in offering the reader a privileged vantage point from which he or she may interpret and make sense of the realist text, and thus conceptualise him- or herself as a similarly centred subject. The accusations tend to veer toward such claims of deviousness: realism is ‘an act of bad faith’,<sup>11</sup> disingenuously naturalising an ideologically constructed reality while disavowing its own inherent artifice, its imprisonment in the closed system of language. As Colin MacCabe argues in a highly influential essay: ‘[In] the claim that the narrative prose has direct access to a final reality we can find the claim of the classic realist novel to present us with the truths of human nature’.<sup>12</sup> Elaborating on his argument, MacCabe presents the realist text as one in which ‘[the] real is not articulated – it is’.<sup>13</sup> As such, realism advocates reality as given, harmonious and static, rather than contradictory and constructed. Some go even further, caricaturing realism as ‘the mind-set that allows us to think that our pictures of the world are not pictures but the world itself’,<sup>14</sup> an extremely bold accusation that carries a schizoid charge of deceitfulness: realism as a delusional, yet powerfully mendacious stance,

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8 Matthew Beaumont, ‘Introduction: Reclaiming Realism’, in Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism*, pp. 1-12 (p. 2). Further references to this chapter will be made after quotations in the text.

9 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 51

10 Ibid.

11 Boyd, Michael, *The Reflexive Novel: Fiction as Critique* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), p. 18

12 ‘Realism and the cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses’, in Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings, and Mark Jancovich (eds.), *The Film Studies Reader* (Arnold: London, 2000), pp. 201-206 (p. 202). Further references to this essay will be made after quotations in the text.

13 Ibid., p. 203

14 Joseph Natoli, *A Primer to Postmodernity* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), p. 21

motivated by devilish ideological cunning. Like Belsey, Natoli views realism as an inherently reassuring, even acquiescent mode. Like Belsey, Natoli includes examples of realism that suggest a staggeringly broad category in need of delimiting. For Belsey, elves and talking animals do not rule out a categorisation of realism, if the aforementioned patterning of their behaviours, relationships and moral codes are familiar to us. For Natoli, adopting a stance of classic realism leads to '[exuding] confidence in your President, or your boss, or your professor, or your lawyer, or in Walt Disney, or in Coke, or in E. F. Hutton, Stockbrokers, or Ross Perot'.<sup>15</sup> As these examples make clear, with their allusions to Tolkien and Coke, the term is potentially endless in scope, and must be subjected to some process of delimiting for the purposes of this thesis. Is that which is true of a populist politician equally true of Flaubert? Theorising around the caricatured realist position offered above has tended to ignore the specificity of the literary movement with which it has become conflated, and the insistent literariness of its central works. By focussing on realism as a literary tradition which reached a point of crystallisation in the nineteenth century, we may remain alert to the ideological work performed in and by language, to the gap between representation and reality, while simultaneously acknowledging a greater level of linguistic and epistemological sophistication in the works of novelists like Flaubert and Henry James (and Richard Yates) than in an advert for make-up, or in a tabloid newspaper column promising to 'tell it like it is'. Recent years have seen the publication of a number of scholarly works that have sought to present a more nuanced picture of realist fiction, emphasising its ongoing concern with literary play as well as with the social world, its submerged, yet undeniable reflexivity.<sup>16</sup> That the publication of these works coincides roughly with the popular rediscovery of Richard Yates (i.e. from the late 1990s onwards) may tell us something about contemporary American fiction which will be subject to lengthy discussion in chapter five: that the reflexivity of realist fiction has been amplified to resemble more closely that of literary postmodernism; or rather, that a synthesis of the two modes has now gained widespread currency, and that this synthesis should not be seen as a conservative

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15 Ibid., p. 37

16 Such as *Realist Vision and Adventures in Realism*, cited above. In addition, this thesis is indebted to Lilian Furst's *All Is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), which will be cited extensively below.

gesture (i.e. a return to old-fashioned aesthetic values), but rather as part of realism's ongoing evolution.

As the term implies, realism is strongly committed to an engagement with reality, driven by its 'desire to be maximally reproductive of that world it is modelling for play purposes'.<sup>17</sup> Yet this commitment alone will not suffice as a definition; the drive toward the highest possible degree of verisimilitude has been a governing principle of literary practice since Homer,<sup>18</sup> and has fuelled an eclectic range of more recent artistic movements,<sup>19</sup> including that of modernism, reacting against realism as unable to capture reality (the implication being, of course, that an engagement with reality is possible through the medium of literature). The answer to the question of which aspects of the world should be prioritised, which details are telling, which details are insignificant, varies from mode to mode, each claiming privileged access to reality.<sup>20</sup> Yet however strong the representational impulse, language itself is not mimetic, can never be figurative in the manner of a painting,<sup>21</sup> and so literature will always perform an abstraction, the question of whether abstraction A is more realistic than abstraction B one that will remain open to dispute. Whether realism is more or less true to life than other modes is not of any concern to this thesis; what matters are its constantly evolving aesthetic strategies, the conversation it carries on with itself while carrying out its creative work, its willingness to engage. As Paul de Man argues, there is instability, a paradox, inherent to all literary writing, determined by language itself, which renders any such argument, any such linear narrative of increased literary progress problematic, as the acute awareness of this instability goes back to ancient times:

The ambivalence of writing is such that it can be considered both an act and an interpretative process that follows after an act with which it cannot coincide. As such, it both affirms and denies its own nature or specificity. Unlike the historian, the writer remains so closely involved with action that he can never free himself of the temptation to destroy whatever stands between him and his deed, especially the temporal distance that makes him dependent on an earlier past. The appeal of modernity haunts all literature. It is revealed in numberless images and emblems that appear at all periods – in the obsession with a *tabula rasa*, with new beginnings – that finds

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17 *Realist Vision*, p. 2

18 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Berne: A. Francke, 1946; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 5

19 Roman Jakobson, 'On Realism in Art', in Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (eds.) *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987) , pp.19-27 (p. 20)

20 Ibid., p. 22

21 Ibid., p. 21

recurrent expression in all forms of writing. No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of literature to fulfil itself in a single moment.<sup>22</sup>

That literature is doomed to fail in its attempt to completely separate itself from the past cannot be helped, nor will this failure result in an end to trying, as said doomed attempt is precisely that which makes literary language literary, as opposed to historical (or descriptive, or scientific): it is a form of writing that ‘both betrays and obeys its own mode of being’.<sup>23</sup> This permanent instability makes any hierarchical model of literary expression difficult to maintain, and there is an irony at work in the academic dismissal of realism during postmodernity that Bowlby expresses succinctly:

[The] valorization of non-realist ‘-isms’ – modernism above all, since that is the one whose historical inception follows chronologically right after the period of realism – depends on just the kind of straightforward and ideologically laden linear narrative that is ostensibly relegated to realist history.<sup>24</sup>

Lilian Furst has composed a comprehensive theory of realist fiction, one which crucially embraces duality and paradox, rather than insisting on a restrictive model of either realism as privileged mode of representation of reality or realism as disingenuous linguistic construct. Like Brooks’ work on realism, Furst’s emphasises the ‘ludic motive’<sup>25</sup> that lies at its core: the construction of artificial worlds undertaken with a straight face, so to speak, its stubborn claims to authenticity made within the realm of artifice.<sup>26</sup> Furst rejects the notion of realism as either naïve or fraudulent, but rather seeks to embrace its invitation to pretend while stressing its connection with reality:

That the realist novel masquerades as truth does not warrant the conclusion that it is a lie, for a lie is a deliberate untruth, whereas the realist novel is a pretense of truth. There is a major difference between these two propositions. Nor should realism be impugned as a form of bad faith on the grounds that it pretends to be what it is not. The realists write in good faith because they sincerely believe in their own creed *and wrestle with its problems*. It is not bad faith or lying that makes realism so difficult to grapple with, but precisely its slippery, ill-definable, uncomfortable middle situation: not wholly fact, or lie, or truth, or even fiction, and drawing on a spectrum of modes including reference, the simulation of reference, and invention, yet not explicable in terms of any one of them exclusively (*ibid.*, p. 25, italics added).<sup>27</sup>

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22 Paul de Man, ‘Literary History and Literary Modernity’, in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 142-165 (p. 152).

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164

24 Bowlby, ‘Introduction’, p. xii

25 *All Is True*, p. 29

26 *Ibid.*, p. 23

27 *Ibid.*, p. 25, italics added.

The realism with which this thesis concerns itself is a literary tradition which emerged in the nineteenth century, obviously influenced by older texts. The term became the subject of much debate shortly after it was first applied to literature (as the French *réalisme*) in 1826,<sup>28</sup> and has remained in a contentious position ever since, feeding into ancient arguments surrounding representation and reality in art and literature.<sup>29</sup> Yet it has ultimately come to denote a mode of writing (and art) performing a positive revaluation of the everyday, of ‘ordinary experience and its ordinary settings and things’.<sup>30</sup> Said revaluation is closely linked to the rise to power and influence of the middle classes during modernity – what Frederic Jameson refers to as the ‘embourgeoisification’ of consciousness during the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> As such, its interest in the ordinary is traditionally determined by the structures of middle-class life, by work, money and marriage. The chief ideologue of a specifically American realism, William Dean Howells (who I will discuss in greater detail below), extended this preference for bourgeois concerns to advocate a mode of writing that focused on “‘the more smiling aspects of life’”,<sup>32</sup> finding said aspects more in keeping with the American experience – indicative of a notoriously narrow definition of American normality as mapped by the middle classes. Yet alongside this concern with the ordinary and the bourgeois comes a new focus on the downright ugly, partly as an extension of realism’s disillusioning, its preference for the real over the ideal, but partly also as actual ‘fascination of the banal and ugly’,<sup>33</sup> a desire to transgress the limits of acceptability and representability, as evidenced in the 1857 trial against Flaubert for outrage to public morality.<sup>34</sup> In other words, realism may display a bourgeois sensibility in its focus on things and money, on market value and representative value – on what these things may tell you about their owner’s position in the socio-economic order of the day – yet realism is frequently engaged in

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28 Bowlby, ‘Introduction’, p. xii

29 Brooks traces this argumentative state of affairs back to Plato: ‘If to Plato art is an imitation of an imitation – that is, of shadows, appearances, rather than true reality – then the art that attempts to be most faithful to appearances, to surfaces, will be the lowest in value. And for many centuries of European art and especially literature, imitation of the everyday, of the real in the sense of what we know best, belongs to low art, and to low style: comedy, farce, certain kinds of satire.’ (p. 7)

30 Ibid.

31 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981; repr. London: Routledge, 2002), p. 138.

32 Quoted in Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 18

33 *Realist Vision*, p. 8

34 Ibid.

describing, in great detail, the filthier aspects of life, both physically and according to bourgeois notions of taste and decency: Guy de Maupassant's unrepentant prostitutes, Flaubert's description of Emma Bovary's illicit affair, the squalid slums and soot-covered industrial towns of Dickens and Zola. So when April Wheeler dies following a self-administered abortion in *Revolutionary Road*, or when Bob Prentice loses his virginity to an underage barfly in *A Special Providence*, or when Pookie Grimes is found naked on the floor, surrounded by empty whisky bottles, in *The Easter Parade*, these scenes are as closely linked to the realist tradition as are the descriptions of commuter trains and office life that recur throughout Yates' work. As such, we find another duality at the core of the realist mode, another example of realism as a mode constantly grappling with itself, even subverting itself, a site of ongoing debate and crisis.

### ***The influence of Flaubert, and its significance***

While a comprehensive survey of the literary tradition of realism lies beyond the scope of this thesis, a discussion of Flaubert will help shed light on the claim of this thesis that Yates produced a realism of a particular twentieth-century hue; clearly belonging to a tradition, just as clearly contributing to this tradition's continued evolution. The similarities in tone and subject matter between *Madame Bovary* and *Revolutionary Road* have been pointed out before,<sup>35</sup> yet it is worth elaborating further on the former's position as a kind of ur-text to the latter, as Flaubert's work makes obvious the actual complexity – rather than the alleged naivety – of realism from the outset.

I mentioned above how the term 'realism' has proven contentious since it was first applied to literature; Flaubert himself rejected the label, and objected firmly to being grouped by Sainte-Beuve among the 'more or less exact observers who in our time pride themselves on conscientiously reproducing reality, and nothing but reality'.<sup>36</sup> As evident from Sainte-Beuve's condescension, the tendency toward dismissive claims regarding realism voiced by critics, and the counter-tendency

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35 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 175

36 Quoted in Francis Stiegmuller, 'Reflections: Gustave Flaubert's Correspondence', in Francis Stiegmuller (ed.), *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1830-1880* (London: Picador, 2001), pp. 3-12 (p. 7)

toward firm refutations of these claims furthered by writers, (as well as a sense of unease with the term itself, an unease Yates himself shared),<sup>37</sup> go back a long way. Flaubert's reluctance to accept Sainte-Beuve's categorisation, and his disciplined devotion to achieving literary style through 'atrocious labour, fanatical and unremitting stubbornness',<sup>38</sup> suggest a keen understanding of novelistic artifice which would render accusations of naivety imprecise at best. *Madame Bovary*, for all its attention to the manners and mores of the nineteenth-century provincial bourgeoisie, is ultimately an exercise in *writing*, an attempt to create a book about nothing ('un livre sur rien'), the novel as a purely aesthetic object, rather than an act of communication in which the author imparts a message to the reader.<sup>39</sup> Peter Brooks sums up its relevance to this thesis in two separate claims that, when considered together, contribute to a more nuanced understanding of literary realism. Brooks considers *Madame Bovary* the quintessential realist novel, in its commitment to documenting the 'detestable provincial ways' of his characters,<sup>40</sup> including Emma herself, his 'unwakened and above all undiscriminating anti-heroine'.<sup>41</sup> It is all so dreary, all so mundane. And this is precisely the reason why, Brooks argues, '[there] is nothing natural about this novel'.<sup>42</sup> The novel stands as an act of will, a meticulously crafted artefact 'about' not very much at all, charting the dull lives of its dull characters with heroic levels of care and attention. Its status as a realist novel is secured not by its claims to unproblematic naturalness, but by its insistent sense of artifice. It draws its subject matter from social realities, yet the form remains unequivocally literary.

In addition to the laboriously crafted prose, Flaubert's concern with language manifests itself as a preoccupation with cliché which stands in direct anticipation of Yates' work (not just *Revolutionary Road*), and which refutes any claim to presenting itself, or language, as transparent.<sup>43</sup> Rather, 'human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we beat our tunes for bears to dance to, when we would wish to move the stars

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37 See epigraph to chapter one.

38 Quoted in Anita Brookner, 'Introduction', in Stiegmuller (ed.) *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, pp. xi-xv (p. xi)

39 Quoted in Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p. 15

40 *Realist Vision*, p. 54

41 Brookner, 'Introduction', p. xi

42 *Realist Vision*, p. 54

43 *Critical Practice*, p. 51

to pity'.<sup>44</sup> Yates' representations of meaningless marketing jargon, of hollowed-out chatter masquerading as critique, of arguments marked by a total lack of communication, all reveal a deep scepticism towards middle-class life, and towards language as it is used in everyday life, inherited from Flaubert. Indicative of both continuity and evolution, the various bourgeois vocabularies that come under such intense scrutiny in *Revolutionary Road* are different from those evoked in *Madame Bovary*, yet marked by a family resemblance: the romance plots and Enlightenment empiricism of the latter have been replaced by the conventions of television (in particular the soap opera and the sitcom) and advertising speak.

And yet for all its failure to measure up, as Brooks reminds us, language 'is all we have'.<sup>45</sup> Emma is trapped in language, searching for the meaning of 'the words "bliss", "passion", "ecstasy", which had looked so beautiful in books' (Flaubert, p. 47); words which, ultimately, do not refer to anything outside language, but are simply linguistic inventions.<sup>46</sup> I will align myself with Brooks' reading of the novel as performing a refusal of 'an expressionist view of language'.<sup>47</sup> Emma is doomed in trying to find the 'real' meaning of her romantically heated vocabulary, as no such real meaning exists. Yet her clichéd reveries are eminently understandable, as the alternative lies with the dullard Charles – at least her delusions give her life some fleeting sense of excitement, and her misguided faith in the transcendent meaning of the vocabulary of romance places her in the realm of the novelist, as Flaubert's oft-quoted statement 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi' would suggest.

The unjustly rewarded philistine Homais makes for another interesting case: a character 'constructed of nothing but clichés',<sup>48</sup> parroting the intellectual detritus of the bourgeoisie of nineteenth-century France without a trace of 'linguistic self-doubt',<sup>49</sup> his second-rate scientific enquiries into cider production become a parody of bourgeois appropriation of the Enlightenment emphasis on knowledge and rationalism: scientific enquiry reduced to a flatly prosaic state in the hands of an

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44 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. by Alan Russell (London: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 203. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

45 *Realist Vision*, p. 61

46 *Ibid.*, p. 63

47 *Ibid.*

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*

intellectual dullard who remains oblivious to the limitations of his own vocabulary. This obliviousness, this lack of reflexivity, renders him a pre-emptive refutation of structuralist attacks on ‘naïve realism’, as if to say: ‘*This* is what a naïve realist looks like’. While realism has aligned itself with emerging scientific vocabularies since the nineteenth century, be they those of the law, sociology, Freud, Marx or Darwin,<sup>50</sup> *Madame Bovary* stands as an early example of realism’s capacity to retain a critical distance to such vocabularies, to examine them while employing them. Such a capacity is embodied also by Yates, whose work gives this critical engagement a particular twentieth-century sheen, a sheen chapter one will discuss thoroughly (and which will show up in later chapters as well, predominantly chapters three and five).

### ***Some aesthetic strategies of the realist novel, and their relevance to a study of Richard Yates***

While realism is a term used in a number of different contexts, and while the realist novel itself is a loose category, some formal choices have nevertheless gained familiarity through their widespread application. The conventions that have come to define the realist novel, from mid-nineteenth-century France onwards, place an emphasis on plausibility, both of narrative and characterisation, and on not exceeding the ‘necessary foreshortening and heightening that all art requires’ in mode.<sup>51</sup> It is precisely such strategies of foreshortening and heightening that will be the focus of this section; namely, realism’s preference for the significant detail, and its tendency toward free indirect speech.

Free indirect speech – third person narration focalised through the fictional character(s), rather than delivered from an external point of omniscience – has been of central importance to the realist novel since Flaubert,<sup>52</sup> and, crucially, to literary modernism: the stream-of-consciousness technique of writers like Woolf and Joyce is

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50 Warner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884-1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965; repr. 1981), pp. 22-23

51 Simon Dentith, ‘Realist Synthesis in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: “That unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness”’, in Beaumont, *Adventures in Realism*, pp. 33-49 (34)

52 Flaubert, p. 15

simply an accelerated continuation of the same technique.<sup>53</sup> Free indirect discourse allows the author to hide, as the minds of characters become the guiding consciousnesses of the text, preventing – or at least attempting to prevent – the identification of any authorial message. Flaubert sought to render the novel a purely aesthetic object precisely through this disappearing act, tearing up ‘the communicative contract’ in which the author expresses a view to the receptive reader.<sup>54</sup> Instead, free indirect discourse creates an impression of events simply unfolding, without interruption or manipulation. Simultaneously, by granting the reader access to a number of fictional minds, he/she is granted a great deal of autonomy in the face of each character’s biases, and an active role in engaging with the text, piecing together meaning from a collection of potentially contradictory narrative fragments without narratorial support.<sup>55</sup> Yates’ fictions are short on authorial comment; the reader may experience some claustrophobia as he or she gains access to/is trapped within his characters’ interpretation of the world around them. Whatever multiple ironies and contradictions the books may offer, they are there for the reader to glean through active participation. It is up to the reader to unpack what is wrong with Frank Wheeler’s strongly held conviction that ‘[the] important thing, always, was to remember who you were’ (*Road*, p. 20). The duality of free indirect speech is crucial to the conceptualisation of realism that governs my discussion of Yates: it is simultaneously more true to life and more purely aesthetic, more insistently artificial, than omniscience, with its open acknowledgement of authorial presence.

Realism’s preference for the telling detail is an open admission of the necessary distance between literature and material reality. ‘The plausible has no beginning and no end’.<sup>56</sup> For a literary portrayal to approach true accuracy, it must necessarily be tedious to the point of illegibility in its endless cataloguing of externalities, its ‘formless and plotless detailist representation’:<sup>57</sup> in describing the

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53 As Peter Brooks puts it: ‘For all the radical innovation of *Ulysses*, there are certainly perspectives in which it is not a repudiation of realism but its further development. It develops techniques for a better matching of writing to experience of the world, to the transitory but crucial sense perceptions that more traditional forms of writing tended to censor or summarize’ (p. 210).

54 *Flaubert*, p. 15

55 George Levine, ‘Literary Realism Reconsidered: “The world in its length and breadth”’ in Beaumont, *Adventures in Realism*, pp. 13-32 (p. 19)

56 *Ibid.*, p. 18

57 *Ibid.*

keyboard on which I am currently typing, I would have to name all the keys, indicate their alternate functions accessed through the shift key, and so on, achieving an effect of pointless tedium through a paradoxically ‘austere, ascetic artistic commitment’ to get it all down in writing;<sup>58</sup> or I could simply state that it is black with white print, which would suffice to give a contemporary reader a clear enough idea of its appearance. Yet this process of selection and exclusion is not simply a matter of composition, but points toward a fundamental process of language use. Roman Jakobson has mapped the ‘bipolar structure of language’ as consisting of metaphoric and metonymic poles, through which we make two kinds of association or connection: by similarity or by contiguity.<sup>59</sup> Whereas Symbolist poetry, for example, tends toward metaphoric association, Jakobson identifies the realist novel as metonymic in nature: the narration ‘metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time’ (*ibid.*),<sup>60</sup> while characters are summed up in small physical features and gestures, such as Emma Bovary’s eroticism captured in her bare shoulders, or the director of the Laurel Players displaying a lifetime of theatricality in one clutch of the fist. In favouring either pole, literary language becomes inherently, necessarily partial in its engagement with the real: the intense focus on detail generates a text-world defined by fragmentation,<sup>61</sup> rather than a putatively stainless window. It is significant that Jakobson discusses the metonymic and metaphoric in relation to aphasia: each tendency becomes a kind of disorder, standing in an oblique relation to material reality.

While the telling detail is a staple of realist fiction in general, it is of particular interest to any discussion of Yates, who would hold up T. S. Eliot’s concept of the objective correlative as a key to good writing, the meaning of which he had initially grasped through F. Scott Fitzgerald,<sup>62</sup> and which he would later find precisely in the

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58 *Ibid.*

59 Roman Jakobson, ‘Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances’, in Pomorska and Rudy (eds.), *Language in Literature*, pp. 95-114 (p. 111)

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Realist Vision*, p. 57

62 As he would write in the essay ‘Some Very Good Masters’: ‘I had never understood what Eliot meant by the curious phrase “objective correlative” until the scene in “Gatsby” where the almost comically sinister Meyer Wolfshiem, who has just been introduced, displays his cuff links and explains that they are “the finest specimens of human molars.” Get it? Got it. That’s what Eliot meant.’ (The

work of Flaubert. Said correlative – an emotion or mood not expressed directly, but encapsulated by a ‘set of objects, a situation, a chain of events’<sup>63</sup> in the text – appears everywhere in Yates. Quite significantly, in Yates’ hands it is frequently used to convey a failure of significance, a shortcoming in relationships: the little plastic bull given to April Wheeler by her father, forever cherished and remembered, while embodying a near-total lack of effort and thought (an object also alluded to by Castronovo in his Yates monograph, as discussed below); the little stamps of ‘Oh Joseph, I’m So Tired’ (discussed in chapter four); the seedy Christmas display of ‘No Pain Whatsoever’ (discussed in chapter two). There is often something pathetic in these objective correlatives; the little details are significant in part precisely because of their smallness. As such, his work offers an invitation to consider how very particular, how fragmented, the fictional world truly is. The prose may be representational, but it is far from panoramic or totalising.

### ***An American and a realist, but an American realist?***

So far, the focus has been on a realism emerging in Europe, and on Yates carrying on a European aesthetic legacy. But realism took root in Yates’ native country as well, and where Yates’ relationship to Flaubert may be located on an intact continuum, his relationship to the American realist tradition is more troubled. In order to pinpoint where this trouble is located, it is important to consider how American realism has concerned itself with issues of masculinity since its inception. The fault lines of this concern may be traced in the debate between William Dean Howells and Henry James. As chief ideologue of American realism, Howells was involved with ensuring a space for literature (and the writer) in the world of men. His satirical portrait of that captain of industry, Silas Lapham, can be read as part of an attempt to recast literature in the realm of labour, of work, thereby simultaneously investing it with a putatively

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New York Times Book Review, April 19, 1981, accessed online at <<http://www.tbns.net/elevenkinds/masters.html>> [last accessed 7 October 2009]). Further references to this essay will be given after quotations in the text.

63 T. S. Eliot, ‘Hamlet and His Problems’, in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), pp. 87-94 (p. 92)

stable masculinity as well as middle-class respectability and citizenship.<sup>64</sup> For Howells, the very category of the Artist was suspect in its effeminacy. The artist is associated with beauty, with fashion, with the parlour, and does as such not fit into a category of normative masculinity. *Real* men – men of work, of business, of the cut and thrust, as it were – would eschew such effeminacy, and rather ‘handle language as a burly carpenter hefts his tools’.<sup>65</sup> Thus the American realist is in a bind: how to create literature while upholding a model of masculinity the very act of artistic creation would seem to oppose?

The debate between Howells and Henry James regarding literary style taps into the duality of realism outlined above, as it illustrates the form’s potential for adopting dual stances; it helps broaden conceptions of classical American realism; and, ultimately, demonstrates how twentieth-century notions of naïve realism have roots within the very realism such a term would appear to decry. Howells, by way of his explicitly gendered suspicion of aestheticism, relegated notions of the literary to somewhere below, even opposed to, notions of humanity, of life, of reality: ‘the supreme art in literature had its highest effect in making me set art forever below humanity’.<sup>66</sup> In *Criticism and Fiction*, he writes of ‘the foolish old superstition that literature and art are anything but the expression of life, and are to be judged by any other test than that of their fidelity to it’.<sup>67</sup> For Howells, literary style equals ‘preening and prettifying’;<sup>68</sup> it obscures truth, to the point where the best writing is ‘unconscious’. According to Howells, when ‘there is no thought of style, [...] the style is as good as it is in the Book of Chronicles’.<sup>69</sup> When ‘unconscious’ is used as a compliment, accusations of naivety would hardly seem excessive; it may suggest a lightness of touch or an effortlessness; it may also, and more problematically, suggest a disavowal of creation as resulting from a set of decisions, a shrill rejection of affected artistry that is in itself an affectation. Yet it is important to note that such notions were met with resistance by contemporaries of Howells, such as James, who

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64 Bell, *The Problem of American Realism*, p. 22. Daniel H. Borus: *Writing Realism: Howells, James and Norris in the Mass Market* (Chapel Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 66

65 *The Problem of American Realism*, p. 22

66 *Ibid.*, p. 19

67 *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891; repr. London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1891), p. 8.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 43

69 Quoted in *The Problem of American Realism*, p. 20

also operated within an admittedly looser realist paradigm, at least while creating such novels of manners as *Washington Square* and *The Bostonians*. As James noted in 1886:

The style of a novel is part of the execution of a work of art; the execution of a work of art is part of its very essence, and that, it seems to me, must have mattered in all ages in exactly the same degree, and be destined always to do so.<sup>70</sup>

For James, then, ‘realism involves not a rejection of style (if such a thing were even possible), but a particular *use* of style’.<sup>71</sup> The disingenuous dismissal of style by Howells provides American realism with possibly its greatest structural flaw, as it disavows the acts of composition, of artistry, involved in the writing of realist fiction, even said fiction’s inherent, and inevitable, fictionality. Yet the space created by this structural flaw is not empty; rather, it has been filled by writers such as James, and later, Yates, who for all their commitment to the everyday, remain equally committed to artistry, rather than a doomed attempt to deny it. So while it is Howells’ version of realism ‘that is most representative of what has tended to pass for ‘realism’ in most American critical discourse’,<sup>72</sup> there is a parallel version running alongside it, denying a monopoly of meaning to the very term realism. The male writer as ‘a virile, robust man of action’ is an enduring figure in American letters, made manifest in a range of writer-personae as well as in their works.<sup>73</sup> From the post-Civil War period through the decades known as the Progressive Era (from the 1890s until after the First World War), the realms of the intellectual and the material came together to recast the writer in a gendered model of professionalism, distinct from both the quasi-aristocratic, well educated ‘man of letters’ whose wealth would free him from the vulgar demands of the world of work, and from those Hawthorne famously dubbed ‘scribbling women’ – writers of sentimental fiction, local-colourists.<sup>74</sup> Materially, this new professionalism was enabled by (for example) a rapidly expanding publishing industry, increasing book sales, a booming magazine market, and the introduction of an International Copyright Act in 1891, which would put a stop to the practice of

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70 Quoted in *ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21

72 *Ibid.*, p. 21

73 John Dudley, *A Man’s Game: Masculinity and the Anti-Aesthetics of American Literary Realism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), p. 5

74 *Ibid.*, p. 89

publishing European works so cheaply as to undercut all competition.<sup>75</sup> Energised by such advances, writers such as Howells, Edith Wharton, Jack London and Frank Norris, to name but a few, sought to reposition the American writer as an embodiment of ‘new national values: strenuousness, political activism, the outdoor life’.<sup>76</sup> Norris carried the anti-style torch proudly, also investing style with suspect qualities of effeminacy: ‘I detest “fine writing”, “rhetoric”, “elegant English” – tommyrot. Who cares for fine style! Tell your yarn and let your style go to the devil. We don’t want literature, we want life’.<sup>77</sup>

Making the link between anti-style and masculinity explicit in an 1897 essay for the magazine *Wave*, instead of ‘literature’, the kind of writing Norris called for was stories about ‘men, strong, brutal men, with red hot blood in ‘em, with unleashed passions rampant in ‘em, blood and bones and viscera in ‘em, and women, too, that move and have their being’.<sup>78</sup> Norris expresses a desire to inject the activity of writing with a certain brutishness, necessarily an uphill struggle. In his essay ‘The True Reward of the Novelist’, Norris draws a link between boxing and literature as sites of consumption, and calls for a literature that can be just as assertive and manly.<sup>79</sup>

We are all Anglo-Saxons enough to enjoy the sight of a fight, would go a block or so out of the way to see one, or be a dollar or so out of pocket. But let it not be these jointed manikins worked with a thread. At least let it be Mr. Robert Fitzsimmons or Mr. James Jeffries.<sup>80</sup>

Moving further along the twentieth century, the American literary landscape is littered with manly men involved, to varying degrees, in the manly pursuit of self-mythologizing. Consider, for example, Jack London, Norman Mailer, Ernest Hemingway, James Ellroy, Kinky Friedman, Charles Bukowski, and Hunter S. Thompson. Without getting into a distracting discussion of their bodies of work, this

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75 For more detailed insights into the material conditions of American literature during this period, see for example Jay Martin, *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914* (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1967); and Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967).

76 Christopher P. Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), p. 2

77 Quoted in *The Problem of American Realism*, p. 117

78 ‘An Opening for Novelists: Great Opportunities for Fiction Writers in San Francisco’, in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. by Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 28-30 (p. 30).

79 *A Man’s Game*, p. 22

80 In *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. by Pizer, pp. 84-87 (p. 85)

(by no means exhaustive) list of writers cultivating strenuously masculine personae and furthering the image of the American He-Man of Letters simply illustrates the scope, range and potency of this discursive formation.

To accurately position Yates in the debates around masculinity that have informed American realism since its inception, simply categorising his work as anti-Howellsian in its teasing out of generally unspoken or implicit male anxieties will not do. Rather, his work may question certain of the form's more strenuously masculinist biases, yet it does so from within. The realist/naturalist model of the writer framed within the realm of work and craftsmanship resonates deeply with Yates' work for a number of reasons. Firstly, the development of Yates' style is characterised by a move toward carefully crafted lucidity,<sup>81</sup> and away from techniques serving to emphasise or draw attention to the author's skill. Certain of his early, uncollected short stories serve to illustrate this point, as they showcase effects Yates would later abandon (or rather temper) in favour of the deceptively straightforward style of his books. There is the immersive effect achieved through the use of present tense and free indirect discourse in 'A Private Possession', aiming to place the reader inside the mind of the lonely schoolgirl Eileen as the events of the narrative unfold, rather than with the distance afforded by the past tense (the tense used in all of Yates' books):

And she hurries into the cool hallway that smells of pencils, threading her way between groups of little girls. She is taller than anyone in the fourth grade and has no friends. Some of the girls are afraid of her, and she accepts this with pride although she would rather be liked. But now she thinks only of getting outside and meeting her brother. (*Stories*, p. 427)

'The Comptroller and the Wild Wind' shows flashes of 'Joycean lyricism':<sup>82</sup>

A long time ago, he had married a girl with splendid long legs and a face that was described as pert (in the blue half-light of dawn she whispered, 'darling, darling, darling,' and the legs were strong, the face was wild and lovely. (*Stories*, p. 436)

'A Last Fling, Like' is written as a chatty monologue reminiscent of Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al*.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, 'A Convalescent Ego' employs the device

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81 Though a lucidity crucially juxtaposed with deliberate clumsiness, inarticulacy and cliché, as discussed in chapter 5.

82 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 128

83 Yates would acknowledge his debt to Lardner in 'Some Very Good Masters'.

of elaborately imagined scenarios – ‘Mittyish reveries’<sup>84</sup> played out inside the mind of the protagonist, Bill, recovering from illness at home. While such techniques would reappear in his later work, their more mature manifestation would be characterised by a toning down, a less conspicuous appearance. The ear for vernacular showcased in the monologue would still be apparent in dialogue; the gap between dream and reality would be handled with a great deal more subtlety and complexity, as in the juxtaposition of Frank Wheeler’s idealised opening night with the reality of the fiasco discussed in chapters one and five; the strategy of immersing the reader into Eileen’s mind would later be employed in a more panoramic, detached fashion, allowing the reader access into the minds of a much wider range of characters per text. So while Yates displayed a keen awareness of the artfulness and artifice of literary composition, this awareness would come to mean a move away from ‘preening and prettifying’.

### ***Technological innovation and the realist/modernist/postmodernist continuum***

Central to realism’s identity we find its claim to cognitive-visual authority, its purported ability to see things as they really are, to capture reality, all the while obviously framed by an invented and constructed narrative situation. Influenced by the development of the daguerreotype, realist literary form is uniquely linked to the realm of the visual. Its claim to cognitive authority grants special importance to observation, to honing in on details of significance (as discussed above) like a camera. Since Ancient Greece, sight has enjoyed a long-standing position within Western thought as the most reliably objective of all the senses; hence the evocation of the world as it appears to us must take into account the world as it looks, must rely on observation and inventory.<sup>85</sup> Hans Jonas maps the Greek privileging of sight as the ‘noblest’<sup>86</sup> of the senses based on three contentions, the first two being of great relevance to realism’s visual emphasis:<sup>87</sup> firstly, sight allows for ‘[comprehending]

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84 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 129

85 *Realist Vision*, p. 16

86 *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966; repr. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p. 135

87 The third, less relevant contention is concerned with sight’s capacity for apprehending great distances, which fed into the Greek idea of infinity, and of foreknowledge.

many things juxtaposed, as co-existent parts of one field of vision'.<sup>88</sup> Less determined by temporal issues than hearing or touch, sight 'thus tends to elevate static Being over dynamic Becoming',<sup>89</sup> a prioritisation that stands in anticipation of MacCabe's aforementioned argument against realism as presenting reality as something that simply *is*. Secondly, the privileging of sight stems from its inherent externality, allowing for a distance between the viewing subject and the gazed-upon object which serves to uphold a dichotomous relationship between the two. No interaction is required; '[by] my seeing it, no issue of my possible relations with it is prejudged'. From this relationship is gained 'the concept of objectivity, of the thing as it is in itself as distinct from the thing as it affects me, and from this distinction arises the whole idea of [...] theoretical truth'.<sup>90</sup> Such claims regarding objectivity feeds directly into realist emphasis on observation as a means of accessing truths about material reality.<sup>91</sup> The Enlightenment<sup>92</sup> would see a continuation of this philosophical stance, with Descartes too designating sight as 'the most comprehensive and noblest' of the senses.<sup>93</sup> Through seeing individuals gain 'conceptual mastery of the world around them', according to Enlightenment beliefs such as those from which literary realism emerged,<sup>94</sup> and so realism's fascination with the camera may be read as a logical extension of extant beliefs. As argued above, Yates' work is characterised by a keen eye for revealing detail, a quality which is countered by a stress on epistemological uncertainty, and an awareness of the gazing eye's limitations. As such, his work stages an ongoing, submerged discussion of its own methods. In addition to the aforementioned sad smallness of these details (such as the little plastic bull), April Wheeler repeatedly and deliberately resists interpretation by eluding the reader's gaze, as well as the gaze of Frank and Shep. She may be introduced lit up by footlights, but her inner life remains hidden from view, as does her death. These gaps

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88 Ibid.

89 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 24

90 *The Phenomenon of Life*, p. 145. The relationship between gazing subject and gazed-upon object is one Yates repeatedly problematises – this will be discussed in some detail in chapter one.

91 As Martin Jay demonstrates, this privileging of sight has always been accompanied by scepticism and critique, and should not be seen as unanimously voiced. One example he employs is Plato's famous cave analogy, 'in which the fire is substituted for the sun as the source of a light too blinding to be faced directly, suggests his suspicions of the illusions of sense perception' (p. 27).

92 Itself a visual metaphor, obviously.

93 Quoted in *Downcast Eyes*, p. 71

94 Nancy Armstrong, 'Realism before and after Photography: "The fantastical form of a relation among things"', in Beaumont, *Adventures in Realism*, pp. 84-102 (p. 86)

in the text suggest an exhaustion of the gaze, an inability to probe beyond a certain point, and as such create a critical distance to the novel's otherwise detail-driven narration.

Modernism saw a similar appropriation of technological innovation, as Cecelia Tichi has pointed out. Where the camera was indicative of an emphasis on visual observation, the gear-and-girder technology of the Progressive Era gave birth to an aesthetic in which literary texts were viewed as machines consisting of component parts performing their set tasks efficiently, generating meaning. Like the giant structures of the day – bridges, factories and the like – these new literary forms exposed their workings, drew attention to their structural composition. So, just as the influence of technology on literary form stresses the continuity between realism and modernism, a similar continuity is found in modernism's concern with the component parts of literature: it is a reflexivity that is simply more pronounced, more explicit, than that found in realist works. The notion of linguistic efficiency becomes another site of contestation in Yates' work, in which language is subjected to entropic processes. This aspect of his work resonates with the work of Tony Tanner, who highlights entropy<sup>95</sup> as a dominant theme in post-war American literature. Tanner argues that one of the reasons for the attractiveness of this concept is precisely its place within late-industrial or even post-industrial society. Such societies necessarily reproduce an abundance of processes and actions based on mechanised movement.<sup>96</sup> In Yates' work, entropy is repeatedly evoked: in the exhausted gaze discussed above; in the reduced figure of the male writer; even in words themselves, worn down and used up until only their husks remain. Glassy clarity is pitched against lies and obfuscation in a battle that runs throughout his work, never to be resolved.

Following on from her work on modernism, Tichi makes a similar argument for the relationship between technology and literary form in her outlining of the influence of television on the work of American writers born in the second half of the

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95 Defined by Merriam-Webster as '1: a measure of the unavailable energy in a closed thermodynamic system that is also usually considered to be a measure of the system's disorder, that is a property of the system's state, and that varies directly with any reversible change in heat in the system and inversely with the temperature of the system; broadly : the degree of disorder or uncertainty in a system  
2a : the degradation of the matter and energy in the universe to an ultimate state of inert uniformity b: a process of degradation or running down or a trend to disorder.' mw3.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entropy [last accessed 27 July 2010]

96 *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970* (London: Cape, 1971), p. 143

twentieth century.<sup>97</sup> Television's sense of flow, the inherently fragmentary experience of an evening's channel hopping, both feed into and shape representation as well as consciousness, what she identifies as an 'extraordinary cognitive change',<sup>98</sup> in which 'the on-screen image achieves a status traditionally accorded the authentic', where that which is televised becomes 'privileged over and above the ordinary'.<sup>99</sup> As such, it becomes possible to trace a continuum from the daguerreotype to the TV set, and by extension, from nineteenth-century realism to literary postmodernism as inextricably linked to emerging visual technologies. By insisting on this continuum it becomes possible to acknowledge the differences between the two modes without establishing a crudely dichotomous model of opposition.

### ***McHale, Cohen, Hassan: Some definitions of postmodernist poetics***

As this thesis argues for Richard Yates as a practitioner of a realism which stands in a dialogic, rather than dichotomous relationship with literary postmodernism, we should consider some definitions of postmodernist poetics, and what their relevance to Yates' work might be. The first definition of interest here is not actually a definition of postmodernist poetics, but of an attending *modernist* poetics.<sup>100</sup> Brian McHale maps a distinction between modernist and postmodernist approaches to literature which may be employed to further the argument for Yates' realism as one that could only occur in the wake of modernism, due to their shared emphasis on epistemological concerns. As McHale argues, the dominant of modernist writing is epistemological in nature, while the dominant of postmodernism is ontological. Appropriating Roman Jakobson's definition of the dominant as 'the focusing component of a work of art'; the one component that 'rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components',<sup>101</sup> a 'poetics of the epistemological dominant'<sup>102</sup> is one in which epistemological themes are foregrounded, where questions regarding what is to be

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97 'Television and Recent American Fiction', *American Literary History* 1:1 (1989), pp. 110-130

98 *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 129

99 *Ibid.*, p. 130

100 As the heading implies, these definitions do not form an exhaustive catalogue. Fredric Jameson's famous definition will come under consideration in chapter one, yet does not govern my reading of *Revolutionary Road* to the extent that the definitions offered by McHale, Cohen and Hassan do.

101 Jakobson, quoted in *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 6

102 *Ibid.*, p. 10

known, how we come to know it, and how we can trust what we know to be true not only govern the narrative, but are also questions in which the reader is implicated.<sup>103</sup> Perspectives may be multiple and contradictory; the primacy of subjectivity in relating experience refuses the possibility of objective clarity; chronology may be dislocated; clues may be withheld; and so on. For characters as well as the reader, knowledge is elusive and contingent. As has been argued above, the concerns and gestures of modernism may be read as amplifications of realist tools such as free indirect speech. As chapter one (as well as later chapters) will argue, Yates' work is steeped in epistemological uncertainty, his fictional world one shaped by doubt, obfuscation and opacity, where characters stumble through a fog of misunderstanding while the reader oscillates between a privileged position of eagle-eyed visual authority and one in which all clues are suddenly withheld and a gap of unrepresentability opens up.

Josh Cohen maps a postmodern aesthetics defined by a crisis of seeing, vision destabilised ‘by the condition of postmodernity and, more particularly, by the society of the spectacle’.<sup>104</sup> The overflow of disjointed images that constitutes a day in the life of a postmodern subject – the adverts, the talking heads, the film clips, the ‘pure excess of signs’<sup>105</sup> that is the postmodern city – all contribute to a state of illegibility through visual overkill, in which ‘any privileged vantage-point to narration’,<sup>106</sup> is denied, and where the old binary of ‘masculine viewing subject and feminised and feminising mass culture is subverted’.<sup>107</sup> Following on from realism’s formal indebtedness to the camera as argued by Furst, a denial of visual privilege or authority would have severe consequences for realist modes of writing. As I will argue, *Revolutionary Road* self-consciously enacts such a crisis of seeing, as the novel is largely characterised by an extreme, even brutal (albeit partial) clarity of vision which nevertheless is compromised at pivotal moments, where the already admittedly fragmented realist gaze is resisted by events and characters defined by their illegibility, their unrepresentability. Like McHale’s modernist poetics, this crisis of

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103 Ibid., p. 9

104 *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p. 74. Further references to this volume are given after quotations in the text.

105 Virilio, quoted in ibid., p. 111

106 Ibid., p. 115

107 Ibid., p. 7

seeing is epistemological in nature: the masculine gaze of the reader is thwarted in its encounter with the text.

Ihab Hassan, meanwhile, sees postmodern literature as shaped by ‘a radical crisis of art, language, and culture’.<sup>108</sup> This crisis has led to a deep distrust of language as compromised, fraudulent, and fluid, and so the writers Hassan identifies as defining postmodern literature are those who ‘give themselves to silence’ in an attempt to capture ‘our blankness and our rage’ in the face of ‘an entropic universe’.<sup>109</sup> As the earlier discussion of Flaubert shows, there is a history of distrust of language – or linguistic self-doubt, in Brooks’ words – within literary realism which places the two traditions on a continuum; the avant-garde gestures that occupy the far end of Hassan’s field of inquiry (such as Burroughs’ cut-up method of writing words on pieces of paper, then randomly reassembling them) are undoubtedly more extreme in nature than the methods employed within the realist tradition, but that does not suggest an absence of shared concerns. As chapters one and three will demonstrate, notions of entropic processes inform much of Yates’ work, as does the relationship between language and silence. The silence of which Hassan writes has two accents: one ‘the negative echo of language, autodestructive, demonic, nihilist’; the other ‘its positive stillness, self-transcendent, sacramental, plenary’.<sup>110</sup> While it is the drive toward the former kind that dominates *Revolutionary Road*, both kinds are present, as I will argue, the novel’s ending performing a kind of horrific synthesis, a transcendental void in which the two accents fuse.

## ***Chapters***

Chapter one focuses on *Revolutionary Road*, his debut novel, which, for better or worse, has come to locate a central position in Yates’ work. Drawing on a range of definitions of postmodernist aesthetics – specifically those of Brian McHale, Josh

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108 *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 4. Further references to this volume are given after quotations in the text.

109 Ibid., pp. ix; 80; 252

110 Ibid., p. 248

Cohen, and Ihab Hassan – the chapter presents a reading of the novel as an antagonistic response to preceding novels of suburbia, and as a site of discursive draining, of linguistic and epistemological entropy. It is the novel that initiated Yates' realist project defined by crisis and uncertainty. Certain aspects of the novel will be discussed in terms of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a novel to which Yates is greatly indebted. By highlighting similarities and differences between the two texts, this chapter aims to acknowledge Yates' alignment with a sophisticated realist tradition characterised by reflexivity and flux (rather than naivety), while demonstrating how Yates' project embodies an evolutionary step forward within this tradition. So while a number of realists, Flaubert among them, may be read as staging crises of realism in their work through honing in on the difficulties presented by language itself, the crisis we find in Yates' work is of a particular moment, and could not have reached its precise form in the nineteenth century.

Chapter two provides an investigation into Richard Yates' use of the short story form in his first collection of stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*. An insistently intertextual collection, it explores generic convention while remaining strongly representational. The short story form itself becomes an object of inquiry, negotiated through the focus on the everyday at its least spectacular that has come to define not just realism, as discussed above, but also the short story genre. Accordingly, this everyday is the everyday as we have come to know it through literature: the everyday as constructed by Flaubert, Joyce, Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, O'Hara and Fitzgerald, rather than the everyday of physical experience. Novels are evoked in order to remind us of the ways novels and short stories differ. Intertextual play has been part of literary realism practically since the category was named, and has even longer roots in establishing hierarchies of verisimilitude: consider, for example, the strategy of appropriation, parody, and repudiation of literary genres held up as falsifying, such as the romance, the gothic, or the picaresque.<sup>111</sup> As Lilian Furst points out, Balzac's italicised insistence in *Old Goriot* that '*All is true*' is itself an intertextual allusion: it was the original title of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*.<sup>112</sup> Seen in this light, the collection does not embody a break from realism, but is rather an example of realism at its most playfully literary, evoking the realist tradition itself,

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111 'Realist Synthesis in the Nineteenth-Century Novel', p. 35

112 *All Is True*, p. 3

rather than older forms of literature, in order to establish its literariness; i.e. evoking Flaubert, rather than Shakespeare, to highlight its textuality. As part of the collection's representational project, these stories present the reader with a number of interpretive challenges, as effects and expectations are produced, then subverted. Allegiances between reader and narrator are formed, then broken; climaxes are promised, then withheld.

Chapter three broadens its textual scope to offer readings of both novels (*A Good School*; *A Special Providence*) and short stories ('Jody Rolled the Bones'; 'A Compassionate Leave') in exploring Yates' engagement with issues of masculinity, as filtered through the gendered realms of work and war. As mentioned above, the issue of masculinity has shaped American realist discourse since the nineteenth century, and it is an issue given complex, conflicted treatment in Yates' work. The disavowal of literary artifice that has come to dominate American (as opposed to European) realism follows the same logic as the disavowal of femininity and homosexuality at work in male homosocial relationships, as theorised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Accordingly, the work of exposure and subversion of homosocial disavowal performed by *A Good School* resonates beyond questions of behaviour in all-male physical environments, right to the heart of the anxieties that have shaped this American version of literary realism. Similarly, Yates' engagement with the world of work becomes a discussion of the (male) writer and his tools, an encoded conversation about the possibilities of writing in the second half of the twentieth century which, due to the nature of its encoding, remains committed to reality in precisely the kind of dualistic performance Furst conceptualises.

Chapter four looks at the autobiographical impulse that shapes most of Yates' novels and short stories. Acknowledging the well-documented existence of real-life sources for much of his work, the chapter nevertheless seeks to move beyond simply pinning the textual tail on the autobiographical donkey, so to speak, and instead focus on the slippery, malleable, layered reading of reality that informs his autobiographical fiction. The repetitions and retellings that emerge as one makes one's way through his work take on a quality of their own, as they suggest an indirect, highly codified relationship between representation and reality far from notions of transparency or from a photographic sense of mimesis. Characters resembling actual persons are openly manipulated and moulded like a sculptor's clay, or employed to evoke

characters from other fictions, in ways that pre-emptively reject any accusations of claims to historical veracity while, through the force of their repeated evocations, insisting on the existence of a world outside the text. The psychoanalytic theory that underpins this chapter is employed to emphasise the creative work that goes into constructing reality.

Chapter five takes as its starting point the renewed interest in Richard Yates – the biography, the reissues, the high-profile film adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* – and asks the question: why now? The chapter argues that, rather than symptomatic of an aesthetic conservatism, a return to once-unfashionable values, the interest in Yates coincides with a dialectical move towards a synthesis of realist and postmodernist strategies that has gained a strong foothold within contemporary American fiction. Framing the discussion is the work of Robert Rebein, who identifies a revitalisation of realism coinciding with the waning influence of postmodernism within American fiction. As Rebein argues, this revitalisation is in part due to realism's adaptability, its capacity for appropriating the techniques of other, putatively more radical or forward-thinking modes. This adaptability feeds into this chapter's investigating into the work of high-profile writers David Foster Wallace, A. M. Homes, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers. Discussing Yates' engagement with the overpowering impact of pop-cultural conventions on the contemporary consciousness, the chapter argues for a reinterpretation of Yates' place within American literary history: the very qualities that made his work anomalous, or peripheral, now place him at the very centre of a widespread tendency in American literary fiction. In particular, his employment of metafictional strategies contained within a framework of representational realism, reaching its culmination in his 1975 novel *Disturbing the Peace*, foreshadows the work of Foster Wallace and Homes, while disrupting the discursive dichotomy between realism and postmodernism. Such a duality of representation and literariness has long roots in realism itself, as has been established above, yet Yates' preoccupation with cinematic convention, white-collar life, and consumer culture is given formal, as well as conceptual, manifestation: the storytelling structures and staples of cheap, contemporary entertainment are openly satirised, as are Yates' own literary project, yet they are satirised with the fourth wall remaining intact. As such, he remains rooted in a tradition, while demonstrating the viability of this tradition in the face of the representational challenges posed by postmodernity.

## ***Survey of Yates Criticism***

The field of Yates criticism is quite small, with no readily discernible, competing schools of thought. Of the academic articles written, most were published at least a decade ago. One, Anya Taylor's 'A Thrice-told Tale: Fiction and Alcoholism in Richard Yates' *Disturbing the Peace*', is not held by any UK library, nor is it to be found online. That article aside, the following should give an overview of what has been written so far.

Castronovo and Greenleaf's monograph on Yates offers readings of all his work, including essays and some short poems written using only the middle row of letters on the typewriter which were published in *Esquire*. The opening chapter is called 'Richard Yates: An American Realist', which clearly stakes out the road ahead. Much of this chapter is devoted to placing Yates in the American literary landscape of the post-war period, especially by placing his work in contrast with other writers of the period.

Yates' contemporaries tend to ascribe grand designs and mystic vision to their protagonist. [...] Yates concentrates on his characters' fears and frustrations and, ultimately, on the limitations of their imaginations.<sup>113</sup>

The difference is not only a matter of content, of portraying ordinary, unhappy people trudging through their lives, as opposed to Bellowian philosophers trying to work out what it means to be human, say. It is also a matter of marrying form to content:

Yates the teller refuses to outstrip his characters by employing a bravura style or a fantastic structure. In ignoring postmodernism and living in the stylistic past, he achieved an altogether different effect from most of his contemporaries and built a reputation that was far less glamorous than Kurt Vonnegut's or Joseph Heller's or Thomas Pynchon's. [...] [He] worked out his vision of American distress without undergoing the stylistic and intellectual fire baptism of the 1960s: he bent language into no new shapes; he apparently cared little about R.D. Laing,

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113 *Richard Yates*, p. 2

aerospace, white negroes, the literature of the absurd, the theatre of cruelty, or any other event or thought current that excited his bolder peers.<sup>114</sup>

Thus placing Yates squarely within the realist tradition, without giving this tradition the nuanced treatment offered by Brooks or Furst, Castronovo embellishes his take on Yates by comparing his work in some detail to a few contemporaries with whom he shares some thematic common ground: Philip Roth, Mary McCarthy and John Cheever. Like them, he offers a sometime satirical take on the white middle class of post-war America, yet in different ways to them all. On Roth's *Goodbye Columbus*:

While Roth piles on the comic effects, Yates uses bleak and pathetic details: *Goodbye, Columbus* mocks the middle-brow dopiness of Ron Patimkin, worshiper of Mantovani; *Revolutionary Road* tells us about the little white toy horse, taken from a bottle of Scotch, that April Wheeler's father gave his adoring daughter.<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, Roth's satire is specifically aimed at the suburban, East Coast Jewish community in which he grew up, drawing complaints from B'nai Brith's Anti-Defamation League. Yates, on the other hand, never narrows his critique down in such a way, but rather takes aim at the American middle class at large, or rather the 'damaged souls' who populate it.<sup>116</sup>

In her best-selling novel about Vassar girls, *The Group*, Mary McCarthy explored terrain also covered by Yates: 'the spectacle of well-educated people messing up their lives with warped ideas about personal authenticity and individualism'.<sup>117</sup> Frank Wheeler, 'part-time radical' and bull session ace, is happy to ridicule Freudianism one moment, only to accuse his wife of penis envy the next, ultimately failing to act upon his dreams while mocking the suburban conformity he is unable to leave behind. Along similar lines, McCarthy describes the well-educated Group as 'smart girls who outsmart themselves'.<sup>118</sup>

Typically, however, McCarthy is sardonic and clear in her attacks: her portraits of the Group have caused real Vassar graduates to take offense, to complain about unfairness and misrepresentation, and to accuse McCarthy of personal attack. In comparison, despite the

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114 Ibid., pp. 5-6

115 Ibid., p. 3

116 Ibid.

117 Ibid., p. 4

118 Ibid.

biographical sources of his work, there's hardly anything vengeful in Yates' satire: his ridicule does not seem invested in the anger and mockery that one finds throughout McCarthy's work.<sup>119</sup>

In his ultimate sympathy for his characters, Yates shares an affinity with John Cheever: 'both writers refuse to flay their characters alive in the McCarthy manner: both extend understanding to their damaged people, while keeping a discreet distance from them'.<sup>120</sup> Stylistically, however, Cheever's range is greater.

Cheever's sentences are highly figurative; Yates' sentences, by contrast, never draw attention to themselves. On the level of form, Cheever is a writer of tales, at once in the tradition of Hawthorne in their wild and haunting emblematic quality while moving in the direction of postmodern experimentation.<sup>121</sup>

So, in sentences that never draw attention to themselves, who is Yates writing about? His people are generally out of step with the world:

[They] are anti-Roosevelt when 'Happy days are here again', convictionless when America is at war, and most at home with the cool inertia or restlessness of the 1950s. [...] Without the energy of the New Deal or the New Frontier, they seem marooned in a permanent time of doubt [...].<sup>122</sup>

From Frank Wheeler to the mother in the short story 'Oh Joseph, I'm So Tired' – who 'believes in the aristocracy' while eking out a living in Greenwich Village, relying on alimony payments for survival – they are rarely, if ever, where they want to be in life, although where that would be may be shrouded in mystery. Typically, they 'get through most of their lives without knowing what's wrong'<sup>123</sup> – note the 'most of'. Throughout his work, there are some recurring characters: in particular 'wretched and pretentious older women' (such as the would-be aristocratic mother mentioned above), and 'the youngish man who seems to wallow in his own failure'.<sup>124</sup> As mentioned earlier, these characters were employed to '[throw] into high relief the

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119 Ibid., pp. 4-5. It is worth noting, by way of modifying this statement slightly, that the character Tom Nelson in *Young Hearts Crying* did cause a peeved former friend, Bob Parker, to write an (unpublished) essay entitled "A Clef" for the journal *Grand Street*, complaining about his thinly disguised fictional alias, an event which will be discussed in some detail in chapter four. But as this novel was Yates' penultimate finished work, it is perhaps testament to the overall lack of ill will and bad faith present in his largely autobiographical work that it took so long for anyone to make their complaints public. Also, as Castronovo points out, exposing individuals is not really a major preoccupation with Yates. He is rather "interested in arranging patterns of dishonesty in his time" (Castronovo, p. 5).

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.

122 Ibid., p. 1

123 Ibid., p. 6

124 Ibid., p. 7. Yates' recurring use of similar characters will be discussed in chapter four.

hidden injuries of class, including bleak childhoods, nothing jobs, and barren landscapes'.<sup>125</sup> His vision is fuelled by the 1950s more than any other decade in which he wrote; they 'provide the smouldering discontent, the inertia, and the frustration that fuels Yates' imagination'.<sup>126</sup> That decade's influence on Yates can be understood through David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, whose concept of the 'other-directed person' finds fictional manifestation in many of Yates' characters. This person tends to become 'his succession of roles and encounters and hence to doubt who he is or where he is going'.<sup>127</sup> Yates' characters are engaged in constant performance, always negotiating their appearance while their private selves often remain undefined, both to us and them. They 'drift from role to unconvincing role' – trying on the semiotic outfit of soldier, or writer, or sculptor, or sturdy family man, never quite fitting.<sup>128</sup> The self in Yates' work is reduced to 'a series of impressions made on an audience'.<sup>129</sup> The Yatesian self occupies a world in which class provides fuel for the characters' unsatisfied desires. People dream of a better life, of cultural capital and the acceptance of those higher up on the social ladder.

Status seeking almost always foreshadows disappointment or disaster: the people become pathetic cases, usually crazy, broke, and baffled. [...] Yates cuts the good life and stylishness down to size, reducing them to routines, pretentious rhetoric, and false management of impressions.<sup>130</sup>

Many of his characters display what the sociologist C. Wright Mills calls 'status panic' – the anxieties and yearnings people display in relation to their class position.<sup>131</sup> Another social theoretician is brought up: Erving Goffman, whose *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, with its ideas of social performance and impression management, corresponds with Yates' struggling performers. It is worth noting that while Castronovo discusses Yatesian performance in relation to class, he fails to mention gender. This is a serious omission, as Yates' men are more often than not having severe problems negotiating classical notions of masculinity.

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125 Ibid., p. 2

126 Ibid., p. 11

127 Riesman, quoted in ibid., p. 11

128 Ibid., p. 12

129 Ibid., pp. 15-16

130 Ibid., p. 13

131 Ibid., p. 14

As well as this monograph, Castronovo also includes a chapter on *Revolutionary Road* (alongside Updike's *Rabbit, Run*) in his study of 1950s American fiction, *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum: 2004). Here Castronovo argues that the two novels offer

a reinvented naturalism, subtler and more mysterious in the ways that it depicts failure. It is a style and a mode for a different country, one in which people's despair emerges from a seemingly innocent-looking social setting.<sup>132</sup>

Talk of style notwithstanding, the reinvention of naturalism seems to consist more of reinserting some ability to shock and upset through subject matter – April's botched abortion and subsequent death, Rabbit Angstrom's child drowning in the bath – rather than a reconsideration of the formal characteristics of naturalism, rendering Castronovo's claim ultimately a bit timid. So while his chapter initially appears to broaden the perspective on Yates as a novelist, the narrow framework established in his monograph remains, in the final instance, intact. The consideration of form represents the greatest departure of this thesis from the reading of Yates' work offered by Castronovo, a departure which has consequences beyond formal questions. His reading imbues Yates' work with an anachronistic quality, harking back to a 'stylistic past' while 'ignoring postmodernism', a stance I will problematise throughout the thesis. On the level of isolated close reading, Castronovo's reading of the fight scene near the end of *A Special Providence* will also be the subject of some critique in the third chapter of this thesis.

Morris Dickstein offers a take on Yates (specifically *Revolutionary Road*) similar to that of Castronovo. Like Castronovo and Goldleaf, Dickstein locates Yates as a writer behind the times:

At a time when the realist aesthetic was waning, or simply migrating from literature into film and television, Yates emerged as one of the last scrupulous social realists. As other members of the World War II generation – Mailer, Styron, Heller, even James Jones – shifted toward

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132 *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture* (New York: Continuum: 2004), p. 188

history, apocalyptic fantasy, myth, and black humor, Yates emerged as the faithful chronicler of the lives of his contemporaries.<sup>133</sup>

Of particular interest here is what I deem to be his misreading of the character of John Givings in *Revolutionary Road*. Dickstein sees him as an existentialist outsider, a howling return of the repressed in direct opposition to the conformity of the suburbs. As my chapter on *Revolutionary Road* will argue, John Givings is not some madman as visionary; rather, this is a role he self-consciously embraces, in the same way Frank embraces the bohemian outsider myth.

Jerome Klinkowitz offers the piece of criticism which most explicitly locates Yates in postmodernity, with its semiotics-driven reading of his work. The title refers to the project of describing manners – ‘implicit signals of value’,<sup>134</sup> – as principally determinant in an age when such structures were made to seem irrelevant. Not only did the emerging counterculture weaken monolithic notions of a standard code of conduct, structuralism cast doubt upon the novel’s mimetic potential, presenting fiction as ‘less about signified reality than about its own play of signifying structures’.<sup>135</sup> In addition, the events of that decade were of such dramatic intensity, what with wars, assassinations, McCarthyism, alongside the countercultural yin and yang of Woodstock and Altamont, that no lesser a novelist than Philip Roth felt that reality was outdoing what any novelist could hope to concoct.<sup>136</sup> Klinkowitz reads Yates as a novelist who has taken on board semiotics in treating social practices as signs in a linguistic system.

Yates’ narrative eye is manneristic, taking in the people’s clothes, their serial points of status, their calculation that the event is less important for what it is than for what it signifies.<sup>137</sup>

Yates’ characters routinely break the rules of the system’s internal grammar, thereby exposing the structure. The Yatesian family is almost always broken: single mothers and absent fathers, long before divorce became the commonplace practice it is today. By disrupting the nuclear family, its structure is exposed.

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<sup>133</sup> *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction 1945-1970* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 135

<sup>134</sup> *The New American Novel of Manners: The Fiction of Richard Yates, Dan Wakefield, and Thomas McGuane* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 2

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>136</sup> Roth’s argument will be subject to discussion in chapter one.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 17

[In] the way family members deal with each other, Yates can see how much of their lives is structured by the highly conventional business of signs; and because their roles are usually off-centre, their commerce in signs draws sharp attention to itself.<sup>138</sup>

By marrying a concern with real-life matters – family, disappointment, alcoholism, marriage – with this interest in signs and systems, Yates, alongside Wakefield and McGuane, perform a transformation: the novel of *manners* becomes a *novel of manners*.<sup>139</sup> The book reads Yates' work up until *Liars in Love* through this conceptual filter, locating manners as a linguistic system, and the struggle to negotiate this system, everywhere. In addition to mapping this struggle, Klinkowitz makes an important point regarding the ‘wedding of language and incident’ in Yates’ prose.<sup>140</sup> While his writing is never acrobatic or experimental like that of his more fashionable contemporaries, neither is it simply a recording of events: The sentences’ shape and their [...] rhythm tell us what we need to know far better than a discursive statement filled with needless detail.<sup>141</sup>

On *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, Yates’ first collection of short stories, Klinkowitz writes:

The title [...] indicates the author’s strategy in this work. The pieces aren’t random: they were written as variations on a common theme, and are here selected and arranged to foreground that peculiar passion in human behaviour which finds its manifestation in rejection, alienation, and despair. The individual stories themselves replicate this rhythm in an inexorable rise and fall. Their sadness is generated textually, not simply from the attitudes Yates invokes but from the quality of his prose on the page.<sup>142</sup>

The wedding of language and incident is integral also to the characters themselves. Often, such as in the short story ‘A Glutton for Punishment’ (or the novel *A Special Providence*, for that matter), the main characters’ self-perception is so thoroughly mediated, filtered through the narrative conventions of cinema and fiction, their lives take on fictional qualities even in their own minds.<sup>143</sup> Of available Yates criticism, Klinkowitz’s work is perhaps closest to the work performed by this thesis: the

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138 Ibid., p. 9

139 Ibid., p. 8

140 Ibid., p. 14

141 Ibid., p. 15

142 Ibid., pp. 22-23

143 Ibid., p. 27

acknowledgement of a formal self-consciousness at work, and the focus on the corrosive impact of popular narrative conventions on characters' sense of themselves, both inform my reading of Yates. Yet Klinkowitz displays an apologetic impulse to allow Yates into the postmodernist fold, to elevate his work above the realist tradition from which he emerges, thus buying into the notion of naïve realism this thesis seeks to problematise. Klinkowitz stages the reflexivity of Yates' work as a break from, rather than a continuation of, realist practices.

Yates' engagement with the short story form comes under scrutiny in Ronald J Nelson's article 'Richard Yates' portrait of the artist as a young thug: 'Doctor Jack O'Lantern'.<sup>144</sup> The article offers a close reading of the short story 'Doctor Jack O'Lantern' from *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, focusing in particular on the narrative's dealing with the creative process as acted out by the young protagonist. Nelson's stated intention is to 'do [...] some measure of justice' to a writer he feels is unfairly ignored by academia and the reading public – at the time of publication, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* was out of print.

A recurring theme in Nelson's treatment is the high level of craftsmanship evident in the story. He employs a quote from W.B. Yeats - 'a poem comes right with a click like a closing box' – to illustrate the strong, yet subtle finality with which the characters are 'immured by their ways of seeing the world'.<sup>145</sup>

The main purpose of the essay appears to be to complicate a point made about Yates' fiction in Klinkowitz's aforementioned study of Yates, Dan Wakefield and Thomas McGuane. The point in question is that Yates' stories follow the process, as outlined by Ihab Hassan in *Radical Innocence*, of 'fear followed by hope climaxing in disappointment', and that the stories in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* are all 'exercises in the building up and tearing down of expectations'. Rather than attempt to contradict these contentions, with which he agrees on a general level, Nelson sets out to delve deeper into the story in order to get to the essence of the characters. Summaries of the two main characters – Miss Price:

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144 In *Studies in Short Fiction*, 32:1 (1995). Accessed online at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2455/is\\_n1\\_v32/ai\\_17156383/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2455/is_n1_v32/ai_17156383/) [last accessed 05/07/2010]

145 Ibid.

In short, she is just what Vincent needs – a gentle, wise, supportive person who tries to give him the stable influence that he has not had and who could make a significant difference in his life. She is perhaps the only mother he has known. [...] As fine a teacher as she is, she lacks the psychological or sociological training that apparently would be necessary to turn him around.<sup>146</sup>

Nelson's view of Vincent is apparent in the title: 'artist as a young thug'. He has artistic talent, but his poor self-image leads to embarrassment as he tells blatant lies in an attempt to impress his new classmates. Furthermore, Miss Price's maternal concern only serves to consolidate his status as teacher's pet, thus alienating him further. While the acknowledgement of Yates' sense of craftsmanship and formal mastery resonates with my own take on Yates, as does his focus on Vincent's flawed creative processes (and its implicit nod to Joyce), my reading of the relationship between Miss Price and Vincent Sabella differs greatly from Nelson's, as chapter two will show in some detail. Nelson stresses the kindness of Miss Price, but fails to acknowledge the depths of her incomprehension (which cannot be reduced to a lack of psychological training), and how her crucial misreading of Vincent taps into epistemological concerns that inform Yates' work as a whole – an observation which may, admittedly, remain beyond the remit of a close reading of a single short story.

Michael P. Moreno's 'Consuming the Frontier Illusion: The Construction of Suburban Masculinity in Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*'<sup>147</sup> reads the novel against the backdrop of the Cold War. Drawing on Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*, Moreno argues that the suburbs were a mould in which a new mode of emasculated male identity was formed: replacing the war hero/frontiersman was the 'organization man', a 'man in a gray flannel suit' – phrases borrowed from William Whyte Jr. and Sloan Wilson respectively, and repeated several times throughout the article – whose more hands-on role within the nuclear family, and his recent conversion into consumer, have subverted his masculinity.<sup>148</sup> Within this context:

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146 Ibid.

147 In *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3 (2003), accessed online at [www.uiowa.edu/~ijcs/suburbia/moreno.htm](http://www.uiowa.edu/~ijcs/suburbia/moreno.htm) [last accessed 02/10/2008]

148 For further discussion of both William Whyte Jr.'s *The Organization Man* and Sloan Wilson's novel, see chapter one.

Yates's novel helps to articulate an emergent literary voice that comes not from the urban or rural parcels of the United States but the suburbs, the genesis of the modern consumer identity and the landscape of imminent death for the American male.<sup>149</sup>

During the Cold War, the suburbs functioned as an ideological defense against the Communist enemy, a showroom for American prosperity and technological progress. New cars and houses, along with washing machines and dishwashers, were emblems not only of wealth, but of the changing nature of domestic labour. This new consumerist landscape called for white-collar work – such as marketing, advertising, and product development – performed by until recently gun-toting men, who now found themselves on the morning commuter train, carrying them from the neither urban nor rural scenery of their homes into the city. Moreno paints Frank Wheeler as the archetypal Cold War suburban male, his sense of masculinity chafing against the emasculating conformity of the suburbs and his marketing job. The ‘organization man’, which Frank Wheeler represents, can’t ‘realize himself in his work, for work is now a set of skills sold to another, rather than something mixed with his own property’,<sup>150</sup> leading to the emergence of ‘unique dichotomies in which the white male was in continual renegotiation between public and private, urban and suburban, self-reliant and familial, productive and consumptive spheres of proliferation and containment’. Against this conceptual backdrop, Frank Wheeler is ‘caught at the crossroads of his yearning to return to a more bachelor-like frontier world of masculinity, intellect, and adventure and his obligation to perform the blurred roles of organization man, suburban father, and compatible husband’; he ‘suffers from white plight [a phrase coined by Moreno earlier in the article], that inner struggle between conforming to the mores of the Cold War and escaping from them into an illusory wilderness of personalized possibilities’.<sup>151</sup>

The suburban environment of *Revolutionary Road* acts to further provoke the impulse of escape:

The consumptive artifacts that now populate the area in which they live, the mass produced homes, the large chromed vehicles, the centerless strip malls, all appear to be out of sync with

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149 Ibid.

150 Mills, quoted in ibid.

151 Ibid.

the patterns of history and the contours of the original countryside, thus creating an impression not of freedom or congruency, but rather containment and violation.<sup>152</sup>

The cars and homes that populate the area look like toys and sweets - gleaming, pastel-coloured, ultimately artificial. The brocaded curtains of the Wheelers' home – and the homes surrounding them – become a metaphor for the Iron Curtain, separating the American consumerist playground/prison from the red menace.

This environment is of course not only stifling for Frank, but also for April. Her routine is like that of other organisation wives: 'kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their station wagon full of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless floor'.<sup>153</sup> As a one-time aspiring actress, April attempts to gain an outlet for her creative urges through the newly formed Laurel Players, a local amateur theatre company whose disastrous debut performance forms the opening scene of the novel. This fiasco not only foreshadows the downward trajectory of the plot in general, it also serves to highlight April's difficulty in performing the role of contented suburban housewife. In Moreno's reading, Frank and April's struggle to perform their gender roles is underscored in the lawnmowing argument in the third chapter:

whereby Frank and April's battle over the lawn becomes a symbol of Frank's campaign for his Cold War masculinity. Awakening from a late night solo-drinking binge, Frank rises at eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning to the sound of April mowing the lawn. Decked out in Frank's old clothing, April assumes the role of suburban lawn-keeper, which is traditionally a masculine duty; however, she does this more out of a feeling of disgust for her husband's laxity than out of a desire to compromise her husband's position in the family. Frank, of course, does not interpret her actions this way. As such, he has forfeited more than his function as the man of the house - however implicating and emasculating that title might be in the topography of suburbia. He has lost all semblance of his place and has thrust his duties onto April who, out of her own frustration as a servile Cold War housewife, reluctantly performs in order to maintain a sense of stability in their lives.<sup>154</sup>

Their conflict comes to a head over their failure to realise their ambition to escape the suburbs and move to Europe. As Frank is offered a lucrative promotion, and April becomes pregnant yet again, Frank exposes his inability to act upon this ambition by

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152 Ibid.

153 Friedman, quoted in ibid.

154 Ibid.

protesting against April having an abortion, as such a decision would threaten his masculine identity: ‘How much, he would ask her, would his prime of manhood be worth if it had to be made conditional on allowing her to commit a criminal mutilation of herself?’ (*Road*, pp. 217-218) After the breakdown of their European dream, Moreno reads their marriage itself as a ‘Cold War marriage, both challenging and containing the other while preserving and protecting the self’. The conflict heads toward a climax; ‘[t]he final chord of this marital cold war must be struck; the nuclear arsenal, which has been proliferating between Frank and April for the past several months, will finally be used to break the spell of containment and oppression’.<sup>155</sup> The nuclear arsenal’s Fat Man and Little Boy are deployed when April performs an abortion on herself and dies from the complication. Their failure at being an ideal suburban couple – at performing their Cold War duties on the suburban battlefield – has rendered April a casualty of war. Moreno’s reading taps into issues of masculinity that will be the subject of lengthy discussion in chapter three, yet his focus on the Cold War is largely replaced by issues of mediation, writing, and work; in other words, Moreno’s historicist take on *Revolutionary Road* is less concerned with the textuality of the novel, its formal characteristics, its use of language, than mine. As an example of this difference of approach, consider the picture window: Moreno reads its curtains as metaphorically made of iron, while in chapter one I read it as a TV screen framing Frank and April’s suburban melodrama taking place within. It thus stages the novel as purely representational in a fashion which places it at odds with this thesis.

Ethan Fishman’s essay ‘Natural Law and Right in Contemporary Middle-Class Literature’ discusses the work of Yates, alongside that of Cheever and John Updike, holding them up as:

the truest chroniclers of the contemporary American bourgeoisie, that group that best represents the realization of the principles of American society set forth two hundred years ago. If this realization is less than ideal, if it indeed is marked most clearly by irresolvable conflicts among and within its citizens that are the primary source of good fiction, it may be that those principles themselves are in conflict.<sup>156</sup>

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155 Ibid.

156 In Ernest J. Yanarella and Lee Sigelman (eds.), *Political Mythology and Popular Fiction* (New York: Greenwood, 1988), pp. 101-14 (p. 101)

Fishman presents Locke as the fundamental figure of American political thought, a thinker who ‘furnished the Founding Fathers with a framework for their claims against colonial rule and armed them with specific arguments in favour of political, social and economic freedom’. In its embrace of Lockeanism, American society has left classical natural law behind. Classical natural law ‘generates rights from obligations’. Within Aristotelian thought, property is ‘an indispensable means to the good life but never an end in itself’. Locke attempted to wed this ultimately modest take on wealth with the more aggressive, Hobbesian theory of natural right, which ‘declares self-preservation to be paramount’.<sup>157</sup>

The Right of Nature is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing any thing, which in his own judgement, and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.<sup>158</sup>

While attempting to reconcile natural law and natural right, natural right was ultimately the favoured party, as the shift in emphasis from duty/obligation to right places the ego at the centre of the moral world.<sup>159</sup> This tension between obligation and right is found within both *Revolutionary Road* and *Disturbing the Peace*. Or, more accurately, ‘Yates’ characters reject moral obligation altogether in pursuit of their most passionate desires’,<sup>160</sup> with disastrous results. April Wheeler, who dies from complications following a self-induced abortion, describes her life as suburban housewife, as opposed to the acting career she used to dream of, as ‘an enormous, obscene delusion’ based on the ‘idea that people have to resign from life and ‘settle down’ when they have families’. Similarly, Frank, philosophy graduate cum office drone, ‘locates the source of his unhappiness in his attempt to impose some vaguely sensed moral order on the actions of himself and others’.<sup>161</sup> In Fishman’s reading, *Revolutionary Road* becomes a morality tale of Frank and April, two egos run rampant, their pursuit of happiness at all cost a destructive force that ultimately leaves April dead and Frank a broken, hollowed-out man. Fishman finds a similar decline and fall triggered by the inconsistencies of American political thought in *Disturbing*

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157 Ibid., pp.101-102

158 Hobbes, quoted in ibid., p. 103

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid., p. 108

161 Ibid., p. 109

*the Peace*. In a bid to unlock his inner greatness, protagonist John Wilder quits his job and leaves his wife and daughter, eventually moving to Hollywood to make it in the movie industry. He fails, however, and the novel ends with Wilder in the psych ward, with little hope or desire to ever leave. At the root of the tragedy inherent in Yates' work is the fact that '[his] protagonists are never as extraordinary as they think. Yet they somehow believe that ordinary family and communal responsibilities do not apply to them'.<sup>162</sup> Fishman traces this tragedy back to Locke's 'inability to make moral obligation consistent with egoism', leaving egoism triumphant in the modern American consciousness. Fishman's observation of the gap between self-image and reality in Yates' characters – that they are 'never as extraordinary as they think'<sup>163</sup> – is one that resonates throughout this thesis, but there is a moralistic tenor to his argument which remains largely absent in mine. Lacking in Fishman's analysis is the sense that the egos on display in Yates' work, while desiring, remain ultimately hollow, cracked, incomplete from the outset. As such, their disastrous endings do not simply arrive as a well-deserved consequence of failing to embrace moral obligation, but from a deterministic narrative logic.

The most recent piece of scholarly writing on Yates (apart from articles published by myself) is by another PhD student, Kate Charlton-Jones, who is based at the University of Essex. Her article 'Social Realism and Performance in the work of Richard Yates with particular reference to *Revolutionary Road*' was published in the *Icfai Journal of American Literature* in August 2008. Her work shares some concerns with this thesis, in particular a complication of the designation of Yates as a realist in light of his absorption of modernist/postmodernist currents into his work. Drawing on Vance Packard's work on the relationship between consumer culture and status anxiety, Charlton-Jones reads *Revolutionary Road* as a site of anxious performance, in which artifice and surfaces come to dominate social interaction to the point where any epistemological certainty is rendered impossible. This thesis departs from the work of Charlton-Jones in a more discursive engagement with postmodern notions of naïve realism, seeing the appropriation of metafictional gestures not as a break from realism, but as an amplification of it.

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162 Ibid., p. 110

163 Ibid.

Blake Bailey's Yates biography *A Tragic Honesty* warrants a mention. While not a work of criticism, it is the most high-profile, and most recent, book devoted to him. It also offers a valuable insight into Yates' expressed literary likes and dislikes, which provides a useful starting point in tracing his influences. Canonical figures like Fitzgerald, Flaubert and Conrad emerge as instrumental in forming Yates' style, yet Bailey also points to Evelyn Waugh, Ring Lardner and, among his contemporaries, William Styron – Yates wrote the screenplay for an as yet unfilmed adaptation of *Lie Down in Darkness* – and Salinger in particular. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the book does an excellent job in linking his life to his work. Yates' mother, father, sister, brother-in-law, his ex-wives, his friends and lovers – they all made at least one appearance in his books, usually more. The problem with this approach, while obviously factually sound, is that it risks reducing Yates' novels to simple confessional, and not the things made of words with which this thesis is concerned, i.e. works of art in language, painstakingly crafted and belonging in a literary tradition.

Of the other pieces of non-academic writing on Yates, 'The Lost World of Richard Yates' by Stewart O'Nan, published in the *Boston Review*, October/November 1999, is noteworthy as an introduction to his work at a time when his books were out of print.<sup>164</sup> O'Nan's article warrants a mention as an early agent in the now widespread rediscovery of Yates' work, which will be subject to discussion in chapter five, as well as in the conclusion.

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164 Available online at [www.bostonreview.net/BR24.5/onan.html](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR24.5/onan.html) [last accessed 21 July 2010]

## ***Chapter one: Revolutionary Road, or, Sand in the Realist Machinery***

All fiction is filled with technique. It's ridiculous to suggest one technique is more realistic than any other.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter seeks to investigate the ways in which Richard Yates' debut novel *Revolutionary Road* presents a mode of realist writing which stages the corrosion of everyday language in post-War American middle-class life, thereby reflexively negotiating its own fictionality, all the while maintaining a representational impulse. Various modes of discourse, from corporate-speak to marital arguments, are presented as drained of meaning, triggering a yearning for silence by way of response. The novel stages a number of crises that strike at the core of the realist novel's aesthetic and thematic parameters, while maintaining a determined faith in the realist novel's viability as a literary formation: crises of visual authority, crises of meaning-making, crises of representation. In the limited field of Yates scholarship, the emphasis is primarily placed on his realist tendencies. In their monograph on Yates, David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf signpost their position clearly by giving the opening chapter the heading 'Richard Yates: An American Realist' (p. 1).<sup>2</sup> Morris Dickstein, in turn, has named him as 'one of the last of the scrupulous social realists' in an age when literary realism was on the wane.<sup>3</sup> Reading both Castronovo and Dickstein, their readings of Yates both position his work as somewhat anachronistic: skilfully crafted, yet doomed to the periphery of American literary life through its dogged commitment to a literary form abandoned by bolder writers with a keener sense of the contemporary. As such, Yates stands as a keeper of the flame, a guardian of past values, his work inherently conservative. This chapter argues for *Revolutionary Road* as the beginning of a literary project founded on a mode of realism that, like postmodernism, could only have emerged after modernism. It is a realism that is in

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1 Richard Yates, in the interview by Scott Bradfield, 'Follow the long and Revolutionary Road', first published in *The Independent* Saturday 21, 1992, available online at [www.richardyates.org/bib Bradfield.html](http://www.richardyates.org/bib Bradfield.html) [accessed 10 October 2009]

2 Richard Yates, p. 1

3 *Leopards in the Temple*, p. 135

dialogue with postmodernism, a realism that problematises many of literary realism's central strategies. Through my reading I will demonstrate how Yates' novel contains currents which insist on a conceptualisation of realism as openly engaged in a reflexive negotiation of its own constructedness, and which comment on and critique what the realist novel had come to represent in contemporary American literature at the time of its publication.

### ***Lilian Furst: Realism, the visual, and fictionality***

In her book *All Is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*, Lilian R. Furst sets out to complicate the position that realism is, at its core, 'epistemologically naïve',<sup>4</sup> a commonplace of postmodernist aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Furst argues for a dualistic reading of the realist novel as occupying a 'daring interface of referentiality and illusion',<sup>6</sup> rather than arguing for either side of a dichotomous structure in which the realist novel is '*either* [...] a faithful portrayal of a social situation at a particular time in a particular place *or* [...] a textual web of discourse'.<sup>7</sup> Rather, realism pivots on contradiction, and remains fully aware of the tension between its own inherent artifice and its programmatic allegiance to material reality.<sup>8</sup> This latter allegiance is inextricably linked to realism's historical emphasis on observation and the realm of the visual. As Furst makes clear, this emphasis should be seen in the context of an increasing interest in the documentary genre, following the invention of photography in 1839 with the daguerreotype.<sup>9</sup> Displaying an early example of the way the possibilities offered by this new technology formed literary priorities, Furst refers to a realist programme devised by Edmond Durany in the short-lived journal *Réalisme*:

[Art] should give a truthful representation of the real world by studying contemporary life and manners through meticulous observation, and it should do so dispassionately, impersonally, and objectively. These prescriptions are predicated on two fundamental assumptions: the intelligibility of the universe and the capacity of the individual eye 'to see things clearly, as they *really* were, and to draw appropriate conclusions from this clear apprehension of reality'.<sup>10</sup>

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4 *All is True*, p. 33

5 See, for example, Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984); or Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*

6 *All Is True*, p. 3

7 *Ibid.*, p. 2

8 For a strongly polemical refutation of the claim that realism is either naïve or fraudulent, see Raymond Tallis, *In Defence of Realism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1988)

9 *All Is True*, p. 6

10 *Ibid.*

The individual eye, then, is located at the centre of the paradox of realism. By adopting a stance of visual authority through seeing things clearly, as they really are, realist fiction does indeed claim ‘to offer a faithful account of the empirical world’, thus attempting ‘to lend to the imaginary the warranty of reality’, yet simultaneously ‘[unmasking] its own pretense [...] through its unavoidable recourse to the signs of language’.<sup>11</sup> Realism is always wrestling with this problem, remaining in a ‘slippery, ill-definable, uncomfortable middle situation: not wholly fact, or lie, or truth, or even fiction’.<sup>12</sup>

As Furst points out, realism, by remaining poker-faced in its fictionality, has invited a number of criticisms along the lines of that levelled by Cecil Jenkins, who calls it ‘a kind of sustained lie which the reader provisionally accepts while remaining aware that the writer is necessarily selecting and re-ordering in the service of a controlled illusion’.<sup>13</sup> While a reflexive awareness of fiction’s inherent artifice as linguistic construct remains a characteristic of all fiction,<sup>14</sup> realism included, its unwillingness to draw attention to this fact has been held against it as evidence of epistemological naivety. Rather than ascribing to this view – Jenkins’ ‘lie’ seems so compromised by complicity and awareness as to cancel itself out – Furst reads realism as an illusion created from a ‘purely ludic motive [...] [calling] upon the same imaginative capacity exercised in so high a degree by children’.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, realism ‘sets greater store in upholding the integrity of the illusion than in betraying its fictive nature’,<sup>16</sup> yet this must not detract from the openly playful origins of both the realist text and the motive for reading it: an elaborate, yet consensual and knowing game in which the text pretends to be true, while the reader pretends to believe it.<sup>17</sup> Here Furst draws on Kendall Walton, who suggested a modification of the notion of ‘suspension of disbelief’ for the experience of reading realist fiction. Where a suspension of

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11 Ibid., p. 19

12 Ibid., p. 25

13 Cecil Jenkins, ‘Realism and the Novel Form’, in *The Monster in the Mirror* ed. by D. A. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 1-15 (p. 8)

14 *Metafiction*, p. 5

15 *All Is True*, p. 29

16 Ibid., p. 42

17 For a more detailed discussion on play in relation to the creation and enjoyment of fiction, see chapter four.

disbelief may be required for the reading of, say, a novel narrated by a dog,<sup>18</sup> or a short story about a 35-year-old man suddenly back in primary school, in the body of a prepubescent boy,<sup>19</sup> a shorter imaginative leap is required for a novel about a middle-class married couple bored by life in the Connecticut suburbs in the 1950s, such as Frank and April Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*.<sup>20</sup> As realism by definition ‘always remains within the compass of possibility, centred on the familiar and commonplace, recorded largely in language consistent with that of ordinary people’,<sup>21</sup> the imaginative work performed by the reader is of a different hue: rather than willingly ignore one’s knowledge that dogs do not talk, one pretends for the moment the events on the page are real, that there used to be a man called Frank Wheeler who worked at a New York-based company called Knox Business Machines; that his wife April died after self-administering an abortion in their home. Having established the ludic element of producing and reading realist fiction, we may consider realism as emerging from a point of profound awareness of its own many limitations and anxieties, its inherent artifice, while simultaneously insisting on the viability of its own techniques: a determined, rather than naïve, realism.

### ***Cecelia Tichi: Modernism and the machine***

Cecelia Tichi demonstrates American modernism’s aesthetic debt to the gear-and-girder technology that dominated American industry and architecture of the period. The ‘world of girders and gears’ is one obviously designed, constructed, fabricated; a world that ‘invites the onlooker to see its internal workings, its component parts.’<sup>22</sup>

The novel and poem, like the automobile and bridge (and gourd and acorn), exhibited formal traits of this technology. Fiction and poetry became recognizable as designed assemblies of component parts, including prefabricated parts. By this logic a poem or novel containing machine images was not necessarily a work of the gear-and-girder world. Yet fiction and poetry

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18 Such as Paul Auster’s *Timbuktu* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997)

19 Donald Barthelme, ‘Me and Miss Mandible’ in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), pp. 95-111

20 Using Auster and Barthelme as examples may seem perverse, even misguided, as one cherished strategy of postmodernist fiction is to revel in its own impossibility (cf. McHale), thus precluding the kind of immersive experience a willing suspension of disbelief may grant the reader. As Jonathan Franzen has argued, however, even the most radically experimental postmodernist fiction risks generating the kind of pleasures it would seek to disrupt (see chapter five).

21 *All Is True*, p. 30

22 *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 4-5

about flowers or fishing or chilled plums or a red wheelbarrow could enact the defining technology in its very form.<sup>23</sup>

As Tichi argues, this appropriation of technological principles would shape literature in significant ways. For the modernists as for the realists, technological advances impacted on literary form; what the camera did for realism, the train, the car, or the factory did for modernist writing. There was a new emphasis on efficiency, on avoiding wastefulness, encapsulated in Thorstein Veblen's belief that fulfilment was to be found in displaying 'a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort'<sup>24</sup> both in the world of work and leisure. Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption was indicative of the corruptive influence of leisure-class culture, symbols of wasteful wealth. By contrast, literature was to be efficient, economical, and fast. Taylorism presented new formal opportunities for writers by presenting a set of new values based upon machine technology, embracing productivity, economy, immediacy and functionalism. Streamlining and minimalism became attractive notions through the valuation of the formulation of efficient motion in space.<sup>25</sup> We find this notion in the work of literary scholar I. A. Richards, who famously stated that 'A book is a machine to think with'.<sup>26</sup> We find it in Ezra Pound's Vorticist Manifesto; in his celebration of speed; in his command to use 'no superfluous word, no adjective that does not reveal something';<sup>27</sup> in his claim that '[good] writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear'.<sup>28</sup> We find it in John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, a novel named, significantly, after a train station: the novel adds velocity to the narration by welding separate words together: 'leadentired', 'apartmenthouse', 'knottymuscled', 'tobaccosmoke', and so on.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, his many characters 'are presented as human components integrated in a large-scale, dynamic system conceived on the model of machine and structural technology'.<sup>30</sup> William Carlos Williams famously described a poem as a 'machine made of words', each component part performing a designated task: 'there can be no part, as in any

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23 Ibid., p. 16

24 Quoted in ibid., p. 62

25 Ibid., p. 79

26 *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1925), p. 1

27 'A Retrospect' in *Literary Essays*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), pp. 3-14 (p. 4)

28 *The ABC of Reading* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 32

29 *Manhattan Transfer* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1925; repr. London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 1, 72, 117, 134. This aspect of Dos Passos' prose has been pointed out by Tichi as part of a narrative form reflective of fast-paced metropolitan rhythms' (p. 198).

30 *Shifting Gears*, pp. 201-202

other machine, that is redundant'.<sup>31</sup> Thinking of novels as machines in this manner, each word a tiny cog, offers a set of highly effective tools for engaging with Yates' debut novel in particular, and his *oeuvre* in general.

Another important lesson imparted by Tichi relates to the shared concerns of nineteenth-century American realists and naturalists with the modernists that were to come, highlighting their non-dichotomous relationship. Modernist concerns with flux, fragmentation, rapid technological advancement and so on had deep roots in nineteenth-century industrialisation and urbanisation. As early as 1882, Hamlin Garland wrote: 'Nothing is stable, nothing absolute, all changes, all is relative. Poetry, painting, the drama, these too are always being modified or left behind by the changes in society from which they spring'.<sup>32</sup>

Theodore Dreiser's classic naturalist novel *Sister Carrie*, to which I will return later, presents a world defined by permanent disequilibrium and dizzying change, Carrie constantly driven forward through an America in the throes of urbanisation and industrialisation. Bearing in mind the affinities between two stylistically very different modes of literature will aid my subsequent argument concerning Yates as a practitioner of a realism that stands in a dialogic relationship with both postmodernist aesthetics as defined by McHale, Cohen, and Hassan in the introduction; and with earlier manifestations of avant-garde sensibilities.

### ***The professional-managerial classes, real and fictional***

During the 1950s and 1960s, popular discourse in the United States, be it fictional, journalistic, or sociological, was rife with speculation around the emerging professional middle classes and the suburban developments in which they lived. As the dominant middle-class position shifted from property-owning entrepreneurship to property-less wage-earning, and as the economic emphasis shifted from the production of goods to the creation of new markets to sell those goods, books like C.

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31 'Author's Introduction', *The Wedge* (Cummington: The Cummington Press, 1944), pp. 5-11 (p. 8)

32 Quoted in Donald Pizer, 'Introduction: The Problem of Definition', in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism*, ed. by Donald Pizer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1-18 (p. 6)

Wright Mills' *White Collar* and William Whyte, Jr's *The Organization Man* sought to explore the new identities that were being formed within this economic climate. Mills saw a worrying development, a downward trajectory for the middle class, even as middle-class status was becoming more widely available than ever before: the middle class were the new 'little people', alienated and apathetic.<sup>33</sup> Central to much of the suburban critique, both fictional and sociological, was the notion that the suburban environment was detrimental to its inhabitants, that its characteristics were contagious.<sup>34</sup> John Keats evoked this theme of illness through his description of suburban developments as 'identical boxes spreading like gangrene' across the country.<sup>35</sup> As suggested in the naming of his fictional suburban couple John and Mary Drone, this standardised environment rubs off on those who live there, creating dull-witted conformists. William Whyte Jr. voiced a similar concern, fearing that suburbia generated mediocrity, and would similarly evoke the notion of 'contagion' when describing social behaviours in the suburbs;<sup>36</sup> studying individual courts of houses separated by roads, Whyte identified processes of assimilation in which community values, as well as vocabularies, are spread throughout the area, while the inhabitants of each court tend to define themselves against those of other, nearby courts.<sup>37</sup> In 1961, Lewis Mumford read the suburbs as a breeding ground for isolated individuals, such as the housewife who 'only by accident is [...] likely to encounter a neighbour' on her weekly trip to 'an impersonal supermarket'; or the 'encapsulated' individual spending 'more and more [time] either in a motor car or within the cabin of darkness before a television set'.<sup>38</sup> Betty Friedan drew a parallel between the environment offered the American housewife and the environment of the Nazi concentration camps:

In the concentration camps the prisoners were forced to adopt childlike behaviour, forced to give up their individuality and merge themselves into an amorphous mass. Their capacity for self-determination, their ability to predict the future and to prepare for it, was systematically destroyed. [...]

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33 *White Collar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951; repr. 2002), p. xviii

34 The account of the debates surrounding the contagious quality of the suburbs is indebted to Dr Jo Gill's plenary address at the *New Approaches to Richard Yates* conference at Goldsmiths College, 5 June 2010.

35 *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. xi

36 *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 334

37 *Ibid.*, p. 336

38 *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961; repr. London: Pelican, 1966), pp. 582-583

When they entered the concentration camp, prisoners were almost traumatically cut off from their past adult interests. This in itself was a major blow to their identity over and above their physical confinement. [...]

They were manipulated to trap themselves; imprisoned themselves by making the concentration camp the whole world, by blinding themselves to the larger world of the past, their responsibility for the present, and their possibilities for the future. [...]

All this seems terribly remote from the easy life of the American suburban housewife. But is her house in reality a comfortable concentration camp?<sup>39</sup>

While widespread and hugely popular, the attacks on suburbia were not without their detractors. The poet and novelist Phyllis McGinley was an early defender of the suburbs, noting with some exasperation that ‘I have yet to read a book in which the suburban life was pictured as the good life or the commuter as a sympathetic figure’.<sup>40</sup> Challenging what she considered the ‘clichés’ of suburban critique, she stated simply: ‘I have lived in the country, I have lived in the city. I have lived in a middlewestern small town. But for the best 11 years of my life I have lived in Suburbia and I like it’. Instead of a mass of conformists, McGinley saw her fellow suburbanites as a diverse group of people, with a wide range of interests, ambitions and opinions. Instead of an environment characterised by dreary monotony, she saw this space as liberating: ‘And how free we are! Free of the city’s noise, of its ubiquitous doormen, of the soot on the windowsill and the radio in the next apartment’. She contrasted her first-hand experience of the suburbs with the prejudices of her city-living friends, who had been ‘aghast’ at their move from an ‘expensive, inconvenient, moderately fashionable tenement in Manhattan’: ‘To this day, they cannot understand us. You see, they read the books. They even write them’.<sup>41</sup>

In this tart observation McGinley made a point shared by others on the pro-suburban side of the debate: that the suburban critique of the time was formulated by people with little to no experience and understanding of the environment. In his sociological case study of Levittown, a suburb built entirely by one single developer, Levitt and Sons, Inc., and which opened to purchasers in June 1958, Herbert J. Gans

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39 *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963; repr. London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), pp. 306-307

40 ‘Suburbia: Of Thee I Sing’, online at [http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/pdocs/mcginley\\_suburbia.pdf](http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/pdocs/mcginley_suburbia.pdf), [accessed 1 July 2010].

41 Ibid.

explained his motivation behind the study in part as a desire to reach out to the upper middle class, its members often stern critics of suburbia: ‘Although this group is probably the single most influential set of opinion leaders in American society, its knowledge of that society is often sadly deficient’.<sup>42</sup> Decrying ‘upper middle class ethnocentrism’,<sup>43</sup> Gans’ stance was one against top-down normativity.

Another critic of the critique, Scott Donaldson, viewed it as part of ‘the champion American myth of all time – the myth of the virtuous and healthy yeoman farmer, at once individualistic and altruistic, simultaneously at one with nature and with his fellow man’.<sup>44</sup> Taking on such bestsellers as the aforementioned *The Organization Man* and *The Crack in the Picture Window*, Donaldson (who mentioned *Revolutionary Road* as a novel complicating the notion of suburbia changing people for the worse, as the problems of Frank and April reach back to childhood)<sup>45</sup> sought to puncture such myth-making, accusing Keats and others of ‘judging the modern suburb by the impossibly high standards of a nonexistent utopian past’,<sup>46</sup> in which all houses were large and comfortable, and everyone lived on charming, pleasant Elm Street. To this end, *The Organization Man* was held up as staging an accusation against which there was no defence, precisely due to its basis in myth:

Whyte, like his few predecessors and many followers, accuses the suburbs of nothing less than failing to live up to the American dream, a dream he defines as the world of the individualistic, self-sufficient yeoman. It is no wonder then that the suburbs remain passive, refusing to enter a plea when faced with this accusation; they are obviously guilty as charged. So, however, is everywhere else, though the city and small town do not face the accusation. The wonder is that anyone should have expected to find the independent yeoman living in the suburbs, in twentieth century America.<sup>47</sup>

Much like classical American realists such as William Dean Howells and later naturalists such as Theodore Dreiser had been informed by emerging sociological, legal and political discourses of the late nineteenth century, many popular novelists of the 1950s borrowed the tone and formal techniques of contemporary social analysis in

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42 *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967; repr. London: Allen Lane, 1967), p. vi

43 *Ibid.*

44 *The Suburban Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. viii-ix

45 *Ibid.*, p. 187

46 *Ibid.*, p. 8

47 *Ibid.*, p. 2

chronicling the lives of the new middle class.<sup>48</sup> For all the concern about new class positions, however, the post-war economic boom also saw unprecedented affluence within American society, an affluence which would aid in a shift of focus toward therapeutic issues and away from class consciousness among the rapidly growing middle classes, replacing Marx with Freud as the chief analytical influence.<sup>49</sup> Since Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler, there had been a strong sense of disillusionment with the Communist party among American intellectuals, who began to employ concepts of anxiety and conformity when engaging in social analysis rather than relying on the vocabularies of economics or sociology.<sup>50</sup>

Within this landscape, it is perhaps not surprising that literary realism in America was at a low ebb at the time of *Revolutionary Road*'s publication in 1961.<sup>51</sup> The dominant tendency towards literary realism at the time was arguably found in what David Castronovo has dubbed the 'naturalistic blockbuster'.<sup>52</sup> Its practitioners, authors like Herman Wouk or Sloan Wilson, would employ the tools and strategies of literary realism – everyday language, 'normal' (i.e. white, middle-class) characters, unspectacular events – to appeal to a wide, middle-class readership looking for a good read, rather than having their perceptions challenged. This was ultimately a literature of consensus, supporting the perception of the 1950s as a decade of conformity and forced calm after the far too turbulent 1940s.<sup>53</sup> From such emphatically middlebrow soil grew a literary sub-genre against which *Revolutionary Road* came to define itself:

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48 Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 136

49 *Leopards in the Temple*, p. 19

50 Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 4

51 Several critics have held up this period as a particularly fallow one for American fiction in general: see, for example, Bruce Bawer, *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and Its Critics* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1988); Robert Seguin, *Around Quitting Time: Work and Middle-Class Fantasy in American Fiction* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2001); John W. Aldridge, *In Search of Heresy: American Literature in an Age of Conformity* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1956)

52 *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit*, p. 23

53 This should not be read as an indictment of American literature in general, of course. As Castronovo points out, the 1950s were a period of great creative ferment and experimentation, seeing in novels as diverse as Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), to name but a few prominent examples. Extremes, both formal and thematic, were being sought out and explored, just not in the 'bread-and-butter naturalistic works' (Castronovo, p. 1) that rested atop bestseller lists of the period.

the novel of the unhappy, suburban couple.<sup>54</sup> Novels such as these would at times employ hyperbole in their attacks on the suburbs and their supposedly attendant sensibilities, viewing them as emblematic of a ‘diminishing national character’.<sup>55</sup> Among these, Sloan Wilson’s bestselling novel from 1955, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, occupies a particularly interesting position in relation to Yates’ novel. They share a number of external characteristics, each focusing on a married, white, middle-class couple feeling out of place in the suburbs. In addition, both novels explore a number of shared, language-related concerns: the language of advertising and its impact on thought; verbal communication within the confines of marriage; the middle-class preoccupation with psychoanalysis. This apparent similarity even caused a rejection of *Revolutionary Road* by publishers Atlantic-Little, Brown, who saw it as ‘one of the many imitators of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*’.<sup>56</sup> Wilson’s novel fits into a mid-1950s literary trend of identifying what has become known as the PMC – short for the professional-managerial classes – as the main victims of postindustrialisation and suburbanisation,<sup>57</sup> as seen with C. Wright Mills: the middle class as ‘the new little people’. Catherine Jurca charges this trend with ‘promoting a fantasy of victimization that reinvents white flight as the persecution of those who flee, turns material advantages into artefacts of spiritual and cultural oppression, and sympathetically treats affluent house owners as the emotionally dispossessed’.<sup>58</sup> In novels such as Wilson’s, owning a suburban house is recast as ‘a sign of economic weakness, suspended ambition, the *failure* of the American dream instead of its fruition’.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Tom Rath, the novel’s protagonist, is downwardly mobile, stressing his suburban middle-class life as one characterised by loss and failure, rather than relative comfort and affluence. Orphaned since childhood (his father had committed suicide after grossly mismanaging the family fortune), he was raised by his grandmother, a once wealthy woman ending her days on a crumbling estate, leaving

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54 Similarly to the point made in n. 6, novels such as these do not occupy anything like the entire field of post-war American fiction of the suburbs. Writers such as John Cheever and John Updike, with whom Yates is often grouped, offer nuanced visions of suburban life. Indeed, Rabbit Angstrom’s attempt to break free from suburbia in *Rabbit, Run* (1961) ultimately represents a moral failure: ‘The freer and more unconstrained he becomes, the lousier he looks as a human being’. (Castronovo, p. 190)

55 Robert Beuka *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 68

56 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 178

57 *White Diaspora*, p. 9

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9

59 *Ibid.*, p. 134

behind nothing but the property. As her lawyer states after her death early in the novel, Tom's grandmother was 'the last of her kind',<sup>60</sup> a statement encapsulating the changing social order.

Yet for all their shared *milieu* and superficially similar cast of characters, *Revolutionary Road* stands at an oblique angle Wilson's novel. At times, Yates' novel reads as an antithetical response to Wilson's: where Wilson maps a conceptual territory of suburban discontent harmoniously resolved, Yates sets about deliberately emptying this territory of meaning, repeatedly mocking this fantasy of victimization, and its attending fantasies of rebellion. At others, their relationship evokes Bloom's concept of 'anxiety of influence',<sup>61</sup> as Yates appropriates elements of Wilson's novel: sometimes in order to flesh them out more thoroughly, and always to draw far more troubling and pessimistic conclusions. Without attempting a complete reading of Wilson's novel, I will highlight those aspects of the book that stand in a dialogic relationship with *Revolutionary Road*, however hostile that dialogue may be.<sup>62</sup>

The opening page of Wilson's novel introduces a theme it will swiftly abandon, yet which will play a significant role in *Revolutionary Road*: that of an anthropomorphised, even malevolent, suburban environment. We immediately learn that the Raths' house has an 'evil genius for displaying proof of their weaknesses and wiping out all traces of their strengths' (Wilson, p. 3). Its 'vengeful' (*ibid.*) interior includes a crack in the plaster wall shaped like a question mark, a mocking reminder of an argument which culminated in Tom throwing an expensive vase at the wall, their subsequent efforts at DIY failing to cover up the crack. This opening gesture stands in isolation in Wilson's novel; conversely, Yates would construct a recurring theme of suburbia as a 'gruesome toyland',<sup>63</sup> a theme which informs the novel's climactic scene.<sup>64</sup>

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60 Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955; repr. Cambridge, Mass.: Robert Bentley, 1979), p. 57. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

61 Discussed in greater detail in chapter two.

62 Yates actively disliked the novel, and would criticise it in interviews, viewing Atlantic-Little, Brown's initial comparison of his draft of *Revolutionary Road* to it as a kind of 'strong medicine' that forced him to reconsider his approach to writing dialogue. (Bailey, p. 178)

63 Richard Yates, p. 51

64 For further discussion of this theme in the novel, see below.

The two writers' representation of dialogue reaches right to the heart of their differing approaches to their material. 'It's funny how hard it is for us to understand each other!' (Wilson, p. 265), Tom Rath thinks to himself, mulling over his recent past as an uncommunicative, discontented husband to Betsy, miserable in his job as speechwriter for the media tycoon Ralph Hopkins, and troubled by his recent discovery of his fathering an illegitimate child in wartime Rome. And for large parts of the novel, there is a significant gap between Tom, who resorts to cynical wisecracking over his job,<sup>65</sup> and Betsy, who is determined theirs should be a happy, wholesome and successful family. Yet this gap (which is firmly bridged by novel's end) seems strangely absent from how they actually talk to each other. Each may have trouble expressing their thoughts and feelings, but, as Yates pointed out, there is a governing honesty (even earnestness) shaping their exchanges, even when they are arguing.<sup>66</sup> As for the arguing, no matter how heated it gets, it may well still end with them declaring their love for each other, even conceding each other's points:

‘You’ve gotten to the point where you disrespect anybody who does what you can’t do,’ she said. ‘You sneer at the United Broadcasting men, and everybody else. You think you’re something special because a hell of a long while ago you were a good paratrooper. And now all you want is security, and life insurance, and money in the bank to send the kids to college twelve to fifteen years from now, and you’re scared because for six months you’ll be on trial on a new job, and you always look at the dark side of everything, and you’ve got *no guts!*’

Suddenly she broke into tears. ‘I love you, Tommy,’ she said between sobs. ‘I just had to say it.’

For several minutes the room was quiet.

‘You’re partly right,’ he said suddenly. (Wilson, p. 71)

This approach to dialogue stands in stark contrast to the characters of *Revolutionary Road*, who never really say what they mean, yet will argue fiercely in favour of opinions they do not really hold (such as Frank’s inexplicably vociferous opposition to abortion). Yates appropriated his approach to dialogue from Fitzgerald, described in ‘Some Very Good Masters’ as showing characters ‘in the very act of giving themselves away’, accidentally letting slip clues to their character they would

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65 And Tom is always fully aware that he is being ‘a cheap cynic’ (Wilson, p. 16) rather than realistic, perceptive or incisive.

66 Henry and Clark, ‘An Interview with Richard Yates’

rather keep hidden. Yates' approach to dialogue reveals a thought-provoking aspect of his work as realism: his choice of dialogue as a site of confusion and mendacity, of gaps and silences, was motivated by a commitment to capturing how people actually speak to each other, hence by a commitment to verisimilitude. The realism of his dialogue is achieved by working against notions of transparency and openness, against naturalising gestures. By contrast, the conversations found in Wilson's novel frequently seem jarringly stilted and forced (rather than artfully crafted), precisely because everyone is so forthright and open, as in the argument above. Wilson's ultimate optimism in his portrayal of Tom and Betsy's relationship, specifically the novel's belief in solving problems through honestly talking them out,<sup>67</sup> finds its equivalent in Tom's approach to the realities of the white-collar workplace and the demands made of the corporate speechwriter. Initially working for a foundation financing scientific research and the arts, Tom applies for a job at United Broadcasting for a simple reason: money. With three children, he needs more of it than the foundation can provide – money for a nicer house, in a nicer location than where they are currently biding their time: 'a crossroads where families waited until they could afford to move on to something better' (Wilson, p. 120). From the initial interview onward, Tom Rath's career arc at United Broadcasting represents a triumph of honesty and personal integrity over the potentially corrosive impact of the language and logic of consumer capitalism as it appeared in the post-war period. At the first interview, he is asked to write a short autobiography – to sell himself in writing. Refusing to play the game, Tom writes a brisk, short note, a gesture which, while highlighting some problems of capturing reality in writing (and certainly in the kind of writing the corporation is asking him to produce), lands him a second interview, and ultimately, a job as a speechwriter for the president of the company. The job in question involves writing a speech intended to promote the creation of a committee increasing public understanding of mental health. There is some speculation around the motives behind this project: Tom's friend, company cynic Bill Ward,<sup>68</sup> suggests it

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67 The problem of Tom's illegitimate child and the child's mother Maria now living in poverty is solved by Tom simply telling Betsy about the whole situation: the wartime affair (he was already engaged to Betsy), the child, the trust fund he intends to set up. They argue, and she drives off, but ultimately returns, more loving than ever. Similarly, he deprives his wartime experiences (which included killing 17 men) of their traumatising edge by finally talking to Betsy about them. For a discussion of Yates' treatment of soldiers (not) talking about the war, see chapter three.

68 Note the pattern of cynicism as the default setting for white-collar males.

may all be in aid of boosting Ralph Hopkins' public profile, a suggestion that, incidentally, turns out to be entirely wrong, with Hopkins' motives beyond reproach. As Tom begins work on the speech, and as one draft after another is rejected, he is increasingly concerned about his abilities, increasingly unsure of what they are asking of him. His concerns reach a point of culmination when he sees what is supposed to be the final draft, thirty pages of repetitions, platitudes and slogans: 'Good Lord, he thought, they're going to sell mental health the way they sell cigarettes!' (*Ibid.*, p. 201) In the wake of this discovery, Tom agonises over whether to tell Hopkins what he really thinks, as he worries this will render him jobless. After another argument with Betsy, who does not want him to turn into a 'cheap cynical yes-man' (*ibid.*, p. 205), Tom decides to be truthful. To his surprise, Hopkins appreciates his honesty, and so they start working on yet another draft. The ultimate success of this final version, all sloganeering exorcised, leads to Tom's promotion to a permanent position on the mental health committee, and later as Hopkins' personal assistant. It soon becomes apparent to Tom that he is unwilling to mirror Hopkins' work habits (work habits which have seen his marriage wither away and his socialite daughter elope with a much older, twice-divorced playboy), and so he eventually simply tells him, relying on the honesty and integrity that have served him so well:

'I don't think I'm the kind of guy who should try to be a big executive. I'll say it frankly: I don't think I have the willingness to make the sacrifices. I don't want to give up the time. I'm trying to be honest about this. I want the money. Nobody likes money better than I do. But I'm just not the kind of guy who can work evenings and week ends and all the rest of it forever.' (*Ibid.*, p. 277)

The strategy pays off, with Hopkins allowing Tom to devote his energies solely to the mental health committee, even revealing plans to move its headquarters to South Bay (where Tom lives), thus removing the commute from Tom's schedule.

This emphasis on telling the truth, on talking it out, shapes the entire novel. It shapes Tom's career arc, as well as his relationship with Betsy. When the novel problematises the benefits of full disclosure, it is only fleetingly: Tom deliberately downplays his chances of getting the job with Hopkins by exaggerating the number of applicants in order to keep Betsy's hopes down, so as to spare her any disappointment; when we learn of Hopkins' psychoanalysis, some concerns are raised about the validity of this practice. Yet it quickly becomes apparent that the scepticism

is geared towards incompetent analysts, rather than the analysis itself: while Hopkins is able to trace his compulsion to succeed back to his mother's contempt for his 'cheerful, rather ineffectual' father (*ibid.*, p. 172), the analyst had claimed to discern a guilt complex rooted in fear of homosexuality. The novel itself embodies a kind of talking cure, solving all problems, be they marital or professional, by discussing them openly. As an ironic aside, it is perhaps worth noting that this is a sentiment that has since been absorbed by the language of advertising itself, so roundly defeated in Wilson's novel. 'It's good to talk' is a slogan for BT/Telecoms at the time of writing.

The novel ultimately holds up Tom and Betsy Rath for the reader's unambiguous sympathy. When Betsy comes back after Tom's revelation regarding Maria and his son in Rome, the following dialogue is staged without a trace of destabilising irony:

'Ever since you came back to me tonight, I've been remembering a line from a poem that used to sound ironic and bitter. It doesn't sound that way any more. Tonight, for a little while at least, I feel it's true.'

'What is it?'

"God's in his Heaven", he said, "all's right with the world." (Ibid., p. 301)

Conversely, Yates creates a textual universe where no one is free from the corrosive processes of late modernity, least of all the protagonists. Laced with irony, the novel negotiates the popular vocabularies of the time, holding up the discourses of the everyday as entirely hollow, contributing to an overall sense of epistemological uncertainty for its characters. In this way, the novel's sceptical take on language complicates any notion of language as able to accurately portray material reality, especially as the linguistic hollowness in the novel directly drives the narrative. The book follows Frank and April Wheeler, a married couple living with their two children in a recent suburban development on the east coast in the 1950s. In describing this environment, Yates evokes a deliberate sense of artifice and two-dimensionality:

The Players, coming out of their various kitchen doors and hesitating for a minute to button their coats or pull on their gloves, would see a landscape in which only a few very old, weathered houses seemed to belong; it made their own homes look as weightless and

impermanent, as foolishly misplaced as a great many bright new toys that had been left outdoors overnight and rained on. Their automobiles didn't look right either – unnecessarily wide and gleaming in the colors of candy and ice cream, seeming to wince at each splatter of mud, they crawled apologetically down the broken roads that led from all directions to the deep, level slab of Route Twelve. Once there the cars seemed able to relax in an environment of their own, a long bright valley of colored plastic and plate glass and stainless steel – KING KONE, MOBILGAS, SHOPORAMA, EAT – but eventually they had to turn off, one by one [...](*Road*, p. 5)

The sense of stylised infantilisation that defines this world – all toys, candy, and silly names – serves a dual purpose: to comment on suburban life in post-war America, thereby demonstrating realist intent; and – crucially – to foreground the artifice of the text itself, emphasise its constructedness.

Departing from the approaches to Yates suggested by Castronovo and Dickstein, the American critic Jerome Klinkowitz has framed Yates within an updated incarnation of the novel of manners, namely ‘the novel of manners in a post-realistic age’.<sup>69</sup> Klinkowitz adapts this strand of the novel to the age of semiotics: the characters in *Revolutionary Road* understand that the world is a system of signs to negotiate and manipulate. I wish to extend and elaborate on Klinkowitz’s argument: the Wheelers are indeed living in a world of signs. However, the signs themselves are distorted, the link between the signifier and signified corrupted, all meaning drained. So the emphasis on surfaces inherent to the self-conscious negotiation of a sign system here becomes a recurring theme of surfaces covering nothing, or at best something vague and insubstantial; of unsuccessful performances.<sup>70</sup> The opening chapter, describing April’s community theatre’s embarrassing failure on opening night in excruciating detail, serves as a proleptic introduction of the theme. The very first sentence is heavy with anticipated disaster: ‘The final dying sounds of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there, silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium’ (*Road*, p. 1). As well as preparing the reader for an awkward evening of amateur dramatics, this sentence

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69 Klinkowitz, *The New American Novel of Manners*, p. 1

70 The theme of performance is the subject of Kate Charlton-Jones’ essay ‘Social Realism and Performance in Richard Yates’ Work, with Particular Reference to *Revolutionary Road*’, in *Icfai Journal of American Literature* 1:3 (2008). Like myself, Charlton-Jones seeks to complicate the notion of Richard Yates as a realist, and draws on the staged artifice of characters’ behaviour to illustrate her point.

contains the novel's major themes and events in condensed form. 'The final dying sounds' suggests death; the dress rehearsal setting and the naming of the Laurel Players both evoke performance or acting; the characters' lack of autonomy, their locked-in state, is foreshadowed by the use of the word 'helpless'; the 'silent' which accompanies it points toward the novel's closing image, of Howard Givings switching off his hearing aid.

Viewing themselves as bohemian free thinkers stranded in suburbia, Frank and April concoct a plan to move to Paris, so that Frank, who has long held onto an image of himself as an 'intense, nicotine-stained, Jean-Paul Sartre sort of man' (*ibid.*, p. 23), can 'find himself' (*ibid.*, p. 109). Before they can do that, however, Frank needs to resign from his job in what is referred to as 'something called the Sales Promotion Department' (*ibid.*, p. 77) of Knox Business Machines, a growing computing firm. Both Knox the company and Frank's job within it are emblematic of the emerging white-collar world in which promotion and sales are becoming increasingly important in the marketplace,<sup>71</sup> and where machines are used to crunch numbers rather than, say, build furniture. The use of the words 'something called' obviously highlights the vagueness of what Frank actually does for a living, a vagueness reflected by his limited investment in the job, which he had initially taken as a kind of joke following April's first, unplanned, pregnancy, Knox being the company his father had worked for. Yet leaving becomes a problem when Frank practically by accident incites the interest of the general sales manager of the Electronics Division. Hurriedly, in order to avoid problems with his immediate superior, Frank has produced a brochure entitled 'Speaking of Production Control', a piece of sleight of hand employing the most dynamic corporate-speak to cover up the fact that 'he didn't quite know what he was talking about' (*Road*, p. 124). To his surprise, the brochure proves a big success, triggering ideas of making a whole series of 'Speaking of...' titles, with Frank at the helm. As well as being a humorous take on the emptiness of corporate jargon – a predecessor to what has become known as 'buzzword bingo' in the twenty-first, in which employees tick off boxes containing stock phrases of the business world during meetings – this series of events evokes Tony Tanner's discussion of entropy as a dominant theme in post-war American literature, as outlined in the introduction. Knox

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71 *White Collar*, p. 67

Business Machines becomes a site of linguistic entropy, where words are put to work until they lose all meaning. A minor, yet telling example of how Knox subjects words and names to a form of mechanical process can be found in the name of a former sales manager, Otis Fields, who had denied Frank's father a promotion several decades earlier. As Frank discusses the computing industry with the newly impressed sales manager Bart Pollock, he asks whether Bart remembers Fields, which he doesn't, until he realises that they're talking about *Oat* Fields (*Road*, p. 199). The institutionalised informality between men of the professional-managerial classes, which automatically turns William into Bill and Robert into Bob, also turns Otis into Oat, whether it is a name or not. As it turns out, Frank's meaningless brochure proves pivotal. Tempted by the increase in pay and status, Frank is no longer so certain about the idea of moving to Paris. Or rather, he seeks to incorporate the previously unimaginable role of successful businessman into his self-image as cultured, urbane bohemian, now daydreaming about 'a Henry-James sort of Venetian countess' telling him how 'you and Mrs Wheeler are so very unlike one's preconceived idea of American business people' (*ibid.*, 208); I will return to this particular daydream later. Crucially, the vocabulary Frank and April use to create their identities is shown to be as drained of meaning and substance as Frank's 'Speaking of Production Control'. Frank's aforementioned idea of himself as an 'intense, nicotine-stained, Jean Paul Sartre sort of man' had, during his twenties, appeared to him as a hindrance with regards to erotic conquests, as he was unwilling to go for 'intense, nicotine-stained, Jean Paul Sartre sorts of women' (*ibid.*, p. 23). For Frank, Existentialism is of little importance compared to the seduction of pretty women. Likewise, when he many years later decides to seduce Maureen Grube, a secretary at Knox, he draws on the death of Dylan Thomas, the 'myth of Free Enterprise', philosophy, and how 'this generation was the least vital and most terrified in modern times' (*ibid.*, p. 96) to impress her. Frank's available vocabulary of high culture and social analysis is all surface, a series of noises employed to get Maureen into bed, an elaborate mating call.

The brittleness of the Wheelers' self-image as cultured bohemians is further highlighted by their reliance on clichés: both in their thoughts and in their conversations, they rely on tired phrases and imagery borrowed from the mass culture

they claim to despise.<sup>72</sup> After the Laurel Players embarrassment, Frank considers how he had imagined the evening to turn out:

[Himself] rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand ('If only I weren't so *nervous*, Frank!'); himself sitting spellbound in pride and then rising to join a thunderous ovation as the curtain fell; himself glowing and dishevelled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss ('Was it really good, darling? Was it really good?'); and then the two of them, stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell, holding hands under the table while they talked it all out. (*Ibid.*, p. 13)

These imagined scenarios are clearly informed by the kind of sanitised conservatism he otherwise rails against. In fact, playing with his children quickly bores him; and his fantasy of himself as a reassuring, central presence, a stable patriarch whose validation and comfort April seeks, has little to do with their actual relationship at this moment in time. A similar deliberately false note is struck when April first suggests they move to Paris so that Frank, we recall, can 'find himself'; and she says he is 'the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You're a man' (*ibid.*, p. 115). Not only is this the kind of dialogue normally performed with swelling strings in the background, just before the camera's gaze shifts from the embracing couple to a roaring fireplace, it is also pre-emptively, and furiously, contradicted by April herself. During the first argument of the book, she taunts him: '*Look* at you, and tell me how by any *stretch* of the imagination you can call yourself a man!' (*Ibid.*, pp. 27-28)

The setting, or rather set, for much of Frank and April's performance is their house; 'really rather a sweet little house', (*ibid.*, p. 29) as their realtor and local busybody Mrs. Givings calls it. Their behaviour here repeatedly appears as if following a script; when their friends Shep and Milly Campbell come over for drinks, they immediately assume their positions in a social play bereft of spontaneity, every facial expression and gesture in character.

Milly Campbell dropped her shoes and squirmed deep into the sofa cushions, her ankles snug beneath her buttocks and her uplifted face crinkling into a good sport's smile – not the prettiest girl in the world, maybe, but cute and quick and fun to have around.

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72 For a more detailed discussion of Richard Yates' treatment of cliché, see chapter five.

Beside her, Frank slid down on the nape of his spine until his cocked leg was as high as his head. His eyes were already alert for conversational openings and his thin mouth already moving in the curly shape of wit, as if he were rolling a small, bitter lozenge on his tongue.

Shep, massive and dependable, a steady influence on the group, set his meaty knees wide apart and worked his tie loose with muscular fingers to free his throat for gusts of laughter.

And finally, the last to settle, April arranged herself with careless elegance in the sling chair, her head thrown back on the canvas to blow sad, aristocratic spires of cigarette smoke at the ceiling. They were ready to begin. (*Ibid.*, p. 58-59)

The house itself reflects the couple's view of themselves: like the Wheelers see themselves as a little island of Bohemia in an ocean of conformity, their small wooden house is initially presented as a respite from the Revolutionary Hill Estates nearby. Still, whatever potential the house may have initially held is proven illusory, the frequently watched television in the corner revealing a closer alliance with mainstream culture than the Wheelers would care to admit. The picture window, a staple of suburban housing, is grudgingly accepted by Frank upon first viewing it with the words 'I don't suppose one picture window is going to destroy our personalities' (*ibid.*, p. 29). As their domestic drama unfolds, the picture window frames them like a TV screen frames a soap opera.

A crucial aspect of the novel is found in the way *everyone* puts on a performance. It is not simply a case of a suburban couple lying to themselves and others; this is the only available mode of behaviour. Shep Campbell, born into a world of nannies, private tutors and tartan kilts from Bergdorf Goodman, spent his youth perfecting the part of an 'ill-dressed, hell-raising lout' (*ibid.*, pp. 137-138) until now, all grown up, his belated aspirations to culture and intellectual sophistications are forever compromised. Steve Kovick, a peripheral character who only appears in one scene (although one of great significance, and to which I will return later), is the leader of a barely competent band at a 'rundown beer-and-pizza joint', yet acts with 'negligent grandeur', like a great artist at the top of his game (*ibid.*, p. 247). John Givings provides a particularly interesting example. As a paranoid schizophrenic, he is on the surface located outside the social structures within which Frank and April find themselves. He combines confrontational fury with a knack for perceiving the flaws in others, if not in himself. His insanity notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to simply read him as a kind of return of the repressed, or an uncomfortable reminder

of the side effects of suburban conformity, as Dickstein does. Rather, there is a clear sense that he quite relishes the role of ‘madman and truth teller’.<sup>73</sup> Like Frank, he is an educated man: a former academic who used to enjoy long conversations with his colleagues about the ‘emptiness’ of life (*Road*, p. 189). It follows that he, like the Wheelers, is well versed in bohemian outsider myths:

You want to play house, you got to have a job. You want to play very *nice* house, very *sweet* house, then you got to have a job you don’t like. Great. This is the way ninety-eight-point-nine per cent of the people work things out, so believe me buddy you’ve got nothing to apologize for. Anybody comes along and says ‘Whaddya do it for?’ you can be pretty sure he’s on a four-hour pass from the State funny-farm; all agreed. (*Ibid.*, p. 187)

This little monologue is permeated with nothing so much as smugness. He is just so pleased with himself, with his implicitly chosen position outside the 98.9 per cent – an imagined statistic simply employed to give an air of gravity to his words. His overly informal speech patterns are an obvious affectation, a deliberately conspicuous rejection of his parents’ bourgeois tastes and behaviour (as is his preference for sherry on the rocks, served in a highball). It is part of a tough-guy performance, resembling Frank as a younger man, back when he was working as a longshoreman and enjoying a reputation as an ‘intense, nicotine-stained, Jean Paul Sartre sort of man’. While his mental instability is real enough, he is not above self-consciously manoeuvring the mythos associated with such instability.

The notion of the centred subject, the autonomous self, is a category shown to be constantly under attack. This is of particular interest in relation to Fredric Jameson’s argument (which I will return to) that the realist novel, upon emerging in the nineteenth century, produced, rather than simply reflected, the new world of industry, measurable time, market demands and empiricism; through creating a referent while simultaneously claiming to be its realistic reflection, the realist novel would shape the public consciousness, forming the kind of subjects which would be willing to embrace these changes.<sup>74</sup> Conversely, Yates repeatedly highlights the hollowness of precisely the kind of complicit subjects Jameson accuses realism, as part of a larger bourgeois cultural revolution, of generating. I have already pointed out the artifice inherent to

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73 Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple*, p. 138

74 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981; repr. London: Routledge, 2002), p. 138

the way characters behave, the recurring theme of poor performances. Furthermore, the suburbs themselves take on a contagious quality, threatening to alter the subjects who occupy them, a process Frank and April try and resist: ‘Economic circumstance might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were’ (*Road*, p. 20). Those who don’t resist end up as chattering, ‘beaten, amiable husks of men’ (*ibid.*, p. 102), their selves eroded by their absurd jobs, their dull home lives.

Towards the end of the book, this contagious quality is intensified, as their living environment starts resembling a monstrous, cruel organism. April dies following a self-administered abortion gone wrong (more on this later), and Frank, running out of the house in despair, finds his surroundings wholly unsuited to his emotional state:

The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. Even at night, as if on purpose, the development held no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves. Proud floodlights were trained on some of the lawns, on some of the neat front doors and on the hips of some of the berthed, ice-cream colored automobiles.

A man running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place. Except for the whisk of his shoes on the asphalt and the rush of his own breath, it was so quiet that he could hear the sounds of television in the dozing rooms behind the leaves – a blurred comedian’s shout followed by dim, spastic waves of laughter and applause, and then the striking-up of a band. Even when he veered from the pavement, cut across someone’s back yard and plunged into the down-sloping woods, intent on a madman’s shortcut to Revolutionary Road, even then there was no escape: the house lights beamed and stumbled happily along with him among the twigs that whipped his face, and once when he lost his footing and fell scrabbling down a rocky ravine, he came up with a child’s enamelled tin beach bucket in his hand. (*Ibid.*, p. 323)

This toyland, the domain of what Frank has disdainfully considered ‘beaten, amiable husks of men’ – the word ‘husk’ obviously evoking the theme of hollowness – is having its revenge on him, mocking his situation. By describing the estate as ‘not [...] designed to accommodate a tragedy’, the passage comments not only on Frank’s despair, but also on the literary mode of tragedy and the incompatibility of art’s grand gestures with the banality of suburban life in the post-war period. The estate becomes the site of Frank’s ultimate emasculation. His manliness, or lack thereof, has been a recurring theme, as seen in April either denying or saluting it. Like the hollowed-out subjectivity generated by their material conditions, the category of masculinity is fragile, unstable, ultimately destroyed. As their children are taken away to live with

their aunt and uncle, Frank is left stripped of all his defences against his contagious surroundings. Recalled through the perspective of Shep, Frank is no longer his opinionated, pugnacious old self; he is just ‘so damned mild!’, his laugh a ‘soft, simpering giggle’ (*ibid.*, p. 330), unable to produce any discernible emotion or assert himself in any way. The old surface of intellectual bluster has been usurped by the ‘beaten, amiable husk’ so familiar from his commuter train ride into New York every morning. The transformation’s ultimate manifestation is represented by Frank’s embrace of psychoanalysis. Earlier, Frank sneeringly referred to psychoanalysis as ‘everybody’s intellectual and spiritual sugar-tit’ (*ibid.*, p. 65). Now, Shep finds himself bored by Frank’s repeated ‘my analyst this’ and ‘my analyst that’ (*ibid.*, p. 331). No longer interested in society at large, the inward turn of Frank’s gaze echoes the shift from historical/sociological to Freudian analysis mentioned earlier.

As Frank’s trajectory removes his outer markers of identity – his opinions, his posture, his displays of temper – he is literally decentred within the narrative, rendering him a ghost-like presence in the text in which he has, until now, been the protagonist. The novel’s final chapter is presented through the previously peripheral points of view of the Wheelers’ friends and neighbours. Shep’s evaluation of Frank as mild and boring follows a growing feeling of annoyance with his wife Milly, who in the months following April’s death tells the story ‘many, many times’ (*ibid.*, p. 326). In the telling and retelling of the tragic event, Milly distorts the story, adding saccharine poignancy and a kind of ‘voluptuous narrative pleasure’ (*ibid.*, p. 327). The final chapter thus stages a corrosion of the preceding narrative, turning a rich text into neatly structured gossip. As she revels in yet another account, Shep steps outside so as not to have to hear the rest, and so that he can let out a few sobs in his grief over April, the long-standing object of his secret affections. Yet even his grief threatens to be coloured by the kind of exaggeration Milly performs, his sobs taking on a theatrical quality as he ‘exaggerate[s] their depth with unnecessary shudders’ (*ibid.*, p. 332). Within Yates’ text, no human utterance is free from distortion.

The novel’s final scene represents a definitive move towards silence, away from the noises that constitute everyday language in the novel. Mrs Givings, the Wheelers’ estate agent, is talking ceaselessly to her husband about the new residents and their congeniality, and how they differ so from the ‘neurotic’, ‘trying’ Frank and April (*ibid.*, p. 336). Where Milly had distorted their narrative by embellishing, Mrs

Givings distorts by reduction. Her limited knowledge of the Wheelers reduces their story to an observation on how they had let their house depreciate. Presented from the point of view of her husband, her monologue is cut short as he switches off his hearing aid, and ‘a welcome, thunderous sea of silence’ is all that remains (*ibid.*, p. 337). It is a concluding image of total refusal, extending to the very nature, the very *possibility*, of narrative itself. The system of everyday language navigated by the characters, the system which again and again has been shown up as a site of confusion and uncertainty, is rejected. Without the available option of meaningful language, silence is the only alternative.

This move away from words, away from narrative, resonates with literary figures not normally associated with realism. As mentioned in the introduction, Ihab Hassan identifies this move towards silence following a disillusionment with language as a cornerstone of postmodern literature, tracing a genealogy from de Sade, via Hemingway and Kafka, to Genet and Beckett. This tendency finds its most extreme embodiment in Burroughs’ uncompromising position: ‘to speak is to lie’, a claim which enables the ‘neo-Dada collages’ borne out of the cut-up method.<sup>75</sup> Obviously, Yates was no neo-Dadaist. Nevertheless, his persistent exposure of fraudulent language reveals an engagement with issues more commonly associated with postmodernism. Incongruous resonances are heard when John Barth writes, in the short story ‘Title’ from the collection *Lost in the Funhouse* from 1968:

Whatever happens, the ending will be deadly. At least let’s have just one real conversation. Dialogue or monologue? What has it been from the first? Don’t ask me. What is there to say at this late date? Let me think, I’m trying to think. Some old story. Or. Or? Silence.<sup>76</sup>

Barth’s story, a self-conscious dramatisation of the struggle to write when ‘everything’s been said already, over and over’ (*ibid.*, p. 105), displays his concern with the exhaustion of literary forms, a concern previously voiced in his famous essay from 1967, ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’. In this essay, Barth bemoaned the prevalence of what he referred to as ‘technically old-fashioned artist[s]’, writers

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75 Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, pp. 88; 249

76 In *Lost in the Funhouse* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1968), pp. 105-113 (p. 106). Further references to this story will be given after quotations in the text.

remaining within the nineteenth-century novel format, which he found to be used up, its moment having been and gone:

A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary [...] It's dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac, when the real technical question seems to me to be how to succeed not even Joyce and Kafka, but those who've *succeeded* Joyce and Kafka and are now in the evenings of their own careers.<sup>77</sup>

Initially this – which Barth himself in *The Friday Book* would denounce as ‘a very silly thing’,<sup>78</sup> – may read as a direct attack on Yates himself: Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* was an admitted influence on *Revolutionary Road*, Emma Bovary’s bored provincial existence echoing throughout. The novel certainly uses the language of the day to engage with contemporary people and topics. But at the core of the novel lies a subversive engagement with the discourses of the everyday which has fuelled the realist novel from its emergence, from marital arguments through the vocabulary of psychoanalysis to business jargon and on to the courtship rituals of the mid-twentieth century. Barth described his novels *Giles Goat-Boy* and *The Sot-Weed Factor* as ‘novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author’.<sup>79</sup> Deliberately, ostentatiously artificial, these novels locate themselves in a moment after the novel’s glory days, when the traditional form of the novel is only accessible through self-conscious play, rather than by earnestly following the rules. Yates’ strategy of maintaining within the territory of suburban realism while simultaneously staging a corrosion of everyday language demonstrates the potential reflexivity of the realist mode: anticipating and antagonising Barth in equal measure, his novel demonstrates how realism is capable of existing on a continuum with postmodernism, denying the disavowal postmodernists such as Barth would perform.

The novel’s concluding move towards silence should also be read against Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. So far, this chapter has focused on *Revolutionary Road* in relation to the literature of its time. In order to appreciate how the novel enacts a

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77 ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’ in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1984), pp. 62-75 (pp. 66-67).

78 *Ibid.*, p. 67 n.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 72

recoding of realism, tweaking the form while remaining within its parameters, we may consider it in relation to its ancestors, mapping its origins and departures. As far as ancestors are concerned, no single novel more clearly stands out as an influence on Yates' debut novel than *Madame Bovary*. By his own admission, it came to stand 'as a model, if not a guide' during the writing of the novel, wanting 'that kind of balance and quiet resonance on every page, that kind of foreboding mixed with comedy, that kind of inexorable destiny in the heart of a lonely, romantic girl' for his own work.<sup>80</sup> Writing of the period when *Revolutionary Road* was beginning to take shape in Yates' mind, Blake Bailey offers some telling clues to the novel's combined rootedness in Flaubertian realism and keen sense of the contemporary, its ability to engage with the postmodern condition through employment of realist tools:

The only hope of escape was to write a successful novel – the raw material of which, he sensed, would be the stuff of his own predicament. But he wanted to transcend the merely personal, to avoid the pitfalls of sentiment and self-pity. And before he wrote a word he wanted above all to purge the stale residue of PR work from his brain; what better antidote than the great hater of the bourgeoisie and their cant, Flaubert, whose impersonal masterpiece provided the perfect goad at the time.<sup>81</sup>

The 'bourgeoisie and their cant' come under strong fire in both novels, yet the nature of the cant in question had changed a great deal since the nineteenth century, and the novel's treatment of the middle classes' available vocabularies departs from Flaubert's in interesting ways. The flat, empty language that is the object of Flaubert's scorn is one that is deeply invested in the Enlightenment, in what Jurgen Habermas described as its desire to employ knowledge to 'the enrichment of everyday life'.<sup>82</sup> Bringing science to the everyday is very much part of the foibles of the novel's mediocre men, such as Charles Bovary, provincial doctor, or Homais, the pharmacist who slyly writes up his own ventures into scientific research while reporting on the trade fair in the local paper, informing its readers in a footnote of sending a 'treatise on cider to the Agricultural Society' (Flaubert, p. 166). By making his boast a footnote, Flaubert stresses its insignificance while mocking his appropriation of

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80 'Some Very Good Masters'

81 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 175

82 'Modernity, An Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. 3-15 (p. 8)

scholarly convention as a thin veneer of Enlightenment valuation of knowledge covering a desire for self-promotion. Homais, having ‘lately read of a marvellous new treatment for clubfeet’ (*ibid.*, p. 186), persuades Charles to perform this new surgery on Hippolyte, the stableman. The operation is a fiasco, leading to Hippolyte’s amputation, another dig at selfish ambition masked by ideas of scientific progress.

The influence on Yates’ treatment of bourgeois language, from corporate jargon to armchair psychoanalysis, should be obvious. Available vocabularies perform an obfuscating function, are deprived of any real meaning. Yet by juxtaposing the endings of the two novels, it becomes apparent that the scepticism displayed by Flaubert, his keen sense of the limitations of language in general,<sup>83</sup> are both somehow heightened in *Revolutionary Road*. In a parting gesture of embittered cynicism, Flaubert rewards Homais’ efforts of self-promotion with the Legion of Honour. The treatise on cider, the inflamed rhetoric of reform in the *Rouen Beacon*, his sycophantic ‘[wooing of] Authority’ (*ibid.*, p. 358), all pay off. ‘Authority respects and public opinion protects him’ (*ibid.*, p. 361). John Givings’ final embrace of silence suggests a rejection, withdrawing in disgust as a possible response to the word-clutter of everyday life. It is not heroic – it is a gesture of quite shocking brutality – but in its borderline nihilism, the novel’s concluding image seems to steer the text toward a black hole. As an act of textual self-destruction, it ensures the validity of discussing the novel in terms of the avant-garde gestures discussed above, yet this does not deny the novel’s standing as a realist text. Rather, it demonstrates what realism is capable of accommodating, the flexibility of its tradition.

### ***Emma and April***

Having discussed the ‘bourgeoisie and their cant’, it is time to scrutinise the influence of Flaubert’s ‘impersonal masterpiece’. Like Flaubert, Yates achieves a sense of impersonality in his writing through a consistent commitment to free indirect speech. The novel is almost entirely without authorial comment, opting instead to filter its

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83 As summed up in this previously quoted simile: ‘like a cracked kettle on which we strum out tunes to make a bear dance, when we would move the stars to pity’.

narrative through the minds of the characters.<sup>84</sup> As I outlined in the introduction, such an approach openly invites the reader to actively participate in the making of meaning, pushing the reader to unpack the ironies and contradictions of the text without the guiding hand of an interventionist, commenting narrator. Barring the opening paragraphs of the first chapter of the novel's third part, omniscience, with its attending sense of epistemological authority, is largely absent. It is a novel of particular perspectives cut off from each other. This sense of particularity, even fragmentation, extends beyond the novel's sense of perspective to inform its representation of character. In particular, the representation of April both evokes and rewrites Emma Bovary in ways that highlight the evolution of realism in Yates' hands.

As Peter Brooks argues, Emma Bovary is a character consisting of fetishised fragments that 'never quite [seem] to cohere into a whole', despite being the novel's 'central object of vision'.<sup>85</sup> Totality is eschewed in favour of an almost atomising eye for detail:

The fresh air played around her, ruffling up stray wisps of hair at the nape of her neck, setting the strings of her apron dancing and fluttering like streamers at her hips. Once when the thaw had set in, and the bark of the trees was running with water and the snow melting on the roofs of the farm buildings, she turned back at the door and went to fetch her parasol. She opened it out; it was of shot silk, and the sun shining through it cast flickering lights over the white skin of her face. (Flaubert, p. 30)

We see not her face, but the skin of her face, an edifice simultaneously eroticised and shorn of identity and cohesion. Recalling the discussion of Jakobson's bipolar model of language in the introduction, the novel enacts an extreme commitment to the metonymic pole resulting in a rejection of totality.

The (non-)representation of April's death performs a destabilising function: a culmination of a larger elusiveness, the final act of a gazed-upon female character simultaneously inviting and slipping away from the gaze of readers and (male) characters alike. From the novel's opening chapter, April is aligned with the spectacle

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84 This is another point of departure from Sloan Wilson's novel discussed above. Wilson provides the reader with any amount of helpful clues and pieces of information that can only issue from the implied author, such as 'South Bay is a small town not far from Stamford' (Wilson, p. 20). By contrast, the narration of *Revolutionary Road* is almost exclusively governed by the horizons of its characters.

85 *Realist Vision*, p. 55

and the spectacle's collapse: there she is, up on stage, looking 'lovely', moving 'with the shyly sensual grace of maidenhood' (*Road*, p. 7); there she is, shortly after, having 'lost her grip' on the performance, awkwardly alternating 'between false theatrical gestures and a white-knuckled immobility' (*ibid.*, p. 9). Like Flaubert, Yates always emphasises significant detail (an aspect of his writing I will return to in later chapters), and here this strategy is employed with a brutal rigour, as every element of the performance's slow, steady collapse is captured. Yet however eagle-eyed and authoritative the narrative gaze, crucial elements of April's emotional life remain obscured to those around her, and to the reader. Her parents are long dead – father by suicide, mother by alcohol – and so all Frank knows of them comes from stories April tells him, stories in which they appear 'as alien to his sympathetic understanding as anything in the novels of Evelyn Waugh'; 'mysteriously rich and careless and cruel' (*ibid.*, p. 38). Yet while April was abandoned by her parents at birth and brought up by a succession of aunts, she insists she loved them, a fact Frank is unable to accept or understand: her inner life remains illegible. All the while, her appearance remains striking, inviting an admiring, masculine gaze that can never possess her: she can make the act of tapping ash from her cigarette 'a maneuver of classic beauty' (*ibid.*, p. 127), and, like an experienced television actress, she knows how to catch the best light (*ibid.*, p. 126). It is worth stressing the significance of April's mediation through the realm of theatre, from the opening onwards. There is a level of explicit self-consciousness in the novel's treatment of her, a rendering visible of the mechanics of the gaze in realist representation: she is not just gazed on and/or desired, she is up on stage, lit up by footlights.<sup>86</sup> Yet for smitten Shep, as for Frank, April eludes understanding, resists interpretation at the point of physical conquest. When they drunkenly have sex in the back of Shep's Pontiac, it is the 'fulfilment of his love at last' (*ibid.*, p. 261); for April, it is something else entirely, though what we can't be sure:

'Oh, April, this isn't just a thing that happened. Listen. This is what I've always – I love you.'

'No. Don't say that.'

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86 Yet this self-consciousness remains contained within the confines of realism. Brooks' notion of realism as 'maximally reproductive of the world it is modelling for play purposes' (Brooks, p. 2) remains intact. April is an amateur actress; her being on stage does not constitute an illusion-breaking device, however suggestive of artifice it may be. To borrow a phrase from theatre, the fourth wall is left in place. This aspect of his writing, this disguised metacommentary, will be discussed in greater detail in chapter five.

'But it's true. I've always loved you. I'm not just being – listen.'

'Please, Shep. Let's just be quiet for a moment, and then you can take me home.'

With a little shock he thought of what he'd steadfastly put out of his mind all evening, what had occurred to him briefly and not at all as a deterrent in the heat of his desire, and now for the first time began to take on an oppressive moral weight: she was pregnant. 'Okay,' he said, 'I'm not forgetting anything.' He freed one of his hands to rub his eyes and his mouth with vigor, and then he sighed. 'I guess you must think I'm kind of an idiot or something.'

'Shep, it's not that.'

There was just enough light to show him where her face was, not enough for him to see its expression or even to tell whether it had any expression at all.

'It's not that. Honestly. It's just that I don't know who you are'

There was a silence. 'Don't talk riddles,' he whispered.

'I'm not. I really don't know who you are.'

If he couldn't see her face, at least he could touch it. He did so with a blind man's delicacy, drawing his fingertips from her temple down to the hollow of her cheek.

'And even if I did,' she said, 'I'm afraid it wouldn't help, because you see I don't know who I am either.' (*Ibid.*, pp. 261-262)

There is a resistance to interpretation at work here, a deliberate withholding of information. While Emma may somehow not add up to a coherent whole, she is nevertheless always on display, however fragmented that display may be: the 'little drops of perspiration on her bare shoulders'; the tip of her tongue sliding 'between her fine teeth to lick, drop by drop, the bottom of the glass' (Flaubert, p. 35); on horseback, 'her face slightly lowered, her hand well up and her right arm stretched out, she abandoned herself to the rhythmic motion, jogging up and down in the saddle' (*ibid.*, p. 170); and so on. April, on the other hand, keeps slipping away from those who try and get a hold on her, readers and characters alike. It is as if the eye for detail, cornerstone of realist fiction, has been subjected to an entropic process similar to that suffered by language itself in the white-collar world discussed above: the exhausted eye encountering its own limitations. While the reader has unlimited access to Frank's most private thoughts, April thwarts all attempts to understand her, even her own. Finding herself living a life determined by falsity, a life in which 'all honesty, all truth, was as far away and glimmering, as hopelessly unattainable as the world of the golden people' (*ibid.*, p. 304), the only honest and true act available to her – terminating her pregnancy – ends in death. It is an act performed in solitude, and it is an act hidden from view, unrepresented, unrepresentable, a gap in the text. Chapter

seven of the novel's third part is focalized entirely through April: we follow her as she watches Frank depart for work in the morning; as she arranges for Milly to babysit the children; as she looks over one of many discarded, 'abortive' (*ibid.*, p. 303) drafts of letters written to Frank; as she catalogues the mistakes of her life; as she remembers an achingly brief visit from her father during childhood; as she writes a note for Frank ('*Dear Frank, Whatever happens please don't blame yourself*' [*ibid.*, p. 310, original italics]); as she prepares the equipment for her abortion. The chapter's final words - 'if you wanted to do something absolutely honest, something true, it always turned out to be a thing that had to be done alone' (*ibid.*, p. 311) – sends April into the void, unreachable by husband or reader. Contrast this with Emma's death in *Madame Bovary*, represented with the same fragmented exactitude as her life: we see her swallowing a handful of poison, '[cramming it] into her mouth' (Flaubert, p. 326); we learn of the lingering, 'dreadful inky taste' in her mouth; of the 'icy coldness mounting from her feet towards her heart'; in a grim echo of the glimpse of her shoulders quoted above, of the 'drops of sweat on her blue-veined face' (*ibid.*, p. 327); of her chattering teeth, her dilated pupils, her agonised groans.

A crucial element in the novel's deeply discomforting effect is located not simply in her death, but in her death as the end result of an epiphanic embrace of truth and honesty. Truth and honesty lead not to fulfilment, peace of mind, integrity, harmony, and certainly not to Paris, but to death; literally, to nothing. The absence of this death in the text only reinforces this point.

### ***The exhausted engine of capitalist desire***

Walter Benn Michaels argues that the critical strategy of evaluating your culture from an elevated vantage point is not, strictly speaking, possible. Or rather, if it were possible to transcend your own culture, you would no longer be part of it, and so no longer have any terms of evaluation left. A culture is not something you like or dislike, but something in which you exist alongside the things you like or dislike.<sup>87</sup> By way of example, he shows how *Sister Carrie*, initially received as an indictment of a capitalist society, takes its plot structure from the logic of capitalism. So while individual scenes may appear designed to condemn the social injustices of the day –

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87 *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 18.

depictions of urban squalor etc. – the deeper structure relies on lessons taught by the very system it would seem to condemn. This is achieved by identifying character with desire to the point where the distinction between what a character is and what he or she wants becomes blurred into insignificance, pithily summed up by Michaels as: ‘What you are is what you want, in other words, what you aren’t’.<sup>88</sup> In her discussion of the American suburban novel, Jurca argues a similar point, namely that discontent, that staple of her field of study, ‘is crucial to the achievement and preservation of middle-class economic social privileges’.<sup>89</sup> As such, desire serves as an engine of narrative, driving characters toward new achievements. Without reducing desire to simply a product of capitalism, stressing the salient role of desire within consumer capitalism should be uncontroversial.

The link between realist form and bourgeois ideology is a topic that has been subject to much scholarship,<sup>90</sup> notably by Fredric Jameson, who has sought to read all literature as part of a larger, Marxist narrative. Denying the political meaning of a text, any text, will only further the processes of reification at work in contemporary life, in which false barriers are set up between the public and the private, the personal and the political, the economic and the psychological, and so on (Jameson, p. 4). The realist novel, Jameson argues, emerged as

an agent in a bourgeois cultural revolution: in the nineteenth century, the novel produces the new world, a world of industry, measurable time, market demands and empiricism; the novel writes this world, creates a referent while simultaneously claiming to be its realistic reflection, in order to shape the public consciousness.<sup>91</sup>

In support of this argument, Jameson scrutinises the innovations in narrative technique brought forth by realism. Pre-realist omniscient narration – ‘the gestures and signals of the storyteller’<sup>92</sup> – embodies a symbolic attempt to restage the traditional storytelling scenario of a person addressing an audience in the flesh overtaken by literature as commodity, i.e. the printed book. Commodification of literature would, according to Jameson, lead to a commodification of the feelings and

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88 Ibid., p. 42

89 *White Diaspora*, p. 146

90 An enormous field of enquiry. For a specifically American perspective, see, for example, Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York; London: Methuen, 1985); Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988); or *American Realism: New Essays*, ed. by Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982)

91 *The Political Unconscious*, p. 138

92 Ibid., p. 141

ideas within as well, desire and longing transformed into a ‘hunger for trinkets’.<sup>93</sup> The formation of a stable point of view focusing on one character positions the reader on the outside looking in on said character, now moulded and solidified as a closed-off, centred subject, yet another by-product of capitalism’s process of reification.<sup>94</sup> So, what would previously have been a collective, utopian impulse is recast within the centred subject as individual desire, a private feeling cut off from the totality. A similar claim regarding the novel’s active part in promoting bourgeois ideology is furthered by Maurice Couturier and Regis Durand, who posit that the ‘bourgeois genre’ of the novel ‘has contributed largely in developing the kind of cultural consensus necessary to the growth of modern capitalism’; has served as an advocate for ‘hallowed values which, too often, serve as a cover for petty economic interests’.<sup>95</sup> This clearly Marxist stance is contentious,<sup>96</sup> yet it is not my aim to either verify or falsify it in relation to nineteenth-century realism. Rather, I aim to suggest that if, indeed, nineteenth-century realism contributed to shaping subjects complicit in the bourgeoisification of the Western world, then *Revolutionary Road* certainly refuses to perform such a task. If we return to Tichi’s idea of literature as a kind of machine, and the realist novel produces an idea of the autonomous self in keeping with bourgeois ideology, the novel embodies a moment when the gears have been worn down to the point where the machine can no longer perform this particular task. I have already discussed how the characters in *Revolutionary Road* are hollowed out, their subjectivities contaminated, even eroded, precisely by their material conditions; ergo, rather than enabling the formation of complicit subjects, the novel carries a discussion of the corrosive impact of consumer culture precisely on said subjects. Also, the novel’s treatment of linguistic entropy suggests a machine aesthetic defined more by industrial waste than efficiency. The text’s use of perspective is another characteristic of this resistance. The inner lives of the characters are available to the reader throughout: we see how they interpret events, how they see themselves. However, the text’s third person narration creates a gap between the characters’ take on things and

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93 Ibid., p. 146

94 Ibid.

95 Maurice Couturier and Regis Durand, *Donald Barthelme* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 69

96 In his aforementioned *In Defence of Realism*, Raymond Tallis offers a forceful rebuttal: ‘One could argue with equal (that is to say as little) plausibility that the work ethos lies behind *both* the growth of modern capitalism *and* the writing (and even the reading) of long books. That is, in other words, the novel is a product or symptom of ‘the consensus necessary to the growth of modern capitalism’ rather than a cause of it’ (p. 43 n.).

that of the narrator, sardonic observation co-existing with empathy, neither fully negating the other. Further destabilisation of the perspective is provided by the novel's frequent use of parentheses. I mention elsewhere Steve Kovick, the deluded band leader. While he is mocked, we are also invited to see him as he sees himself, through the vivid evocation of his high-school career peak, and by letting us know that his excessive solos at Vito's Log Cabin, however misguided, leave him 'weak and happy as a child'. For all the sardonic comments about his lack of mastery and unwarranted arrogance, the subjective experience of Steve Kovick still speaks up, rejecting the finality of external narrative authority. Likewise, when Frank goes on his many lengthy rants about the stultifying conformity of the day, or the over-reliance on armchair psychoanalysis, or the overall mediocrity permeating society, the points he makes are often accurate, even incisive, and the intensity of his delivery lingers, in spite of his repeated hypocrisies, or the awkward reception of his loud performances. These conflicting voices approach Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel, in which characters are 'capable of standing *alongside* their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even rebelling against him',<sup>97</sup> rather than subjecting to a monolithic authority. While the balance remains tipped in the narrator's favour, part of the novel's power to disturb comes precisely from the characters' insistence upon the validity of their illusions. Returning to Steve Kovick, his voice is interrupted, and drowned out, by a bracketed representation of the opinions of the venue's core clientele, local high school seniors: '(it was the corniest band in the world but the only live music for miles around; besides, there wasn't any cover and they'd serve you without proof of age and the big parking lot was nice and dark)' (*Road*, p. 247). Whatever dignity Steve may insist on is abruptly contradicted by this little aside. This disruptive use of parentheses is a recurring strategy. When April becomes pregnant again, the initial plan to move to Paris seems foiled. As Frank starts to consider alternatives, he considers the promotion he has been offered and the possibilities this may open up:

[Why] think of accepting Pollock's money as a mere compromise solution, an enforced making-the-best-of-things until the renewal of her ability to support him in Paris? Didn't it have the weight and dignity of a plan in its own right? It might lead to almost anything – new people, new places – why, it might even take them to Europe in due time. Wasn't there a good chance

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97 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 6

that Knox, through Knox International, might soon be expanding its promotion of computers abroad? ('You and Mrs. Wheeler are so very unlike one's preconceived idea of American business people,' a Henry-James sort of Venetian countess might say as they leaned attractively on a balustrade above the Grand Canal, sipping sweet Vermouth...) (*Ibid.*, p. 208)

Frank's initial rationalising optimism is contagious, the quick series of questions evoking a determined urgency which is then immediately undermined by his own subsequent bracketed flight into a pipe dream of imagined sophistication – a fantasy which shows up the previous, seemingly more genuine thought process as equally fictitious.

Like the Wheelers' house, Frank's commuter train is recast, and crucially *miscal*t, as a site of bohemian rebellion in Catherine Jurca's aforementioned 'fantasy of victimization'. Recall Walter Benn Michaels' argument regarding the logic of capitalism functioning as a narrative engine: Carrie's desire for more wealth, status, and material goods, which drives her from the slums to the stage, from Drouet to Hurstwood, etc. Without this desire, there is no novel. A distorted mirror image of this notion of the logic of capitalism serving as a narrative engine can be found in *Revolutionary Road*. The novel is defined by what Frank and April Wheeler want for themselves, but also how their desires fail to drive them anywhere. April's dreams of acting end with The Laurel Players' single, embarrassing production; Frank's dreams of Paris are not enough to make him leave his job. The logic of capitalism here generates the energy to run a treadmill, not embark on a character arc like Carrie's, a point reaching its ironic crystallisation on the train between New York City and the Connecticut suburbs, specifically upon Frank's return home after a clandestine afternoon at Maureen Grube's place. He feels triumphant – 'like a man'. And so he rejects the rear smoker, where he'd be surrounded by 'beaten, amiable husks of men' (*Road*, p. 102), with insufficient leg room. Rather, Frank chooses to stand out in the iron passageway while he clutches a cigarette. The commuter train, with its predetermined path and schedule, is transformed in Frank's mind into a misguided metaphor for freedom. Just like the predictable cycle of life during late capitalism is represented as ultimate freedom, the commuter train is ironically re-imagined as a site of individual expression, as Frank's adolescent fantasy of boho-hobo cross-country

travel come to life, when the reality is one of metronomic shuttling from suburb to city to suburb again, for Frank as much as for his fellow commuters.

### ***Philip Roth: ‘Writing American Fiction’***

In 1961, the year of *Revolutionary Road*'s publication, Philip Roth verbalised a crisis of realism as a direct result of the nature of reality itself in the mid-twentieth century United States in his article ‘Writing American Fiction’:

[It] stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.<sup>98</sup>

This passage is often quoted when highlighting American writers' move away from realism during this period. If reality is no longer real, engaging with this strange new state of affairs surely requires a new approach, a new set of tools. But, crucially, what Roth was commenting on was not realism per se, but rather the naturalistic blockbuster version of realism mentioned earlier, and its failure to engage with ‘the corruption and vulgarity and treachery of American public life’ in any significant or profound way.<sup>99</sup> In these books (such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, which Roth mentions), ‘[all] issues are generally solvable’. Roth likens this fondness for neat resolutions with popular Broadway plays, where ‘in the third act, someone says, “Look, why don't you just love each other?” and the protagonist, throwing his hand to his forehead, cries, “God, why didn't I think of that!”’, and before the bulldozing action of love, all else collapses – verisimilitude, truth, and interest<sup>100</sup>. By stressing lack of verisimilitude as a flaw, Roth seems not so much to call for abandoning the tools of realism as for adapting them to a new range of demands.

*Revolutionary Road* provides one early adaptation of realism in the face of an increasingly unreal reality, a tendency that would only intensify as the 1960s progressed. But where the 1960s provided implausibility in the form of dizzying absurdity and a frenetic pace, the 1950s of *Revolutionary Road* is a decade of

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98 In *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 117-135 (p. 120).

99 Ibid., p. 122

100 Ibid.

flattening, of timidity, bringing to mind Fredric Jameson's evocation of the 'new depthlessness' inherent to the postmodern.<sup>101</sup> Unreality comes from a lack of substance rather than sensory overload. Without abandoning the world of work, marriages, commuter trains and drinks before dinner which constitutes a life for so many in the American 1950s, the novel subjects its own component parts – its available vocabularies – to intense scrutiny. The novel thus enacts, and weathers, a crisis of realism. Importantly, crisis is part of the realist tradition, not opposed to it. Thinking about realism, dissecting its anatomy, has been part of realist writing since the nineteenth century. Acknowledging this permanent state of flux enables us to see Yates' work as an amplification of realist tendencies, even when it explores the limitations of representation. When words no longer mean anything, when narration ceases to function, the novel remains part of a tradition committed to both.

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101 *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 5

## ***Chapter Two: Eleven Kinds of Loneliness, Eleven Kinds of Writer's Block***

This chapter will focus on Richard Yates' short stories, in particular his first collection, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, published in 1962. The collection draws attention to a number of conflicts, not necessarily to resolve them – conflicts surrounding the possibilities of interpretation; between stable and unstable ironies; between form and content. In particular, the collection can be viewed as a self-conscious encryption (and subversion) of a familiar apprentice narrative: that of how the writer came to write, and by extension how the writer came to master his craft. The volume achieves this not only by virtue of being a collection of stories published prior to the publication of *Revolutionary Road*, but also through various stories' explicit engagement with apprentice writers, and the problems of writing. This engagement is part of an elaborate intertextual game drawing on Hemingway's *In Our Time*, and in particular that collection's concluding story, 'Big Two-Hearted River'. Through its repeated evocation of writerly impotence, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* subverts its own culmination, and refuses a sense of climactic mastery. The collection's repeated use of more or less explicit intertextual allusion functions to ensure its position within an evolving realism, a realism referring to other modes of writing, such as modernism, as well as its own tradition. By becoming its own object of enquiry, this realism stages an amplification of the claim to literariness made by literary realists since the nineteenth century. The duality of realism outlined in the introduction – its clinging to its status as both representation and linguistic artefact – is here made manifest by an ongoing investigation into generic convention, a discussion of the short story form made possible by its playful negotiation of an everyday life that is itself a creation of literary history, constructed by writers such as Flaubert, Joyce, Sinclair Lewis and Hemingway (who will all be discussed in this chapter), yet still firmly rooted in observable reality.

## **Frank O'Connor: On the margins**

Frank O'Connor provides several insights into the short story genre which prove useful for considering Yates' short stories. The first is the generic emphasis on the lonely individual: 'outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society, superimposed sometimes on symbolic figures whom they caricature and echo – Christ, Socrates, Moses'.<sup>1</sup> The short story displays 'an intense awareness of human loneliness',<sup>2</sup> an awareness which, crucially, O'Connor deems rare in the novel. While O'Connor's reading of the genre has a romantic bent, with an emphasis on the existential lone wolves, it is a perspective that resonates with much scholarship on the genre. Clare Hanson calls the short story 'ex-centric' in focus, engaging with the experiences of those 'not part of official or "high" hegemony', a genre that has historically 'offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks – writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling "narrative" or epistemological/experiential framework of their society'.<sup>3</sup> Iain Reid, meanwhile, highlights the genre's preoccupation with 'ordinary people, apparent nonentities', and its especial suitability for 'the portrayal of regional life, or of individuals who, though situated in a city, lived there as aliens'.<sup>4</sup> O'Connor's loners resist identification with the reader; the appeal lies not in recognizing oneself in, to borrow an example from O'Connor, the protagonist of Gogol's 'The Overcoat', Akakey Akakeivitch. Rather, the quintessential short story strategy invented by Gogol consists of taking an otherwise unromantic character, lacking in allure or admirable qualities – 'the absurd little copying clerk' – and '[imposing] his image over that of the crucified Jesus, so that even while we laugh we are filled with horror at the resemblance'.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of a hero, the short story has what O'Connor unhappily calls 'a submerged population

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1 *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 19.

2 Ibid.

3 'Introduction' in Clare Hanson (ed.), *Re-Reading the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 1-9 (p. 2)

4 *The Short Story* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 24

5 *The Lonely Voice*, p. 16

group'<sup>6</sup> – the unprivileged, the minor, the inarticulate, the unsophisticated. As the title of his collection would suggest, the awareness of human loneliness is acute with Yates, as it was for his contemporary short story writers in America.<sup>7</sup> Several characters embody this outsider role, roaming the margins of their particular social world. Geographically, too, these characters tend to be situated at the margins: in the outer boroughs of New York, at an isolated army base in Texas, at a TB ward, and so on. As important to my discussion of Yates' characters as their loneliness or marginality, however, is O'Connor's insistence that 'we are filled with horror at the resemblance' to the crucified Jesus. Beyond forcing the reader to acknowledge a kinship with otherwise unappealing characters, this strategy alludes to a revocation of readerly privilege, a staring back, an interruption, which would go beyond a humanist acknowledgement of kinship. This textual resistance will be dealt with in greater detail in my treatment of the stories 'A Wrestler with Sharks' and 'Builders' in particular.

'The B.A.R. Man' reads like an exercise in stretching the possibilities offered by Gogol's copying clerk to their limit: how loathsome can a character be without drowning out the insistence of 'I am your brother' heard in Gogol and then taken up by the short story genre as a whole? From the very first sentence, the protagonist is outlined as both unremarkable and a potential menace: 'Until he got his name on a police blotter, and in the papers, nobody had ever thought much of John Fallon'.<sup>8</sup> By alerting the reader to the encounter with the police which concludes the story, yet withholding the cause of his arrest, Yates places Fallon – almost fallen – firmly outside: outside anyone's consideration (nobody had ever thought much about him) but also outside the law. Did he kill a man? Rob a bank? Rape someone? Whatever his transgression, for it to reach the newspapers we can assume a certain magnitude. This double outsider role, as little man and as criminal, immediately diverts Fallon away from that territory between the reader's pity and condescension which an equally unremarkable, but less criminally inclined character would risk entering. We are told his eyes were kindly, 'except when he widened them in bewilderment or

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6 Ibid., p. 19

7 William Peden, *The American Short Story: Front Line in the National Defense of Literature* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1964), p. 47

8 In *The Collected Short Stories* (London: Methuen, 2004), pp. 94-106 (p. 94). Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

narrowed them in menace' – not that bright, then, but no holy fool either. Like April Wheeler, he is over the hill at 29; where she had seen her vague ambition of becoming an actress come to nothing more than a community theatre fiasco, Fallon remembers his experience as a B.A.R. man in the infantry during the Second World War as a 'braver and more careless time'. Working as an insurance clerk now – a nod to Gogol? – he still wears his serviceman's identification bracelet. His home life in Sunnyside, Queens is shared with his wife Rose, both location and wife named with borderline-cruel irony (again, just like April, whose life holds little promise of spring). Rose is 'a very thin girl', who 'suffered sinus headaches, couldn't have children, and who earned more money than he did by typing eighty-seven words a minute without missing a beat on her chewing gum'. She also chastises him for not finishing his milk, as if he were a child. On the day the story takes place, Fallon suffers a series of humiliations and setbacks, starting with Rose insisting he take her to the new Gregory Peck movie rather than going to the Island Bar and Grill to watch the boxing on television and get drunk with 'the boys' – 'friends of habit rather than of choice' (*ibid.*, p. 94) – which is how he usually spends his Fridays. At work, things only get worse. At the customary payday lunch, his colleagues start reminiscing about the Navy, a topic which makes Fallon '[squirm] with boredom' (*ibid.*, p. 95). As the ex-Navy contingent grow sentimental, praising the Navy as a place where 'every man's got his own individual job to do', unlike the Army, where 'all you do is walk around and look stupid like everybody else', Fallon's pride is wounded, and he lashes out:

'You oughta tried an infantry outfit, Mac,' he said. [...]

'The *infantry*? Whadda they got – specialists in the *infantry*?"

'You betcher ass they got specialists,' Fallon said. Every son of a bitch *in* a rifle company's a specialist, if you wanna know something. [...]'

'Wait a second,' Kopeck said. 'I wanna know one thing, John. What was your specialty?'

'I was a B.A.R. man,' Fallon said.

'What's that?'

And that was the first time Fallon realized how much the crowd in the office had changed over the years. In the old days, back around 'forty-nine or 'fifty, with the old crowd, anyone who didn't know what a B.A.R. was would almost certainly have kept his mouth shut.

'The B.A.R.,' Fallon said, laying down his fork, 'is the Browning Automated Rifle. It's a thirty-caliber, magazine-fed, fully-automatic piece that provides the major firepower of a twelve-man rifle squad. That answer your question?'

'How d'ya mean?' Boyle inquired. 'Like a tommy gun?'

And Fallon had to explain, as if he were talking to children or girls, that it was nothing at all like a tommy gun and that its tactical function was entirely different; finally he had to take out his mechanical pencil and draw, from memory and love, a silhouette on the back of his weekly pay envelope. (*Ibid.*, p. 96)

This lengthy, yet edited passage is significant for a number of reasons. His colleagues' ignorance of the B.A.R. – no doubt resonating with many readers at the time of the story's publication – highlights the growing distance between Fallon and his glory days: his treasured memory, his peak, is exposed as irretrievably gone and fading into the distance. His carefully phrased description of the weapon – no doubt memorised during the war – is at odds with the slapdash informality of the rest of the conversation, all 'betcher' and 'whadda' and 'wanna'. The dignity he bestows on the B.A.R., however studied, seeks to insist on the significance of his experience. His investment in his past reaches an unexpected level of poignancy with the use of the word 'love'. It is not a word readily associated with John Fallon as he has been described so far; an aggressive, crude, burly nobody in a routine-ridden marriage. Inserted into the sentence in this way, its effect is startling, a bright flash of gentleness of feeling against a drab background. The brevity of the moment only adds to its intensity, as his efforts are immediately undermined, as it becomes clear that, rather than the specialised technical knowledge that is the Navy's stock-in-trade (at least according to Kopeck and Boyle), the role of B.A.R. man mainly required physical strength and endurance, lugging a heavy weapon and ammunition around for miles on an empty stomach: in short, grunt work. His defeat is completed by his own refusal to admit how many times he'd fired it (twice), which is met by smirking, humiliating silence: 'the worst part of it was that none of them said anything' (*ibid.*, p. 97) Had they said something, the hulking Fallon would have had an excuse for violence, an excuse denied by his colleagues' condescending pity towards an older man, which makes them change the subject.

As the day progresses, Fallon's ruined mood – made worse by Rose's telling him off for not drinking his milk – triggers an argument. Out of nowhere, he brings up

her inability to conceive; not to be outdone, Rose reminds him that they rely on her bigger salary to hold onto their lower-middle-class lifestyle, and so she certainly wouldn't want to be pregnant anyway; his retort is to pettily draw attention to her small breasts. He storms out, past the Island Bar and Grill, and gets on the underground to Manhattan. We are given further damning insights into his character: in a bar on Third Avenue, where the ending is foreshadowed by a man defending McCarthy's 'principles' (*ibid.*, p. 100) in a discussion, Fallon meets two younger infantrymen on leave, apparently impressed by his comparative worldliness and his B.A.R. man credentials, but more so by his willingness to pay for drinks and cab fare – as he introduces himself, they only mumble their names in return, unwilling to commit to this single, older, overly familiar stranger. Upon entering a dance hall with his acquaintances, he removes his wedding ring, picturing erotic conquest as he asks a 'tall and well-built' girl to dance (*ibid.*, p. 102):

In his exultant, beer-blurred mind he already knew how it would be when he took her home – how she would feel to his exploring hands in the dark privacy of the taxi, and how she would be later, undulant and naked, in some ultimate vague bedroom at the end of the night. (*Ibid.*)

At this point, we have seen enough of John Fallon to recognize the unlikelihood of any such scenario, and his ambitions are immediately thwarted, as the girl in question rejects all his advances, telling him off for dancing too closely and refusing to engage in conversation. While her friends are flirting with the younger soldiers, she remains frosty, imploring them to go home with her. Fallon's defeat is obvious; and it is at this point in the narrative that his potential for brutality, already glimpsed, is revealed in full to the reader. Heading to the bar for more beer, he is not prepared to give up:

‘Bitch,’ he was whispering. ‘Bitch. Bitch.’ And the images that tortured him now, while he stood in line at the makeshift bar, were intensified by rage: there would be struggling limbs and torn clothes in the taxi; there would be blind force in the bedroom, and stifled cries of pain that would turn to whimpering and finally to spastic moans of lust. Oh, he’d loosen her up! He’d loosen her up! (*Ibid.*, p. 104)

This distorted echo of his previous, beer-fuelled fantasy presents a gear change in the portrayal of Fallon – a fulfilment of the potential planted in the opening sentence – and it enables the ending. Having been abandoned by the infantrymen and the girls during his trip to the bar, he finds himself out on the street, directionless and angry.

McCarthy-ism is reintroduced, as former soldiers, men Fallon's age, are protesting against a Professor Mitchell, clearly a leftist intellectual going through a Senate hearing. As the man is being led past the protesters by the police, Mitchell's 'snobbish face' and 'serene, superior smile' send Fallon into a blind rage:

Not until several people whirled to look at him did Fallon realize he was yelling; then all he knew was that he had to yell again and again until his voice broke, like a child in tears. '*KILL that bastard! KILL 'im! KILL 'im!*' (*Ibid.*, p. 106)

As Fallon attacks Mitchell, the story concludes with him being overpowered by the police, knowing a 'sense of absolute fulfilment and relief' (*ibid.*). The repeated emphasis on Fallon as infantilised – the milk, his breaking voice, his acquaintances ditching him like the cool kids abandoning a foreign exchange student – serves as an ironic counterpoint to his hulking physique, his brutishness. But it also stresses his vulnerability, disavowed but insistent, an ever-returning repressed. Fallon-as-child is not Fallon-as-Christ. Nonetheless that one word, 'love', refuses to go away. John Fallon is a petty, coarse, childish, vain, aggressive, graceless would-be rapist; he is also one of us. While the case against him is overwhelming, each page containing new damning evidence, the lingering image of him lovingly drawing a machine gun (!) forces the reader to acknowledge a family resemblance.

### ***Debunking rhythms***

O'Connor's identification of the short story as a genre particularly concerned with outsiders, loners and 'little people' implies what Susan Lohafer makes explicit in calling attention to the modern short story's 'flattery of the self as the axis of a world'.<sup>9</sup> The size restrictions inherent to the genre do indeed invite a focussing rather than a panning out: John Fallon's bad day, rather than a 10-page representation of Life in the American fifties. *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* is full of the kinds of characters O'Connor has in mind: cab drivers, school teachers, secretaries, soldiers; insignificant, unspectacular, and recognizably human in the traditional realist mode.

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<sup>9</sup> *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), p. 12

And yet there are moments in these stories, specifically near the end, where characters encounter a kind of epistemological black hole. It is a strategy identified by Thomas M. Leitch as a ‘debunking rhythm’, popular among American short story writers from Melville onwards.<sup>10</sup> The reassuring move from thesis to antithesis, where the initial problem is resolved – the lonely girl married, the killer caught, the ignorant aware – is, as Roland Barthes points out, highly stable: ‘its apparent function is to consecrate (and domesticate) by a name, by a metalinguistic object, the division between and the very irreducibility of this division. The antithesis separates for eternity’.<sup>11</sup> While the text may offer a resolution to its initial problem, by taking its structure from the basic binary of thesis versus antithesis, it simultaneously insists on the necessity of this relational model. Leitch demonstrates how, rather than moving toward a stabilising sense of closure, American short story characters (and their audience) often go ‘not so much from ignorance to knowledge as from a false sense of certainty to a more authentic sense of uncertainty’.<sup>12</sup> This mode debunks illusions without necessarily providing new answers or making new promises, and ultimately presents a challenge to the centred subject, as it strips characters of assumptions, beliefs and values without offering any stable alternatives; chipping away at the building blocks of subjectivity.

The two central characters in ‘A Really Good Jazz Piano’ occupy a different universe from the lower-middle-class worlds on display in the collection’s other stories. Ken Platt and Carson Wyler are Yale graduates, sons of privilege living it up in France. This is the territory of Fitzgerald (whose influence on Yates will be discussed further in chapter five) and John O’Hara. While Ken and Carson are best friends, ‘it had never been an equal friendship, and they both knew it’ (*Stories*, p. 111). Ken is about to move back to Denver to take on a junior partnership in his father’s business. Carson has a large private income and no family ties. This sense of imbalance extends to their personalities. Carson is socially adept, popular with the opposite sex, and endowed with a winning ability ‘to find and convey an unashamed enjoyment in trivial things’ (*ibid.*, p. 109), a quality that made him a trendsetter at

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10 ‘The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story’, in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 130-147

11 *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 26-27

12 ‘The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story’, p. 133

Yale. Ken, on the other hand, ‘never really [has] a good time away from Carson’. Overweight and needy, he has only ever gained access to the kind of glamorous social life available to the right kind of Yale student as ‘Carson’s dull but inseparable companion’. Exactly what it is that makes Ken so off-putting is a bit of a mystery. While he is ‘fat and physically awkward’, talks too much, and is so desperate to be liked as to be lacking in dignity or poise, none of these traits fully explains why no one (save Carson) likes him. One detail about his appearance seems to provide Carson with something akin to an explanation: ‘when Ken smiled his upper lip slid back to reveal a small moist inner lip that trembled against his gum’ (*ibid.*, p. 111). Carson’s gaze here performs a typical short story (and realist) manoeuvre: honing in on a telling detail, all of Ken’s quivering clinginess captured in his smile. Their relationship is instrumental in forming their identities: without Carson for company, Ken becomes the ‘Lard-Ass Platt’ of his Denver boyhood again, going to the cinema and stuffing himself on chocolate to fend off the loneliness. Carson, meanwhile, takes strength from ‘the buoyant wealth of Ken’s admiration’ (*ibid.*, p. 112).

The title is taken from Ken’s description of Sid, a black American pianist he has discovered in Cannes while Carson has lingered in Paris with his ‘current girl’ (*ibid.*, p. 110). The story’s opening scene finds Ken on the phone to Carson, drinking in that legendary watering hole for Americans in Paris, Harry’s Bar. Listening to Sid playing over the phone, Carson agrees to sign him up for the International Bar Flies, an informal club for American drinkers abroad – ‘a square’s thing, really’ (*ibid.*, p. 109). This shared membership is at first a point of pride: Ken and Carson, non-squares, are now friendly with a Real Black Man.

They both enjoyed the fact that this was Ken’s discovery. Always before it had been Carson who led the way, who found the girls and learned the idioms and knew how to best spend each hour; it was Carson who had tracked down all the really colourful places in Paris where you never saw Americans, and who then, just when Ken was learning to find places of his own, had paradoxically made Harry’s Bar the most colourful place of all. Through all this, Ken had been glad enough to follow, shaking his grateful head in wonderment, but it was no small thing to have turned up an incorruptible jazz talent in the back streets of a foreign city, all alone. It proved that Ken’s dependency could be less than total after all, and this reflected credit on them both. (*Ibid.*, p. 113)

The supposed incorruptibility of Sid, the pianist, is of great importance to Ken, who makes a number of assumptions about him – that he would not want to move back to

the States, that his musical integrity is all that matters to him – based on ‘his whole mental attitude’ (*ibid.*), supposedly gleaned from one brief, shy conversation, rather than anything Sid himself has actually said. Reunited in Cannes, the two friends go to the basement bar where he is playing. After his set, as they share a table with Sid and his French girlfriend, it becomes clear that their assumptions about him are false: he would, in fact, love to move back to the States, get a job in Las Vegas, and earn some ‘real money’ (*ibid.*, p. 115). Ken is disappointed; to him, this amounts to Sid prostituting himself, an assertion which generates enough awkwardness around the table for Carson to need to employ his entire repertoire of social skills in order to smooth things over. Once again, Carson’s dominance over Ken is re-established; he subsequently chastises him for being so ‘sophomoric’ (*ibid.*, p. 116).

Their next encounter with Sid turns out to be a disaster for them all, Ken and Carson’s perceived identities permanently damaged. This time, Murray Diamond, a Las Vegas nightclub owner, is in the audience, and Sid is eager to please. To Ken and Carson’s disgust, he infuses his performance with an air of minstrelsy, changing his accent, constantly appealing to Diamond:

‘Anything special you’d like to hear, Mr Diamond? Something old-time? Some more of that real old Dixieland? Maybe a little boogie, maybe something a little on the sweet side, what we call a commercial number? Got all kind of tunes here, waitin’ to be played.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 121)

Already in a bad mood, Carson now agrees with Ken: this is indeed prostitution; ‘degrading’ and ‘degenerate’ (*ibid.*). Rather than simply leave, the pair stay to, in Carson’s words, ‘watch the spectacle’ (*ibid.*, p. 122). Their stay concludes with Carson humiliating Sid in front of the whole club, everyone silently watching. Ken is furious with Carson’s disproportionate cruelty.

He wanted to run up and hit him with all his strength between the shoulder blades, one great chopping blow that would drop him to the street, and then he would hit him again, or kick him – yes, kick him – and he’d say, goddamn you! goddamn you, Carson! The words were already in his mouth and he was ready to swing when Carson stopped and turned to face him under a streetlamp.

‘What’s the trouble, Ken?’ he said. ‘Don’t you think that was funny?’

It wasn’t what he said that mattered – for a minute it seemed that nothing Carson said would ever matter again – it was that his face was stricken with the uncannily familiar look of his own heart, the very face he himself, Lard-Ass Platt, had shown all his life to others: haunted and

vulnerable and terribly dependent, trying to smile, a look that said Please don't leave me alone.  
(*Ibid.*, p. 124)

That final plea, too humbled to present itself with the imperative force of an exclamation mark or to frame itself with inverted commas, becomes a formal (as well as conceptual) representation of Carson's new frailty. The story has rested on the dynamic between Ken and Carson as essentially unequal companions. Ken's eagerness to please has driven the narrative; it has hurried Carson along to Cannes, made Carson come and see Sid play, and it has made Sid join the International Bar Flies (his public humiliation is based on their shared membership). By upsetting this dynamic, the story concludes by '[disabusing the reader] of [his or her] illusions about the world the story presents or represents without substituting any more positive or comprehensive wisdom'.<sup>13</sup> It is ultimately up to Ken to grant Carson a sort of amnesty, attempting to regain equilibrium – in their case a familiar imbalance – by telling him to forget it. As they walk off in search of coffee and peace of mind, with 'what anyone would have said was perfect composure' (*Stories*, p. 124), permanent damage has been done.

### ***'It's just something to do'***

The short story 'No Pain Whatsoever' employs a number of strategies familiar from *Revolutionary Road*, raising issues regarding literary tradition, realism and the epistemological questions posed by modernist fiction. The plot deals with Myra, who at the beginning of the story is being driven out to a Long Island TB ward by her friends, Marty and Irene, all the while fending off the advances of her boyfriend Jack. It is not the attention per se that is unwanted; rather, she finds it inappropriate, as she is going out to see her husband Harry, who has been a patient at the TB ward for four years: 'It was early Sunday evening, late in December, and the Long Island streets looked stale; dirty crusts of snow lay shrivelled on the sidewalk, and cardboard images of Santa Claus leered out of closed liquor stores' (*ibid.*, p. 47). The bleakness continues, as various breakdowns in communication leave the main characters stranded in their own isolation. If we recall Brian McHale's argument from the

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13 'The Debunking Rhythm of the American Short Story', p. 133

introduction regarding the epistemological dominant of modernist writing, ‘No Pain Whatever’ is governed precisely by such concerns, filtered through the prism of interpersonal relationships, as this passage from the car going to Long Island shows:

‘I still don’t feel right about you driving me all the way out here,’ Myra called to Marty, who was driving, to be polite.

‘S alright,’ Marty grumbled. Then he sounded his horn and added, to the back of a slow truck, ‘Get that son of a bitch outa the way.’

Myra was annoyed – why did Marty always have to be such a grouch? – but Irene, Marty’s wife, squirmed around in the front seat with her friendly grin. ‘Marty don’t mind,’ she said. ‘It’s good for ‘m, getting out on a Sunday insteada laying around the house.’

‘Well,’ Myra said, ‘I certainly do appreciate it.’ The truth was that she would much rather have taken the bus, alone, as usual. (*Ibid.*, p. 47)

Out of five separate utterances or statements, only one can be said to be sincere: ‘Get that son of a bitch outa the way’. The rest are lies or polite exaggerations. Myra would rather have gone alone, and Marty certainly minds. As for Irene, her breezy friendliness is subtly undermined by the use of the word ‘squirmed’ in describing her turning around in the car. While it is an accurate description of the physical movement undertaken, squirming evokes social, as well as physical, discomfort. It is an awkward situation, and Irene knows it, but she is determined not to let on. Marty’s little moment of frustration adds just enough honesty for the entire situation not to become a catalogue of falsehoods, which heightens, rather than diminishes, the epistemological uncertainty of the situation.

Once there, the situation hardly improves:

‘What’s that thing on your lap, Harry?’ It was a ring of blond wood a foot wide, with a great deal of blue knitting wool attached to little pegs around its edge.

‘Oh, this?’ Harry said, holding it up. ‘It’s what they call rake-knitting. Something I got from occupational therapy.’

‘*What-knitting?*’

‘Rake-knitting. See, what you do, you take this little hook and kind of pry the wool up and over each peg, like that, and you keep on doing that around and around the ring until you got yourself a muffer or a stocking-cap – something like that.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Myra said. ‘It’s like what we used to do when I was a kid, only we did it with a regular little spool, with nails stuck in it? You wind string around the nails and pull it through the spool and it makes sort of a knitted rope, like.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ Harry said. ‘With a spool, huh? Yeah, I think my sister used to do that too, now that I think of it. With a spool, now that I think of it. With a spool. You’re right, this is the same principle, only bigger.’

‘What’re you going to make?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I’m just fooling around with it. Thought I might make a stocking-cap or something. I don’t know.’ He inspected his work, turning the knitting-rake around in his hands, then leaned over and put it away in his bed stand. ‘It’s just something to do.’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 50-51)

The mindlessly looping conversation, echoing the repetitive, infantile task of rake-knitting, reduces language to a set of noises one makes to pass the time, ‘something to do’, drained of meaning. This is an excellent example of Yates’ skilful interplay between form and content, in which language is implicitly acknowledged as an artist’s materials – like oil paint or marble – malleable, rather than fixed or stable. Like we see in Hemingway,<sup>14</sup> speech devolves into prattle. Hemingway, identified by Hassan as belonging to the silence-bound aesthetics of the postmodern, ‘distrusts the accretions of language’:

Knowing that the currency of words has been inflated by fustian or mendacity, that the connotations of words have been counterfeited, he seeks new values for language in slang, in fact, in understatement.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the decadence of Hemingway’s prattlers, their glorying in mindless party chatter, or their verbal acts of self-promotion, is replaced by a flat despair.<sup>16</sup> Cohn of *The Sun Also Rises*<sup>17</sup> debases the experience of looking at a cathedral by making ‘some remark about it being a very good example of something or other’.<sup>18</sup> Harry’s discourse on the creative endeavour of rake-knitting is entirely free from this kind of self-aggrandizing impulse. Like the rake-knitting itself, it is just something to do. Myra and Harry’s conversation gains its aesthetic effect not simply from the semantic dimension of

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14 For a more detailed discussion of Hemingway’s influence on Yates, see below.

15 *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, p. 88

16 There are overly verbose characters throughout Yates’ work, most notably the many variations on the mother figure, discussed at length in chapter four.

17 A character who will be subject of further discussion in chapter four.

18 Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Scribner, 1926), p. 92. Adding to the disdain expressed in the above quote, the sentence ends with a dismissive ‘I forget what’ by the narrator, Jake Barnes, who will be discussed further in chapter three. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

language, but from ‘sounds, echoes, and rhythmic undulations – in short, by what Kristeva termed the “semiotic” as opposed to the symbolic functions of language’.<sup>19</sup> The semiotic functions here work against the words’ semantic function, as the chafing repetition undercuts their surface meaning.

Through its title, ‘No Pain Whatsoever’ stresses the couple’s wilful refusal to engage with the reality of their situation. Upon Myra asking whether he is in pain, Harry replies:

‘None at all any more [...]. I mean, as long as I don’t go raising my arm too high or anything. When I do that it hurts, and sometimes I start to roll over on that side in my sleep, and that hurts too, but as long as I stay – you know – more or less in a normal position, why, there’s no pain whatsoever.’ (*Stories*, p. 53)

Held under siege by pain, he is rendered immobile, yet trying to convince himself and his wife that pain is not a problem. This deliberate dishonesty is echoed in the story’s ending, as Myra leaves the hospital to be collected by her friends and her lover. As she lets herself be groped, in contrast to the opening, in which she fends him off, with her friends drunk in the front of the car, she succumbs to their suggestion to go for a drink. As long as she ignores their drunken inanity, her lover’s boorishness, and her collapsing marriage, she feels no pain whatsoever. Myra and Harry both lie to themselves and each other – and they know they do – yet they maintain the pretence nonetheless.

### ***Generic difference and intertextual play***

Yates’ short stories display a particular formal self-consciousness concerning generic difference between the short story and the novel. That one seemingly prosaic defining feature of the short story – that it is short – has far-reaching implications. As I mentioned in relation to ‘The B.A.R. Man’, the short story is better suited for a narrow spatial perspective, focusing on a character, rather than a society. A similar temporal restriction applies. O’Connor identifies time as the novelist’s ‘greatest asset’: ‘the chronological development of character or incident is essential form as we

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19 Gabriele Schwab, *Subjects without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press (1994), p. 6

see it in life, and the novelist flouts it at his own peril'.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, the short story must choose a particular moment – stop time, rather than have it unfold. This resonates with Georg Lukacs' assertion that '[the] short story is the most purely artistic form'. The focus on a single moment, a single mood, renders the short story 'abstract', i.e. it becomes a 'pure' art object.<sup>21</sup> By not attempting to represent the world as such, the tiny moments that constitute the genre's chief domain insist on their own autonomy. Yates dramatises this generic difference by extracting moments from classic novels, blowing them up, freezing them, and subsequently highlighting the 'short story-ness' of his texts.

The story 'Doctor Jack O'Lantern' sees Yates directly referencing Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a move familiar from *Revolutionary Road*. Its opening scene, where a new boy, Vincent Sabella, is introduced in class, his name mispronounced by the teacher, echoes Flaubert's opening scene, in which Charles Bovary becomes Charbovari to his fellow students' amusement (Flaubert, p. 17).

'What would you like us to call you, Vincent?' Miss Price inquired. 'I mean, do you prefer Vincent, or Vince, or – or what?' (It was purely an academic question; even Miss Price knew that the boys would call him 'Sabella' and that the girls wouldn't call him anything at all.)

'Vinny's okay,' he said in a strange, croaking voice that had evidently yelled itself hoarse down the ugly streets of his home.

'I'm afraid I didn't hear you,' she said, craning her pretty head forward and to one side so that a heavy lock of hair swung free of one shoulder. 'Did you say 'Vince'?"

'Vinny, I said,' he said again, squirming.

'Vincent, is it? All right then, Vincent.' A few of the class giggled, but nobody bothered to correct her; it would be more fun to let the mistake continue. (*Stories*, p. 4)

Again we see the epistemological uncertainty of characters misunderstanding and misinterpreting the world around them, their own perspective shutting out valuable information. This pattern proves pivotal to the story. In a fit of embarrassed anger after being chastised by Miss Price, Vinny writes all the swear words he knows – all four of them – on a school wall. Some of his classmates see him, and are impressed with his tough demeanour when they tell him how this will land him in trouble with

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20 *The Lonely Voice*, p. 15

21 Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 51. Further references to this volume are given after quotations in the text.

Miss Price, as he exploits his inner-city, working class background to create an image of himself as a rebellious street kid, in direct opposition to the middle-class, suburban softness of his peers. He maintains this illusion after being found out, convincing the other boys that Miss Price beat him after class, when in fact she had talked gently to him about how her feelings had been hurt by him, called him ‘dear’ and unknowingly angered him further, as her treatment of him as a pitied teacher’s pet had contributed to his being shunned by the other pupils. His lie appears to finally help him gain acceptance among the other boys, who listen rapt as he tells of Miss Price taking the ruler to his knuckles. This exchange is seen, but not heard, by Miss Price, who crucially misinterprets the situation. As she doesn’t realise his newfound popularity rests on the notion that he is a rebel, she ruins everything by complimenting Vinny on his windbreaker, exposing his lie in the process. Once again, his classmates turn on him, pushing him and coining the nickname which gives the story its title. As a final gesture, in a bid to sever his ties to Miss Price, he draws a portrait of her on the school wall, complete with pubic hair. It is as necessary as it is cruel, and the effectiveness of the act relies on Miss Price failing to understand his intentions. She must take it personally.

This deliberately small-scale narrative draws attention to crucial, genre-specific differences between itself and the canonical novel it references. *Madame Bovary* spans decades, moves from character to character: most significantly, the focus shifts from Charles to Emma, taking in the manners and mores of the provincial bourgeoisie along the way. ‘Doctor Jack O’Lantern’, on the other hand, freezes Charles Bovary’s initial moment of embarrassment and effectively turns it into a short story. Every significant event that befalls Vincent – from the first day at school, to getting caught out in lying to the class about his eventful evening, to getting caught out in lying about Miss Price’s reaction – is a reworking of the same event: a boy mocked and ostracised by his peers. By replaying *Madame Bovary*’s opening scene over and over, the story highlights the micro-perspective inherent to the short story genre. To paraphrase O’Connor: you could never write a novel about Vincent Sabella’s little rebellion, any more than you could turn *Madame Bovary*, with its representation of time marching slowly, tediously on in the French provinces, into a short story.

A similar strategy is employed in ‘Out with the Old’, which appropriates the eponymous protagonist of Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt* for its own purposes, borrowing him for the creation of Harold ‘Tiny’ Kovacs, a hulking, toothless TB patient whose childish sense of humour is a constant source of irritation for the other patients. As he dresses to go home for Christmas, the change of clothes causes a profound transformation, turning him from Tiny into Harold:

The clothes themselves were no surprise – his family ran a prosperous restaurant in Queens, and he was appropriately well-turned-out in a rich black overcoat and silk scarf – but the dignity they gave him was remarkable. The silly grin was gone, the laugh silenced, the clumsy movements overcome. The eyes beneath the snap-brim hat were not Tiny’s eyes at all, but calm and masterful. Even his missing teeth didn’t spoil the effect, for he kept his mouth shut except to mutter brief, almost curt Christmas wishes. (*Ibid.*, p. 129)

For comparison, here is Babbitt:

His large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry. His face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and the red spectacle-dents on the slopes of his nose. He was not fat but he was exceedingly well fed; his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the khaki-coloured blanket was slightly puffy.<sup>22</sup>

Like Tiny, he resembles a giant baby (more on this later), weak and infantilised – note the helpless hand. And like Tiny, the donning of clothes and accessories transforms him:

His first adornment was the sleeveless dimity B.V.D. undershirt, in which he resembled a small boy humourlessly wearing a cheesecloth tabard at a civic pageant. [...] His second embellishment was combing back his hair. It gave him a tremendous forehead, arching up two inches beyond the former hair-line. But most wonder-working of all was the donning of his spectacles.

[...] Babbitt’s spectacles had huge, circular frameless lenses of the very best glass; the ear-pieces were thin bars of gold. In them he was the modern business man; one who gave orders to clerks and drove a car and played occasional golf and was scholarly in regard to Salesmanship. His head suddenly appeared not babyish but weighty, and you noted his heavy, blunt nose, his straight mouth and thick, long upper lip, his chin over-fleshy but strong; with respect you beheld him put on the rest of his uniform as Solid Citizen.’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18)

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22 *Babbitt* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922; repr. London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p. 12. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

We see here an awareness of the world as a system of signs – familiar from Klinkowitz's aforementioned take on Yates as a novelist of manners ‘in a post-realistic age’, manoeuvring through an elaborate sign system. (We also see how this awareness stretches back to earlier novelists like Lewis.) Like Babbitt, Tiny gains authority from his outfit. In the ward, where everyone wears a dressing gown, the semiotic system is impoverished, making it harder to discern distinctions of class and social standing. Fully dressed, Tiny becomes a respectable member of society, his size becoming a signifier of masculine heft rather than something comically childlike and plump. The short story’s ending again echoes a particular scene in *Babbitt*, the choice of which bears witness to the kind of strong misreading – ‘*an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation*’<sup>23</sup> – identified by Harold Bloom, who notes that ‘he who lives with continuity alone cannot be a poet’.<sup>24</sup> Bloom’s focus is on poetry, but it is not too great a liberty to adapt the notion to the writer of fiction. Simply repeating, continuing, what one’s literary forebears have created, leads to cliché, a form of textual entropy where the same ingredients produce lesser results, their potency withering with each recycling. And so as part of the Nietzschean struggle presented by Bloom, the strong poet/writer performs a deliberate swerve away from his/her influencing figure, as the will to literary power requires that the writer carve out his/her own territory. In Yates’ re-imagining of the Babbitt character, he performs a deliberate move away from the optimistic, forward-looking ending of Lewis’ novel, freeze-framing him at his most ludicrous, and thus creating a rupture which allows him to re-employ George Babbitt without simply repeating him.

Back at the TB ward, Harold is quickly transformed into Tiny again, replacing the quiet dignity of his fully dressed self with an annoying penchant for pranks and unfunny gags. On New Year’s Eve, he dresses up as a baby – fully embracing his infantilisation – as part of a celebratory procession through the ward, his loud jollity in stark contrast to the sterile, death-riddled environment. He sings the loudest, roaring with laughter. The procession of too-cheerful patients reads like a funhouse reflection of Babbitt’s performance at the State Association of Real Estate Boards

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23 *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 30, original italics.

24 Ibid., p. 78

convention in Chicago.<sup>25</sup> Presenting their bid to host the next year's convention, Babbitt and his fellow Zenith real estate brokers put on a procession to impress the board. Babbitt has dressed up as a clown, and is described as 'beating a bass drum, extraordinarily happy and noisy' (Lewis, p. 167). But where this is a small moment in a narrative in which Babbitt undergoes a great deal of progress, ending on an optimistic note, Tiny's story ends with him in a nappy, merrily clutching a drink. He has absorbed the stagnation and mental entropy of the prolonged hospitalisation, ending up at a point where any concept of development or progress – of time – would appear irrelevant, the procession's chant of 'Out wivvie old! In wivva new!' (*Stories*, p. 139) a darkly ironic joke (as things so often turn out in Yates' world). Emulating the short story in which he exists, Tiny is a freeze-frame shot – not just of Babbitt, but of himself. The intertextual play apparent in these two stories emphasises not just their literariness, their constructed, textual nature, but also the formal characteristics of the modern short story.

As has already been established, intertextual play has been a fixture of literary realism since the nineteenth century. Its purpose may have been to mock other literary forms for their supposed fraudulence, parodying genres such as the romance or the gothic;<sup>26</sup> or it may have been employed to establish realism in the realm of the literary, belonging to the same frame of reference as Shakespeare, say, as in Balzac's aforementioned allusive '*All is true*'. What we see in this collection is an intertextual game drawing on the realist tradition itself, a realism that is its own field of enquiry. When Yates draws on Flaubert, or Lewis, or modernists like Hemingway<sup>27</sup> and Joyce, my introductory claim that his version of realism could only have emerged when it did gains strength from one simple, yet not trivial fact: in the nineteenth century, the tradition with which he engages was not yet a tradition, those most influential texts had not yet been written. This fact of chronology adds an extra layer of reflexivity to an already reflexive mode of writing, like rings added to a tree as it ages. To a certain extent, realism has always been 'about' writing, language, literature, while simultaneously dealing with manners and mores, work and money, marriage and

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25 Whereas this procession may also be read as a grotesque moment in the mode of Hawthorne, a deliberate nod in the direction of 'Young Goodman Brown' or 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux', the already established similarity to Babbitt – as well as a mention of Sinclair Lewis as an influence in the autobiographical essay 'Some Very Good Masters' – would support my reading.

26 'Realist Synthesis in the Nineteenth Century Novel', p. 35

27 See discussion of 'Big Two-Hearted River' below.

divorce. With Yates, realism is also ‘about’ realism. His is not the only realism that engages with the realist tradition in this way, of course, but by acknowledging this aspect of his work, it becomes easier to accept the potential (though far from inherent) viability of realism as a mode of writing in the twentieth century. The scenarios and characters of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* are both recognisable and believable, yet they achieve both qualities from their literariness as much as from their connection to material reality. The Riviera of ‘A Really Good Jazz Piano’ is the Riviera as we know it from fictional representations of the rich at leisure; Vincent Sabella is Charles Bovary; yet the asymmetrical friendship of the former, and the sullen vulnerability of the latter, would be recognisable in a world where neither Fitzgerald nor Flaubert had written a word.

### ***Writer’s block, writerly impotence***

Beyond their employment of intertextual play in order to enact generic difference, both ‘Doctor Jack O’Lantern’ and ‘Out with the Old’ offer subtly encrypted engagement with the problems of writing, here in the form of graffiti and letter writing respectively. (Journalistic writing and the writing of fiction are investigated in other stories, to which I will return later.) As Ronald J. Nelson has pointed out, Yates represents Vincent Sabella’s graffiti writing as if he were describing ‘an artist contemplating his medium and its possibilities’.<sup>28</sup>

For a minute or two he just stood there, looking at the blankness of the concrete wall; then he found a piece of chalk in his pocket and wrote out all the dirty words he could think of, in block letters a foot high. He had put down four words and was trying to remember a fifth when he heard a shuffling at the door behind him. (*Stories*, p. 12)

In Nelson’s words, a deliberate nod to Joyce, whose *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* also features a scribbled-on wall and a lonely schoolboy, this is ‘the artist as a young thug’: the writing process enacted by a character without any storytelling ability.<sup>29</sup> His nickname comes from telling an entirely unbelievable story in class, transparently misappropriating elements of stories told by his classmates. ‘Doctor

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28 ‘Richard Yates’ portrait of the artist as a young thug: ‘Doctor Jack-O’-Lantern’

29 Ibid.

Jack O’Lantern’ is part of his mishearing of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a film he claims he, too, has seen. In light of Yates’ obvious debt to Flaubert in the writing of this story, we can read this scene as a bit of knowingly self-deprecating commentary on any given text’s dependency on the texts that came before; on Bloom’s aforementioned strong misreadings. (Vincent Sabella’s misreading is obviously not very strong – in this reading, this passage amounts to Yates bowing down to Flaubert.)

A sense of writerly impotence, complete with castration anxiety, is found in Miss Price forcing him to wash the swear words off the wall after a fellow pupil – a girl, appropriately in this context – tells on him. Similar fears related to female teachers are replayed in the story ‘Fun with a Stranger’. The strict (and scary) Miss Snell is to give her third grade pupils a present at the end of the year, but what will it be? The children’s hopes for jack-knives, pocket torches, toy soldiers and miniature dolls are dashed on the rocks of the cheap erasers she presents to them with ‘the soft, tremulous smile of a giver’ (*Stories*, p. 93).

In ‘Out with the Old’, writer’s block makes an appearance in the form of McIntyre, a fellow inpatient at the TB ward struggling to write a letter to his daughter, who is pregnant out of wedlock. We follow McIntyre’s writing process, we read his words as he creates them, we see him discard them – we read four versions of page 3 of the letter, a page he abandons mid-sentence:

But from there on, the pen lay dead in his cramped fingers. It was as if all the letters of the alphabet, all the combinations of letters into words, all the infinite possibilities of handwritten language had ceased to exist. (*Ibid.*, p. 136)

### ***Narration and irony***

‘A Wrestler with Sharks’ forms a kind of diptych with ‘Builders’, joining forces in negotiating Yates’ own apprenticeship as a writer, and inserting a number of question marks into *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* as a whole. Crucially, ‘A Wrestler with Sharks’ stages a tug of war between stable and unstable irony which refuses to resolve itself.

From the word's emergence as *eironeia* in Plato's Socratic dialogues, doubling, play and subterfuge have been at the heart of irony's purpose. Plato used the word pejoratively, as a form of lying, and affirmatively, 'to refer to Socrates' capacity to conceal what he really means'.<sup>30</sup> Both a form of lying and a means to truth – the Socratic pleading of ignorance employed to unravel unwarranted assumptions – irony exists in gaps and cracks: between the said and the meant, between the event and the narration, between the intended and the perceived. Fittingly for such a double-dealing concept, it can itself be split in two, manifesting itself as either stable or unstable.

Wayne C. Booth maps out the four defining characteristics of stable irony:

1. It is intended, 'deliberately created by human beings to be heard or read and understood with some precision by other human beings'.<sup>31</sup>
2. It is covert, 'intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface'.
3. However covert, it remains stable or fixed: 'once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions'.
4. It is finite in application – the reconstructed meaning remains 'local, limited'.<sup>32</sup>

As this list shows, stable irony is kept on a tight leash at all times, its duplicity contained by intention, fixity, and limitation. Stable irony rewards the attentive reader/listener with an inevitable uncovering of 'real' meaning under the ironic statement. The statement 'What a sweet man' uttered after witnessing a nightclub bouncer punching a seven stone teenage girl leaves little room for doubt: while the use of irony may here be in poor taste, it is simply not possible that the statement could be uttered in earnest. It has produced 'incongruities no mind can live with comfortably',<sup>33</sup> and so the process of reversal inherent to all decoding of stable ironies *must* take place.

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30 Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2

31 *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 5

32 *Ibid.*, p. 6

33 *Ibid.*, p. 18

Less glaringly obvious, yet equally stable irony carries with it a dimension of flattery. The ironic statement is uttered; some get it; others don't. The irony becomes a velvet rope, offering privileged access to the connoisseur, confused exclusion to the great unwashed. As a reader, the author of stable ironies 'grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built'.<sup>34</sup> As such, stable irony may be linked to claims to cognitive-visual authority of the kind that has informed literary realism since the nineteenth century (and which has roots back to the ancients, as the introduction shows). The reader, like the author, sees what is going on – sees what characters fail to see. This 'special relationship' between reader and author is one which 'A Wrestler with Sharks' undermines: it gives with one hand, while taking away with the other.

Like in 'Builders', the narrator – here called McCabe, but sharing the voice of Bob Prentice, and easily identified as an alter ego of Yates himself – finds himself at the unglamorous end of professional writing (a field I will be returning to in chapter three). Here, his employer is *The Labor Leader*, 'a fat, biweekly tabloid, badly printed, that spilled easily out of your hands and was very hard to put together again in the right order'. '[A] kind of trade paper for union officials', the paper's shabby presentation is matched by its content – 'certain to be stale, likely to be muddled' (*ibid.*, p. 72) – the fruits of the labour of the mainly uninterested staff, hacks who dream of better things. McCabe, telling the story in the past tense, has since been 'rescued' (*ibid.*, p. 74) by a nameless picture magazine. The disillusioned equilibrium is temporarily upset by the arrival of Leon Sobel, a former sheet-metal worker. At 35, he is older than most of the staff – further stressing the early-career transience of the place – 'a very small, tense man' (*ibid.*, p. 73) who has taken the poorly paid job 'out of principle', in stark contrast to his colleagues. From the outset, the text stresses the discrepancy between his own self-image (and the image he attempts to project) and how he appears to McCabe and, by the process of inclusion outlined above, the attentive reader. His eyes are 'not so much piercing as anxious to pierce' (*ibid.*, p. 74). In conversation with McCabe, a would-be display of authoritative body language – lifting one haunch and placing it on the edge of McCabe's desk – is rendered

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34 *Ibid.*, p. 28

laughably clumsy by his short stature. As he explains his motivation for taking the job, he is given plenty of rope to hang himself:

'Listen, McCabe. You're a young kid yet. I wanna tellya something. Know how many books I wrote already?' And now his hands came into play, as they always did sooner or later. Both stubby fists were thrust under my nose and allowed to shake there for a moment before they burst into a thicket of stiff, quivering fingers – only the thumb of one hand remained folded down. 'Nine,' he said, and the hands fell limp on his thigh, to rest until he needed them again. 'Nine. Novels, philosophy, political theory – the entire gamut. And not one of 'em published. Believe me, I've been around a while.' (*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75)

The attention to significant, pathetic detail – those stubby fists employed for emphasis – and the complete lack of self-awareness in boasting about his nine unpublished 'books', however uncomfortable, grant the reader a privileged vantage point.<sup>35</sup> Our privileged viewpoint, our cognitive-visual authority, intact, we see Sobel as he fails to see himself: as hopelessly naïve, even deluded in thinking the only reason his 'books' are hitherto unpublished is because his is an unknown name in the world of letters. As we already know he has been a sheet-metal worker his entire adult life, the warning signs are already alerting us that his works of 'philosophy' and 'political theory' are nothing more than speculative rants without any grounding in scholarship. All suspicions of Sobel's penmanship are confirmed, of course. Shortly after joining *The Labor Leader*, he is offered a gossip column by Finney, the managing editor, for no extra pay, and no byline – after everyone else has declined the offer. Whereas McCabe, and everyone else in the office, recognise this 'opportunity' as an unrewarding chore, Sobel sees it as a golden opportunity, hatching a plan to bypass Finney altogether by bringing the finished column to the owner, Kramm, and demand a raise and a byline from him. McCabe's account of the finished column provides the short story with possibly its most merciless stable irony, among stiff competition. After weeks of toil, Sobel brings him the finished manuscript, complete with a photo 'clipped to the top of page 1' (*ibid.*, p. 81) – how many pages of union gossip are there? – anxiously awaiting his comments.

I can't remember the exact words of the opening paragraph, but it went something like this:

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35 Recall the discussions of the importance of detail in realism in the introduction and in chapter one.

This is the ‘debut’ of a new department in *The Labor Leader* and, moreover, it is also ‘something new’ for your correspondent, who has never handled a column before. However, he is far from being a novice with the written word, on the contrary he is an ‘ink-stained veteran’ of many battles on the field of ideas, to be exact nine works have emanated from his pen.

Naturally in those tomes his task was somewhat different from that which it will be in this column, and yet he hopes that this column will also strive as they did to penetrate the basic human mystery, in other words, to tell the truth. (*Ibid.*, p. 82)

McCabe can only advise him to remove the photo before he is called in to see Kramm. The text itself requires no further comment. The contrast between Sobel’s clunkily pretentious, error-riddled prose, and the sharp clarity of McCabe’s narration is glaring enough, the clashing styles an unmistakable signal of ironic intent.<sup>36</sup> The meeting with Kramm ends with Sobel losing his job, his ultimatum – ‘You take this column or I quit!’ (*Stories*, p. 83) – inevitably backfiring.

I mentioned earlier the story’s position alongside ‘Builders’ as part of a negotiation of Yates’ own apprenticeship as a writer, a negotiation which ultimately has implications for the collection as a whole. The two stories’ companionship is crystallised in a hat, of all things (more on this later). Sobel, imitating another staff writer, starts wearing a (not very nice) waterproof cloth hat ‘as a symbol of journalism, or of nonconformity’. He even develops ‘a whole new set of mannerisms to go with the hat’, toying with it, cocking it back, shaping it ‘into a careless slant over one eyebrow’ upon leaving the office, and so on. McCabe ‘used to picture him studying his reflection in the black subway windows all the way home to the Bronx’ (*ibid.*, p. 78). While it is stated that Sobel sees the hat as a symbol, its ultimate metaphorical value is not the one he intended. Rather, it comes to represent his failure at becoming a writer; his superficial grasp of what writing actually entails; his lack of mastery. All his dilettantism is condensed in that hat: preening vanity undermined by ineptitude. And yet, all nodding complicity between McCabe and the reader, so carefully established from the very beginning, is swept away as the story reaches its ending. Seeking to do the now sacked Sobel a favour, McCabe manages to get him an interview at a hardware trade journal through an old acquaintance. Calling to give him the news, he gets Sobel’s wife on the other end, her voice not ‘the high, faint voice I’d

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36 *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 67

expected. It was low and melodious' (*ibid.*, p. 84). Struggling to link the voice to the photo he has seen, he explains to her the nature of the interview.

She put down the phone, and I heard them talking in the background. Their words were muffled at first but then I heard Sobel say, 'Ah, I'll talk to him – I'll just say thanks for calling.' And I heard her answer, with infinite tenderness, 'No, honey, why should you? He doesn't deserve it.'

'McCabe's all right,' he said.

'No he's not,' she told him, 'or he'd have the decency to leave you alone. Let me do it. Please. I'll get rid of him.'

When she came back to the phone she said, 'No, my husband says he wouldn't be interested in a job of that kind.' Then she thanked me politely, said goodbye, and left me to climb guilty and sweating out of the phone booth. (*Ibid.*)

This concluding scene creates an unsettling effect in relation to the preceding narrative. Where the ironic contrast between Sobel's self-image and his outward appearance has been treated with a great deal of detail, the reader offered a magnifying glass to hone in on his embarrassing flaws, here there is a withholding of information, conflicting signals rejecting assumptions without offering new ones in return (cf. discussion of 'A Really Good Jazz Piano'). Sobel and his wife are partially obscured, only parts of their dialogue overheard. What does become clear is that the image so far offered of Sobel's home life – Sobel hunched over the typewriter in his futile quest for truth-telling glory, his wife crying in confusion and despair – is incomplete at best. What is made clear, however, is the wife's loyalty to her husband, a devotion which, however misguided it may be as far as his abilities as a writer are concerned, nevertheless is granted a poignant warmth altogether lacking from the reader's initial response to Sobel. The in-crowd connection established by McCabe is conflicted, as the flattery inherent to the preceding stable ironies – you, reader, like me, recognise both fools and bad prose when you encounter them – turns to a forced sharing of his discomfort. When McCabe is left guilty and sweating, so is the reader: the tremors are felt beyond the text, as the ironist and his appreciative audience have had their supposedly superior view clouded.<sup>37</sup> There is an element of reconstruction required in any encounter with an ironic text: 'the tearing down of one habitation and

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37 Such disruption of the reader's field of vision is a familiar strategy in Yates' work, as the discussion of April in chapter one demonstrates.

the building of another one on a different spot'.<sup>38</sup> The audience must recognise and pick apart the ironic statement, and replace it with its real, unsaid meaning. In the case of 'A Wrestler with Sharks', the story rests on the reader's ability to see Sobel *not* as the truth-telling scribe of his imagination. Crucially, the work of reconstruction is made easy by the stability of the situation. McCabe's authority is unquestioned; Sobel's position – already established – is reaffirmed. In the words of Booth:

If there were victims (and there usually were) they were never the implied author (whatever victimized masks he assumed in passing) and they did not include the true implied reader; the reader and author were intended to stand, after their work was done, firmly and securely together.<sup>39</sup>

As we can see, 'A Wrestler with Sharks' breaks with this model, after employing it for the majority of the narrative. McCabe's puzzling encounter with Mrs Sobel creates a distinct sense that a trick has been played: on McCabe, and, ultimately, on the reader. Whatever sneering pleasures the reader has extracted from reading of Sobel's delusions and ineptitude are ultimately held up as shameful.

### ***Nick Adams and Robert Prentice***

Returning to the theme of intertextuality in the collection, and what such intertextual practice might imply about Yates' realism, it is crucial to stress the subtly subversive debt owed by 'Builders' to Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River', the concluding story of *In Our Time*. While highly different on the level of plot, both stories stand as statements of authorial intent, carefully constructed to round off their respective collections, to stand as signature pieces, yet Yates achieves much of his impact through an undermining of Hemingway's efforts.

'Big Two-Hearted River' provides *In Our Time* with a point of culmination in a number of ways. It is the final and by far the longest story of the collection; it is one of several stories about Hemingway's fictional alter ego Nick Adams, yet its length and conceptual heft ensures its position as a crowning moment, rather than simply one story among others; as Joseph M. Flora argues, it is 'unquestionably the most brilliant

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38 Ibid., p. 33

39 Ibid., p. 233

of the collection [...]; unmistakable proof that its young author had mastered his craft'.<sup>40</sup> The organisation of the collection in such a way – linked by thematic concerns and character, finishing with a clear sense of climax – was modelled on James Joyce's *Dubliners*, as well as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.<sup>41</sup> The lineage is worth noting. While the relationship to nineteenth-century realists is discussed elsewhere in this chapter, as well as in chapters one and three, the trajectory backwards via Hemingway to Joyce (see also the discussion of 'Doctor Jack O' Lantern' above) is yet another indication of the realist-modernist continuum established in the introduction of this thesis. Indeed, the tendency to create short story collections that invite consideration as a whole, governed by overriding themes and/or recurring characters, flourished during the height of modernism, not during the nineteenth century. Beyond Anderson and Joyce, Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* stands as a prominent example of this tendency, a tendency evident in the title of Yates' collection, with its promise of eleven variations on a theme.

It is important to note the relevance of mastery to 'Big Two-Hearted River', not simply as an example of Hemingway at his best, but as a theme repeatedly evoked in the portrayal of Nick's relationship with his environment. While the shock of war lies unspoken under this story of a fishing trip, hinted at by the charred Michigan countryside, the blackened grasshoppers hopping along, the shock is handled through mastery of nature, mastery of fishing, camping, and hiking. Nick's trip is hard work, but rewarding, meaningful:

He walked along the road feeling the ache from the pull of the heavy pack. The road climbed steadily. It was hard work walking up-hill. His muscles ached and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him.<sup>42</sup>

Potentially treacherous personal needs have been left behind; what is left is the purity of physical experience. The descriptions of Nick setting up camp, of making coffee and cooking, are descriptions of a man who knows what he is doing, who has the right

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40 Robert M. Flora, *Hemingway's Nick Adams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 144.

41 Ibid., p. 146

42 In *In Our Time* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), pp. 179-214 (p. 181). Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

tools and the right skills for the task at hand. Fishing, too, is an activity of skill and preparation, as these two passages demonstrate:

The meadow was wet with dew and Nick wanted to catch grasshoppers for bait before the sun dried the grass. He found plenty of good grasshoppers. They were at the base of the grass stems. Sometimes they clung to a grass stem. They were cold and wet with the dew, and could not jump until the sun warmed them. (*Ibid.*, pp. 197-198)

He had wet his hand before he touched the trout, so he would not disturb the delicate mucus that covered him. If a trout was touched with a dry hand, a white fungus attacked the unprotected spot. Years before when he had fished crowded streams, with fly fishermen ahead of him and behind him, Nick had again and again come on dead trout, furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly-up in some pool. Nick did not like to fish with other men on the river. Unless they were of your party, they spoiled it. (*Ibid.*, pp. 203-204)

When a large trout gets away, the disappointment is kept in check by the sensory pleasures offered by the day: the warming sun, the smooth rocks and logs. When greater horrors threaten to simmer to the surface, embodied by the swamp into which the river runs, Nick feels the threat, but is ultimately undefeated by it. He stays away from its deep water, its confined space, its poor light: ‘In the swamp, fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it’ (*ibid.*, p. 213). Yet his aversion is only temporary, and he knows it. The story, and the collection, concludes with the following paragraph, an act of determined affirmation in writing:

Nick stood up on the log, holding his rod, the landing-net hanging heavy, then stepped into the water and splashed ashore. He climbed the bank and cut up into the woods, toward the high ground. He was going back to camp. He looked back. The river just showed through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamps. (*Ibid.*, p. 214)

Nick has bloomed, from the boy of ‘Indian Camp’ (the collection’s opening story) into a writer who will be able to confront his experiences, called to action against the darkness (*Flora*, p. 174). From boy to man, from shock to recovery, the trajectory of Nick Adams is like his walk to the river: uphill, but happy. The brief coda of the collection that is ‘L’Envoi’, the final ‘in our time’ insert, is dwarfed by Nick’s concluding note of positive determination.

Of the short stories found in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, ‘Builders’ is perhaps the most explicitly reflexive, as it is peppered with self-subverting devices that suggest a deliberate dismantling of the narrative arc offered by *In Our Time*. From its opening

sentence, it sets out to negotiate not only the narrative strategies of fiction, but the reflexive treatment of said strategies as well:

Writers who write about writers can easily bring on the worst kind of literary miscarriage; everybody knows that. Start a story off with ‘Craig crushed out his cigarette and lunged for the typewriter,’ and there isn’t an editor in the United States who’ll feel like reading your next sentence. (*Stories*, p. 141)

Not simply metafiction in the sense of being a fiction about the nature of fiction, this opening passage takes on the quality of meta-metafiction: a fictional treatment of the fictional treatment of the writing of fiction, moving in a spiral of reflexivity.<sup>43</sup> Crucially to this story’s relationship with ‘Big Two-Hearted River’, this reflexivity is chiefly employed to undercut the story itself, to lower expectations, to draw attention to its flaws. It continues:

So don’t worry, this is going to be a straight, no-nonsense piece of fiction about a cabdriver, a movie star, and an eminent child psychologist, and that’s a promise. But you’ll have to be patient for a minute, because there’s going to be a writer in it too. I won’t call him ‘Craig’, and I can guarantee that he won’t get away with being the only Sensitive Person among the characters, but we’re going to be stuck with him right along and you’d better count on his being as awkward and obtrusive as writers nearly always are, in fiction or in life. (*Ibid.*, p. 141)

The story insists upon its own artifice, with the narrator owning up to his command of the characters – ‘I won’t call him Craig’ – thus commenting on the narrator’s God-like function: omniscient and omnipotent within the confines of the text.<sup>44</sup> The narrator’s role is then given a further twist, as it becomes clear that the writer in question is the narrator himself. In other words, the narrator is his own creation, the ‘I’ of the text undermined by himself from the start, both puppet-master and puppet simultaneously. Like in ‘A Wrestler with Sharks’, the historical Yates and his alter ego, here named Bob Prentice – further undermining his authority – are involved in a complex struggle for textual control.

The narrative deals with the narrator’s early days as a writer, working as a rewrite man for the UP, handling financial news items he doesn’t understand. This young writer is portrayed as floundering, yet indulging his own writerly vanity:

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43 For a more detailed discussion of metafiction, see chapter five.

44 *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 29

[E]very morning I could turn up at the *Daily News* building wearing a jaded look, a cheap trench coat that had shrunk a size too small for me, and a much-handled brown fedora ('Battered' is the way I would have described it then, and I'm grateful that I know a little more now about honesty in the use of words. It was a handled hat, handled by endless nervous pinchings and shapings and reshapings; it wasn't battered at all). What I'm getting at is that just for those few minutes each day, walking up the slight hill of the last hundred yards between the subway exit and the *News* building, I was Ernest Hemingway reporting for work at the *Kansas City Star*. (*Stories*, pp. 141-142)

Firstly, this passage contains an echo of 'A Wrestler with Sharks', as Sobel's unflattering cloth hat finds a companion in Bob's much-handled fedora. For Bob as well as Sobel, the hat takes on the power of metaphor, both falsely claiming a sense of writerly authority through external signifiers. The crushing portrayal of Sobel leaves permanent stains on Bob, smudging him upon contact. The back-and-forth exchange of the two stories creates a tension which is never fully resolved. On one hand, 'Builders' is a virtuoso performance in which the narrator reflexively mocks his own inept apprentice period, all the while building a complex textual structure. That his ineptitude finds embodiment in an overly optimistic allegiance to Hemingway's own apprentice period, a period culminating in the unequivocal graduation that is 'Big Two-Hearted River' is indicative of the kind of knowingly subversive intertextual work Yates is performing. On the other, there are signs that the narrator's superiority is far from stable. McCabe's final confusion and Bob's concluding doubts surrounding his own narrative both suggest that these two have been made to perform certain tasks, their apparently eagle-eyed narration undermined by their own obvious fictionality vis-à-vis their author. The text operates in the gap explored by Paul de Man, that of the inherent irony of all narration. To de Man, all writing produces 'a gap or distance between a text and what it signifies'.<sup>45</sup> What is unique to literature, among all acts of writing, is that it 'acknowledges that it creates through narrative, rather than presenting narrative as the representation of some mythical prior reality'.<sup>46</sup> This acknowledgement culminates in the final irony – appropriately enough – of achieving a form of authenticity unavailable to other forms of writing.

Bob's retrospective rumination on his hat evokes a recurring theme of Yates' work: the inherent tension between language and the world. Pondering the difference

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45 *OIrony*, p. 108

46 *Ibid.*, p. 110

between ‘battered’ and ‘much-handled’, the narrator’s view of the language/reality conundrum is ultimately optimistic: it is difficult, yet possible, to accurately describe the world. It is a distinctly pre-Saussurean take on language, yet imbued with the epistemological uncertainty characteristic of modernism as outlined in the discussion of ‘No Pain Whatsoever’, as well as echoing Flaubert’s sense of struggle to find ‘le mot juste’, his ‘linguistic self-doubt’, to repeat Brooks’ phrase. The search for the right words is given verbal expression throughout the story: upon seeing a piece of furniture, the narrator comments that he doesn’t know what to call it, but guesses at the word ‘credenza’. His work is another site of uncertainty, as he ignorantly parrots business jargon (again, there are echoes of *Revolutionary Road*) which in turn is reproduced in newspapers across the country:

‘Domestic corporate bonds moved irregularly higher in the moderately active trading today...’ That was the kind of prose I wrote all day long for the UP wire, and ‘Rising oil shares paced a lively curb market,’ and ‘Directors of Timken Roller Bearing today declared’ – hundreds and hundreds of words that I never really understood (What in the name of God are puts and calls, and what is a sinking fund debenture? I’m still damned if I know) [...] (*Stories*, p. 142)

The irony of a writer not understanding a word he writes is an obvious one, and it is a founding principle of the story that this young writer is, simply put, not very good. He is perfectly aware that all the outward similarities between his own life and the narrative arc of Hemingway’s are of no consequence to the actual stories he produces on his typewriter – ‘always, always something bad’ (*ibid.*) – and it is due to this mediocrity that he discovers an ad in a magazine (read when he should have been writing) for an ‘unusual free-lance opportunity for talented writer’ (*ibid.*, p. 143) offered by a man called Bernard Silver. The introduction of this element of the story offers a parody of Hemingway’s poetics of omission, creating a hole in the story by deliberately obscuring some events due to their mundane nature:

I won’t bother you with the dry, witty, Hemingway dialogue that took place when I came out from behind the screen that night and Joan turned around from the sink, with her hands dripping soapsuds on the open magazine, and we can also skip my cordial, unenlightening chat with Bernard Silver on the phone. I’ll just move on ahead to a couple of nights later, when I rode the subway for an hour and found my way at last to his apartment. (*Ibid.*)

The mechanics of narrative pacing are exposed, the processes of exclusion and selection inherent in maintaining the drive of realist fiction acknowledged.

Bernard Silver is looking for a writer in order to turn his experiences as a cab driver – the veracity of which is questionable at best – into first-person narratives for publication, possibly even filming. Sentimental yarns of how he saved marriages, prevented suicides and robberies, all from the driver's seat of his taxi. He offers his ideas on the craft of storytelling to Bob, who just about manages to conceal his disgust.

'Do you see where writing a story is [...] [like] building a house?' And he was so pleased with his own creation of this image that he didn't even wait to take in the careful, congratulatory nod I awarded him for it. 'I mean a house has got to have a roof, but you're going to be in trouble if you build your roof first, right? Before you build your roof you got to build your walls. Before you build your walls you got to lay your foundation – and I mean all the way down the line. Before you build your foundation you got to bulldoze and dig yourself the right kind of hole in the ground. Am I right? [...] So all right, supposing you build a house like that. Then what? What's the first question you got to ask yourself about it when it's done? [...] Where are the windows?' he demanded, spreading his hands. 'That's the question. Where does the light come in? Because do you see what I mean about the light coming in, Bob? I mean the – the *philosophy* of your story; the *truth* of it; the –'

'The illumination of it, sort of,' I said, and he quit groping for his third noun with a profound and happy snap of his fingers. (*Ibid.*, pp. 148-149)

Once again characters struggle to find the right words, and this time the implicit mockery of the unsophisticated Bernard extends to his poetics. His insistence on 'truth' and 'philosophy' is really a demand for the kind of neat, optimistic message of hope and redemption that will make the *Reader's Digest* buy his stories. Such use of these otherwise lofty words constitutes a corrosion of language. Nevertheless, Bob takes the job, as the extra money will help him and his wife realise their dream of moving to Paris – there's that again – so that he can focus on his writing, just like Hemingway.

Following Bernard's recipe for success, acting in bad faith throughout, Bob finds that he can write the kind of story he has been hired to write without too much trouble:

I took that little bastard of a story and I built the hell out of it. First I bulldozed and laid myself a real good foundation, then I got the lumber out and bang, bang, bang – up went the walls and on went the roof and up went the cute little chimney top. Oh, I put plenty of windows in it too – big, square ones – and when the light came pouring in it left no earthly shadow of a doubt that Bernie Silver was the wisest, gentlest, bravest and most lovable man who ever said 'folks.' (*Ibid.*, pp. 151-152)

The sarcastic briskness of the tone mocks the simplistic writing required of him, the sort of cloying tale of everyday heroism which relies on narrative clichés and untruths like ‘closure’. The metaphor of the windows also serves to comment on Yates’ work beyond this particular story, as the other short stories in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* are also decidedly short on the kind of ‘philosophy’ and ‘truth’ that are employed to bring a little light into the lives of readers, or, to put it in terms used by Jean-Francois Lyotard about literary realism in general: ‘to deceive, to seduce, and to reassure’.<sup>47</sup> As the narrative progresses, the project Bob has been hired for degenerates further, as initial possible routes to publication are blocked. After the tall tales of Bernie Silver’s acts of selfless kindness and bravery fail to metamorphose into *Reader’s Digest* riches or Hollywood success, Bernie changes the concept into a form of political infomercial disguised as short story, campaigning for the election of a Vincent J. Poletti for Congressman. The mock autobiography of Bob’s earlier stories is to be replaced with disingenuous political careerism, as Bernie, a racist Republican – ‘On the national level, yes. On the local level, no’ – gives his support to the local Democrat Poletti, whose status as ‘a comer in the party’ (*Stories*, p. 163) would make him an opportune horse to back. This idea is viciously mocked by Bob to Bernie’s face, but he agrees to the assignment anyway, the promise of cash impossible to resist in the face of his wife’s pregnancy. Whereas the earlier stories had been constructed according to Bernie’s formula, this time the process proved even less inspired:

In the end I built – oh, built, schmilt. I put page one and then page two and then page three into the old machine and I *wrote* the son of a bitch. [...] What does a public servant do when he really wants to go out of his way to help people? Gives them money, that’s what he does; and pretty soon I had Poletti forking over more than he could count. It got so that anybody in the Bronx who was even faintly up against it had only to climb into Bernie Silver’s cab and say ‘The Poletti place’, and their troubles were over. And the worst part of it was my own grim conviction that it was the best I could do. (*Ibid.*, p. 166)

Unsurprisingly, Bernie doesn’t like this story much, and their creative partnership ends. Eventually, so does Bob’s employment at the UP, and when Bernie calls him up some time later, Bob can tell him that he is, in fact, writing a novel, and is therefore

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47 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 74

unable to write for him any more. What Bob fails to realise until later, is that Bernie did not want to rehire him as a writer, but rather to utilise his position within the UP to gain access to the lucrative syndicated comic-strip market – the latest incarnation of the adventures of Bernie Silver is in strip form. Bernie’s adventures are thus subjected to the kind of narrative entropy seen in *Revolutionary Road*, although here the material was pretty banal from the start – from the ‘heart-warming’, sentimental, but carefully put together, to hastily assembled, sycophantic political propaganda, to a few frames in the funny pages.

The story concludes with a reflection on the story just told:

And where are the windows? Where does the light come in?

Bernie, old friend, forgive me, but I haven’t got the answer to that one. I’m not even sure there *are* any windows in this particular house. Maybe the light is just going to have to come in as best it can, through whatever chinks and cracks have been left in the builder’s faulty craftsmanship, and if that’s the case you can be sure that nobody feels worse about it than I do. God knows, Bernie; God knows there certainly ought to be a window around here somewhere, for all of us. (*Ibid.*, p. 173)

The reflexivity of the opening paragraph returns, the narrator openly acknowledging the manufactured nature of this story starring himself, freely admitting that any ‘light’ would only be present by accident. The deliberately trite metaphor of storytelling as house building is recast as a reminder of fiction’s uphill struggle towards ‘truth’, ‘philosophy’ and ‘illumination’. Strategically placed at the end of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, it becomes, literally, the last word; a final note of uncertainty, embodied in the string of ‘maybe’ and ‘not sure’ and ‘God knows’. Whereas the story’s placing at the end of the collection, its length (it is approximately twice as long as the second longest story in the volume), and its employment of a writer as first-person narrator all suggest a culmination – Vincent Sabella all grown up, Nick Adams emerging triumphant – the story itself, with its deliberately uncertain ending, resists any sense of mastery or blossoming.

## **Chapter Three: War, Work, Masculinity**

This chapter will primarily focus on those sections of Richard Yates' work that negotiate notions of masculinity through the prism of war: *A Good School*, *A Special Providence*, and a number of his short stories, taken both from his collections, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and *Liars in Love*. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on male homosocial desire will be of particular importance to this portion of the chapter. Further, the chapter will engage with popular narratives of war, and World War II in particular, as these provide a site of contestation in Yates' war fictions, echoing his treatment of everyday language in *Revolutionary Road*. As argued in the introduction, that strand of American realism that was shaped in accordance with William Dean Howells' critical writings enacts a disavowal of art and artifice that is highly gendered in its biases, its stylistic and formal preoccupations shaped by contemporary debates surrounding masculinity. As such, realist writing that seeks to expose and subvert the ironies and contradictions of normative masculinity may also be read as a reflexive negotiation of the discursive formation of American realism, carving out a space within that formation where the contradictions of masculinity may be exposed, and as such moving beyond some of the masculinist assumptions that were instrumental in shaping American realism in the nineteenth century. Through a reading of Yates' work guided by issues of masculinity, this chapter will highlight his complicated relationship with the American realist tradition, again demonstrating a closer allegiance with Flaubert, as well as with other American writers standing in a transitional relationship with the European and American literary traditions, specifically Henry James<sup>1</sup> and Ernest Hemingway. Due to the number of lengthy texts discussed in this chapter, these readings can only ever be conspicuously non-exhaustive; rather, they provide an examination of certain ideas, certain trains of thought progressing through his work. In addition, the chapter will investigate Yates' treatment of the world of work, and particularly his focus on writing as a form of labour. Ultimately, Yates' engagement with war fiction ties in with his broader engagement with realist form. As the following aims to demonstrate, American literary realism has a rich history of anxious contestation around discourses of

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1 See the discussion of the debate between James and Howells in the introduction.

masculinity as enacted in war fiction, from Stephen Crane onwards, and Yates' war fiction enacts elements of this history. Yates' war fictions may be read as part of a larger investigation into the relationship between realism (and writing in general) and masculinity, as the crisis of realist representation his work enacts<sup>2</sup> also takes place in its treatment of male identities, and how their attendant discourses have underpinned American realism since the mid-nineteenth century.

### ***Writing as labour***

Recalling the discussion of the anxieties around masculinity in American realism in the introduction, Yates' work problematises the professionalization of the writer which were in part fuelled by such anxieties, driven by a desire to recast writing as a manly, businesslike pursuit, defined by craft and professionalism, rather than feminised aestheticism. Writing is repeatedly cast as a form of labour in Yates' work, far removed from notions of Art as immaterial or transcendent. Writing is usually an arduous task riddled with difficulty (see discussion on *A Special Providence* below, as well as chapter two), and, more often than not, it is also a *job*. For the copywriters, rewrite men, trade journalists, school paper editors and creative writing teachers that occupy Yates' fictions, writing is an issue of craftsmanship – the parallel to Howells should be apparent – and of making money, supporting a family, showing up at the office every day.<sup>3</sup> In the emerging white-collar economy of the post-war period, Howells' skilled professional is replaced with the office drone. The Yatesian writer has more than a little in common with C. Wright Mills' disenfranchised middle-class male: a faceless hack hanging on in a marketplace built on conformity and efficiency, rather than an Artist gazing dreamily out of his window while composing a sonnet. As such, Yates' work stages the male/masculine realist writer in a state of entropy, and

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2 See chapter one.

3 This does not apply to *A Good School's* Bill Grove, obviously. The issue of craftsmanship remains relevant, though, as the epilogue makes explicit (note the use of the word 'trade'): '[Dorset Academy] saw me through the worst of my adolescence, as few other schools would have, and it taught me the rudiments of my trade. I learned to write by working on the Dorset *Chronicle*, making terrible mistakes in print that hardly anybody ever noticed. Couldn't that be called a lucky apprenticeship?' (*A Good School* [New York: Delacorte, 1978; repr. New York: Picador, 2001], p. 178). Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

his war fictions stand as the texts where this corrosion of normative masculinity reaches a culmination, where the fault lines of heterosexual male identity in the mid-twentieth century are most glaringly exposed.

The sense of loss related to the role of the writer is palpable, a weary resignation at party's end. Christopher P. Wilson argues that this new emphasis on professionalism was not isolated to literature, but served as a wider response to a new complexity of life, ushered in by technological advances, rapid urban growth, industrialisation, and so on. In this climate, what was needed was expertise achieved through 'rigorously trained professionalism'.<sup>4</sup> So while the call for professionalism may have been tinged with anxiety from the outset, anxiety was paired with a dynamic optimism, a belief that the vicissitudes of late-nineteenth-century life could be mastered through a rejection of amateurism in favour of a hearty, robust seriousness. In Yates' work we find no such sense of cultural get-up-and-go. Rather, those of his fictions that engage most explicitly with the world of work tend to be populated by characters in the process of being overpowered by the mundane enormity of white-collar working life. These professionals are not experts: Frank Wheeler does not know the meaning of his brochures; 'A Wrestler with Sharks' opens by informing us that no one at the trade paper *The Labor Leader*, not even its owners, take any pride in their work; 'A Glutton for Punishment' pivots on the protagonist Walter Henderson losing his job; and so on. If we recall the introductory discussion of Flaubert, it would be pertinent to bring up his loathsome invention Homais, parroting jargon in his mediocre articles. As an illustration of the weariness around writing Yates' work expresses, it is worth bearing in mind that, while lacking in critical acuity, Homais is richly rewarded for his mediocre efforts. In the hands of Yates, the writer-as-professional is subjected to an entropic process which turns him into the writer-as-hack, tired and semi-competent, tinkering with exhausted, incomprehensible vocabularies.

The earlier masculinist mythos of the writer as professional had held a 'veiled promise that the individual would not be reduced to a social cipher by the stifling comfort, anxiety, and interdependence of modern life'.<sup>5</sup> Rugged masculinity could

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4 *The Labor of Words*, p. 13

5 Ibid., p. 143

still exist, even after the frontier has been conquered and all the blanks on the map had been filled in. In Yates' texts, said reduction has already taken place; or, more precisely, the idealised masculinity at the heart of American realist thought surrounding the figure of the writer is repeatedly shown up as compromised, full of inherently non-ideal structural flaws.

### ***Men at war***

With the discursive connection between American realism and masculinity in mind, let us consider what role war plays in literary negotiations of American manhood. Scrutinizing the roots of war, Barbara Ehrenreich seeks to find a more satisfying theory of war than those offered so far. The notion of war as pure politics, summed up in Prussian officer Carl von Clausewitz' aphorism as a 'continuation of policy by other means', ignores the visceral horror of battle.<sup>6</sup> Freudian or psychological explanations, dwelling on 'some dark flaw in the human psyche, a perverse desire to destroy' or instinctual aggressiveness,<sup>7</sup> are also flawed, more suited to red-mist scenarios of hand-to-hand combat than the cool precision required of an archer or a bomber pilot.

Furthermore, fighting itself is only one component of the enterprise we know as war. Wars are not barroom brawls writ large, or domestic violence that has somehow been extended to strangers. In war, fighting takes place within battles – along with much anxious waiting, war consists of *preparation* for battle – training, the organization of supplies, marching and other forms of transport – activities which are hard to account for by innate promptings of any kind.<sup>8</sup>

Then, of course, there are the many variations of the practices of desertion and self-harm men have engaged in to avoid war – hardly actions of natural born killers in their element. Instead of opting for these theories, then, Ehrenreich looks back at humankind's hunter-gatherer roots, and identifies masculinity as the dominant element in war, to the point where 'war is one of the most rigidly "gendered" activities known to mankind';<sup>9</sup> even 'an activity that has often served to *define* manhood itself – which is exactly what we would expect if war in fact originated as

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6 *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War* (London: Virago, 1997), p. 7

7 Ibid., p. 8

8 Ibid., p. 9, original italics.

9 Ibid., p. 125

substitute occupation for underemployed male hunter-defenders'.<sup>10</sup> Going further, Ehrenreich believes

There is no compelling biological or ‘natural’ reason why men have starred so exclusively in the drama of war. Men make wars for many reasons, but one of the most recurring ones is to establish that they are, in fact, ‘real men’. Warfare and aggressive masculinity have been, in other words, mutually reinforcing cultural enterprises.<sup>11</sup>

Ehrenreich’s highlighting of the masculine dominance of the realm of war is useful for thinking about narratives of war. It should come as no surprise that war fiction should predominantly be fiction about men. Further, war fiction tends to focus on a limited group of individuals, rather than take a birds’ eye view of the war as a whole, which invites treatment of the individual’s place in the war, their reasons for fighting, their hopes, fears, and dreams. By focusing on individuals rather than nation states, war fiction invites discussion around what makes men enlist for war, rather than what makes governments declare it.

Kathy J. Phillips makes a similar argument to Ehrenreich’s in identifying men’s desire to prove their masculinity as their chief reason for enlisting for war, rather than loftier notions of defending freedom, fighting fascism and so forth. Quoting N. Kinzer Stewart’s article ‘Military Cohesion’, Phillips reports:

Studies of American combat veterans recorded that if a majority scoffed at ‘patriotism’ as sentimental bunkum, most valued group loyalty and a ‘code of masculinity’ (Stewart 146). Infantrymen and bomber crews resisted their desire to run away because of ‘friendship’, ‘machismo’, ‘sense of honour’, and the fear of being seen as a coward. (Stewart 148)<sup>12</sup>

As such, war resonates keenly with the masculinist tendencies found within certain quarters of American realism, a world of men far removed from the parlour, from society, what John Limon ironically refers to as ‘a (female, verbose, therefore for writers dangerous) simulacrum’.<sup>13</sup> Messy, brutal, ‘mute’ war thus comes to stand as pure, even beautiful:

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10 Ibid., p. 127, original italics.

11 Ibid., p. 129

12 Kathy J. Phillips, *Manipulating Masculinity: War and Gender in Modern British and American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 85

13 John Limon, *Writing After War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 34

War is the direct ancestor of environmental art. The distant cannonade can sound like the bass incitement of an outdoor symphony; the distant file of enemy troops brings out the contours of the landscape like Christo's fence.<sup>14</sup>

As Michael Davitt Bell points out, the exaltation of manly activities on the part of Howells, and later Norris, is governed by a certain overcompensating disingenuousness, an idolising of perceived masculine qualities the men themselves did not possess. As a boy, Howells was 'a strangely nervous and morbid child, feebler than his companions';<sup>15</sup> as an adult, he was 'troubled by his ambiguous social and sexual identity' and had initially turned to literature 'not [...] as a "worldly" or institutional" activity but as an *alternative* to such activities'.<sup>16</sup> Davitt Bell pinpoints Norris' model of naturalism as '[sounding] like nothing so much as a prospectus for a body-building course, promising to turn the ninety-eight pound literary weakling into a dynamic he-man, one who "counts" in the domain of masculine "reality"'.<sup>17</sup>

It is therefore interesting to note that these visions of masculinity are not taken at face value within American realism. While soldiers may have valued camaraderie, a 'code of masculinity', there is a bubbling stream running through American letters treating these concepts with as little reverence as the soldiers of Stewart's study would treat the concept of patriotism. The well from which this stream springs is found within American naturalism (itself a literary category deeply invested in the pursuit of manliness), namely Stephen Crane's 1895 Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. A deeply ironic work with an ambiguous ending (to which I will return shortly), the short novel shows its events through the perspective and thoughts of young soldier Henry Fleming (significantly referred to as 'the youth' throughout, an infantilising strategy echoed in the naming of Yates' Robert Prentice) in search of heroic experience to match the inflamed rhetoric of 'tales of great movements'.<sup>18</sup> At the heart of this search lies a preconception of the military realm as 'a virile alternative to the ordinary and domestic',<sup>19</sup> the domestic, of course, being

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14 Ibid.

15 *The Problem of American Realism*, p. 25

16 Ibid., p. 26

17 Ibid., p. 119

18 In *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories*, ed. by Anthony Mellors and Fiona Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 3-117 (p. 5). Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

19 *The Problem of American Realism*, p. 145

tightly bound to the feminine, to Mother. Yet images of domesticity follow him through his first battle: there are temper tantrums as an officer vents ‘the furious anger of a spoiled child’ (Crane, p. 28); cartridge boxes are arranged ‘as if seven hundred new bonnets were being tried on’ (*ibid.*, p. 30); the youth waves off gun smoke ‘like a babe being smothered attacks the deadly blankets’ (*ibid.*, p. 32); a corpse lies ‘in the position of a tired man resting’ (*ibid.*, p. 33).<sup>20</sup> The struggle to close ‘the ironic gap between the rhetoric of preconception and the recalcitrant truth of experience’<sup>21</sup> is from the start compromised by Henry’s doubt about his own preconceptions, and this doubt feeds into an ambiguous, and highly contested, conclusion with the end of Henry’s adventure. We are told that now he ‘could look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly’ (Crane, p. 109), and furthermore, that ‘he was a man’ (*ibid.*). The transformation from youth to man, and the establishment of idyllic harmony as the narrative concludes with ‘a golden ray of sun’ coming ‘through the hosts of leaden rain clouds’ (*ibid.*). Whereas some critics call for a straight reading of the ending, where Henry’s transformation is real, that the change of weather constitutes a genuine ‘symbol of hope and change’,<sup>22</sup> others read the ending ironically, as simply another of Henry’s overly romanticised narratives, this time a recasting of himself as a grizzled, wizened veteran as opposed to the naïve cub of old, injecting the indifferent weather conditions with a quasi-idyllic meaning to suit. The feasibility of both readings indicates that the instability of Crane’s irony deliberately subverts any naïve claims to certainty.<sup>23</sup>

Leaping to a point in time, and a war, closer to Yates, James Salter’s *The Hunters*, published in 1956, offers another complex and complicating take on popular narratives of camaraderie and securely authenticated manhood offered by war. Its title clearly taps into the same roots of war later explored by Ehrenreich, yet its suggestions of tribal unity and shared sense of purpose are undercut by the narrative. Set during the Korean War, the novel focuses on the experienced, bordering on aging in military terms, fighter pilot Cleve Connell. For the men in the Air Force, what makes them is the number of Russian MIG planes they shoot down in dogfights,

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20 This passage is indebted to Michael Davitt Bell’s chapter on Crane in *The Problem of American Realism*.

21 *The Problem of American Realism*, p. 146

22 *Ibid.*

23 See discussion on stable vs. unstable irony in chapter two.

a confirmed kill ensuring a star next to the pilot's name on the squadron list. (For contemporary readers at least, the resemblance between this manhood-validating practice and that of schoolteachers rewarding conscientious children is an unvoiced, yet insistent irony of the novel.) The ultimate goal is to become an ace, a status awarded those with five kills, five stars. What is immediately striking is the frailty of the bonds between these Men at War. Typical bonding practices – drinking, singing, playing cards – seem more for show, as what truly shapes the social world of the men is stiff competition. Great things are expected of Cleve Connell, both by his father and by the other men: his is 'a reputation based on achievement' (Salter, p. 7). Yet the kills will not come. Fruitless missions, during which the skies are either free of MIGs altogether, or they remain too far off in the distance to engage, keep piling up, while Connell's arrogant, upstart Other, Ed Pell, has his first kill confirmed shortly after arriving, although this was achieved through a proleptic act of irresponsible, disloyal flying.<sup>24</sup> Camaraderie is an illusion, loyalty non-existent.

### ***Prelude to war: A Good School, homosocial desire and spectacular masculinity***

*A Good School* does not have a military setting. It takes place at a New England prep school, the Dorset Academy, where the more eccentric and wayward sons of the American upper middle classes (and a fair few whose parents merely dream of belonging to this particular social stratum) receive a suitably genteel education without too much discipline. Yet the Second World War plays a crucial role; at first distant, its events encroach inexorably on campus life as the novel progresses. One student, Larry Gaines, leaves before graduation to join the Merchant Marine, only to die in an accidental fire on board a tanker transporting military gasoline to North Africa. Others volunteer for the Air Force and the Marines, until the draft claims them all. So the war is there, even though it does not claim centre stage until the very end.

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24 The prolepsis points towards Pell's self-serving flattery of the missing in action Connell after the novel's final dogfight.

There is another reason why this novel is most meaningfully discussed alongside Yates' other war fictions. Like the typical war novel, the prep school setting provides an almost exclusively male universe, where homosocial relationships are scrutinised. Before entering into a closer engagement with the novel, a brief look at the concepts of homosociality and homosocial desire is in order, in particular Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work in this area. Used to describe a wide range of relationships between members of the same sex, the word 'homosocial' serves both to evoke and mark difference from 'homosexual', a dual function which is by no means accidental.<sup>25</sup> To map out this territory in the broadest of brush strokes: rugby teams, sewing circles, Fathers 4 Justice, women's shelters, gentlemen's clubs and feminist collectives all constitute homosocial spaces where men and women respectively, and in various ways, work to promote the interests of their gender, enforce a sense of brother/sisterhood, and so forth. What Sedgwick identifies, however, is a radical difference between male and female homosocial relations. Women, she writes:

who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities. [...] The apparent simplicity – the unity – of the continuum between 'women loving women' and 'women promoting the interests of women', extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms, would not be so striking if it were not in strong contrast to the arrangement among males.<sup>26</sup>

The 'arrangement among males' of which Sedgwick writes relies, by way of contrast, on the very disavowal of any erotic potential.

When Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms get down to serious logrolling on 'family policy', they are men promoting men's interests. [...] Is their bond in any way congruent with the bond of a loving gay male couple? Reagan and Helms would say no – disgustedly. Most gay couples would say no – disgustedly.<sup>27</sup>

Now dated reference to Reagan and Helms aside, Sedgwick's point can be extended: phenomena such as gay-bashing and the American military's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy on homosexuality point to an insistence upon homosexuality as inherently Other to homosocial relations among heterosexually identified men, to the point

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25 *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 1-2

26 Ibid., p. 3

27 Ibid.

where homophobia becomes a ‘tool of control over the entire spectrum of male homosocial organization’.<sup>28</sup> One of *A Good School*’s primary achievements lies in its insistent exposure of the links such normative homosociality seeks to deny; in its un-breaking of the continuum between ‘men loving men’ and ‘men promoting the interests of men’, as we shall see. The relevance of a discussion of homosociality within a larger discussion of realism lies precisely in this realm of disavowal and acknowledgement. The anxious disavowal of artistry by American realists and naturalists like Howells and Norris combines with the homosocial mechanisms such as those outlined above to form a neatly symmetrical pattern. Disavowal of art equals disavowal of the feminine. As outlined above, homosocial relationships may function as a policing body, excluding those on the outside the boundaries of normative masculinity while keeping those on the inside in line. With *A Good School*, Yates demonstrates the possibility of operating within a realist mode, in a deliberately plain style, without combining those aesthetic choices with a simultaneous anxious disavowal of behaviours that cross such borders. It is not the claim of this thesis that Yates was the first or only realist to achieve this, but it is worth noting when discussing his relationship with the American realist tradition.

As mentioned, the novel takes place on a New England prep school for boys, its faux-Cotswold architecture an objective correlative of the school’s doomed pretence of Old World gentility.<sup>29</sup> The protagonist, an awkward dreamer named William (Bill) Grove, who bookends the third-person narrative with a first-person foreword and afterword, shares a number of characteristics with the historical Yates, and reappears as the protagonist and narrator of ‘Regards at Home’.<sup>30</sup> Yet while Grove may be the protagonist, the novel is sufficiently flexible in its use of point of view and focalization to offer detailed looks inside the minds of all the major characters, a strategy which allows close scrutiny of a large number of homosocial relationships. From the opening sentence of the core narrative, the novel highlights the potentially erotic in the deep fascination and admiration young boys award those most successful among them:

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28 Ibid., p. 115

29 For a more detailed treatment of Yates’ fondness for the objective correlative, see chapter five.

30 Yates’ habit of repeatedly employing similar characters will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four.

At fifteen, Terry Flynn had the face of an angel and the body of a perfect athlete. He was built on a small scale, but he was utterly beautiful. Walking fully dressed among his friends, he moved with a light, nimble, special grace that set him apart from everyone [...]. And if Terry looked good in his clothes, that was nothing compared to his performance every day in the dormitory when he stripped, wrapped a towel around his waist and made his way down the hall to the showers. He had what is called muscle definition: every bulge and cord and ripple of him was outlined as if by the bite of a classical sculptor's chisel, and he carried himself accordingly. 'Hi, Terry,' the boys would call as he passed, and 'Hey Terry'; within a very few days after his arrival at Dorset Academy, Terry Flynn had become the only new boy in Three building to be universally called by his first name. (*School*, pp. 9-10)

On top of all this, he is, naturally, 'hung like a horse' (*ibid.*, p. 10), a fact noticed by all the others. On his fourth prep school, Terry is lagging academically, still learning to read in the second form, his classmates 'a cluster of thirteen-year-olds each of whom would feel warm and silly all over whenever Terry smiled at him' (*ibid.*). As is apparent, the all-male Dorset Academy is a site of much swooning – an activity which hardly denies the potential presence of the erotic.

As this passage on Terry Flynn highlights, the male body is key to notions of male identity, with Flynn's popularity inextricably linked to his physical appearance, which reveals sexual maturity as well as strength. This state of affairs is not ahistorical. Historian E. Anthony Rotundo has charted the development of male identity in America, identifying the birth of a number of twentieth-century manhood-shaping cultural forms in the late nineteenth century, notably the emerging focus on the male body. From the end of the American Revolution up until the early second half of the nineteenth century, 'bourgeois Northerners showed the deepest concern for manhood in its moral, social, and political meanings, while placing a lesser emphasis on the male body'.<sup>31</sup> Yet by the 1850s, physical culture would become a vogue, increasing in intensity until approaching a mania during the century's final third, coinciding with the emergence of American realism. Gymnastics, cycling and skating were all in fashion, but most popular of all was body-building.<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that the most popular activity is not one which prioritises skill per se, but rather the one that most purely performs the male body as spectacle. It is also worth recalling Michael Davitt Bell's evocation of Norris' model of naturalism as a kind of body-

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31 *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), p. 222

32 *Ibid.*, p. 223

building programme, stressing the influence of contemporary visions of manhood on American realist and naturalist form. Rotundo recounts a letter from 1884 written by psychologist James Cattell, then a graduate student:

My breast increased in circumference 4½ inches in three months, and the rest of my body in proportion. I had not supposed this to be possible. I am not fatter – my stomach measures only 31½ inches, whereas my hips [sic] are 38¼.<sup>33</sup>

The letter resembles nothing so much as Bridget Jones' diary entries in its anxious cataloguing of measurements. Jokes aside, Cattell's letter points to a dual effect of this new focus on the body. Ostensibly, physical fitness was linked to mental fitness. According to politician and explorer Hiram Bingham, 'the development of a man's body gives him strength of mind and self-control'.<sup>34</sup> But this poring over muscle measurements, the admiring glances at the body-builder on his podium, flexing every muscle in ostentatious display, surely resembles the peacock dance of sexual desire more than James Cattell would perhaps have cared to admit. The very pursuit of a pure, normative masculinity, untainted by effeminacy, homosexuality, decadence, aestheticism, and so on, generates exactly the kind of erotic undercurrent it seeks to deny.

The teachers, too, take part. The much-loved assistant English master Robert 'Pop' Driscoll admits to himself a fascination with the academically successful, athletic Larry Gaines: 'He was so *nice*', as well as being 'just about the best-looking boy in the school', to the point where '[looking] into his bright face could make you almost as shy as looking into the face of a beautiful girl' (*School*, p. 37). Crucially, the suggestion is not that the heterosexually identified Driscoll, married with a son, wants to initiate a sexual relationship with Larry, nor that this is what Terry Flynn's young admirers want. Rather, their feelings as occupants of a homosocial universe are held up as existing on an unbroken continuum between the sexual and the social. This is a matter of aesthetics: the much-evoked beauty of Terry Flynn stresses its importance, even in this all-male environment, rejecting any notion that the world of men (or, in this case, boys) is a world where such matters are marginalised. In its portrayal of an

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 224

all-male, aggressively heterosexual environment where boys swoon over each other and male teachers marvel at the beauty of their male students' faces, *A Good School* employs the realist mode to widen, rather than paper over, the cracks of contradiction in the edifice of homosociality.

When the boys do engage in the kind of homophobic gender-policing Sedgwick points to as fundamental to patriarchal social organisation, their acts are laced with irony, their inherently paradoxical nature exposed. As an underdeveloped, skinny boy still displaying most physical signifiers of childhood, Grove is an easy target for bullying, both in the form of cruel remarks and the more ritualistic physical torment popular among young males. As boy equals not-man equals insufficiently masculine, the bullying is of an explicitly gendered variety.

They laid him sideways on the bed, removed his shoes, unbuckled his belt and pulled off his pants. He worked one foot free and kicked with it, but it was quickly caught and twisted; then Art Jennings straddled him, facing his feet, and sat on his face.

Under the stifling weight of wool-clad buttocks he could no longer see, but he could hear. '...Shaving cream,' somebody was saying, and somebody else said 'Call that hair? Shit, you could *wipe* it off.' He felt warm water around his groin and the careful scrape of a safety razor; it didn't take long.

But the shaving turned out to be only a preliminary action. When it was done he felt a hand close around his prick – and whose hand was that? Which of these bastards was queer enough to take somebody else's prick in his hand? – and begin the rhythmic work of masturbation. (*Ibid.*, pp. 25-26)

Mark Simpson debates the spectacle of modern masculinity, and the threat homoeroticism poses to masculinity's claim to socio-cultural dominance.<sup>35</sup> From adverts selling moisturiser (the focus being on rehydrating your skin after a strenuous workout, rather than on looking pretty, naturally), to hyper-butch rappers revealing bare, oily torsos to their overwhelmingly male fan base, 'men's bodies are on display everywhere'. Simpson links this phenomenon to male anxiety, as '[men's] bodies are placed in such a way as to passively invite a gaze that is *undifferentiated*: it might be female *or* male, hetero *or* homo'.<sup>36</sup> The shaving and masturbation of Grove exposes a strong sense of confusion. The male gaze, active and overpowering, turns in on itself,

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35 *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 7

36 *Ibid.*, p. 4, original italics.

as Grove's wisp of pubic hair is scrutinised and mocked. The boys seek to establish their own normative masculinity, and hence their own heterosexual dominance (by being the fully developed Self to Grove's barely pubertal Other) by performing a non-consensual homosexual act.

Grove was getting a hard-on, in spite of himself. Quick taunting visions of girls' naked breasts, of girls' naked thighs and crotches swam in the seat of Art Jennings' pants, and Grove knew he would be utterly helpless in a spasm of release at any moment now, unless he fought for control.

And so he fought for control. It took all the power of concentration he could never bring to his studies, but he won.

'...Ah, shit, it's going down. You lost it...'

They hadn't jerked him off; they hadn't made him come, and he knew now that they wouldn't. It might be a dismal triumph, but it was a triumph all the same. Then Jennings shifted his weight, moving from Grove's face to somewhere below his throat, and by squirming and craning around Grove could see the hand that still worked on him. Its little finger was elegantly stiff: it was Terry Flynn. (*School*, p. 26)

As objective correlatives go, Terry Flynn's 'elegantly stiff' little finger has all the compact effectiveness required: the would-be adult butchness of the boys mocked and undermined by an unselfconsciously parodic feminine gesture, and it renders the boys' later chants of 'Ho-mo; ho-mo; ho-mo...' (*ibid.*, p. 57) at a gay pupil ironic. The boys' anxious attempts at proving their own masculinity at the exclusion of that of others (Driscoll's son is also subject to the forced masturbation ritual) are clearly insufficient: going to the more centrally located Miss Blair's School (for girls) to take their exams, they are met by girls gleefully singing of 'Dorset fairies' (*ibid.*, p 146), the school's reputation for liberal arts feyness preceding them.

For Sedgwick, the ability to '[triangulate] [...] homosocial desire through women'<sup>37</sup> provides a crucial strategy for negotiating and containing said desire in a way that enables success within the realm of normative masculinity. The presence of a female partner as buffer serves to ensure the male-on-male relationship does not spill over. The relationship between Grove, his friend Bucky Ward, and Bucky's girlfriend Polly Clark provides an interesting example of this kind of dynamic. As Grove advances in years, the bullying abates, and the school paper provides a place for making actual friends (and for struggling to find the right words, reminiscent of the

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37 *Between Men*, p. 102

various ruminations on writerly apprenticeship found in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, discussed elsewhere). Bucky Ward is one such friend.

Sitting around the office or strolling the flagstones or taking aimless walks in the woods, they seemed never to tire of another's company. As Grove sometimes reflected, with a touch of uneasiness, it was almost like falling in love. Bucky Ward could make him laugh over and over again until he began to feel like a girl who might at any moment cry 'Oh, you keep me in *stitches!*' What saved him was the nice discovery that very often, without even seeming to try, he could make Bucky Ward laugh too. (*School*, p. 86)

The unease Grove feels finds an outlet in responding to Bucky's sense of insufficiently requited love for Polly:

'We care very deeply for each other,' he said, 'but I'm more deeply involved than she is. She says she loves me but she isn't *in* love with me, and when I ask her to clarify that she says she doesn't know her own mind. That hurts. You can't imagine how that hurts.'

But Grove thought he could imagine it; at least it seemed so romantic a predicament that he lowered his eyes and felt his own face grow sad and wistful in the look of someone more loving than loved. (*Ibid.*, p. 87)

Grove's ability to empathise is really just a scrambled acknowledgement of his own feelings for Bucky, existing somewhere on the continuum between friendship and love. Polly's role in this triangle is complicated at the spring dance, when Grove and Polly meet for the first time (up until this moment, her presence has existed in language only, through Grove's frequent rhapsodizing. Dateless, naturally, Grove is standing frozen in the 'stag line' – are wallflowers not supposed to be girls? – until Bucky offers up Polly for a dance. Through this gesture, Polly becomes a form of currency for the two boys, a means for Bucky to express affection for Grove.

'[Exactly] the right size for him' (*ibid.*, p. 127), Polly provides Grove with a great deal of excitement, his erection 'a brave and tender prod to suggest her every move around the floor' (*ibid.*), which she does not seem to mind at all. Strengthened by his success with Polly, Grove gains the courage to dance with a number of girls throughout the evening, until, as the band strikes up 'Goodnight, Sweetheart' for the last dance, he finds himself once again with Polly, deciding against giving her back to Bucky, instead finishing the dance in the middle of the dance floor, away from Bucky's searching gaze. A week after the dance, Grove receives a letter from Polly containing, amid all the pleasantries, a sentence heavy with promise – 'I am fond of

Bucky, but he doesn't *own* me' (*ibid.*, p. 130, original italics). The hitherto awkward Grove, whose strongest affections have been directed towards Bucky, is suddenly 'beginning to feel like a devil of a fellow' (*ibid.*). His desire redirected toward Polly, Grove now finds himself in an unprecedented position of masculine authority in relation to Bucky, who is visibly hurt by Grove's initially stated intention to answer Polly's letter. As Bucky perceives his relationship with Polly disastrously weakened, his own homosocial desire becomes more explicit. In a scene reminiscent of a lovers' quarrel, the two boys are trying to resolve the situation.

The bench behind the club was vacant, so they sat there in silence for a long time, smoking, while the delicate moral question hung in the air. Grove knew he would probably give in – there seemed no other way to conclude this business – but he wanted to let the tension last a while. He wanted to savor his power over Ward as the minutes of silence went by; and Ward seemed to be enjoying himself too, in a wretched way.

In the end it was Grove's impatience with Ward's apparent pleasure that made him say 'Look: I won't write to her if you don't want me to.'

'It can't *be* because I don't want you to – don't you see that?'

'Well, then, it's because I don't want to,' Grove said. 'Okay?'

'Okay,' Ward said. 'Okay, thanks.' He looked as though he regretted saying 'thanks', but it was too late.

And not until an hour later, walking alone and thinking of Polly Clark, did Grove begin to feel a sense of loss.' (*Ibid.*, pp. 130-131, original italics)

Like Grove's earlier enactment of his own position in relation to Ward, Ward's wretched pleasure now comes from the familiarity of his role as more loving than loved, only this time Grove and Polly share status of beloved. The gap in time between the end of their conversation and Grove's emerging sense of loss neatly captures the emotional intensity of their relationship. The main players in this particular triangular drama are Grove and Ward. Polly is peripheral, near incidental.

The lovers' quarrel subtext of this conversation is made explicit in the following scene, when Grove scores the 'quiet triumph' (*ibid.*, p. 131) of securing the highly intelligent (albeit in that pretentious manner of adolescents) managing editor of the school paper, Hugh Britt, as a room-mate the next year. While his relationship with Ward may have more warmth – Britt is, by Grove's own admission, an 'ice-cold perfectionist' (*ibid.*, p. 102) – Britt has remained, through Grove's intense initial

honeymoon period with Ward, ‘the one person in the world whose approval he wanted most’ (*ibid.*). The three of them have formed a triangular drama of their own, with Britt and Ward more or less openly antagonistic towards each other, each talking the other down to Grove. And so when Grove picks Britt over Ward, Ward is once again stricken by the betrayal, this time it is ‘even worse than the crisis over Polly’s letter’ (*ibid.*, p. 131).

‘Let’s take a walk,’ Ward mumbled, and they walked a great distance, out past the infirmary and into the woods and down a long hill, until they came to a small wooden bridge across a glittering stream.

It was a lovely spot – the kind of place where lovers might meet to discuss the impossibility of their situation, only to fall into each other’s arms in the end. And that was the trouble: it *was* a place for lovers, not for anything as puerile as the sad, silent display of Bucky Ward’s hurt feelings.

‘Here’s the thing, Bill,’ Ward said after a very long time. ‘When I saw your name and Britt’s on the double-room list I felt – well, I felt let down, that’s all.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m sorry you felt that way.’

‘The point is, I thought you and I were – you know, the best of friends – and I’d more or less assumed we’d be rooming together. That’s all.’

Grove didn’t know what to say. He wanted to assure Ward that they were still ‘the best of friends,’ but he would be damned if he’d let Ward change his mind about rooming with Britt. He thought of Polly Clark’s line – ‘he doesn’t *own* me’ – and felt as if Ward was trying to own him too. Above all, he resented having been brought to such a romantic place for such an embarrassing conversation. (*Ibid.*, pp. 131-132)

The structural arrangement of the two scenes, with the latter immediately following the former, is of some significance here. The less explicitly romantic scene allows for the kind of disavowal necessary to a stable male homosocial dynamic. The second, with its scenic location – and the appearance towards the end of the scene of an actual, heterosexual couple, Larry Gaines and Edith Stone, holding hands and everything – simply strikes too close for comfort, expressing loudly what must be treated with silence for the relationship between the two boys to function. Expressing loudly what must be treated with silence is what this novel does throughout. By repeatedly insisting on the social-sexual continuum in male relationships, yet doing so with the carefully wrought plainness that was his style, the novel is yet another example of a realism of duality: a realism in which preening and prettifying are simultaneously rejected and embraced.

## ***At war with the domestic: ‘A Compassionate Leave’ and A Special Providence***

Where *A Good School* engages with the contiguous relationship between the social and the sexual in all-male settings, the short story ‘A Compassionate Leave’ and the war novel *A Special Providence* have a different agenda. Both reveal a deep scepticism towards popular discourses of war, with their gendered catchwords like heroism and camaraderie, and both enact a struggle between the realm of war and the domestic realm. As such, these fictions carry echoes of Crane, yes, but they also investigate the role of narrative structure. Their structures are conspicuous; they provoke discussion; invite questioning; explicitly generate meaning. Further, like *A Good School*, *A Special Providence* offers an engagement with the male body that subverts American discourses of war, both those found in fiction and film, and the more official propaganda efforts of the state (in which Hollywood often played a part during the Second World War).<sup>38</sup> In keeping with the governing argument of this thesis, this subversion is part of Yates’ idiosyncratic engagement with realist form and convention, a questioning of realism’s foundations which nevertheless takes place within the realist mode; which, indeed, places this part of his body of work within the realist tradition of contained self-scrutiny, as outlined in previous chapters.

‘A Compassionate Leave’, from the 1981 collection *Liars in Love*, consists of five main narrative blocks, all told in the third person, which gives it a sprawling feel for a short story (a feel characteristic of the collection as a whole). The first block creates certain expectations which are then thwarted as the story progresses, moving away from the military and towards domesticity. Its opening paragraph is typically Yatesian in its highly concentrated focus on the less smiling aspects of existence:

Nothing ever seemed to go right for the 57<sup>th</sup> Division. It had come overseas just in time to take casualties in the Battle of the Bulge; then, too-quickly strengthened with masses of new

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38 For further material on Hollywood’s role in the American government’s war effort, see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 1987); Bernard F. Dick, *The Star-Spangled Screen: The American World War II Film* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985)

replacements, it had plodded through further combat in eastern France and in Germany, never doing badly but never doing especially well, until the war was over in May. (*Stories*, p. 273)

The war may be over, but the setting is still military, the focus on the disgruntled 57<sup>th</sup> Division through their middling wartime performance, on to a short, promising stint as part of the Army of Occupation in Germany ('there were an extraordinary number of unattached girls in Germany then' [ibid.]), a time cut mercilessly short by their next orders: to staff a redeployment camp in France, where 'the people [...] were famous [...] for detesting Americans' (ibid.). The initial impression created is that this will be a story about life in the 57<sup>th</sup>, a microcosm of grunts and officers. The first three paragraphs are all about the division as a whole, with no names mentioned, no individuals focused on. Actions are actions of 'many', 'some' or 'others', not of any single character. The first to emerge, Captain Henry R. Widdoes, commanding officer of the C company, makes his first appearance at the end of the fourth paragraph, explaining the purpose of their transfer from Germany. We are told he has a Silver Star, awarded 'for leading an attack through knee-deep snow last winter' (ibid., p. 274) which 'had gained him an excellent tactical advantage and lost him nearly half a platoon' (ibid.). Even in this peaceful, tedious setting, 'many of the men in the company were afraid of him' (ibid.). The character of Widdoes, 'gruff and hard-drinking' (ibid.), but with a nervous habit of taking little steps on the spot while talking which hints at post-traumatic stress syndrome, is right at home in war fiction, to the point where the contrast between his character and the 57<sup>th</sup>'s duties in the redeployment camp ('mostly supply work and clerical work, I imagine' [ibid.]) is slightly jarring, alluding to the tension between war and the domestic sphere that will form the core of this part of the chapter.

As the division settles in, we are introduced to the second character, buck sergeant Myron Phelps, a cigar-smoking coal miner attempting to impart some manly wisdom upon his younger soldiers.

'Ah, I wish you kids'd quit talking about Germany. I'm tired of all this Germany, Germany, Germany. [...] I mean, what the hell would you be doing if you *was* in Germany? Huh? Well, you'd be out getting laid and getting the clap and getting the syphilis and getting the blue balls, that's all, and you'd be drinking up all that schnapps and beer and getting soft and getting out of shape. Right? Right? Well, if you ask me, this here is a whole lot better. We got fresh air, we got shelter, we got food, we got discipline. This is a *man's* life.'

And at first everybody thought he was kidding. It seemed to take at least five seconds, while they gaped at Phelps and then at each other and then at Phelps again, before the first thunderclap of laughter broke. (*Ibid.*, original italics)

Phelps, displaying a loyalty to military life he thinks fitting of a war veteran approaching middle age, is mocked brutally by men who are not only younger than him, but outranked by him too. This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. Like the opening paragraph, it is instantly recognisable as Yatesian in its depiction of a character self-consciously performing a role, striking poses and choosing his words accordingly. Phelps is clearly putting on a show as older and wiser, a ruggedly paternal figure who dispenses advice and nuggets of wisdom through the cigar smoke; in short, a John Wayne character. Equally characteristically, the performance is instantly recognisable as such and therefore rendered ridiculous, both to his soldiers and to the reader. Crucially, the main source of ridicule here is Phelps' notion of what a man's life is and ought to be; ultimately, what the masculine ideal is. For Phelps, a real man benefits from austerity and discipline. For the other men, who have just survived a war, this notion is laughable. If this is what a man's life is, then they do not want any part of it. The group loyalty and 'code of masculinity' identified by Stewart as chief reasons for going to war are notably absent here, for what is 'a man's life' if not a life lived by such a code? Phelps' words resonate ironically with the strenuous insistence on rugged masculinity found in American realists/naturalists like Howells and Norris – his derision of Germany, with its women and alcohol, echoing realist suspicion regarding feminised art – and demonstrates yet again the entropic processes at work in Yates' fiction. The earnest claims of the aforementioned writers have by this stage become hollowed out, trite phrases rolled out by poseurs with no self-awareness: the masculinity which in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was held up as a site of vigour, strength and vitality, deliberately pitted against effete, aestheticist decadence, has degenerated to Phelps, dispensing unwanted advice to sullen, irritable teenage boys (themselves hardly models of manly heft). As it becomes clear that Phelps' little unsolicited speech will make him a permanent laughing stock, we meet Private First Class Colby, who will turn out to be the story's protagonist, laughing along with the others, but secretly agreeing with Phelps on one point: 'he too had come to like the simplicity, the order and the idleness of life in these tents in the grass. There was nothing to prove here' (*ibid.*, p. 275). Colby's fondness for the

idleness and lack of mettle-testing of peacetime camp life is a far cry from Phelps' notion of ascetic purity of existence, however. Rather, his sentiments are those of a boy out of place in a military setting (he is 19), whose wartime experience 'had taken him through pride and terror and fatigue and dismay' (*ibid.*), and who now wants an unchallenging time of peace and quiet.<sup>39</sup>

Our first encounter with Colby sees him leave the site of Phelps' embarrassment and approach Widdoes to apply for the compassionate leave of the title, in order to visit his mother (who is English) and younger sister Marcia, who moved to London after his parents' divorce when he was eleven. At this point, the story starts to shift away from the 57<sup>th</sup> Division, instead honing in on Colby, his past, and his family. His meeting with Widdoes, who seems puzzled by Colby's unconventional family arrangement, concludes the opening narrative block, and what follows is a flashback to America, to Colby's father somewhat unnecessarily explaining the roots and the fallout of his divorce from Colby's mother. The mother, wanting custody of both children, had taken them to Detroit. On the pretext of taking the children to a baseball game, the father had abducted Colby back (the sister had been ill that day). And so, as she already had boat tickets back to London, mother and sister were gone. It is clear that Colby's sister has continued to occupy an important part of his emotional world, after a close childhood (before the move, obviously).

At five, she had taught him to blow steady bubbles in bathwater; at eight, she had kicked over his electric train in order to persuade him that paper dolls could be more entertaining, which was true; a year or so after that, trembling in fear together, they had dared each other to jump from a high limb of a maple tree, and they'd done it, though he would always remember that she went first. (*Ibid.*, p. 278)

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39 This particular desire corresponds neatly with discourses surrounding post-war suburban life, and the forced tranquillity of the 1950s: a longing for peace and quiet after a period of violence, stress and insecurity. The desire for conformity and harmony that motivated William Whyte Jr.'s 'organization man' (Whyte, p. 131) is alive and well in Colby, the redeployment camp a little military suburbia. Recalling chapter one, it is worth noting that Whyte makes the link between the war and the organisation man explicit by quoting Tom Rath, protagonist of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*: "I've been through one war. Maybe another one's coming. If one is, I want to be able to look back and figure I spent the time between the wars with my family, they way it should have been spent." Whyte tartly describes this attitude as one of 'self-ennobling hedonism' (p. 132), an exaltation of mediocrity as morally superior. Colby's failed masculinity is thus one that taps into debates with which Yates had ambiguously engaged since *Revolutionary Road*, a consensus culture he mocked as much as he mocked those that decried it.

While one year his junior, she was clearly the more assertive, and he was just as clearly not a particularly masculine boy, even then. The flashback to America (with its flashback within to Colby's earlier childhood) raises questions about just what type of story this will be. Is this not a story about the 57<sup>th</sup> Division? What do Widdoes and Phelps have to do with this? The army seems a very long way away.

There had been letters since, from both sister and mother, with decreasing frequency from his sister, but with 'dogged regularity' (*ibid.*) from his mother. His own letter to Marcia from Germany, replete with 'deft references to his combat infantry service' (*ibid.*), had gone unanswered, 'and that had left a small, still-open wound in his feelings' (*ibid.*). This is the first hint of an incestuous undercurrent in his feelings for Marcia, the wish to impress as a man at war carrying a certain erotic charge.

This narrative block concludes with Colby back at the redeployment camp, writing a letter to his mother 'explaining his helplessness in the matter of the leave' (*ibid.*), and stretching out on his cot, across from Phelps, either sleeping or 'more likely, still ashamed and so pretending to sleep' (*ibid.*). By returning to camp life, the story can segue to the next block: from here on in, the story seems intent on denying the possibility of soldierly authority or camaraderie, and on insisting on the overwhelming influence of the domestic sphere. First, we follow Colby on a three day pass to Paris with his friend, the 'quiet, thoughtful' (*ibid.*, p. 280) George Mueller. Both lacking in sexual experience (although embarrassing attempts are recounted in typically Yatesian detail), they are intrigued by the possibilities offered by the French capital, the rumoured relaxed attitudes to sex and prostitution that should ensure erotic success, even for two boys as awkward as Colby and Mueller. After selling cigarettes on the black market, Colby and Mueller try their luck with the women on the Left Bank. Like Frank Wheeler, Colby has read *The Sun Also Rises* in high school, and so he 'knows' that 'the Left Bank was where everything nice was most likely to happen' (*ibid.*, p. 283). Unsurprisingly, the women do not live up to the gossip and speculation of the barracks, their 'cool and quickly averted glances' (*ibid.*) clearly signalling their contempt for Americans. Recall the subversion of Hemingway's *In Our Time* found in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, as discussed in chapter two; just as Bob Prentice is no Nick Adams, Colby is no Jake Barnes, as will become clear. And so the Place Pigalle, teeming with prostitutes, steam rising sinistly from manhole covers, has more to

offer, but here Colby is stricken by fear of humiliation and parts ways with Mueller, who has been picked up by a ‘trim and pleasant-looking’ (*ibid.*) woman. Drifting around town, getting progressively drunker without meeting any girls or women sitting alone, Colby ends up in a ‘strange little American-style bar’ (*ibid.*, p. 285), joining a group of soldiers in a rendition of the bawdy song ‘Roll Me Over’ (ironically about having sex repeatedly). Initially the sing-along is a lively affair, a model image of soldiers on leave, yet by the end – the song has ten verses – all enthusiasm is drained. The jolly camaraderie is shown to be an illusion, a weak plan B for soldiers with nothing better to do at a time when convention dictates they should be having the time of their lives. The next evening he goes back to Place Pigalle, yet finds he has spent all his money on drink, and is now unable to afford ‘even the most raucous of middle-aged whores’ (*ibid.*, p. 286). As he makes his way to the Army trucks waiting to take the soldiers back to camp, he realises his failure to lose his virginity was down to more than shyness or awkwardness: ‘it was cowardice’ (*ibid.*). Jake Barnes, the expatriate journalist protagonist of *The Sun Also Rises*, through which Colby’s expectations of Paris are filtered, may too be unable to have sex, but this is due an undefined war wound, not the shaky nerves of the teenage virgin.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, by constantly alluding to early, modernist Hemingway, Yates maintains the realist-modernist continuum discussed in previous chapters, grappling with an influence that rivals Flaubert’s for importance to his work, integrating the two in his fusion of lucidity and uncertainty.

Finally, the papers for Colby’s compassionate leave are ready, and so he departs for London. While his encounter with his mother and her new family is an uncomfortable, if amiable affair, he excitedly makes arrangements to meet his sister Marcia. It is clear he wants to impress her (the incestuous aspect of his affection for his sister remains present and correct): as he approaches their meeting place, he is ‘trying in every way to perfect what he hoped would be a devil-may-care kind of walk’ (*ibid.*, p. 289).<sup>41</sup> Over drinks, Colby finds himself dismayed by the number of photos of American soldiers she keeps in her wallet, many of whom have supposedly offered marriage proposals. Marcia, unaware that he was coming to London, has already made plans to go to Blackpool for a week with a friend, but invites him

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40 The significance of the wounded male body will be discussed in greater detail below.

41 Reminiscent of Frank Wheeler’s “terrifically sexy” walk in *Revolutionary Road* (p. 76)

around for supper the next day, a scene of failed domestic happiness. Over a casserole of Spam, sliced potatoes and powdered milk, Marcia's flatmate Irene turns to Marcia and says: 'Oh, he's sweet, your brother, isn't he – and d'you know something? I think you're right about him. I think he *is* a virgin' (*ibid.*, p. 292). It is here, not in Paris, and certainly not on the Army base, the story reaches its moment of climax, where Colby reacts most strongly to the events unfolding around him, as he breaks out in a hysterical laughing fit. Military life simply cannot affect him as strongly as his sister can. The military in this story mainly stands for idleness and boredom; the real battles take place in the home.

As is the case with 'A Compassionate Leave', the very structure of *A Special Providence*, awkward and puzzling as it may be, provides vital clues to the text's meaning. The synchronicity between the structural composition and certain key themes of the narrative serves to complicate a reading of the novel as simply poorly constructed, a criticism made by Elizabeth Dalton in the *New York Times Book Review* at the time of the novel's publication, p. 396).<sup>42</sup>

The novel follows Robert Prentice as a young infantryman fighting the tail-end of the Second World War, and as a boy during the Depression, on the heels of his mother in a near-constant flight from creditors. Like Grove, Prentice shares more than a name with other Yatesian protagonists. Of particular relevance here, he is a de facto Bill Grove after deployment: like Grove, he is an alumnus at a New England boarding school, a child of a broken home (whose father is now dead), and an aspiring writer and intellectual of questionable abilities (the latter more so than the former). Finally, they are both reluctant mummy's boys. While *A Good School* is bookended by first-person ruminations on the narrator's father (and the novel is dedicated to Yates' own), a mother figure in the foreword closely resembles the one in *A Special Providence*.<sup>43</sup>

Much as I might wish it otherwise, I did prefer my mother. I knew she was foolish and irresponsible, that she talked too much, that she made crazy emotional scenes over nothing and could be counted on to collapse in a crisis, but I had come to suspect, dismally, that my own personality might be built along the same lines. In ways that were neither profitable nor especially pleasant, she and I were a comfort to one another. (*School*, p. 2)

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42 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 396

43 For an in-depth discussion of the mother figures in Yates' work, see chapter four.

Largely absent in the mostly male universe of *A Good School*, in *A Special Providence* she is *everywhere*, an insistently female presence in the normally male-dominated realm of the war novel. This insistent presence is underlined by the novel's structure, as extended analepsis is employed to break up the main wartime narrative. The 1944-set prologue sees Prentice on a weekend pass from military camp to New York, visiting his mother before being shipped overseas. From the very beginning, Prentice's youth is accentuated, his physical immaturity and sexual inexperience. At Penn Station, he manoeuvres through 'acres of embracing couples: men whose uniforms looked somehow more authoritative than his own, girls whose ardour was a terrible reproach to his own callousness'.<sup>44</sup> '[Weak] with envy' at these couples, 'he tried to make up for it by squaring his wrinkled overseas cap into one eyebrow and hoping that the tension in his face and the hurry in his walk might suggest, to other observers, that he was bound for a welcome as romantic' as that reserved for other homecoming soldiers. Unlike them, however, Prentice is only welcomed, albeit enthusiastically, by his mother in a little apartment 'on a dark block beyond Eighth Avenue' (*ibid.*, p. 2), and this early juxtaposition of paired-up lovers with this son and mother enacting a faux-romance looms over large parts of the narrative. To her son, Alice Prentice is an overwhelming presence; he finds himself 'staggering in the clutch of his mother's hug', 'the force of her love [...] so great that he had to brace himself in a kind of boxer's stance to absorb it' (*ibid.*, p. 3). It is an intensity that defines her personality. She talks in long, rambling monologues, rarely courting a substantial response. The daughter of a dry-goods merchant from small-town Indiana, she had nonetheless 'developed a passion for art, and for elegance, and for the great and distant world of New York' (*ibid.*, p. 6), a passion which had led her through the world of fashion illustration to an unspectacular career as a sculptor, one which she still, at the time of the prologue, believes is on the cusp of taking off. But to return to the faux-romance motif: holding her son at arm's length (strictly in the literal sense), she calls him her 'big, wonderful soldier' (*ibid.*, p. 3). After dressing up for dinner, she asks him: 'Do I look alright? Do I look nice enough to go on a date with a handsome soldier?' (*ibid.*, p. 4) Going out for their 'date', she clings to his arm, her frail body's need for support enabling a parody of embracing lovers. Throughout his

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44 *A Special Providence* (New York: Delacorte, 1976; repr. London: Methuen, 2006), p. 1. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

childhood, Prentice has been happy to play the male part in their odd drama. Through frequently uprooting and moving to new places where her credit rating is unsullied, the two have cultivated a shared outsider identity, little Bobby always ‘the only new boy and the only poor boy’ (*ibid.*, p. 7), his mother’s aesthetic sensibilities and faith in her own artistic future always demanding genteel surroundings, ex-husband George constantly pestered for more money. Like Grove and his mother, Prentice and Alice have been a comfort to each other.

[He] had loved her *romantically*, with an almost religious belief in her gallantry and goodness. If the landlord and the grocer and the coal dealer and George Prentice were all against her, they would have to be his enemies too: he would serve as her ally and defender against the crass and bullying materialism of the world. He would gladly have thrown down his life for her in any number of ways; the trouble was that other, less dramatic kinds of help were needed, and none came. (*Ibid.*, p. 8, italics added)

Come 1944, the range of his feelings has widened. The old romantic love is still there, yet it feuds with feelings of anger, even contempt. Fed up after a lifetime of histrionics (collapsing while clutching her breast a speciality) and irresponsibility, he now formulates angry speeches that are never given, speeches in which he calls her a ‘liar and a fake’ (*ibid.*, p. 17). On the one hand, his mother equals home. With his father dead, and his childhood spent drifting from place to place, she monopolizes the domestic sphere to the point where abandoning her carries the risk of ending up rootless. On the other hand, enduring this domestic sphere must involve a great deal of self-deceit. And so the tensions between truth and lies, between the protective bubble and the world out there, are enacted throughout the novel, each part representing a pull away from the part preceding it, a narrative tug of war. The prologue ends with Prentice drifting off to sleep in his mother’s apartment ‘feeling privileged and safe, cradled in peace’ (*ibid.*, p. 20), asserting that ‘[he] was home’ (*ibid.*), a statement ironic and earnest in equal measure. Opening with the words ‘*Com-mence – fire!*’ (*ibid.*, p. 23, original italics), Part One yanks the novel abruptly out of the preceding warm, suffocating domesticity, and into the noisy, hard, scary and *male* world of the war novel. It is a world for which Prentice is ill prepared; furthermore, it is a world which repeatedly demonstrates the failures of maleness, as the normative masculinity offered by the American propaganda machinery is juxtaposed with men who in various ways deviate from the ideal. Once again, camaraderie is held up as exclusive at best, non-existent at worst, as Prentice’s

budding sense of himself as a soldier is trampled by his fellow enlisted men at training camp in Virginia:

Prentice had begun to feel an unreasonable elation. It pleased him to know that he hadn't bathed or changed his clothes for six days, that he was learning to handle his rifle as an extension of himself, and that he'd taken part in elaborate field problems without doing anything noticeably absurd. A pleasant little spasm of shuddering seized him; he squared his shoulders, set his feet wider apart, and briskly rubbed his hands together in the woodsmoke.

'Hey Prentice,' said Novak, who had been watching him from the other side of the fire. 'You feeling pretty sharp today? You feeling like a real fighting man?'

This caused a chuckle around the group, and Cameron, a big Southerner who was Novak's friend, did his best to keep it going. 'Old Prentice gunna be a regular tiger, ain't he? Jesus, I'm, glad he's on our side.' (*Ibid.*, p. 24)

Their teasing runs deeper than Prentice's incompetence, although this is repeatedly asserted: he is clumsy, he oversleeps, he gets lost at various points throughout the novel, and is significantly proud of not doing anything noticeably absurd during training. For all his bungling, however, class issues set the tone in much of their dealing with him. The men in his platoon are mostly several years older than him, military old-timers retraining as replacement riflemen:

Some were from recently dissolved Anti-Aircraft units, in which they had idled for years at the gun emplacements around West Coast defense plants; some were from Ordnance or Quartermaster depots; there were ex-cooks and ex-clerks and ex-orderlies, and there were washouts from various officer-candidate schools. Many of them were non-coms in line or technical grades and continued to wear their impotent chevrons, but all of them – every foul-mouthed, hard-drinking, complaining one of them – had in common the miserable fact that their good deals, their months or years of military safety were over. (*Ibid.*, p. 25)

It has been pointed out by Morris Dickstein that in the American novel of the Second World War, the dominant character, the soldier, is a child of the Depression. Rather than being heavily invested in lofty ideals, he is often a man who has joined the military for the work. The grunt is the common man; the hiking army a box-car full of drifters, or the migrating family.<sup>45</sup> Prentice's platoon consists of such men,

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<sup>45</sup> *Leopards in the Temple*, p. 24. A converse perspective is offered by Peter G. Jones in his *War and the Novelist* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976). Jones sees the World War II novel as offering a new emphasis on high-ranking military officers as a consequence of evolving military technology. As military force grows, so the novel tends to focus on those with the power to wield it: commanding officers, even generals. Such high-ranking officers are near absent in Yates' war fictions, and so any further discussion of this kind of novel, dubbed 'literature of command' by Jones, would

shift workers at the coalface of military mundanity rather than glory-soaked warriors. By contrast, Prentice is drafted straight out of school (boarding school, no less), and their different backgrounds help sour further already pretty sour relations. Disastrously, he is ‘unable to accept his defeats with any kind of grace’ (*Providence*, p. 26), instead retorting with ‘shrill obscenities [...] in what sounded like the clipped, snotty accents of a spoiled rich kid’ (*ibid.*). While his childhood may have been characterised by a lack of financial capital, his boarding school education and his mother’s artistic-aristocratic tendencies have ensured that he will remain as apart from the proletarians in his platoon as from his classmates, whose financial security and familial stability were in stark contrast to Prentice’s own situation. The soldier-as-worker raises a number of issues concerning American manhood at the time of the Second World War. As Christine Jarvis has noted, the Depression dealt a huge blow to American masculinity, as large numbers of men were rendered unable to provide for their families.<sup>46</sup> The war and its attending propaganda became involved in a ‘process of shoring up damaged models of masculinity’,<sup>47</sup> a process that would largely concern itself with the male body, depicting the American male as active, muscular and powerful; note the continuity with the new construction of manhood in the second half of the nineteenth century outlined in the discussion of *A Good School* above. The restoration effort of American masculinity concerned itself with precisely the model of masculinity that had been instrumental in shaping the dominant, masculinist strand of American realism in the late nineteenth century. Propaganda posters and Hollywood films constructed an image of the American soldier at odds with the realities of war, an image it has been the purpose of much subsequent war writing, including that of Yates, to demolish. Prentice’s body is repeatedly cast as a site of uncertainty and anxiety, his skinny frame and boyish face unable to perform their expected tasks, unable to look the part of soldier and thus fulfil their roles in the spectacle of masculinity.

While the propaganda machinery of the war set about reconstructing the American male, the wounded male body – an inevitable consequence of war – would

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simply prove digressive. It warrants mentioning, however, if only to serve as a reminder that ‘the war novel’ is at no point any one thing, but rather a sprawling, contradictory discursive formation.

46 *The Male Body at War: American Masculinity during World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 10

47 *Ibid.*, p. 11

throw up a series of difficulties. If the American male at war is active, strong, virile, muscular and so forth, what of the wounded soldier? Legless, blinded, castrated, his body would come to signify a number of occasionally contradictory concepts. Wartime advertisements would emphasise soldiers handling phallic weaponry, their metallic impenetrability rubbing off on their physiques.<sup>48</sup> The American male body at war thus defined as self-contained and whole, the leakages of the wounded body would thus become abject, unspeakable, excessive.<sup>49</sup> The notion of the whole body thus rests on the existence of this abject, wounded body, as “whole” masculinity defines itself by what it excludes or rejects – bodily fluids, waste, wounds'.<sup>50</sup> Yet for all its abjectness, the wounded body nevertheless stands as a guarantor of wartime activity, of self-sacrifice in the service of one's country: consider Ernest Hemingway's famous creation Frederic Henry, bristling at the nurse's reprimand that he asks 'a great many questions for a sick boy', specifying that he is not sick, but wounded.<sup>51</sup> Prentice, on the other hand, is not wounded, but sick, further evidence of his failure as a soldier and as a man: he cannot even get hurt properly. Like Colby, Prentice contrasts with a Hemingway figure (as he had already contrasted with Nick Adams in 'Builders', Yates' previous book). As with the aforementioned Jake Barnes, Frederic Henry's wound simultaneously guarantees and effaces his masculinity: Barnes is rendered impotent (thus unmanned) by war, that most male of activities (recalling Ehrenreich). Similarly, Henry is bedridden, but it is from fighting, thus negating the nurse's diminutive 'sick boy'.

The illusory nature of the iconic Hollywood war hero, a fully grown embodiment of normative masculinity such as John Wayne or Kirk Douglas, is a recurring theme in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse 5*, with the significant subheading *The Children's Crusade*, highlighting the youthfulness of those fighting: 'just babies then' (Vonnegut, p. 11, original italics). Indeed, when the novel introduces the British POWs who most closely resemble Hollywood's image of the WW2 soldier, their purpose is clearly parodic, their prison camp a site where the war is all fun and games, musical numbers and abundance. In *A Special Providence*, the

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48 Ibid., p. 50

49 Ibid., p. 90

50 Ibid., p. 91

51 *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929; repr. London: Arrow Books, 2004), p. 79

gruffly masculine working stiffs – echoing both Howells and Yates’ white-collar workers – are distinctly lacking in heroic gloss, as is Prentice’s longed-for companion and father figure John Quint. A pipe-smoking, bespectacled ex-Ordnance man who manages, to Bob’s snobbish amazement, to hold ‘the respectful attention of every muscle-headed slob in the room’ (*Providence*, p. 27), even making them laugh ‘by urbane and witty turns of phrase that Prentice would have thought to be miles over their heads’ (*ibid.*), Quint at first seems designed to alleviate anxieties of manhood in the bookish male, a reassuring amalgamation of masculine authority and intellect. A friendship develops between the two, yet Bob’s immaturity and incompetence proves grating even to Quint, who explodes with anger after Bob oversleeps on the morning of their moving out, telling him he is ‘through’ being his ‘God damned father’ (*ibid.*, p. 69). The last time we see Quint, he is using his intelligence in an unexpectedly cowardly way, highlighting the lack of heroes in this particular war novel, and the frailty, even deceitfulness, of the idealised masculinity Quint has come to represent. A few hours before they are about to attack the Alsatian village Horbourg, he surprises Bob by sitting down next to him for a chat (they are not on speaking terms, after all). It soon becomes apparent that the reason for this sudden change of tone springs from cunning, rather than friendship. As they are both ill, Bob having lost his voice, Quint suggests they tell the commanding officer they have pneumonia (which in Bob’s case turns out to be true). He is clearly calculating that Bob will say yes immediately, thus sharing the potentially shaming burden of calling in sick so close to battle. The pleading in his eyes has an unexpected effect: rather than encourage Bob to agree, it stirs his Hollywood-moulded sentimentality to the point where Bob sees himself as in a movie, and promptly decides to stay. Bob’s self-dramatising self-sacrifice points to a cinematic convention which, much like the wounded body, sends out curiously mixed signals surrounding masculinity. During the Second World War, Hollywood repositioned abject self-sacrifice from the dominion of long-suffering mothers in women’s melodramas to ‘a transgeneric sine qua non’, a must for any war movie worth its salt.<sup>52</sup> When Bob insists on soldiering on in the face of illness, the consequences are horrific in a particularly ironic way, as it leads to his own hospitalisation (and therefore relative safety) and Quint’s death. Self-sacrifice

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52 Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 111

becomes self-preservation, his so-called heroism leading to the death of another, as cliché is exposed as fraudulent yet again. Bob's actions are given a further parodic dimension within the confines of the American novel. As Peter Aichinger points out, there is a tendency among American war novelists to 'depict the individual who goes to war in search of experience'.<sup>53</sup> *A Special Providence*, published six years after the cut-off point of Aichinger's study, depicts an individual going to war in search of a movie.

The ironic evocation of pop-cultural cliché is a strategy that informs the novel's take on war, with both soldiers and civilians taking behavioural cues from matinee idols and trite song lyrics. As such, the novel performs a similar act of discourse draining as witnessed in *Revolutionary Road*, although with a different target. Where *Revolutionary Road* set out to empty out the various vocabularies of analysis that have informed realism since the nineteenth century, *A Special Providence* exposes the hollow centre of the concepts that have shaped popular American war narratives for a similar length of time. As such, the novel achieves its sense of realism – its verisimilitude – not only through its rejection of such discourses of patriotism, heroism and camaraderie, but also through a break from the masculinist implications of said discourses, implications that, crucially, have informed American realism from the outset. On an eight-hour pass in Baltimore prior to being shipped overseas, Prentice loses his virginity to a girl he meets in a bar. Singing along to the jukebox playing *I'll Walk Alone* (a highly topical ballad about waiting patiently for an absent lover), a 'tremor of sentimentality' (*Providence*, p. 47) wrinkling her forehead, she unwittingly parodies the song's sentiments, as Prentice is clearly not the first soldier she has taken home for some casual, yet clandestine sex (she still lives with her parents, her age estimated around seventeen), nor will he be the last.

Similarly, Bob frequently pictures himself in movie-styled scenarios, the gap between the imagined and the actual never less than glaring. His relationship with Sam Rand is characteristic in this regard. Rand is a farmer from Arkansas, twenty-nine years old, who sparks jealousy in Prentice by quickly establishing a strong

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53 *The American Soldier in Fiction, 1880-1963: A History of Attitudes toward Warfare and the Military Establishment* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), p. 39

rapport with Quint. On the eight-hour pass mentioned above, however, his spirits high, Prentice softens towards him, albeit condescendingly:

[He] could see now that Rand posed no serious threat: there was reassurance in the very fact that Rand was so simple and unschooled, so ‘colorful’, like a character actor in the movies. He could serve both Prentice and Quint as a kind of homely, comic relief from the more serious aspects of their friendship, and in that way could safely be welcomed. In combat, when Sam Rand lay wounded, Prentice might run out under heavy fire to bring him back and carry him all the way to the aid station, as Lew Ayres had done with the other man in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, not realizing he was already dead. And Quint, unashamed of the tears in his eyes, would say, ‘You did all you could for him, Prentice’ (or better still, ‘Bob’). (*Ibid.*, p. 42)

Bob’s patronising daydreams are given short shrift by reality: during the attack on Horbourg, Bob collapses with pneumonia and spends the next five weeks in hospital. Quint is killed right after the attack, stepping on a landmine on the way to the next town. Bob learns this from Sam, who has been promoted to Sergeant. Evoking writerly impotence in ways similar to ‘Out with the Old’,<sup>54</sup> Bob tries and fails to write a letter to Quint’s parents, unable to avoid the clichés that now seem obscene.

The novel’s treatment of the hollowness and tenacity of cliché finds its conclusion after the war has ended.<sup>55</sup> Bob, still heavily invested in the clichés of war narratives, feels the war has ended too soon, denying him the opportunity to somehow atone for Quint’s death (*ibid.*, p. 288), for which he melodramatically blames himself. In addition, there is the embarrassment he feels about his overall inept performance, thrown into sharp relief by the constant tales of Bulge heroism and drama that fill the mess hall at meal times. This feeling of ineptitude is shared by Walker, the only man in Bob’s company who can match him for immature incompetence. Following a perceived slight, Walker furiously attacks Bob, and the two agree to a fight behind a barn the next morning. Here we see the first signs of Bob’s burgeoning rejection of the idealised imagery of war and soldiers offered by Hollywood.

‘Okay, kid,’ Walker said. ‘This is it.’

And it was the absurdity of the phrase – nobody said ‘This is it’ except in the movies, unless they were phony bastards [...] – that roused Prentice to his first real anger of the morning. He wanted to smash and break the head of anyone stupid enough to say a thing like that; he wanted

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54 As discussed in chapter two.

55 A theme discussed in greater detail in chapter five.

to kill all the posturing fraudulence in the world, and it was all here before him in this big, dumb, bobbing face. (*Ibid.*, p. 300)

For all his rage, however, Bob continues to measure the world against the movies, and the novel itself is to a certain degree guilty of perpetuating the sentimentality it decries. As Castronovo and Goldleaf argue in their Yates study, the fight itself is sentimental, two guys settling their differences fair and square, in a manner resembling *From Here to Eternity*.<sup>56</sup> Yet the novel remains fully aware of this dual position, as this passage after the fight is over demonstrates:

And the worst part, as they came into view of a little cluster of men near the back door of the Second Platoon house, was that he found himself unable to keep from enjoying the picture they made: victor and vanquished, modest winner and plucky loser, a couple of good guys who'd gone up behind the barn and had it out. (*Providence*, p. 302)

The rejection is only completed later. With heavy-handed use of metaphor, Bob vomits up all the pancakes and jelly he has eaten for breakfast, a smooth, sickly sweet meal which, at the time of his vomiting, has already been explicitly compared to the lying sentimentality evident in the quoted passage above. Unsubtle as it may be, the vomiting scene crucially represents a refusal of the preceding fight – and its hollow implications – as part of a larger cliché system. By failing to note this, Castronovo and Goldleaf ultimately misread the scene. It is still flawed, but for different reasons than they posit. Rather than simply succumbing to the clichés the novel sets out to subvert, it is instead guilty of satirising Hollywood clichés already satirised by Hollywood itself. As such, the novel's treatment of cliché is in and of itself already rather tired. Thomas Doherty demonstrates how the clichés and simplifications employed by Hollywood at the time were in fact perceived as such by soldiers and civilians alike even as the films were showing in cinemas, a quarter century prior to *A Special Providence*'s publication. Hollywood itself would take this on board, with films like William Dieterle's *I'll Be Seeing You* (1944) juxtaposing idealised cinematic representation (the fictitious film-within-a-film *Make Way for Glory*) with a soldier's view of how the war 'really' is, as presented by the burnt-out veteran Zachary Morgan (Joseph Cotten):

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56 *Richard Yates*, p. 123

It's just a difference in size. To a guy that's in it, the war's about ten feet wide and...kind of empty. It's you and ... a couple of fellows in your company maybe, maybe a couple of Japs. It's all kind of mixed up, uh, sometimes it's ... all full of noise and sometimes it's quiet.<sup>57</sup>

And so on, expressing not only the trouble with conjuring experience in language (for Morgan) but also Hollywood's awareness of its own limitations in capturing the experience of war on film.<sup>58</sup> Far from the cutting edge, the film is a romance starring Ginger Rogers beside Cotten, with Shirley Temple in a supporting role. This belatedness places *A Special Providence* at odds with Yates' otherwise more timely subversions of fraudulent conventions. While the realist novel of suburbia and its discontents at mid-century was well-established on American bookshelves by the time *Revolutionary Road* was published in 1961, for example, its conventional narrative of middle-class self-pity had yet to be subjected to the deep irony Yates would provide.<sup>59</sup> *Disturbing the Peace*, meanwhile, was published during a moment in American literature when mocking representational conventions, be they cinematic, televisual or literary, was fashionable. Furthermore, the lack of nobility, honour, and camaraderie was already familiar from novels such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Alfred Hayes' *All Thy Conquests* (1946), and Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950).<sup>60</sup> Many of its key points were simply made too late to be of much significance.

When discussing the novel's flaws, it is important to devote close attention to its structure, as this has been held up as a key weakness, as mentioned above. Part One ends with Prentice collapsed in a heap, ill and unable to fight, drifting off, hearing his mother telling him to 'just rest' (*Providence*, p. 108). This drift toward home leads the novel into Part Two, an extended flashback to his childhood with his mother. Where she has made short cameos in Part One, in brief telephone conversations as well as in Prentice's behaviour (his shrillness, his snobbery), Part Two provides the canvas for her hold over Prentice to be painted in broad brush strokes and bright colours. We find her, alone in New York, drinking heavily and

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57 Quoted in *Projections of War*, p. 12

58 Ibid., p. 13

59 See chapter one.

60 For a thorough discussion of these novels as embodiments of a new disillusionment and nihilism in relation to group identity at odds with earlier American war writing, see Jeffrey Walsh, *American War Literature: 1914 to Vietnam* (London: Macmillan, 1982)

indulging in deluded optimism, taking ‘comfort from the belief that nothing was ever as bad as it seemed – that everything, somehow, worked out for the best’ (*ibid.*, p. 111). The following chapters then proceed to show nothing in particular working out for the best in a string of disappointments and humiliations, both for her and her son. There are men: married, cigar-smoking philistine Dr. Harvey Spangler; Sterling Nelson, a cultured, English businessman whose sophistication appeals to Alice’s sense of refinement, yet who ultimately abandons her for his wife in England, a wife he has presented as an ex. There are money troubles, her tastes for pre-Revolutionary houses with ample studio space at odds with her meagre earnings as an artist and her ex-husband’s decent, yet unspectacular salary at Amalgamated Food and Dye. These money troubles send the two across the country, creditors nipping at their heels, until they end up in Texas with her sister and her husband Owen, a boorish, racist anti-Semite whose open contempt for the relationship between mother and son triggers a fight between the two sisters, Alice’s sense of drama demanding that the two of them leave the next day.<sup>61</sup> Broke, the two of them walk the five miles to the nearest town, Alice wobbling in heels, little Bobby playing grown-up and his mother more than happy to let him take charge, be responsible, and, demonstrating his mother’s influence, cope with the scorching sun and the dust simply by pretending that it is cold. Another example of Yates’ knack for parody, their walk becomes a funhouse mirror image of the Dustbowl migrations of the Depression. Their hardships are entirely, exasperatingly preventable.

As we return to the battlefield, it becomes ever clearer that Bob takes after his mother in a number of ways. Learning of Quint’s death, he blames himself, adorning his guilt with melodramatic gestures, ‘gazing at the ceiling as if beseeching God for punishment’ (*ibid.*, p. 236), ‘[letting] his head fall forward and [clasping] his temples with both hands’ (*ibid.*).<sup>62</sup> There are also hints that he finds alcohol as great a comfort as his mother does, schnapps sending ‘a fine warmth through his veins’ (*ibid.*, p. 291).

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61 It is worth noting that this drunk bully stands as another embodiment of entropic masculinity, with his jeering putdowns of Prentice’s insufficient toughness. For all his bluster, he is a loser: tinkering with his unfinished, never to be finished history of the First World War, drinking too much, impotently raging against the ‘menacing rise of the American Negro’, and the Jews who have supposedly taken over the East Coast (*Providence*, p. 195).

62 Consider this scene in contrast with Shep Campbell’s self-awareness at the end of *Revolutionary Road*, pulling back from his ostentatious display of grief in his back garden. Prentice has yet to realise the hammy fraudulence of his reactions.

There is something cheaply Freudian about this wholesale adoption of his mother's character traits – this, too, has been pointed out by Castronovo and Goldleaf – and it is puzzling in the light of the mockery of pseudo-Freudianism we see in *Revolutionary Road* as well as other Yates texts. Nonetheless, the dark family romance of the novel, while psychologically simplistic, finds formal and structural manifestation in the novel, so its awkward shape retains aesthetic justification, the overpowering mother given formal embodiment in a flashback that is in many ways more vivid and emotionally intense than the war narrative, with its emphasis on repetitive drudgery.<sup>63</sup>

The epilogue, set in 1946, also focuses on Alice. She still drinks heavily, she still thinks her one-man show is just around the corner, and she still lets her mind wander back in time for extended periods. Looking back to the spring after the Texas fiasco, we learn of a success which, however small, makes her endless talk of exhibitions and career take-off seem less pathetic: a sculpture she had made of Bob, accepted for the Whitney Annual exhibition and photographed for the art page of the *New York Times*. In addition, that spring saw a recently financially flush George Prentice ask her to remarry him – only to die of a heart attack a week later, in a familiarly Yatesian sketch of hope and disappointment. The present sees her sit through lunch with the equally lonely Natalie Crawford, a woman she dislikes, but who helps keep isolation at bay by providing company, however dull. She is still waiting for Bob to return from Europe, so that he can support her for a year (all the time she needs to get her career back on track, apparently), before going to college on the G.I. Bill. The novel's final two paragraphs encapsulate his struggle to break free from her, in its ambiguous portrayal of a victory of sorts.

Early in [...] June, she received a letter from Bobby enclosing a postal money order for three hundred dollars [...]. He wrote that he had decided to take his discharge overseas and go to live in England, where he would either find a job or enrol in an English university – he hadn't yet decided which.

In July, she received another letter with a London postmark and no return address, enclosing a money order for one hundred dollars, which he explained was half of his mustering-out pay. He said he was out of the Army now, and feeling well, and that he would write again soon. He wished her luck. (*Ibid.*, p. 322)

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63 The imbalance between the novel's parts has also been pointed by Castronovo and Goldleaf (p. 122)

So Bob is free, kind of. There is, however, cowardice to his solution, a fear of engaging with her evident both in the taciturn wording of his letters and in the lack of return address, which suggests his autonomy is only partial even now. He can only escape her by hiding.<sup>64</sup> As such, the freedom gained is gained precisely through the kind of failure of masculinity Yates' work repeatedly stages, his newfound autonomy subverted by his ultimate inability to resist his mother's influence.

'Jody Rolled the Bones' from *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* offers another look at masculinity-related disappointment through its narrative of Sergeant Reese and his platoon. Sergeant Reese is a more successful version of the surly replacement riflemen of *A Special Providence*, having 'drifted into the Regular Army in the thirties' (*Stories*, p. 39) in search of work, and then moved (not very far) up the ranks. To the initial disappointment of his men, who had expected, and wanted, someone 'burly, roaring, and tough, but lovable, in the Hollywood tradition', 'Reece was tough, all right, but he never roared and we didn't love him'. In return, the platoon of which the narrator is part, are 'probably not very lovable either', white-yet-ethnic urban youth whose Polish, Italian and German surnames are a challenge for Southerner Reece, 'shameless little wise guys' (*ibid.*, p. 40). Reece is strict with the men, who are lazy and cynical. It is 1944, and 'bitterness was the fashionable mood' (*ibid.*). He does however manage to alter their feelings of hostility towards him by leading by example, displaying competence and professionalism in his work. As performance among the men improves, so Reece eases up on the pettier disciplinary actions, which in turn helps alter the men's feelings toward the craft of army life, toward 'soldiering', 'Reece's favourite word' (*ibid.*, p. 46). Their newfound appreciation is made manifest in their sudden appreciation of the previously resented chants accompanying their marching. The title is lifted from one of these chants, Jody being

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your faithless friend, the soft civilian to whom the dice-throw of chance had given everything you held dear; [...] he would always have the last laugh. You might march and shoot and learn to perfection your creed of disciplined force, but Jody was a force beyond control, and the fact had been faced by generations of proud, lonely men like this one, this splendid soldier who swung along beside our ranks in the sun and bawled the words from a twisted mouth: 'Ain't no use in goin' home – Jody's got your gal and gone. [...]' (*Ibid.*, p. 45)

64 For further discussion of the troubling ending of *A Special Providence*, see chapter four.

Soldiering now respectable, the men take pride in their work, achieving a temporary progress toward a kind of manhood which has been conspicuously absent from this platoon whose youth and immaturity have been emphasised throughout: defiance of authority has been met with giggles (*ibid.*, p. 41); before their conversion, suggestions that Reece was only doing his job would have been met ‘with a long and unanimous Bronx cheer’ (*ibid.*, p. 42). This is the behaviour of naughty schoolboys, rather than grown men, perhaps unsurprising given that they are all 18.

This being a Yates story, disappointment is just around the corner: as the boys’ admiration of Reece grows ever stronger, as they adopt his speech patterns, even his accent, wanting to be just like their firm, yet emotionally distant surrogate Dad, he is transferred, rumoured to be too good at his job, showing up the significantly youthful and plump (therefore not manly and chiselled) lieutenant. Denying them the sentimental pleasure of maintaining their respect for him, Reece responds to the news by bullying the boys just like in the beginning. The boys, in turn, are too immature to empathize, and instead sulk over their treatment.

His replacement is ‘a squat, jolly cab driver from Queens who insisted that we call him by his first name, which was Ruby’ (*ibid.*, p. 52). ‘[Every] inch a Good Joe’, he giggles (!), is a slack drillmaster, and falsely ingratiates himself with the lieutenant, whom Reece had treated with ‘silent scorn’ (*ibid.*). Before long, all respect for soldiering is gone, and by the end of their training cycle they are, once again ‘shameless little wise guys’ (*ibid.*, p. 54). The Army has signally failed to turn them into men, Reece’s model masculinity impotent against the Army’s will.

### ***After the war: Toy soldiers***

*Young Hearts Crying* stages a number of male responses to war, from the vulnerable to the laughable. Michael Davenport served as a waist-gunner in the Air Force towards the end of the Second World War, a ‘fly-boy’ like Salter’s Cleve Connell.<sup>65</sup> Supposedly at the glamorous end of military service, Michael’s time in the Air Force

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<sup>65</sup> *Young Hearts Crying* (New York: Delacorte, 1984; repr. London: Methuen, 2005), p. 3. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

had been ‘humbling and tedious and bleak’; combat ‘had come close to scaring the life out of him’; overall, ‘he’d been enormously glad to get out of the whole lousy business when it was over’ (*ibid.*, p. 4). Still, while at Harvard on the GI Bill after the war, he finds that there are perks to being a war veteran: ‘the light that came into people’s eyes, or the quickening of their attention’ when they learn of his military past; best of all, ‘playing it down seemed only to make it more impressive’ (*ibid.*, p. 5). This civilian fascination with the reticent war veteran is given a second airing for comic effect as a bit of party chatter about the talented, struggling painter Paul Maitland:

‘Too young to’ve seen the whole thing, of course, but he was up to his neck in it from the Bulge right on through to the end. Infantry. Rifleman. Never talks about it, but it shows. You can see it in his work.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 21)

(The comic potential of reticence as its own kind of affectation has also been observed by Kurt Vonnegut:

I think a lot of people, including me, clammed up when a civilian asked about battle, about war. It was fashionable. One of the most impressive ways to tell your war story is to refuse to tell it, you know. Civilians would then have to imagine all kinds of deeds of derring-do.<sup>66</sup>)

In addition to the coyness of Michael and Paul, we have Bill Brock, ‘touchy’ about being classified 4-F (*Crying*, p. 21), and Tom Nelson, another painter – albeit far more successful than Paul Maitland – who has appropriated the signifiers of war as his own box of toys, turning them into a spectacle of boyhood. Over the years, he wears a number of military jackets, from Army to Navy to Air Force, and stages elaborate toy soldier battles around the house, imitating gun smoke with cigarettes. Where *A Good School* stages the all-male environment of Dorset Academy as eroticised, the spectacle of masculinity defined by the ‘utterly beautiful’ Terry Flynn, in *Young Hearts Crying* the world of male homosocial relationships is infantilised: middle-aged boys playing soldiers, trading punches at cocktail parties while wives look on, aghast. (As a side note, it is worth mentioning that Michael Davenport is an unapologetic homophobe, as is his wife Lucy. Whereas homophobia is subjected to

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66 *A Man without a Country* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), p. 20

subversively mocking scrutiny in *A Good School*, its contradictions are left largely unexamined in *Young Hearts Crying*.)

Where Grove and Prentice are both apprentice writers, so is the narrator of ‘Jody Rolled the Bones’, albeit more circumspectly: by telling his story, he has become a writer of Yates’ creation. Furthermore, Michael Davenport scrapes by, sporadically publishing collections of poetry to little public interest. Their various failures as men, from their looks to their actions, strike directly at the anxiety of the male writer struggling for masculine authority, an anxiety instrumental in defining American realism, and the American male writer, for close to 150 years. The writer may cast himself as a man of business, as a man of action, but the solitary, silent, inward-facing aspects of the work itself will always resist such claims. The playful act of making up stories will always sit uncomfortably next to digging for oil, manufacturing cars or fighting wars as a signifier of male agency and usefulness. This final observation leads us toward chapter four, where the relationship between play and artistic creation will be discussed in the context of the autobiographical nature of so much of Yates’ work.

## ***Chapter Four: Autobiography, Psychoanalysis and Play***

This chapter will focus on Richard Yates' use of autobiographical material in his novels and short stories, with particular (though not exclusive) focus on *The Easter Parade*, *Cold Spring Harbour*, *Disturbing the Peace* and various short stories from *Liars in Love*. While they will be identified when pertinent, the purpose is not to pinpoint real-life sources for the events and characters described – this particular task has already been exhaustively performed by Blake Bailey in his biography, the source for my identifications; nor is it to attempt to engage with all instances of such life mining – with the arguable exception of some stories from *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, all Yates' fictions contain at least trace amounts of more or less encrypted data from his own life – but rather to investigate the ways in which this strategy of mining his own life for material firstly emphasises the primacy of subjectivity to relating experience; secondly, how it functions as a kind of intertextual play, in which any identification of real human beings is at the most equal to a simultaneous identification with other literary characters; and thirdly, how it draws attention to the constructedness of the fictions when viewing his collected works as one cohesive literary project, an approach I will argue they invite. All three effects add nuance to Yates' popular positioning within a realist framework by stressing the duality of realism, its simultaneously held positions as representation and construct; they enable the reader to acknowledge the autobiographical impulse in his work and, more broadly, to consider the presence of the author in the text without permanently shutting down interpretation once the biographical tail has been pinned to the textual donkey, so to speak. By drawing on both continental philosophy and the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott, I intend to read Yates' autobiographical fictions as an engagement with reality that cannot be reduced to what Northrop Frye named the ‘low mimetic’, a mode of writing in which ‘the canons of probability’ match our own experience;<sup>1</sup> but rather acknowledges the psychological work and linguistic mechanisms that generate reality as it is perceived; a reality of layers; a reality that, recalling MacCabe’s argument outlined in the introduction, is articulated, rather than something that simply *is*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 34

## ***Issues of genre***

Let us first consider some problems of autobiography that have gained currency since the emergence of structuralism. Autobiography and the various emerging currents of thought gathered under the umbrella of postmodernism are all in one way or another concerned with ‘theorizing the subject’,<sup>2</sup> and as such lend themselves to joint consideration.<sup>3</sup> Paul de Man has famously, and contentiously, argued for autobiography as a form of ‘de-facement’,<sup>4</sup> a deliberate act of obscuring, rather than of a truthful, factual representation of a life, a self.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, Yates was a novelist, not an autobiographer in the traditional sense, so pointing out that his novels (and short stories) did not approach documentary status would be redundant. Barrett J. Mandel’s assertion that ‘every moment of any true autobiography’ is shaped by ‘the author’s intention [...] to convey the sense that “this happened to me”’<sup>6</sup> deliberately excludes the autobiographical novel, and for good reason: as we shall see, Yates’ autobiographical impulse is more ambiguous than that. Nonetheless, aspects of de Man’s argument may be fruitfully employed when considering Yates’ fiction. At the heart of de Man’s argument lies the problem of generic definition:

Can autobiography be written in verse? Even some of the most recent theoreticians of autobiography categorically deny the possibility though without giving reasons why this is so. Thus it becomes irrelevant to consider Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* within the context of a study of autobiography, an exclusion that anyone working within the English tradition will find hard to condone. Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm; the works themselves always seem to shade off into neighbouring or even incompatible genres and, perhaps most

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2 Leigh Gilmore, ‘The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography, and Genre’, in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, ed. by Kathy Ashley, Leigh Gilmore, and Gerald Peters (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp. 1-18 (p. 1)

3 In addition to the anthologizing approach taken by Ashley et al, see Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1994) for a comprehensive survey of various, primarily French and North American critical movements of the second half of the twentieth century and their impact on understandings of the subject.

4 *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 67.

5 For an opposing view, see Michael Sheringham’s defence of autobiography’s inherent referentiality in his *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires: Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); also Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)

6 ‘Full of Life Now’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 49-72 (p. 53)

revealing of all, generic discussion, which can have such powerful heuristic value in the case of tragedy or of the novel, remains distressingly sterile when autobiography is at stake.<sup>7</sup>

Bearing this generic slipperiness in mind,<sup>8</sup> we may consider the difference between Yates' explicitly fictional negotiation of the autobiographical impulse and a memoir like Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* as one of degree, rather than of essence. If it is possible to write autobiography in verse form, as de Man suggests, then we must also be open to the possibility of writing autobiography in novel form.

The degree of difference, then, between fiction which more or less transparently draws on real people and events – the roman a clef, say – and the autobiography *qua* autobiography, lies partly in the fiction's acknowledgement of its own positioning at an oblique angle to actual events or persons. While the engagement with material reality is very much in evidence in the autobiographical novel, in its insistence on drawing on real-life sources – its truth claim is necessarily of a different stripe than that of the autobiography. As such, we can approach the interaction of fiction and autobiography without becoming mired in discussions of whether event A took place as portrayed in novel B, or if character C is a fair representation of individual D and so on, but rather what literary effects such manipulation produces.<sup>9</sup>

Suggesting a dual interpretation of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, in which 'each example [...] can produce [...] an endless discussion between a reading of the novel as fiction and a reading of the same novel as autobiography',<sup>10</sup> Gerard Genette argued against a dichotomous view of the two genres, and in favour of one which acknowledged their coexistence. Highlighting the factuality of events portrayed in fiction need not amount to a disavowal of artistry – rather, the art is created in the

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7 *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 68

8 A slipperiness evoked also by James Olney in 'Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction', in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, pp. 3-27: 'Autobiography, like the life it mirrors, refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other' (pp. 24-25)

9 For thorough investigations into the relationship between autobiography and fiction as one characterised by continuity and overlap, rather than mutual exclusion, see *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, ed. by Gunnthorin Gudmundsdottir : (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2003); and *Fiction and Autobiography: Modes and Models of Interaction*, ed. by Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Wolfgang Goertschacher (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2006)

10 Quoted in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, p. 69

manipulation of the raw material, creating metaphorical significance absent from, and irrelevant to, the event as it unfolded in the world. For the purposes of this thesis, Genette's insistence on such a dual function should be considered in light of the already established defining duality of realism. The autobiographical impulse that powers so much of Yates' work is not at odds with the same work's inherent fictionality; nor is its realism at odds with its explicit constructedness.

Jacques Derrida has also made observations on autobiography that may feed into my discussion here. Derrida argues that testimony – and by extension autobiography – gains its potency not from ‘sharing knowledge, [...] making known, [...] informing, [...] speaking true’, but rather from its inherent link to – indeed, its dependence on ‘at least the *possibility* of fiction, perjury, and lie’, to ‘the *possibility* of literature’.<sup>11</sup> Without this possibility, testimony would no longer be testimony. Again, autobiographical fiction makes explicit what autobiography implies: the contingency of claims to truth. The intention here is not to collapse all distinction between autobiography and fiction; as Ann Jefferson has argued in favour of upholding this distinction, ‘generic differences need to be respected as an effect of reading, even if they cannot be defined as intrinsic qualities of the texts in question’.<sup>12</sup> The text which is presented as autobiography produces a reading experience distinct from that which is presented as a novel, and it is not my purpose here to deny this difference.<sup>13</sup>

Mary Evans sees autobiography since modernity as an anxious attempt to ‘maintain, through the written word, a sense of [oneself] as a coherent person’, an attempt made all the more fraught by the increasingly fractured state of the modern self.<sup>14</sup> While Evans ultimately denies the possibility of autobiography in a plainly documentary sense, precisely this denial may be employed to uphold autobiographical

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11 ‘Demeure’, in Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 13-103 (pp.27-29), original italics.

12 ‘Autobiography as Intertext: Barthes, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet’, in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 108-129 (p. 109)

13 For a high-profile example of what happens when the equilibrium is disturbed, rather than knowingly played around with in a consensual game between author and reader, consider the ensuing scandal after it was discovered James Frey had fabricated certain elements of his memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. Frey, whose book had been picked for *Oprah's Book Club* on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, was later interviewed on the show by Winfrey, who opened her interview by saying ‘James Frey is here and I have to say it is difficult for me to talk to you because I feel really duped. But more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of readers.’ (For a full transcript of the interview, go to [http://www.oprah.com/slideshow/oprahshow/oprahshow1\\_ss\\_20060126](http://www.oprah.com/slideshow/oprahshow/oprahshow1_ss_20060126))

14 *Missing Persons: The Impossibility of Auto/biography* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 26

fiction as not necessarily less truthful in its engagement with the self and with reality, but rather presenting a more complex view of reality: reality as taking place in language and in the psyche, a reality that can be paradoxical, irrational, even fictional, where truth can be subjective or metaphorical.

### ***Melanie Klein, splitting and storytelling***

The notion of the fractured self as a product of modernity may be considered in relation to Melanie Klein's work within psychoanalysis, her theories on splitting and the relationship between psychological damage and creativity, and the creative work necessary for psychological development. A crucial component in Kleinian splitting is that of the internal object. Fittingly, the concept is given its most succinct formulation in a dictionary:

This term denotes an unconscious experience or phantasy of a concrete object physically located internal to the ego (body) which has its own motives and intentions towards the ego and to other objects. It exists within the ego, and in a greater or lesser extent of identification with the ego (a phantasy of absorption, or assimilation, to the ego). The experience of the internal object is deeply dependent on the experiencing of the external object – and internal objects are, as it were, mirrors of reality. But they also contribute significantly, through projection, to the way the external objects are themselves perceived and experienced.<sup>15</sup>

From the very beginning of the infant's life, object relations are a factor in the infant's consciousness, the first object here being the mother's breast.<sup>16</sup> The infant's development is intimately tied to a creative act linked to the object: that of splitting the object – the breast – 'into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast',<sup>17</sup> a splitting which also splits love from hate. As the child grows, the scope widens from good and bad breast to good/loved and bad/hated mother in an effort to separate the mother who punishes from the mother who nurtures and gives affection. Whereas the beloved mother is idealised internally, the punishing mother is closely linked to creative work: she is the monster of nightmares, the witch of fairy tales.

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15 R. D. Hinshelwood: *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1991), p. 68

16 Melanie Klein: 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms', in Klein et al, *Developments in Psycho-Analysis* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1952), pp. 292-320 (p. 293).

17 Ibid.

With repeated reassurance of the mother's love, however, [the] splitting of love from hate diminishes. The baby can bear to begin experiencing her as hated as well as loved. It thereby experiences both the mother and itself as more whole. [...] Integration, however, brings about 'depressive position' anxiety lest in attacking the hated mother the baby thereby lose the loved mother. For the two are now recognised as one and the same. This anxiety, wrote Klein, culminates in the losses of weaning, and is only overcome through the child's growing confidence, stemming from internalisation of good and loving mothering, that it has sufficient inner goodness effectively to make good any damage done the mother by hatred and frustration.<sup>18</sup>

So, while the early splitting of the breast/mother is an important part of the infant development, with the idealised internal object acting as a focal point in the ego, helping build it up by encouraging cohesiveness,<sup>19</sup> the splitting must be followed by successful integration, in which both bad and good mother can be understood as one whole person, and in which the depressive position brought on by this understanding is overcome. Yates' work repeatedly enacts Klein's theories on schizoid mechanisms precisely as a failure of integration, a point I will return to later.

### ***D. W. Winnicott and Vladimir Nabokov: Between internal and external***

In addition to Klein, the psychoanalytical theories of D. W. Winnicott on the relationship between playing and reality are of great relevance to any discussion of artistic creation, and of particular interest when considering that which is both autobiographical and fictional, both claiming a relation to lived experience and openly admitting manipulation. Winnicott identifies the act of playing (and, for the adult, the acts of artistic creation and enjoyment) as taking place in 'an intermediate area of experiencing', between the inner world and the outer reality.<sup>20</sup> In this intermediate area we find illusion. While illusion can signify madness in the adult, if the adult demands that others share an illusion not their own<sup>21</sup> – 'They are all after me, I swear!' – like the splitting identified by Klein it is an important part of the child's

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18 Janet Sayers, 'Sex, Art, and Reparation', in *Women: A Cultural Review* 1:2 (1990), pp. 135-143 (p. 139)

19 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms', p. 297

20 D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971; repr. London: Routledge, 2005), p. 3, original italics.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 4

development. In fact, affording the child the illusion of magical control is good parenting: when the infant is hungry, it makes its wish for the breast's appearance known, and so the breast (or the bottle) appears. Eventually the mother (or other guardian) is responsible for disillusioning the child – everything does not simply appear when you want it to – but, as Winnicott states, ‘she has no hope of success unless at first she has been able to give sufficient opportunity for illusion’.<sup>22</sup> The task of accepting reality is never completed; for Winnicott, play, art and religion provide an intermediate area in which ‘the strain of relating inner and outer reality’ can be temporarily relieved.<sup>23</sup> Beyond the aforementioned axis of play, art and religion, life itself is experienced precisely ‘in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals’.<sup>24</sup> As such, the notion of play becomes particularly relevant to our discussion of Yates, although here precision is advised. Before entering into a more detailed discussion on play, we should consider the relevance of Winnicott’s notion of the intermediate area of illusion to a wider consideration of realism. A defining characteristic of realism as a literary mode is its commitment to upholding its own illusion as part of its invitation to the reader to pretend. Where postmodern metafiction is defined by its refusal to maintain any such illusion, its frequent use of illusion-breaking devices,<sup>25</sup> realism presents its obviously fictional narratives with fewer (if any) interruptions, its acknowledgement of artifice generally implied, rather than made explicit. As such, the realist mode fits Winnicott’s model of the adult’s intermediate area of negotiating experience beautifully. It is an illusion, the person experiencing it knows it is an illusion, but for the illusion to serve its purpose as an intermediate area, it needs to remain an illusion for the duration of the experience.

### ***Nabokov: Further notes on play, and on the role of detail***

When discussing play in relation to literary form, postmodernism immediately announces its presence, with its emphasis on playing around with formal conventions,

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22 Ibid., p. 15

23 Ibid., p. 18

24 Ibid., p. 64

25 See chapter five.

character, chronology, and so on. Yates was vocally dismissive of play of this kind, what he termed ‘witty little intellectual puzzles and puns and fun and games for graduate students to play with’,<sup>26</sup> and the salient role of sadness in his work might at first glance make a description of his work as playful seem imprecise, even perverse. Yet his use of memory and personal history does invite a discussion of play as an intermediate space in relation to literature, both for the reader and the writer. The link suggested by Winnicott between play and art is made explicit by Vladimir Nabokov’s lectures on literature given during his academic career.<sup>27</sup>

Like the notion of play, Vladimir Nabokov might seem an odd framing device in this context, but the apparent dichotomy here is false. In his lectures, he may have talked of great literature as, essentially, ‘fairy tales’: works of imagination that seek to create their own, explicitly fictional worlds.<sup>28</sup> Yet among such fairy tales he counted realist classics such as *Madame Bovary* and *Bleak House*; to Nabokov, (and, as I argue, to Yates and his predecessors) realism need not entail a disavowal of constructedness, or a Norrisian privileging of ‘life’ over ‘art’. Instead, ‘with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass’.<sup>29</sup> A number of Nabokov’s expressed views on literature feed directly into our current discussion. In an introductory essay to his collected lectures on literature, Nabokov suggests that ‘[in] reading, one should notice and fondle details’,<sup>30</sup> an observation which ties in neatly with Yates’ aforementioned fondness for the telling detail in his writing, and with realism’s general emphasis on details, the significance of which I have discussed in the introduction. It is in details, and by extension in the specifics, Nabokov finds great art:

Time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds, all these are for writers of genius (as far as we can guess and I trust we guess right) not traditional notions

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26 Henry and Clark, ‘An Interview with Richard Yates’

27 My discussion of Nabokov and Winnicott is indebted to Julie Campbell’s essay ‘Life as Art: Autobiography as Artistic Creation in Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*’, in *Fiction and Autobiography*, ed. by Coelsch-Foisner and Goertschacher pp. 185-207

28 ‘Gustave Flaubert: Madame Bovary’ in *Lectures on Literature* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980), pp. 125-177 (p. 125)

29 ‘Good Readers and Good Writers’, pp. 1-6 (p. 6)

30 Ibid., p. 1

which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way.<sup>31</sup>

While novels may be of great conceptual scope, they are based on the specific and individual: *this* bored wife of a provincial doctor, whose trajectory might nevertheless offer a comment on stifling bourgeois boredom. With Yates, a similar accessing of the social through the particular, the domestic and the individual takes place, bolstered by the deceptively openly autobiographical nature of much of his work. When Alice and Bob Prentice go to stay with Alice's sister in Texas to escape their creditors in *A Special Providence*, Bob's uncle Owen, as mentioned in the previous chapter, embodies any number of political viewpoints and demographic locations, yet he remains, ultimately, that one particular character, drinking in his study, hiding from the chatter of Alice Prentice. This stress on the particular and specific becomes a means to carving out an autonomously literary space for the writer of realism, distinct from the broad scope of sociology or economics or other social and scientific vocabularies that have influenced realism from the beginning.<sup>32</sup>

The pairing of good readers and good writers is indicative of Nabokov's theories of literature. The reader, taking delight in watching the writer create an illusion, is a *participant*, is playing a game with the text. Winnicott's 'potential space' thus offers a possible model for a reading of Yates' work that, like the work of Winnicott himself, is indebted to Kleinian psychoanalysis in acknowledgement of the obvious links to Yates' biography, all the while favouring the realm of the aesthetic as an intermediate space.<sup>33</sup> As such, we may fruitfully look to his biography, all the while upholding an emphasis on the constructedness, the *literary* nature of these

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31 Ibid., p. 2

32 See chapter one.

33 At this point, let me emphasise a crucial difference between Klein and Winnicott, as argued by Mary Jacobus in *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis: In the Wake of Klein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): where Klein would uphold a rigid divide between internal and external objects, between inner and outer worlds, Winnicott's transitional object functioned in part as a buffer zone between these two; he was at pains to distinguish between the transitional object and Klein's internal object (Winnicott, p. 13). Where infantile omnipotence for Klein represented a form of control that was potentially despotic, for Winnicott said omnipotence was necessary for any subsequent healthily creative relationship with external reality (Jacobus, p. 93). Following from this divide, we should consider Peter Rudnytsky's claim in *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D. W. Winnicott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) that Winnicott's approach to cultural experience as growing directly from infantile play is unique among psychoanalytic approaches to art in its respect of art as an autonomous human activity paired with an insistence on its infantile origins (Rudnytsky, p. xiii).

fictions. Indeed, the literariness does not operate *in spite of* autobiography, but does in part emerge from it.<sup>34</sup> The repeat appearances of Yates' alter ego, the mother, the sister, the father, and their sometimes subtle, sometimes less so alterations (in *A Special Providence*, for example, Bob Prentice is an only child) draw attention to the writer's power to reorganise and manipulate his/her material – contradictory versions of events are presented without hierarchical organisation. On the one hand, they insist on their own connection to reality; on the other, the conspicuously limited range renders his chosen motifs hyper-legible precisely as literary motifs, as elements of a project. As this thesis repeatedly seeks to demonstrate, it is not the only unresolved tension in Yates' work.

### ***Life and/as literature***

Considering the intertextual dimension of Yates' use of autobiographical material raises further issues surrounding Yates' fictions as artefacts, as things made of words. Yates' appropriation of lived life goes against the model of naïve realism which is discussed in the introduction: an attempt at directly transferring the stuff of material existence onto the printed page, unaware of (or ignoring) the limitations of language or the artifice of fiction, papering over the contradictions of capitalist reality through a disingenuous naturalisation of historical constructs. Naïve realism remains oblivious to Barthes' insistence upon the death of the author, upon language as the speaking agent of literature, and not the author.<sup>35</sup> For Barthes, there is no Author-God existing before the text as a source from which ultimate meaning springs.

The temporality is different. The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*. The author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as

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34 My argument here is indebted to David Malcolm's essay "All is True?": The Functions of Auto/biographical Material in John McGahern's Fiction', in *Fiction and Autobiography*, ed. by Coelsch-Foisner and Goertschacher pp. 181-193

35 'Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 143

predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*.<sup>36</sup>

Up against Barthes' argument the very notion of autobiographical fiction would seem offensive, a brazen insistence upon the Enlightenment Self, going against the 'anti-humanist, anti-representational' stance taken by practitioners of literary postmodernism.<sup>37</sup> In *Young Hearts Crying*, Yates weaves intertextuality with autobiography in a way which acknowledges literature as a web of texts while simultaneously insisting on this web's non-dichotomous relationship with reality. The novel follows Michael Davenport through failed marriages, first to Lucy, then to Sarah, as well as showing his dashed dreams of greatness; he wants to be a major poet, but has to settle for minor status instead, with only a few poorly selling books and a teaching job in the Midwest to his name. Drawing heavily on not only his own experiences, but those of his friends as well, the character Tom Nelson caused former friend, Bob Parker, to write an (unpublished) essay entitled 'A Clef' for the journal *Grand Street*, complaining about his thinly disguised fictional alias.<sup>38</sup> In this essay, he wrote of how he not only recognised himself portrayed as 'one of the great idiots of [his] generation',<sup>39</sup> but several other friends and acquaintances as well. One of them, the poet Peter Kane Dufault, was surprised to find himself the basis for Michael Davenport. Like Dufault, Davenport was Ivy League-educated, married to a wealthy woman and a skilled middleweight boxer in his youth. It would appear Yates had taken some facts of Dufault's life and blended them with parts of his own personal history in the creation of Davenport.

But, let us consider the opening sentence of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*: 'Robert Cohn was once middleweight champion of Princeton' (Hemingway, p. 3). Like Davenport, Cohn uses boxing as an act of compensation for a perceived unsatisfactory masculinity – Cohn is bookish as well as Jewish, a source of self-consciousness at Princeton at the time; Davenport mainly feels the need to compensate for his sheltered middle-class background. Like Davenport, Cohn marries

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36 Ibid., p. 145

37 Jefferson, 'Autobiography as Intertext' p. 108

38 *A Tragic Honesty*, pp. 538-540

39 Ibid., p. 539

and divorces an independently wealthy woman. So, which model is more important, Cohn or Dufault? While it is no doubt a bracing experience recognising the minutiae of one's own life in the fiction of others, this recognition rarely travels outside the author's circle until it shows up as trivia in a biography. The connection to Cohn, however, taps directly into the work of one of the twentieth century's most widely acclaimed and read writers, and a writer whose influence on Yates has already been discussed in chapters two and three.

When Davenport agonises over how to present himself on the jacket of his first book, including a forced reference to his boxing past in the author description, his wife Lucy has the following to say:

'It's painfully self-conscious [...]. It's as though you're afraid 'Harvard' may sound sort of prissy, so you want to counteract it right away with this two-fisted nonsense about prizefighting. Listen: You know these writers who've spent all their lives in college? [...] Well, a lot of them are scared to put *that* stuff on their book jackets, so they get themselves photographed in work shirts and they fall back on all the dumb little summer jobs they had when they were kids: 'William So-and-so has been a cowhand, a truck driver, a wheat harvester, and a merchant seaman.' Don't you see how ludicrous that is?' (*Crying*, p. 55)

The over-compensating mythology of the novelist as rugged individualist – a mythology Hemingway drew upon in the creation of his ambulance-driving, big game-hunting, hard-drinking persona, and one with deep roots in American realism<sup>40</sup> – and the subversion thereof is of much greater interest to a general readership than a character assassination of someone Yates used to drink with (someone whose characteristics, lest we forget, are amalgamated with Yates himself in the construction of the fictional character, further evidence of the kind of creative splitting Yates would so frequently employ in his work). Without text, without literature, the resonance of Davenport's trials is greatly diminished.

### ***All about mother***

If we return to Nabokov, the initially perhaps puzzling notion of linking Yates to a sense of play in artistic creation should make more sense. As Winnicott makes clear, the need for magical control over the world does not fade away with the onset of

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40 Recall the discussion of masculinity in chapter three.

adulthood. Indeed, he argues for a link between artistic creation and earlier failures in the then-child's development of a self in a passage that may stand as a painfully poignant epigraph to this chapter, as well as to Yates' body of work:

In a search for the self the person concerned may have produced something valuable in terms of art, but a successful artist may be universally acclaimed and yet have failed to find the self that he or she is looking for. The self is not really to be found in what is made out of products of body or mind, however valuable these constructs may be in terms of beauty, skill, and impact. If the artist (in whatever medium) is searching for the self, then it can be said that in all probability there is already some failure for that artist in the field of general creative living. The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of self.<sup>41</sup>

The primacy of subjectivity to relating experience, rather than a panoramic objectivity, is stressed in Yates' portrayal of various mother figures in his fictions, all recognisably based on his own, yet subtly morphing from text to text, as different characteristics are emphasised. I have already discussed the role of the mother in *A Special Providence* as a destabilising presence whose dominance Bob Prentice, and the novel itself, are trying to combat. A similar figure appears in *The Easter Parade*, *Cold Spring Harbor*, peripherally in *A Good School*, as well as the short stories 'Oh Joseph, I'm So Tired', 'Regards at Home' and 'Trying out for the Race'. Such conspicuous repetition has already elicited comment: in his review of *Liars in Love* for the *New York Times* in 1981, Robert Towers reads this tendency to repeatedly feature what are essentially the same characters, only with different names, 'as if Yates were under some enchantment that compelled him to keep circling the same half-acre of pain'.<sup>42</sup> This half-acre is meticulously outlined over the course of his work, in particular from *A Special Providence* onwards; as narratives bleed into each other, a consideration of his output as component parts of one large text is justified. The bulk of *Cold Spring Harbor* takes place during the summer after Phil Drake's first, difficult year at boarding school. Awkward boarding school boys with divorced parents are a staple feature: with the aid of Bill Grove in *A Good School* and Bob Prentice in *A Special Providence*, Phil Drake provides a detailed portrait of a trajectory from boyhood via adolescence through to young manhood with readily identifiable precedents in Yates' own life. Bob Prentice and Bill Grove are seen again

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41 *Playing and Reality*, p. 73

42 'Richard Yates and His Unhappy People', [http://www.richardyates.org/bib\\_towers.html](http://www.richardyates.org/bib_towers.html) [accessed 6 October 2009]

as budding writers in short stories ('Builders' and 'Regards at Home' respectively). Toward the margins of Yates' work, Mrs Givings of *Revolutionary Road* shares a number of characteristics with Ann Blake of *Young Hearts Crying*. Contradictory variations occur. Like Prentice (and like Yates, obviously) Bill Grove serves in the Second World War. As mentioned elsewhere, *A Special Providence* ends with Prentice abandoning his waiting mother, staying in Europe rather than coming home to support her while she works on her pipe dream of a 'one man show', as had been her plan. By way of concluding their arrangement of him financially supporting her, he sends an initial postal money order of three hundred dollars, earned by 'selling cigarettes on the black market in Paris' (*Providence*, p. 322); then a second money order for one hundred dollars, 'half of his mustering-out pay' (ibid.). The final sentence is abrupt, curt, almost cruel: 'He wished her luck' (ibid.). Prentice is in London, with no plan of returning, and leaving his mother no contact details.

Conversely, the Bill Grove we meet in 'Regards at Home' had been unable to go to college on the GI Bill after the war, as 'I had my mother to take care of' (*Stories*, p. 297). During this period, his feelings toward her alter from the romantic idealisation of her 'free spirit' (ibid., p. 298) he had experienced as a boy, to resentment at her irresponsibility culminating in his taking pleasure in witnessing her having all her teeth pulled out by a dentist. (At this point, it would be pertinent to mention Klein's assertion that the infant's response to the bad/frustrating breast is to 'attack' it 'in oral-sadistic phantasies';<sup>43</sup> Grove's narration here evokes the despotism mentioned in n. 33. Regardless of whether the event has a biographical counterpart, the scene is pungently Kleinian: the bad mother being punished, her grotesque mouth – wellspring of soliloquies and the point where alcohol enters her body – vandalised, while the son silently keeps count of the pulled teeth. By conflating two separate issues [bad teeth; his mother's irresponsibility] Grove quietly enacts omnipotent control as a tyrannical act of discipline: in his mind, this trip to the dentist is an act of corporal punishment. Images of the mother being punished and humiliated are plentiful, as we shall see.)

After over a full, difficult year of living together, Grove finally reaches a tipping point upon seeing her perform an infantile song-and-dance routine, upon which he simply comments: 'She was fifty-seven years old.' (*Stories*, p. 304). In an

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43 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms', p. 297

echo of the ending of *A Special Providence*, Grove ‘borrowed three hundred dollars from the bank, explained that I would make all the payments on it, and told her, in so many words, that she was on her own’ (*ibid.*). Against the better judgement of both parties, he marries his girlfriend immediately. The abruptness of his departure, given vivid representation by the rushed rhythms of that one sentence, is similar to the harshness of the earlier novel. Yet here Grove’s hasty exit is tempered by his continued contact, albeit occasional, with his mother: in addition to the three hundred dollars, there are sporadic requests for ten and twenty, until she finally lands a paid job as secretary at Pen and Brush. While trying to impress a friend from work, Dan Rosenthal, Grove talks of his dream of moving to Paris, shelved now his wife is pregnant. When the question ‘why Paris?’ arises, Grove’s narration is one which echoes throughout Yates’ work: ‘There weren’t any real reasons. Part of it was the legend of Hemingway, and that of Joyce; the other part was that I wanted to put three thousand miles of sea between my mother and myself’ (*ibid.*, p. 310). The dream of Paris and the legend of Hemingway are present from *Revolutionary Road* onwards – we find the former (and its disappointing meeting with reality) in a number of his fictions, while the desire to put an ocean between mother and son finally comes to fruition, in ‘Regards at Home’ as at the end of *A Special Providence*. In both texts the move is enabled by the war; in this case, a string of payments from the government after contracting tuberculosis, his illness considered a ‘service-related disability’ (*ibid.*, p. 317). Implored by Rosenthal, once a budding artist, now a single man responsible for his own mother, much like Grove, not to ‘piss it all away’ (*ibid.*, p. 319) – ‘it’ being ‘luck, time, opportunity, a young girl for a wife, and a child of my own’ (*ibid.*) – Grove at story’s end finds himself in a rare position for a Yates character: at the beginning of a promising journey, full of ambition. When he finally leads his mother off the *SS United States* after a leaving party during which she has unwittingly revealed her underwear at great length, one of the story’s chief functions is to soften and moderate the somewhat callous ending of *A Special Providence*. Oral-sadistic phantasies aside, it represents a move of sorts towards integration, towards the character being able to live with his mother, albeit from a safe distance, rather than casting her out altogether. Read together, the use of realist form in both versions heightens the awareness of psychological work that goes into making sense of lived experience. No version is presented as more knowingly artificial than the other. If ‘Regards at Home’ appears less abrupt, it is through its more successful integration,

and not through a stronger commitment to representation. Both narratives lay claim to an engagement with reality. That the two realities are at odds with each other is illustrative of the interpretive and creative work required to create a model world for play purposes (recalling Brooks) that resembles the one we live in.

In addition, ‘Regards at Home’ presents a kind of allegorical problematising of the demands of storytelling familiar from other short stories, such as ‘Doctor Jack O’Lantern’ or ‘Out with the Old’. As implied earlier, Rosenthal is in many ways a double of Grove, an embodiment of Kleinian splitting; Grove without a way out. They have both had to spend time taking care of their mothers; both have some artistic skill or talent that has yet to bear fruit; both struggle to represent truthfully the people around them. During a conversation with Grove, Rosenthal tries to describe his father, a textile factory worker who had gone to great lengths to educate himself in his spare time:

‘Ah shit. It’s impossible to say something like that without demeaning the man. You get a picture of some funny little guy hunched over a machine all day and then talking Kierkegaard all night. That’s not what I mean at all. Know something? When you’re close to someone, when you love someone, you can only make a goddamn fool of yourself trying to explain it. Same with my mother.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 305)

Indeed. This point is echoed in the portrayal of Grove and his wife, Eileen, trying to describe people (including Rosenthal) to each other, their conversations breaking down ‘into admissions that we weren’t even sure we had it right, and then there would be silence until a quarrel broke out over something else’ (*ibid.*, p. 307). For all the overlap between Grove and Rosenthal, Rosenthal becomes a kind of sacrificial lamb, who stays in New York to look after his mother in a faux-incestuous parody of marriage so that Grove can leave.

The struggle, and frequent failure, of Yates’ protagonists to reconcile their feelings of love and hatred for their mothers follow Klein’s model of splitting and integration in relation to the schizoid mind closely. The hated, punishing mother is produced again and again, a presence sometimes overpowering (as in the previously discussed *A Special Providence*), other times pathetic: *The Easter Parade*’s Pookie Grimes lying face down, naked and covered in faeces, surrounded by empty whisky bottles, after suffering a cerebral haemorrhage. Frequently lacking in confidence and

overcompensating with vanity and arrogance, his characters can combine callous distance with desperate neediness: the greatest fear of Emily Grimes, protagonist of *The Easter Parade*, is to be alone, yet she makes only the barest minimum of visits to the state hospital where both her mother and sister end up. The work as a whole enacts this tension, as the mother figures become increasingly pathetic, even grotesque, and the artistic qualities present in Alice Prentice of *A Special Providence* are excised from later incarnations. Alice Prentice's habit of throwing herself to the floor in times of distress, feigning a seizure, is puerile, yet some way short of pathological; near the end of *Cold Spring Harbor*, Yates' final novel, Gloria Drake is having a psychotic episode by the hospital bed of her daughter Rachel, shortly after she has given birth, from which she has to be led by her ex-husband, muttering incoherent insults. The gradual transformation of the mother figure into a 'cackling, malodorous clown'<sup>44</sup> is of particular interest when considering realism's programme of fidelity to reality, and, in turn, the autobiographical impulse's relevance to realism. For Yates, the later, more cartoonish, in short *less realistic* literary incarnations of his mother were the most accurate, reaching the level of 'triumph' in *Cold Spring Harbor*.<sup>45</sup> Yet this triumph of precision was achieved partly by leaving out matters of historical fact: when Alice Prentice, the irresponsible, immature, largely unsuccessful artist experiences a triumphant moment of her own when her sculpture of her son's head is accepted for exhibition at the Whitney Annual, and later photographed for the *New York Times*, it is a moment obviously inspired by Ruth Maurer's greatest success as a sculptor: a commission to sculpt a bust of heavyweight boxer Joe Louis. A photograph of Maurer at work on the bust was published in a number of American newspapers, including the *New York Herald Tribune*. This success was fictionalised once more, and more directly, in the short story 'Oh Joseph, I'm So Tired', in which Helen, the mother of the narrator and protagonist, here simply known as Billy, is commissioned to sculpt the head of President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt. (The sculpture of Joe Louis' head is roughly twice the size of a normal head. By contrast, Helen is persuaded by her lover to make her Roosevelt 'only six or seven inches high' [*Stories*, p. 185] to cut costs, rendering the head 'too small. It didn't look heroic' [ibid., p. 195]. The creative licence granted by fiction allowed Yates to manipulate, to

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44 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 553

45 Ibid.

*sculpt*, his raw material – his life, and the lives of those around him.) In a further link between the two texts, a separate sculpture makes an appearance in both. In Part Two of *A Special Providence*, we see little Bobby Prentice posing naked for his mother, a model for a sculpture of a Faun, until the work is interrupted by the giggles of spying children. In ‘Oh Joseph, I’m So Tired’, there is an early, seemingly off-hand mention of ‘a life-size little boy whose legs turned into the legs of a goat at the knees and another who knelt among ferns to play the pipes of Pan’ (*ibid.*, p. 177). The story develops a sense of unease around these sculptures: recounting her initial meeting with Roosevelt to her friends, Helen expresses a great deal of disgust at Roosevelt’s appearance. Upon being reproached – ‘he can’t help being crippled, Helen’ (*ibid.*, p. 182) – Helen employs the defence of a strict aesthete: ‘I’m only trying to tell you how ugly it was’ (*ibid.*, original italics).

And that seemed to carry a certain weight. If she was an authority on beauty – on how a little boy might kneel among ferns to play the pipes of Pan, for example – then surely she had earned her credentials as an authority on ugliness. (*Ibid.*, pp. 182-183)

By aligning the sculpture of the little boy with her shallow, one might even say ugly, reaction, it no longer functions simply as an example of her work, but as a site of discomfort.

Due to its generically determined concentration<sup>46</sup> and retrospective narration in which the perspective of a seven-year-old is presented to us by the now grown narrator, ‘Oh Joseph, I’m So Tired’ stands as an excellent example of an enactment of the Kleinian split between the loved and hated mother, and the struggle to reconcile the two. The hated mother is embodied in the bigot who recoils at Roosevelt’s physique, who angrily says that ‘*none* of my friends are Jews, or ever will be’ (*ibid.*, p. 198, original italics). Yet the same character offers occasional, fleeting moments of comfort:

I had discovered, or rediscovered, that crying is a pleasure – that it can be a pleasure beyond all reckoning if your head is pressed in your mother’s waist and her hands are on your back, and if she happens to be wearing clean clothes. (*Ibid.*, p. 190)

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46 See chapter two.

That final ‘if’ is of great significance here, and key to the failure of reconciliation: Helen’s slapdash approach to hygiene is repeatedly evoked, culminating in her drunkenly leaving a ‘slick mouthful of puke’ (*ibid.*, p. 194) on Billy’s pillow – with him in bed – after a party. Whatever moments of comfort and reassurance she may offer are ultimately fatally undercut by her far more frequent actions producing fear, loathing and pity in her son. The mother we see at the story’s end is the hated one, recounting her anti-Semitic rant over the telephone to her friend, pouring another drink in the kitchen, ‘at the onset of a long battle with alcohol that she would ultimately lose’ (*ibid.*, p. 197).

Alongside Ruth Maurer’s minor achievements as a sculptor, she was also active in a number of arts organisations, including a period as ‘resident sculptor’ at Pen and Brush, the organisation for women in the arts. The historical Ruth Maurer, then, while not an artist of distinction (Bailey notes how her work has ‘totally disappeared’),<sup>47</sup> was certainly active enough in the arts for any attempt at documentary realism to necessarily include such activity. When Yates decided not to include this aspect of his mother’s life in his later attempts at capturing her character, this decision renders obvious the explicitly indirect relationship between reality and his fiction, and the primacy of subjectivity in his relating of experience. What is real and what is true are not here matters of *data*, but acts of mental creation: the grotesque held a truth the woman in the world did not. While there are any number of theoretical and formal concerns relevant to Yates’ work – concerns discussed in other chapters – it is nevertheless clear that access to information about his life opens up rich seams of interpretation, precisely as this information sheds light on the gaps and cracks between the fiction, which, even prior to any reading of Bailey’s biography, invites interpretation along autobiographical lines due to its repeated invocation of a limited range of settings, events and characters, and the life to which this fiction refers. These fictions are embarrassingly revealing confessions somehow engaged in a game of misdirection, at once uncomfortably candid and playfully obscuring. When fictional texts become conspicuous in their evocation of lived experience, as Yates’ do, the relationship between text and experience arguably becomes part of the text, an intermediate space worthy of consideration without automatically lapsing into literary

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47 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 260 n.

gossip-hunger. This intermediate space invites discussion of truth, representation and referentiality, not anecdote.

As for *The Easter Parade*, in conversation Yates himself described the novel as “‘autobiography’” rather than ‘allegory’;<sup>48</sup> in a profane echo of Flaubert’s famous statement ‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi’, Yates laughed that ‘Emily fucking Grimes is me’.<sup>49</sup> In this novel, as in *Young Hearts Crying, Disturbing the Peace*, and the aforementioned ‘Regards at Home’, two ‘versions’ of Yates appear. It is worth bearing in mind that Klein argued that the splitting of the object would always result in a corresponding splitting of the ego.<sup>50</sup> It therefore stands to reason that the constant evocation of the split mother would be accompanied by an equally frequent splitting into numerous alter egos. In *Young Hearts Crying*, Davenport contains elements of Yates himself (as well as the aforementioned elements of Dufault and Cohen): his homophobia; his aversion to ‘people who played at being artists of one sort or another’; his habit of calling women ‘baby’<sup>51</sup> – a habit shared, not incidentally, by John Wilder in *Disturbing the Peace*. A less central character, the writer and creative writing teacher Carl Traynor (who Lucy moves in with some time after her divorce from Michael), resembles Yates in more substantial ways, his mannerisms, teaching style, literary accomplishments, and work habits closely matching Yates’ own. Traynor, too, would call women ‘baby’ - a perhaps lazy duplication Yates’ former friend Anatole Broyard would allude to in a brutally dismissive review of the novel for the *Sunday Times*.<sup>52</sup> As for *The Easter Parade*, Emily Grimes – modelled on Yates’ ex-wife Martha Speer in addition to Yates himself, is married to the poet Jack Flanders for a while. Like Yates, Flanders spent time teaching at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Like Yates, Flanders is a writer struggling to replicate the relative success of his first book. Of his third, Flanders is scathing: ‘It’s lousy. You wouldn’t believe how lousy’.<sup>53</sup> Yates considered his third book, *A Special Providence*, a failure, ‘weak’, ‘not properly formed’.<sup>54</sup> Physically, too, Flanders and Yates (and Emily)

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48 Ibid., p. 465

49 Ibid.

50 ‘Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms’, p. 298

51 *A Tragic Honesty*, pp. 533-534

52 Ibid., p. 532

53 *The Easter Parade* (New York: Delacorte, 1976; repr. London: Methuen, 2004), p. 86. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

54 Henry and Clark, ‘An Interview with Richard Yates’

resemble each other, at least in the areas Yates felt self-conscious about: ‘He was very tall and spare with a sad, sensitive face’ (*Parade*, p. 83). In *A Special Providence*, Prentice’s tall, skinny body is evoked to reflect his lacking masculine heft, both physically and mentally/emotionally. The ‘sad, sensitive face’ was something Yates would go to great lengths to distort and conceal in order to appear more masculine, growing a beard and squinting in photographs in order to camouflage his big, round eyes and plump lips.<sup>55</sup>

Moving on, I want to consider what *literary* effects Yates achieves through his various alter egos. The various adult incarnations, such as Jack Flanders, make for interesting objects of study in this case. As they are invariably involved in writing of some sort – either as budding writers earning a salary in trade journals or on copy desks, or as published authors plugging away some distance below the highest reaches of literary fame and success – their narratives offer comments on writing and literature that reach beyond autobiography. Jack Flanders’ time at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop is a case in point. As a poet, Flanders is ‘what the kids here call “traditional”. I like Keats and Yeats [note the pronunciation] and Hopkins’ (*Parade*, p. 104). A colleague, Bill Krueger, is

what they call ‘experimental’ - he’s thrown everything overboard. His favorite critical adjective is ‘audacious’. Some kid’ll get stoned on pot and scribble out the first thing that comes into his head, and Krueger’ll say ‘Mm, that’s a very audacious line’. His students are all alike, the snottiest, most irresponsible kids in town. They think the way to be a poet is to wear funny clothes and write sideways on the page. (*Ibid.*, pp. 104-105)

On one level, this is a thinly veiled dig at Robert Coover, a contemporary of Yates at the workshop. Yet the personal link is incidental, bordering on trivial; Flanders’ tirade is obviously of greater significance as an attack on the experimental fiction of American postmodernists like Coover; as Yates’ fiction speaking up for itself, and for the validity of its formal strategies, in the face of hostile literary currents. As such, this part of the novel becomes a form of cloaked metafiction of the kind discussed in chapter five: a discussion of literary form that does not break the fourth wall, but is contained within a framework of representation. Flanders’ glum dismissal of his own work is of equal relevance:

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55 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 40

You know what it's like? It's like bad light verse. Not even *good* light verse. Dum de dum de dum, and dum de diddley poo. I should've been a songwriter in the nineteen thirties, only I probably would've failed even at that. It'd take about twenty-seven of me to make an Irving Berlin. (*Ibid.*, p. 101)

If Flanders' attack on Krueger and his students should be read as a (barely) encrypted defence of representational writing, his take on his own work displays a similarly camouflaged awareness of the pitfalls of writing in a more 'traditional' mode, whether it be poetry or prose: of triteness and – a key concern for Yates – cliché. Everyday language is necessarily dependent on the familiar, the recognisable. Reconciling this dependence with the demand upon the writer to 'make it new' is something we find Yates grappling with throughout his work with varying levels of success – the 'bad light verse' represents his occasional failures, cast out to the margins of the narrative.<sup>56</sup>

The motif of the writer poring over his work is one of Yates' most frequently evoked: Vincent Sabella and his obscene graffiti in 'Dr. Jack O'Lantern'; Bob Prentice with his letters in *A Special Providence*, as well as his business copy, his ghostwriting and his own, weak fiction in 'Builders'; Bill Grove's labours, first on the school newspaper in *A Good School*, later as a copywriter at Remington Rand in 'Regards at Home'; Jack Fields trying his hand in Hollywood (although primarily trying his hand as F. Scott Fitzgerald in Hollywood); Jack Davenport in *Young Hearts Crying*, plugging away on his poems, first in the attic, then in the pump shed, productive evenings alternating with 'times when he couldn't get his brains together, when he would sit there in a paralysis of inattention, smoking cigarettes and despising himself' (p. 30); and so on. As an occasionally intermingling shadow motif of the struggling writer we find the simply *bad* writer, a figure assuming many forms, and, like the struggling writer, not one confined to the more explicitly autobiographical of his fictions. There is Krueger with his coterie of students (although it bears mentioning that Flanders' disgust at 'that phony little son of a bitch' (*Parade*, p. 97) is laced with envy: 'the little cocksucker is nine years younger than me' (*ibid.*, p. 105). There is Sobel in 'A Wrestler with Sharks', whose semi-literate ramblings the reader gets to sample comprehensively. The Robert Prentice of 'Builders' is highly

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56 As previous discussions of Flaubert make clear, such critical scrutiny of one's own use of everyday language is part of the realist tradition.

dismissive of his own efforts: of his ghostwriting, of the stories he was working on prior to meeting Bernie Silver, and ultimately of ‘Builders’ itself. There is Sloane Cabot in ‘Oh Joseph, I’m So Tired’, whose rejected radio play about ‘an enchanted circle of friends’ (*Stories*, p. 194) in Greenwich Village somehow combines saccharine sentimentality with gratuitous cruelty in its vivid evocation of a seven-year-old boy’s severe stutter; there are Carl Traynor’s students at the New School, their helpless efforts recounted in great detail, each rookie mistake held up for the reader’s wincing amusement. Reading Yates, one is often subjected to long passages of deliberately terrible prose, or stretches of dialogue serving as rope with which the characters may hang themselves, such as Bill Grove’s self-aggrandizing inanities regarding the writer’s craft in ‘Regards at Home’.

It is also a motif which, naturally, ties in with his literary achievements. If, as I argue throughout the thesis, Yates at his best embodies a deliberately contingent, reflexive realism in his meticulously crafted, highly economical fictions shot through with an ironic murkiness, at his weakest this tension is insufficiently upheld. ‘Good Yates’ skewers cliché; ‘bad Yates’ skewers *some* clichés while unwittingly embracing others. ‘Good Yates’ ironizes the self-pity of his characters. ‘Bad Yates’ simply represents self-pity. Any definition of realism (and, by extension, Yates’ work) as ‘naïve’ would have to ignore the formal self-consciousness required to manage the kind of balancing act Yates’ work enacts, as well as the formal self-consciousness that has shaped crucial realist works since the term was invented.

The use of autobiographical material ties in with literary realism through its reliance on the visual, as I have discussed in chapter one. Realism takes its cues from observable reality; autobiographical fiction necessarily draws on observed events, as well as first-hand experience. Yates obviously understood as much; while laughingly dismissing *The Easter Parade* as pure autobiography, with the major events and characters ‘all there lying around’,<sup>57</sup> simply waiting to be recorded, he simultaneously gave himself credit for being ‘the one who *saw* it’.<sup>58</sup> The importance of seeing is one we find stressed throughout Yates’ work (and throughout the history of literary realism, as discussed in the introduction and in chapter one): in the capture of the

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57 Quoted in *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 465

58 Ibid., original italics.

Laurel Players' director, turning his hand into a fist on his chest during his motivational speech at the beginning of *Revolutionary Road*; in Gloria Drake's 'little laughing shudder that was probably meant to be girlish and disarming', but which simply '[called] attention to how loose and ill-defined her lips were';<sup>59</sup> in Andrew Wilson's ill-timed lunge for Emily Grimes on her sofa bed which causes sparks from her just-lit cigarette to fly into her hair and onto her dress in *The Easter Parade*; in how Robert Prentice in *A Special Providence* 'quared his shoulders, set his feet wider apart, and briskly rubbed his hands together in the woodsmoke' in satisfaction at not having done 'anything noticeably absurd' (*Providence*, p. 24) during that day's infantry training; and so on. The emphasis on significant physical gestures speaks of the writer's ability to spot them, and in turn to bear witness, while simultaneously creating a fragmentary effect, an image of a world of tiny, unintegrated parts. The partial visual authority is rendered even more partial in Yates, as the ability to spot crucial details is repeatedly undercut. I have already discussed the epistemological uncertainty and drained discourses which cloud character interaction in *Revolutionary Road*: the empty jargon, the absent communication, the withholding of significant clues. *The Easter Parade* presents its own highly ironic commentary, not only on its own narrative, but of the super-text that is the body of work: Emily Grimes' response to every piece of information she does not or cannot comprehend is to say 'I see'. It is how she, aspiring to be an intellectual, responds to Lars Ericson talking of the freedom simply 'to be' (*Parade*, p. 63) gained from being a seaman; it is how she responds upon learning of his bisexuality; it is how she responds to her sister Sarah's plans to place their mother, who has become a 'discipline problem' (*ibid.*, p. 146) at the nursing home, in the (free) state hospital instead. Emily's failure to see in the midst of a body of work riddled with acute observations is echoed in the tendency Yates' characters have towards speaking in vague clichés, while the narration is characterised by glassy lucidity. Their failures comment on realism's claims to cognitive and visual authority.<sup>60</sup>

The link between seeing and participation is of particular relevance if we recall the conflicted emphasis on the visual in Yates. Here, the reader's immersion in a textual world rife with revealing detail does not belong on an axis of seduction,

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59 *Cold Spring Harbor* (New York: Delacorte, 1986; repr. London: Methuen, 2005), p. 21

60 As discussed in the introduction and chapter one.

hypnosis and passivity, but is rather characterised by agency. And so, when we read of the little stamps given to Billy and his sister Edith by their father in ‘Oh Joseph, I’m So Tired’, we are co-participants, allies: the writer mimicking the act of whispering a secret, the reader mimicking the act of leaning in. The emotional intensity of the scene, narrated with neither embellishment nor exaggerated deadpan, requires a high level of active alertness:

‘Here we go; what do you think of these?’ They were two fragile perforated sheets of what looked like postage stamps, each stamp bearing the insignia of an electric lightbulb in vivid white against a yellow background, and the words ‘More light’.

My father’s office was one of many small cubicles on the twenty-third floor of the General Electric building. He was an assistant regional sales manager in what was then called the Mazda Lamp Division – a modest job, but good enough to have allowed him to rent into a town like Hastings-on-Hudson in better times – and these ‘More light’ stamps were souvenirs of a recent sales convention. We told him the stamps were neat – and they were – but expressed some doubt as to what we might do with them.

‘Oh, they’re just for decoration,’ he said. ‘I thought you could paste them into your schoolbooks, or – you know – whatever you want. Ready to go?’ (*Stories*, 179-180)

There is almost an excess of significant information here, all presented in a deceptively unobtrusive fashion: of their father’s decline from an already unassuming class position – at his peak still only able to rent; of his understanding of his children growing ever more limited with the distance forced upon them by his divorce from Helen; of his children’s gratitude laced with incomprehension in the face of this distance. The prose, with its unassuming rhythms and vocabulary, is designed to generate a minimum of readerly friction. Yet the stamps, evoking yet again the visual in a deceptively everyday, uncomfortably ironic fashion resonating with the concluding paragraph of ‘Builders’, with its questions to Bernie Silver: ‘And where are the windows? Where does the light come in?’ (*Stories*, p. 173) – everyone in Yates’ textual universe is in need of more light, more illumination, more transparency, but where will it get in? As discussed elsewhere, the Prentice narrating ‘Builders’ would credit any light in his story to ‘whatever chinks and cracks have been left in the builder’s faulty craftsmanship’ (*ibid.*) – matters of accident, rather than design. In yet another nod of reflexivity, this touchingly trivial present echoes the ‘tiny white plastic horse’ (*Road*, p. 39) given to April Wheeler in childhood by her father (who would go on to ‘[shoot] himself in a Boston hotel room in 1938’ [*ibid.*, p. 38]). The fondling of details is a sizeable task when reading Yates.

## **Disturbing the Peace: *Banishing the scapegoat***

*Disturbing the Peace*, Yates' third novel and fourth book, offers a detailed treatment of various issues concerning the fictionalisation of lived experience, issues which feed into a conception of engagement with the real as an act of creation.

The novel's protagonist, John Wilder, is a successful New York salesman selling advertising space for *The American Scientist*. At 36 he has a wife, Janice, and a ten-year-old son, Tommy. The outward signs of professional and domestic success are offset by severe psychological problems: the opening chapter sees him committed to the psychiatric wing of Bellevue Hospital Center over the Labour Day long weekend, having suffered a nervous breakdown while on a business trip. Wilder's mental illness is instrumental to the novel: firstly, his oscillating mental health drives the narrative; and secondly, it is during his first breakdown he has the 'epiphany' (the inverted commas suggest the questionable validity of the insight gained) that 'there's greatness in me' (*Disturbing*, p. 12), a conviction that will make him leave his family to pursue his dream of becoming a film producer. It is through his venture into film-making that the novel's engagement with autobiography is at its most explicitly reflexive.<sup>61</sup>

While John Wilder's greatness lacks designation at first, it takes the shape of film-making success after embarking on an affair with Pamela Hendricks, a 21-year-old working in the advertising industry, at a sales pitch meeting. From a wealthy family and educated at an expensive liberal arts college, Pamela's feelings towards making films echo those of John:

'One funny thing, though,' she said while he fixed himself a new drink, 'I know I can't act and I don't photograph well, and I certainly can't write and wouldn't know what to do if somebody handed me a camera, but I've always had this feeling I'd be good at making movies. Good movies.' (*Ibid.*, p. 115)

(Note the admitted absence of anything like artistic talent: a typically Yatesian prolepsis evoking the familiar themes of inevitable disappointment, similar to April Wheeler's hopes for Frank to 'find himself'. Find what, exactly?)

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61 The novel's engagement with cinematic convention will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Their affair intensifies, with films providing an arena for bonding (and occasional hidden resentment, as the art house tastes of the sophisticated, well-educated Pamela occasionally chafe against those of the not very well-read – indeed self-conscious about his slowness as a reader – college drop-out John). It is against this backdrop of film talk and ambition that John’s story of his stay in Bellevue (which the reader already knows from the second chapter of the novel) triggers the idea in Pamela’s mind that they should go ahead and make a film based on his experiences, their lack of artistic talent offset by Pamela’s network of skilled and/or talented friends from college: the actors, writer, director, set designer and so forth could all be procured cheaply. The novel’s depiction of the filming process, and its juxtaposition with the events as represented in the novel’s second chapter, provide a wealth of material for a discussion of issues surrounding autobiographical fiction. Firstly, this part of the novel is characterised by an awareness and acknowledgement of the inherent artifice of the crafted fiction – the specifically cinematic here stands in a synecdochic relationship to all artistic representation. Before filming begins, the director Julian conducts a guided tour of the set, for the benefit of John, Pamela and the reader (I quote at such length here due to the density of significance):

‘If you’ll come this way you’ll see what we’ve done – tried to do anyway. We’re shooting in black and white, of course, so the colors don’t matter. Here’s your corridor. I know you’ll say it’s too short, but don’t worry. A camera can make thirty feet look like sixty if you use it right. Same goes for the bunks. We’ve only got eight bunks, but I can give an illusion of five or six times that many. Peter got the bunks from this home for retarded kids they’re tearing down upstate; then he put hinges on ‘em and went to a scrap-metal yard for the chains and the grids. Look.’ He slammed two bunks against the wall, clamped them, and drew the grid across them. ‘That look right? Sound right?’

‘It’s fine; fine.’

‘And here’s your padded cells. The padding was another of Peter’s inspirations; borrowed it from the gym here at school. Look all right?’

‘Looks fine.’ [...]

‘And here’s one of your windows. You stand here, I’ll go around and light it, then you tell me if the light’s right.

It was; either an early grey morning or a late grey afternoon.

‘...and as for your mess hall, if you’ll just come through here...’

‘Fine,’ he kept saying. ‘Where’d you get the benches?’

‘Peter borrowed ‘em from the library. And here’s your front door, with the cop’s stool, and here’s Charlie’s KEEP OUT door...’ [...]

‘Oh, and here,’ Julian said. ‘Come over this way. Here’s your Jerk-off City.’

It was a perfect replica of that loathsome alcove [...]. (*Ibid.*, pp. 134-135)

While Yates was sceptical towards cinema,<sup>62</sup> it would be a mistake to read this passage as a simple dig at cinematic fraudulence – although, granted, Julian’s breezy allusion to ‘this home for retarded kids’ clearly functions as a revealing glimpse of a callousness at odds with the intended gravity of the project in question. While he may have privileged the written word, Yates was no stranger to borrowing material from others,<sup>63</sup> nor to illusory tricks of craft (cf. the deftness of pacing in the thin, yet life-spanning *The Easter Parade*, a feat of narrative efficiency which ought to be considered in light of the modernist machine aesthetic discussed in chapter one, as well as Flaubert’s short story ‘A Simple Heart’,<sup>64</sup> capturing the entire life span of the maidservant Félicité in less than 40 pages through meticulous selection and composition. Again, the continuity between realist and modernist practices is evident). When we first hear of John’s desire to make films, in conversation with his psychiatrist, authenticity and truthfulness are at the centre of his ambition:

‘[In] the army there was nothing magic about the big silver screen any more, and we all got to be very vocal, brutal movie critics. We could spot a fake plot or a fake ‘message’ a mile away; we’d stomp and laugh and yell obscenities at anything cheap or trite or hoked-up or sentimental, and I remember thinking Jesus, these guys are like me: we’ve *all* been raised on movies, and we’re just beginning to figure out what frauds most of them are.’ (*Disturbing*, pp. 97-98, original italics.)

Since the project’s inception at Pamela’s luxury apartment (rent paid by her father), the onus has been on getting the story right, telling it truthfully – somewhat optimistically, Pamela thinks John is the right man for the project in part because, as she puts it: ‘you were stone-cold sane the whole time’ (*ibid.*, p. 123), an assertion the reader knows to be false, having already read of John at Bellevue talking to himself, screaming in restraints, being sedated. Yet truth involves some form of translation from the outset, as the aesthetic decision to shoot in black and white shows.

Emerging problems and their solutions continue to fuel the discussion. Clay Braddock, the actor playing Charlie, the black nurse who had exhibited a great deal of professionalism in dealing with John and his fellow inmate Dr. Spivack in chapter

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62 See chapter five.

63 See, for example, chapters one and two for discussions of his use of *Madame Bovary* and *Babbitt*.

64 In *Three Tales*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1961; repr. 1971), pp. 17-56

two, objects to his character speaking ‘Perfect English’ while the other black characters ‘talk like stereotype down-home niggers’ (*ibid.* p. 131). While Wilder’s reasoning is satisfactory to Braddock – it is ‘neutral’, rather than ‘perfect’, and has been developed from a need to maintain authority over a particularly unruly crowd – Braddock’s initial objections serve to comment on the fiction – the novel’s second chapter – as well as on the fiction-within-a-fiction.

During filming, John’s input adds layers of ambiguity to the novel, if not the film. For proof, consider the opening of chapter five in relation to its root in chapter two:

‘...I don’t care! I don’t care! Can’t you idiots understand? I don’t care! I want my father to see me like this!’

‘All right, Henry; easy now...’

‘Don’t call me *Henry*, you dumb black bastard – call me Doctor or I’ll break every fucking bone in your-’

‘You ain’t gonna break nothin’, Doctor...’

‘Cut!’ Julian said. ‘Okay, hold it right there. What’s the trouble, John?’

‘No real trouble,’ Wilder said, ‘it’s just that I think the orderlies ought to be rougher on Klinger. They don’t like him; he’s a troublemaker; he calls them spades and jigaboos, and they’re tired anyway from working the night shift. I want to see them *really* grab him and yell at him and muscle him around before they shoot him out.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 141)

John’s intrusion is complexly, ambiguously revealing: while the dialogue is a near-verbatim repetition of an exchange between Doctor Henry Spivack and some hospital orderlies in chapter two, John’s insistence that the orderlies handle ‘Klinger’ more roughly contrasts with how events unfolded in chapter two:

‘You ain’t gonna break nothin’, Doctor,’ a second orderly said, and the two of them held his arms. Both orderlies were bigger than he; they had no trouble turning him around and leading him down the corridor. He didn’t struggle in their grip but his shouting rose until he sounded on the verge of tears. (*Ibid.*, p. 19)

Why is John exaggerating the violence of this situation? On one level, there is of course the Yatesian preoccupation with inept storytellers, John Wilder applying a touch of sensationalism to the material. On another, there are his anxieties surrounding race, which reach a paranoid-grotesque culmination during the novel’s third and final nervous breakdown, with John imagining his own racially motivated

electrocution at the hands of another group of black orderlies. Finally, though, there is simply an acknowledgement of the requirements for representing moments of heightened intensity. The psychiatric hospital setting already provides an environment in which the psychological, subjective dimension of reality is foregrounded; manipulation and distortion thus feeds into a richer conception of reality as a site determined by psychological work as much as by base materiality.

Kleinian splitting may also be self-administered by the subject, compartmentalising intolerable aspects of his/her personality and projecting them outward. While we find splitting taking place in ‘Regards at Home’ and *Young Hearts Crying*, as discussed, and again in *The Easter Parade* – the author-figure peripheral to the daughter/sister-figure, yet both demonstrably drawn from the same set of lived experiences – in *Disturbing the Peace* such splitting fits most neatly into a Kleinian model. Unlike Bob Prentice and Bill Grove, Wilder’s physique differs drastically from Yates’ own. Whereas the former are tall and thin, with round eyes and full lips considered effeminate, Wilder is short (this is noted for the first time on page six, and repeated a number of times).<sup>65</sup> What they all share, however, is a sense of anxiety around their height, and a threatened and diminished sense of masculinity in relation to their appearances: Bill Grove thinks he looks like a girl; Bob Prentice feels self-conscious about his physique compared to the other soldiers; John Wilder, upon first meeting Pamela, mistakenly assumes she will be ‘too damned tall’ (*ibid.*, p. 108) for him. Unlike Prentice and Grove, his artistic ambitions are cinematic, rather than literary; in fact, he is a very slow reader, and does not read for pleasure. His slowness as a reader, a trait shared with Yates, is another site of anxiety, and he locates it as the cause of his unsatisfactorily low score on an Army IQ test: 109, one point below the requirement for officers’ training. Yates’ own IQ had also been measured at 109 in the army, on the exact same grounds: while he did not get any questions wrong, he did not finish the test. In addition, Wilder and Yates share both alcoholism and a bipolar personality disorder.

When juxtaposed with the writer Chester Pratt, it becomes near impossible not to read them as a split Yates, a symbolic banishment or purging, Yates exercising

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65 It is worth noting that the design of John Wilder was drawn up specifically to avoid public humiliation on Yates’ part (Bailey, p. 442)

magical control through his fiction. When we first meet Pratt, he is terribly drunk at a party, the author of one acclaimed novel he is currently trying to turn into a film (strong correlation here with Yates' own experience post-*Revolutionary Road*). He becomes Wilder's rival for the affections of Pamela Hendricks – after her first break-up with Wilder, she spends some time with Pratt in Washington, where they work for Robert Kennedy until his assassination (again, like Yates), and where Pratt's drinking ultimately pushes Pamela away. In a move designed to link the two characters further, Pratt and Wilder have the same AA sponsor. Near the end of the novel, with Wilder in a psychiatric hospital, seemingly permanently, we are suddenly presented with a brief passage focalised through Pratt – a surprising shift in point of view, as up until this point he has been a peripheral character, either briefly glimpsed or referred to in the third person by Pamela. He is now stably sober, with 'all the poison [...] out of his system' (*ibid.*, p. 271); he is working on a script based on Wilder's original, not quite feature-length film, all the while compiling material for his next novel; he is back together with Pamela, who he sees 'like the glass of cold milk he drank at eleven o'clock each morning: she made him feel young and strong and full of good health' (*ibid.*); he has decided to stay on in Hollywood – 'the place where his luck had changed' (*ibid.*) – beyond finishing the script. Where Yates' various other alter egos are characterised by uncertainty and instability, Pratt has reached a sense of equilibrium altogether lacking elsewhere. Doubts are fleeting, alcoholism a defeated foe, and his height, crucially, a site of confirmed masculinity: the scene finishes with him leaning over to kiss Pamela on the neck, and Pamela, stretching, remarking that he is 'so nice and tall' (*ibid.*, p. 273). By Yates' standards, such harmony is conspicuous, and it is clear that Chester Pratt represents an idealised self rather than a triumphant, real self. Yates never quit drinking, and his Hollywood career was less successful than Pratt's. While speculating in authorial intention has been deemed academically questionable since Wimsatt and Beardsley's seminal essay 'The Intentional Fallacy',<sup>66</sup> juxtaposing work and biographical fact when studying Yates does emphasise the fact that parts of his work approach aspects of psychoanalytical theory in a manner best described as 'textbook'. Just like the creative splitting of the self into idealised and intolerable parts is a marker of illness, an always-already

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66 In *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954)

doomed attempt at self-treatment, the creation of Chester Pratt lacked prophetic impact: the tranquil equilibrium achieved by Pratt was to remain within the realm of fiction, as was the permanent containment of Wilder's illness. Reality was to remain a tangle of work, alcohol, tumultuous relationships and an oscillating, bipolar psyche. The harmonious equilibrium of Pratt's recovery inadvertently illustrates a key aspect of Yates' realism: it is defined by the cracks, not the papering over.

## ***Chapter Five: Yates after postmodernism***

I can't read John Barth with anything but irritation. I can't read Donald Barthelme at all. I can read hardly any of the many other new 'post-realists,' whatever their ever-increasingly famous names may be. I know it's all very fashionable stuff and I know it provides an endless supply of witty little intellectual puzzles and puns and fun and games for graduate students to play with, but it's emotionally empty. It isn't *felt*. (Henry and Clark)

The book is inanimate because it communicates no real feeling and so gives us no sense of a conscious person.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will investigate the question that should follow any acknowledgement of Richard Yates' strange, posthumous career arc, from near-forgotten 'writer's writer' at the time of his death, to the source of Sam Mendes' high-profile 2008 adaptation of *Revolutionary Road*, now an author whose every book, including initial failures like *A Special Providence*, is repackaged in attractive paperbacks and on sale in every bookshop of reasonable quality in Britain. That question is: why now? What aspects of his work ensure a warmer reception now than when this work was first crafted? How has the American literary landscape changed in order to prove more accommodating of Yates' work? In order to answer these questions, I will discuss certain writers who have come to prominence after the peak of literary postmodernism in the 1970s, writers who, in some instances, echo John Barth's notion of 'exhaustion' of literary form,<sup>2</sup> but who see postmodernism (and in particular metafiction), rather than realism, as the exhausted mode. Some are formally and thematically closer to Yates than others. Some, such as A. M. Homes, have explicitly championed Yates, have openly cited him as a direct influence on their work. At a more oblique angle stands David Foster Wallace, a novelist and short story writer who, unlike Yates, received widespread acclaim among academics and graduate students as well as a wider reading public from the very beginning of his writing career, and as such can be seen as emblematic of his time (as opposed to the decidedly non-emblematic state of affairs that is being 'discovered' after one's death). The purpose of this engagement

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1 David Foster Wallace, 'How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart' in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005; repr. London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 141-155 (p. 151)

2 See chapter one.

with Yates via Foster Wallace is not a simple matter of claiming influence; there is no record of Foster Wallace mentioning Yates in essays or interviews, formats in which he would be vocal in his admiration. Rather, it will present Yates' work as setting up certain problems of representation which Wallace (and other writers of his generation) would later attempt to solve from a different angle; as attempting a synthesis of realist concern for character, human emotion and story with postmodern aesthetic strategies and concerns, a synthesis which has gained significant currency within American literary fiction.<sup>3</sup> While this synthesising impulse necessarily results in a wide range of formal strategies – the most cursory of readings will reveal Yates and Wallace as radically different in their modes of expression – its conceptual foundations are nevertheless shared. From interviews to book reviews to longer essays to fiction, Wallace espoused a cohesive programme of literary practice, and it is this programme I wish to explore. Consequently, texts are discussed not based on their bulk, fame, or centrality in his body of work: more space is devoted to a review of tennis player Tracy Austin's autobiography than to *Infinite Jest*, his best known book. Many passages will be quoted at exhausting length. This is mainly due to Wallace's prose, which is verbose, yet informed by a desire for accuracy which makes it difficult to edit without simultaneously draining his points of nuance.

### ***Robert Rebein: The revitalisation of realism***

In his 2001 study *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism*, Robert Rebein argues for the revitalisation of realism as one of the most significant developments in American literature after the peak of postmodernism (suggested by Rebein as 1974, the year Thomas Pynchon won the National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow*).<sup>4</sup> This sense of revitalisation is important to this thesis for a variety of reasons: it insists on the viability of realism as a literary mode suited to engage with postmodernity, while acknowledging that this mode had gone through

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3 See Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), p. 20

4 Ibid., pp. 7; 15

a fallow period.<sup>5</sup> It acknowledges the malleability of realism, its adaptability, drawing on Keith Opdahl's argument for the durability of realism as owed to its ability to absorb techniques 'from the movements that would supplant it'.<sup>6</sup> Opdahl outlines the debt owed by post-war American realism to the two movements that had come directly before: the naturalists (themselves deeply indebted to the realism of the nineteenth century) had opened up a realm of possibility regarding subject matter, while the New Critics of the 1930s and 1940s advocated a meticulous attention to language (as in the interpretive approach of close reading) which realists would take on board.<sup>7</sup> In addition, 'realistic writers borrowed from postmodernists, too, so that it was often difficult to distinguish between a premodernist writer who read his contemporaries and a postmodernist writer who used realist techniques'.<sup>8</sup> It is the contention of this chapter, and this thesis, that Yates' work draws on nineteenth-century realism (cf. the introduction, as well as chapters one, two and three), borrows from preceding literary movements (including modernism, as chapter two demonstrates), while simultaneously standing in a dialogic relationship with the postmodernism that dominated the literary landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, a dialogic relationship which anticipates current tendencies in American fiction. The freedom of subject matter won by the naturalists is evident in his unflinching portrayal of everyday despair: April Wheeler's horrible (yet unseen) death; Pookie Grimes naked and stroke-afflicted on the floor, surrounded by empty whisky bottles; John Wilder's mental dissolution (see discussion of *Disturbing the Peace*, below), and so on. The work of the New Critics impacted on his work through T. S. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative, the importance of which to his aesthetics he would make apparent in his essay 'Some Very Good Masters'.

To unpack Yates' dialogic relationship with postmodernism, I find Rebein's stress on the distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism made by the editors of the anthology *Postmodern American Fiction* instructive. The former refers to 'a historical period stretching from the 1960s to the present',<sup>9</sup> while the latter

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5 See chapter one.

6 Keith Opdahl, 'The Nine Lives of Literary Realism', in *Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Sigmund Ro (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), pp. 1-18 (p. 3).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., pp. 3-4

9 Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy, 'Introduction' in *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, ed. by Geyh, Leebron, and Levy (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), pp. ix-xxx (p. x)

denotes ‘a tentative grouping of ideas, stylistic traits, and thematic preoccupations that set the last four decades apart from earlier eras’.<sup>10</sup> Within the former, we find defining phenomena such as

upheavals in the international economic system, the Cold War and its decline, the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of the American population, the growth of the suburbs as a cultural force, the predominance of television as a cultural medium, and the rise of the computer.<sup>11</sup>

The latter, meanwhile, contains such diverse traits as

pastiche, the incorporation of different textual genres and contradictory ‘voices’ within a single work; fragmented or ‘open’ forms that give the audience the power to assemble the work and determine its meaning; and the adoption of a playful irony as a stance that seems to prove itself endlessly useful.<sup>12</sup>

To Rebein’s account of characteristics of postmodernism might be added the definitions of postmodernist poetics offered by Hassan, McHale, and Cohen, as discussed in chapter one: postmodernist literature as characterised by a move toward silence, by its ontological dominant, and by a crisis of cognitive-visual authority, respectively. In addition, Terry Eagleton emphasises postmodernism as a reaction ‘to the austere autonomy of high modernism [...] impudently embracing the language of commerce and commodity’, achieving its subversive effects through a ‘contrived depthlessness [...] sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock’.<sup>13</sup> As Rebein argues, one category is far more solid than the other. The problem with postmodernism as a unifying category is its potentially endless scope (as the numerous definitions would suggest): fictions at opposite ends of the aesthetic spectrum could easily be labelled postmodern. Using Rebein’s examples, Carver’s short story ‘Cathedrals’ could be labelled postmodern due to its portrayal of an America ‘uprooted by divorce and relentless in its mobility, a world in which cathedrals have been reduced to “something to look at on late-night TV”’.<sup>14</sup> Equally postmodern in content is Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, ‘with its reference to such local contemporary phenomena as junior tennis and Boston, Massachusetts, Alcoholics

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 ‘Awakening from modernity’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987. Eagleton echoes Jameson’s case for the ‘new depthlessness’ of postmodernism, as mentioned in chapter one.

14 *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, p. 8

Anonymous'.<sup>15</sup> Yet simultaneously, such a grouping together is problematic: Carver's 'low-rent, minimalist style, [...] depressed, earnest tone and barely contained sentimentality and understated, "epiphanic" ending' versus the 'maximalist spill (1,079 pages), [...] futurism and footnotes and wilfully stupid jokes and pointed lack of an ending' of Wallace's novel.<sup>16</sup> Other examples that illustrate the broadness of the category could include Bret Easton Ellis very much 'embracing the language of commerce and commodity', endlessly cataloguing high-end consumer goods:

Next to the Wurlitzer jukebox is a black ebony Baldwin concert grand piano. A polished white oak floor runs throughout the apartment. On the other side of the room, next to a desk and a magazine rack by Gio Ponti, is a complete stereo system (CD player, tape deck, tuner, amplifier) by Sansui with six-foot Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood.<sup>17</sup>

That novel also famously embraces 'squalor and shock', a quality it shares with James Ellroy's *LA Quartet*, in which historical fact (such as the unsolved murder of Elisabeth Short in 1947, fuelling the *Quartet*'s first novel<sup>18</sup>) is gleefully mixed with fictions of shocking depravity. This mixing raises ontological questions of the kind stressed by McHale, and highlights the textuality of history through its questioning of 'the received narratives of our history and our present' (Geyh, Leebron, and Levy, p. xii), itself a characteristic of the postmodern age in America, during which the Watergate scandal, the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X all weakened public belief in the official version of events. As for depthlessness, consider, for example, Don DeLillo's 'Most Photographed Barn in America':<sup>19</sup> the real thing – the barn – has been entirely usurped by its status as most photographed; it has been reduced to a state of permanent two-dimensionality. While all these examples may be described as postmodern, their concerns and strategies, from DeLillo's deadpan to the Ellroy's fevered seediness, are sufficiently eclectic to suggest some definitional slippage.

Given the difficulty of pinpointing postmodernism as a coherent aesthetic movement, and its waning influence, Rebein suggests shifting the focus from

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15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p. 9. Wallace's uneasy relationship with postmodernism will be subject to detailed discussion below.

17 *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991; repr. London: Picador, 2001), p. 24

18 *The Black Dahlia* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1987; repr. London: Arrow, 1993)

19 *White Noise* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984; repr. London: Picador, 2002), p. 12

postmodernism to postmodernity when seeking to define postmodern literature;<sup>20</sup> i.e. literature that seeks to engage with the dizzying shifts that took place during this historical period, rather than literature that adheres to a given set of aesthetic strategies. This could be literature investigating the workplace after Fordism (with its well-paid assembly-line workers, loyal to their employers, while sufficiently affluent to afford the mass-produced goods Fordism generates),<sup>21</sup> in the era of flexible accumulation, characterised by a decreased emphasis on the manufacture of goods in favour of marketing,<sup>22</sup> greater flexibility (such as flexi-time) and less job security (greater reliance on temporary and part-time workers eligible for less benefits than their full-time, even unionised counterparts).<sup>23</sup> It could deal with shifting family structures: the percentage of American adults who are divorced almost tripled from 1970 to 1996, from 3.2 to 9.5.<sup>24</sup> Looked at from this angle, Yates' realism appears distinctly postmodern in its themes and environments: it deals with the growth of suburbia, the emergence of computer technology, the fragmentation of the nuclear family, the shifting of class structures, consumer capitalism, the impact of television (and Hollywood) on the culture, changing models of masculinity – all phenomena associated with postmodernity in some way. As chapter one has demonstrated (and this chapter will demonstrate), this engagement with the postmodern is formal as well as thematic, seeping into the language and storytelling structures of his fictions. The relevance of Yates today can in part be understood through the revitalisation of realism that Rebein discusses. Prominent writers operating within a realist mode have emerged since postmodernism's peak, writers such as Robert Stone and Richard Ford, who has championed Yates' work, as seen in his introduction to the Methuen edition of *Revolutionary Road*, quoted in the introduction to this thesis. For some of these writers, postmodernism was never particularly relevant. As Rebein argues, minority writers 'could not say, along with the mostly white, eastern males of postmodernism, that their world had been represented to death';<sup>25</sup> realism engaging with their lived experience was far from the exhausted mode for gay, Latino and Native American

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20 *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, p. 15

21 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990; repr. 2001), p. 126

22 See the discussion of this shift in emphasis in relation to *Revolutionary Road* in chapter one.

23 *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 150

24 [www.census.gov/prod/3/98pubs/p20-496.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/3/98pubs/p20-496.pdf) [accessed 2 July 2010]

25 *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, p. 6

writers that it was for John Barth in 1967. Yet on the other side of the spectrum, that side which came of age under the influence of postmodernists like Pynchon, Barth and Coover, among the generation of writers that includes Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers, and A. M. Homes, we find a synthesis of postmodern techniques and preoccupations with a concern for character and representations of everyday life straight out of the realist tradition. It is this fusion which forms the core of this chapter.

### ***After postmodernism***

The 1990s were the site of a generational move beyond the postmodernism which had been dominant during this generation's artistic coming of age, a patricidal tendency to rebel against postmodernist fiction without regressing.<sup>26</sup> Before embarking on my discussion of Wallace proper, I will make a brief detour via two other major American novelists of the 1990s (and 2000s), Jonathan Franzen and Richard Powers. The purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive survey of their work, but rather to draw attention to shared affinities which should ultimately cast some light on the phenomenon that is the widespread (re-)discovery of Richard Yates.

The career arc of Jonathan Franzen, fellow Midwesterner and friend of Wallace, may stand as emblematic of the generational move mentioned above. He has openly admitted to a conflicted influence of postmodernism on his own work.<sup>27</sup> His

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26 Sibylle Freitag, *The Return of the Real in the Works of Jonathan Franzen* (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 2009), p. 11

27 See, for example, his essay on William Gaddis, tellingly entitled 'Mr. Difficult', in *How to be Alone* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002; repr. London: Harper Perennial, 2004), pp. 238-269. In his essay, Franzen tells of his struggle to reconcile two seemingly mutually exclusive models of the relationship between artwork and audience. In what Franzen calls the Status model, 'the best novels are great works of art, the people who manage to write them deserve extraordinary credit, and if the average reader rejects the work it's because the average reader is a philistine' (*ibid.*, pp. 239-240). This model 'invites a discourse of genius and art-historical importance. Conversely, in the Contract model the writer's role is to "[provide] words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience"; "a novel deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's trust. [...] The discourse here is one of pleasure and connection" (*ibid.*, p. 240). Franzen describes Gaddis as a writer adhering to the Status model, and praises Gaddis' debut novel, *The Recognitions* (1955) as a work of matching difficulty and reward: heavy going, but worth the effort. He compares the feeling of finishing it with the virtuous feeling springing from having 'run three miles, eaten my kale, been to the dentist, filed my tax return, and gone to church' (*ibid.*, p. 245). The essay represents a kind of falling out of love, the disappointment of one reader who loves *The Recognitions*, yet who finds himself unable to finish *JR* (1975), and who, for all his college-age immersion in the 'canon of intellectual, socially edgy, white-male American fiction writers' (*ibid.*, p. 246) – Pynchon, DeLillo, Coover, Gaddis and so on – never

first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, has a plot that has been described more than once as ‘Pynchonesque’,<sup>28</sup> a labyrinthine, paranoid, deliberately outlandish and thus non-mimetic web of events involving the conspiracy to appoint an Indian woman, former Bombay police commissioner S. Jammu, as the new St. Louis police chief; a Native American terrorist group; the declining financial fortunes of the city of St. Louis; and so on. Yet it is important to bear in mind that the novel’s incredibly detailed portrayal of St. Louis points to a literary legacy predating postmodernism: ‘as earnest a depiction of place and regional mannerisms as anything we might find in Chopin, Joyce, or Faulkner’.<sup>29</sup> His second novel, *Strong Motion*, hinges on a similarly anti-realistic plot – a number of earthquakes in Boston caused by industrial pollution – yet there is a new emphasis on personal relationships, between family members or between lovers, although it should be noted that these relationships primarily function as manifestations of the novel’s leitmotif of violent collision (between tectonic plates or people). His third novel, *The Corrections*, provided Franzen with a professional breakthrough: the novel won the National Book Award, and Franzen found himself at the centre of media controversy when he expressed unease regarding the novel’s selection for Oprah’s Book Club in an interview with the *Portland Oregonian*.<sup>30</sup> Such trivia aside, the novel represented a shift in tone within Franzen’s work, a prioritising of emotion and characterisation in its portrayal of a Midwestern family, the Lamberts, which invites a reading of the novel as an attempt to fuse the tools and strategies of postmodernism and realism.<sup>31</sup>

A similar shift may be found in the novels of Richard Powers, his novel *The Echo Maker* – another National Book Award winner – providing an emblematic metaphor for this generation of American writers’ synthesizing approach. The novel focuses on a pair of Nebraskan siblings, Mark and Karin Schluter. After a car

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stopped yearning for the pleasures offered by ‘Dickens and Conrad and Bronte and Dostoevsky and Christina Stead’ (*ibid.*, p. 247). While his college self knew that characters ‘properly speaking, weren’t even supposed to exist’, that they were ‘feeble, suspect constructs, like the author himself, like the human soul’, he nevertheless found, to his shame, that he ‘seemed to need them’, drawing readerly pleasure from the portrayal of Oedipa Maas in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and of Richard Nixon in Coover’s *The Public Burning* (*ibid.*).

28 *Return of the Real in the Works of Jonathan Franzen*, p. 18

29 Robert Rebein, ‘Turncoat: Why Jonathan Franzen Finally Said “No” to Po-Mo’, in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. by Neil Brooks and Josh Toth (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) pp. 201-222 (p. 204)

30 *Return of the Real in the Works of Jonathan Franzen*, p. 10

31 *Ibid.*, p. 110

accident, Mark develops Capgras Syndrome, a brain disorder which leaves him convinced that his sister is not his sister, but in fact an impersonator. While she looks like her, talks like her, and knows everything his sister knows, she does not *feel* like his sister (at the novel's beginning, they have not seen each other for a long time), and so all the facts are rendered obsolete. As one doctor tells her:

‘The Capgras sufferer almost always misidentifies his loved ones. A mother or father. A spouse. The part of his brain that recognizes faces is intact. So is his memory. But the part that processes emotional association has somehow disconnected from them.’<sup>32</sup>

Karin enlists the help of an Oliver Sacks-like populariser of neuroscience, Dr Gerald Weber, who describes the syndrome as such: ‘Lack of emotional ratification overrides the rational assembly of memory. Or put it this way: reason invents elaborately unreasonable explanations to explain a deficit in emotion. Logic depends upon feeling’ (*ibid.*, p. 134). To which his wife responds with a chuckle: ‘This just in: male scientists confirm the bleeding obvious’ (*ibid.*) Capgras has a dual function in this novel. Firstly, it crystallises the novel’s preoccupation with disconnection (or, more precisely, unrecognised connections): between individuals, and between humanity and the environment – the novel’s second narrative strand is concerned with the heron population of Nebraska facing endangerment, possibly extinction. Secondly, in the context of Powers’ body of work the centrality of emotion in shaping rational thought processes as evidenced by Capgras here serves as a coded defence of a fiction of emotional involvement; a refusal of a dichotomous model of artistic appreciation, where cold, hard, manly thought stands on one side, and warm, soft, womanly emotion stands on the other, forever separate. *The Echo Maker*, like Powers’ previous work, is a boldly cerebral novel founded on extensive research, and written in a wilfully elevated, explicitly literary prose. Yet its conceptual heft is inseparable from the domestic drama at its core: without the relationship between brother and sister, the Capgras loses its impact, indeed, it becomes redundant: only loved ones are misrecognised. Without love, there is no diagnosis.

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32 *The Echo Maker* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006; repr. London: Vintage, 2007), p. 76. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

## A. M Homes: Suburban surrealism

Belonging to the same generation of novelists as Franzen, Powers, and Wallace, the novelist and short story writer A. M. Homes has openly cited Yates as an influence on her work; specifically, *Revolutionary Road* as a ‘predecessor’ to her 1999 novel *Music for Torching*, as ‘one of the first books that took apart suburbia’.<sup>33</sup> Both novels are about a discontented married couple living in the suburbs with their children, failing at maintaining a streamlined existence. Yet Homes’ championing of Yates goes beyond thematic concerns, and suggests issues of form that are of great relevance to this thesis’ discussion of Yates’ categorisation as a realist. In the interview with Weich, Homes refers to the ‘American surrealist tradition’, citing John Cheever’s ‘The Swimmer’ and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* as examples of literature that creates an ‘odd mix of the surreal and the real’,<sup>34</sup> that renders conspicuously strange events convincing, even normal. While Homes does not explicitly draw the connection between Yates and this surrealist tradition, context suggests it remains important to read his influence on her work in this light, especially when we consider *Music for Torching*’s commitment to rendering suburbia an utterly alien environment. For *Revolutionary Road* to truly stand as a predecessor to this novel, its strangeness is as important as its commitment to the everyday, the cartoonish, shadowless, ‘gruesome toyland’ (recalling Castronovo and Goldleaf) of the Revolutionary Hill Estates as crucial as Frank and April’s relationship. If we recall Brian McHale’s conception of postmodernist fiction as governed by ontological questions, as revelling in a sense of ontological impossibility, Homes’ project breaks with this line of thought in order to tap into a realist concern for verisimilitude. Postmodernism does not tend to try and convince the reader of its own veracity: its open artifice is precisely the point. Conversely, Homes insists the strangeness of her fictions is taken from life itself: ‘Life is incredibly surrealistic. Especially where I live, in New York City, the weirdest things happen every day. So many things are so odd. You just have to be aware of it’.<sup>35</sup> It is a repeat insistence on her part: Homes recounts a book reading and Q & A session where an audience member asks where she gets her ideas.

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33 Dave Weich, ‘A. M. Homes is a Big Fat Liar’, at <http://www.powells.com/authors/homes.html>, [last accessed 25 May 2010]

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

Her answer is a pithy ‘From you’.<sup>36</sup> The bizarre shootings, fires, car crashes, kidnappings and murders that propel her plots forward are the stuff of newspaper headlines, everyday occurrences in contemporary America.: ‘I get them from looking at the world we live in, from reading the paper, watching the news’ (*ibid.*). Note the evocation of looking as a means of accessing reality, and this looking again feeding into a body of work characterised by its oddness.

Homes’ stories frequently break with real world probability: ‘A Real Doll’ is about a boy dating a Barbie doll; in ‘Raft in Water, Floating’, and in ‘The Weather Outside is Sunny and Bright’ a shapeshifter appears, at one point morphing from a coyote to an old woman to a man within a few sentences.<sup>37</sup> Yet for all their ontological impossibility (in keeping with McHale’s definition of postmodernist literature), these stories are written with a typically realist eye for detail (the significance of which has been subject of discussion in previous chapters): the logistical difficulties of being in a dysfunctional, sexual relationship with a Barbie doll are meticulously represented, as when he has to crush a Valium into little crumbs before spiking her drink: ‘I figured Barbie could take a little less than an eighth [...] without getting totally senile’.<sup>38</sup> Such an approach has a peculiar effect, summed up by David Leavitt: ‘The more bizarre things get, the more impressed one is by A.M. Homes’ skill as a realist’.<sup>39</sup>

*Music for Torching* follows the couple Elaine and Paul, two characters first seen in Homes’ short story ‘Adults Alone’.<sup>40</sup> The boredom and frustration they evince in that story have here reached apocalyptic proportions: by the end of chapter one, they have deliberately set their house on fire, hoping to purge their lives of suburban

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36 *The Mistress’s Daughter* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007; repr. London: Granta, 2008), p. 68. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

37 ‘Raft in Water, Floating’, in *Things You Should Know* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002; repr. London: Granta, 2004), pp. 21-28 (p. 26). ‘The Weather Outside is Sunny and Bright’ appears in the same collection.

38 ‘A Real Doll’, in *The Safety of Objects* (Scranton: W. W. Norton, 1990; repr. London: Granta, 2004), pp. 151-173 (p. 157)

39 Quoted in Weich, ‘A. M. Homes is a Big Fat Liar’

40 In *The Safety of Objects*, pp. 15-33

ennui.<sup>41</sup> Like Frank and April Wheeler, Paul and Elaine feel they do not belong in this environment; like Frank and April, they belong a bit more than they would like:

[Setting] the fire was on some level a declaration of their awareness, the great and formal announcement: This is not who we are, we are not like you, we have failed, we are failing, we are failures. And yet, this is exactly who they are; they are not different at all. They are exactly the same as everyone else, and worse yet, they are trapped in it, entirely engulfed – this is their life.<sup>42</sup>

The suburban life in which they are engulfed is one characterised by a strangeness bordering on the otherworldly represented with an idiomatic plainness, as in this description of the clean-up crew at the house days after the fire:

Men in yellow coveralls, with goggles and masks, swarm through the house like bees. Paul counts six of them. Their outfits are intimidatingly hard-core; they're dressed as though they're clearing up a toxic-waste site, as though the house is truly contaminated.<sup>43</sup> Paul wants to tell them to lighten up – it's not that bad. He wants to say, Hey, we live here, we've lived here for years, we're okay. (*Ibid.*, p. 176)

If Homes' post-apocalyptic vision carries on and amplifies Yates' take on the suburban environment, *Music for Torching*'s engagement with white-collar work performs similar acts of continuation. Recall Yates' ironic evocation of white-collar jargon as drained of meaning, crystallised in Frank's 'Speaking of Production Control' brochure. Now consider this dialogue between Paul, his ambitious junior colleague Herskovitz, and their boss, Warburton:

Herskovitz on the love seat starts in. 'Return is fine, but what about the future? You have to look at what's ahead and not always down at the bottom line. You miss something staring at your feet.'

Paul hates Herskovitz, creeping up behind him, gunning to run him over, to skip into the second spot, the big office next to the corner that's been empty ever since Sid Auerbach went into cardiac arrest during a conference call.

'Let me take this one on,' Paul says. 'I think we can do something here, we can go further if we go deeper.'

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41 Fires, shootings and car crashes are frequently evoked by Homes as short, sharp shocks that are sometimes invited, but always serve to shake up the status quo.

42 *Music for Torching* (New York: Rob Weisbach Books, 1999; repr. London: Granta, 2006), p. 53. Further references to this volume will be given after quotations in the text.

43 Note the contamination theme echoing Frank's views of suburbia in *Revolutionary Road*, as discussed in chapter one.

'I want you to bring me a new way of seeing,' Warburton says. 'Fresh vision.' (Ibid., p. 160)

It is a game of buzzword one-upmanship, and its stringing together of corporate catchphrases is both as deftly executed and utterly meaningless as anything from Frank's pen. The Flaubertian contempt for middle-class cant, shared by Yates, is equally present and correct here, closely attuned to the evolving white-collar jargon of American postmodernity.

### ***David Foster Wallace: Postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism indeed***

From the very beginning of his career, David Foster Wallace explicitly located himself, and was located by the literary marketplace, within the American postmodern tradition, a term I here use with some hesitation, for reasons which will become apparent. In his review of Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* the critic Tom LeClair portrayed him as 'the gifted offspring of "Pop Pynchon"',<sup>44</sup> while Jay McInerney identified him as a 'student of literary post-modernists like John Barth and Robert Coover' through his 'flirting with metafictional tropes and self-referential narratives'.<sup>45</sup> Yet while the lineage is easily discernible, Wallace's relationship with his obvious literary forebears is tinged with a sense of unease, as his work would frequently turn the conventions of American literary postmodernism in on themselves as part of a project Wallace himself would refer to in terms of 'patricide'.<sup>46</sup> It is this turn which provides the starting point for my discussion.

In his fictions as well as in essays, Wallace would comment explicitly on literature, on its purpose and conventions. A recurring theme, which made its first appearance in his 1990 essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction', is that of the appropriation by television (and advertising) of the reflexive conventions of

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44 Quoted in Stephen Burn, *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum Books, 2003), p. 13

45 'The Year of the Whopper', *The New York Times Book Review*, 3 March 1996  
<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/03/books/the-year-of-the-whopper.html> [accessed 13 October 2009]

46 Larry McCaffery: 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1990), pp. 127-150 (p. 146)

postmodernist fiction, and the consequences this appropriation has for the creation of new fiction. The essay opens with the following:

Fiction writers as a species tend to be oglers. They tend to lurk and to stare. They are born watchers. They are viewers. They are the ones on the subway whose nonchalant stare there is something creepy, somehow. Almost predatory. This is because human situations are writers' food. Fiction writers watch other humans sort of the way gapers slow down for car wrecks: they covet a vision for themselves as *witnesses*.<sup>47</sup>

Two aspects of this paragraph immediately present themselves as revealing of literary preferences and desires that are much older than postmodernism. Firstly, there is the emphasis on observation, on seeing, an emphasis with strong ties to realist writing, as discussed in chapters one and four, as well as in the introduction. I will be returning to this emphasis on the visual shortly. Secondly, there is the hypnotic almost-repetition: 'oglers'; 'watchers'; 'viewers'. Wallace's work is filled with this extreme thoroughness of approach, an obsessive attention to nuance in order to make his meaning absolutely clear. In 'E Unibus Pluram', for example, this strategy manifests itself in an eight-point, four fifths of a page long mapping of the differences between voyeurism and watching TV, each point addressing different ways TV shows are not real life. His work in general is filled with this sort of covering of bases, whether he is discussing the ethics of eating lobster ('Consider the Lobster'); market research ('Mr Squishy'); the rules and tactics of the fictional game Eschaton (*Infinite Jest*); John McCain's 2000 campaign for the Republican presidential candidacy (originally 'Up, Simba', in 2008 repackaged as an autonomous work with the new title *McCain's Promise*); to name but a few prominent examples from both his fiction and his essays. While this strategy can be as exhausting as it is exhaustive, as several pages are filled in order to make quite simple points, it is nonetheless a distinctly outbound move, emphasising his view of writing as 'an act of communication between one human being and another'.<sup>48</sup> But to return to his emphasis on the

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47 In *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997; repr. London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 21-82 (p. 21) (first publ. in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1990), pp. 151-194), original italics.

48 'Greatly Exaggerated', *Supposedly*, pp. 138-145 (p. 144)

(tele)visual: television, Wallace asserts, has ‘become its own most profitable analyst’ (‘E Unibus Pluram’, p. 30);<sup>49</sup> it has become metatelevision:

Television used to point beyond itself. Those of us born in, say, the ’60s were trained by television to look where it pointed, usually at versions of ‘real life’ made prettier, sweeter, livelier by succumbing to a product of temptation. Today’s mega-Audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what’s not needed. A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger.<sup>50</sup>

And while such reflexivity is not new to US entertainment, Wallace asserts that, due to Americans spending on average six hours a day watching television, the consequences are enormous: the practices of watching and being watched start shaping the way Americans understand themselves.

Because the practice of ‘watching’ is expansive. Exponential. We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. Pretty soon we start to ‘feel’ ourselves feeling, yearn to experience ‘experiences’. And that American subspecies into fiction writing starts writing more and more about...<sup>51</sup>

Wallace’s claim, then, is that the emerging metafiction of the 1960s was deeply indebted to the televisual culture from which it emerged, and, while initially radical, less subversive than it may have claimed: ‘less a “response to” televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV’.<sup>52</sup> By 1990, Wallace argues that this circle of influence has ‘closed and come spiral’: that TV has appropriated the reflexivity of metafiction, and so consequently (and disastrously), ‘television’s power to jettison connection and castrate protest [is] fueled by the very ironic postmodern self-consciousness it had first helped fashion’.<sup>53</sup> Postmodern irony, Wallace argues, has been instrumental in consolidating television’s ‘six-hour hold on my generation’s *cojones*’ through a skilful handling of the ‘tension in the Audience between what we do want and what we think we ought to want’, by packaging reassuring familiarity in novel

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49 ‘E Unibus Pluram’, p. 30

50 Ibid., p. 33

51 Ibid., p. 34

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., p. 35

knowingness.<sup>54</sup> By way of example, Wallace refers to advertisements for popular 1980s sitcom *Alf*, in which

the fat, cynical, gloriously decadent puppet (so much like Snoopy, like Garfield, like Bart, like Butt-Head) [advises] me to ‘Eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV.’ His pitch is an ironic permission-slip to do what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position, a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape, reassurance. The cycle is self-nourishing.<sup>55</sup>

Such pre-emptive admission of the passivity television encourages renders it strangely invulnerable to criticism. If you want to critique television, a puppet alien just beat you to it. As such, it

has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism that television requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours per day.<sup>56</sup>

Demonstrating such neutralization at work, Wallace discusses the contemporary (at the time of writing) literary trend of Image Fiction, in which pop artefacts, TV shows and so on become the subjects, rather than simply referents or symbols, of the fictional work.<sup>57</sup> With roots in postmodern novels such as Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, starring Richard Nixon, Image Fiction could be about ‘a stormy love affair between a boy and a Barbie doll’,<sup>58</sup> as in A. M. Homes’ aforementioned ‘A Real Doll’; or it could feature ‘Sonys as characters in Heideggerian parables’,<sup>59</sup> as in William T. Vollmann’s *The Rainbow Stories*. Crucially, Wallace sees this as an extension of the realist project, an attempt to respond to a reality ‘whose defining boundaries have been deformed by electric signal’,<sup>60</sup> an ambitious act of defamiliarization through a fictional look ‘behind the scenes’ driven by irony and self-consciousness, which in most cases fails, precisely because such ironic, self-conscious, defamiliarizing strategies have long since been adapted by television itself.<sup>61</sup>

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54 Ibid., p. 41

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 50

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., p. 51

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., p. 52

While writing on literary postmodernism often tends to set up a dichotomous model of naïve, classic realism vs. knowing, reflexive postmodernism,<sup>62</sup> there are compelling reasons to consider the two modes as existing on a continuum (the reflexivity of realism has been thoroughly discussed in previous chapters), hinted at by Wallace in the quote above, and developed in greater detail by Cecelia Tichi. Recalling her conception of literary modernism as formally inspired by the emerging machine technology of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, which should be paired with a simultaneous recalling of Furst's stress on realism's indebtedness to the emerging camera technology of the mid-nineteenth century, Tichi draws out the influence of television on young fiction writers of the 1980s, writers with no recollection of the pre-television era (precisely the generation of writers to which Wallace, Homes, Franzen, and Powers belong). The move away from older notions of 'symmetry and proportion',<sup>63</sup> away from clearly defined beginnings, middles and endings as criteria for successful narrative, towards a narrative logic characterised by an open-ended, continuous quality, is not a move away from realist intent. Rather, it embodies 'a new relation between the individual and the world, a relation which TV structures'.<sup>64</sup> When the average American watches six hours of TV per day, that is a large portion of said average American's lived experience. The proliferation of televisual images fired at the viewer with no hierarchical organisation – those six hours may offer nature documentary, news, sitcoms, advertisements, political commentary and costume drama – would encourage a different approach to representation than was encouraged by the birth of the daguerreotype. This does not necessarily render the different approaches antithetical. Both modes are responses to dizzying technological change directly affecting the realm of the visual.

If TV structures a new relationship between individual and the world as increasingly fragmented and flowing, Tichi also argues for a new emphasis on the tentative and the provisional as means of maintaining integrity in this new, televisual reality.<sup>65</sup> A refusal of firm stances is a mode of resistance against the seductive flurry

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62 E.g. Barth's 'The Literature of Exhaustion', Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction*, Natoli's *A Primer for Postmodernity*, Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice*.

63 'Television and Recent American Fiction', p. 121

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., p. 127

of images, a refusal to be sucked in. To illustrate her point, Tichi refers to that well known champion of Yates, Richard Ford, and his novel *The Sportswriter* as an effort to create a ‘fiction of TV consciousness’.<sup>66</sup> Her argument inadvertently links Ford to Yates in a manner entirely appropriate to the conceptual thrust of this thesis. Through his early, dirty realist novels *A Piece of My Heart* and *The Ultimate Good Luck*, as well as the trilogy of novels narrated by Frank Bascombe – *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day*, and *The Lay of the Land* – Ford has cemented his position as an American realist, and come to stand as an agent in the revitalisation of realism in late twentieth century American fiction as outlined by Rebein. Interestingly in this light, it is the indeterminacy of Frank Bascombe’s narration Tichi scrutinises. Frank’s recollections are often vague, occasionally on purpose:<sup>67</sup>

‘What was our life like? I almost don’t remember now. Though I remember *it*, the space of time it occupied. And I remember it fondly. [...] [My] father had some work that involved plating ships with steel at the Ingalls ship-building company, for the Navy [...]. The year before that they had been in Cicero, doing what I’m not really sure. [...] I don’t even remember where I wanted to go, except it probably wasn’t there. [...]’<sup>68</sup>

Like Yates’ work, Ford’s is strongly representational, and in the Frank Bascombe trilogy he displays a traditional realist commitment to the portrayal of middle-class everyday life: suburbia, work, consumption, relationships and divorces. Yet the deliberate vagueness here should also be seen as evidence of Yates’ influence. Recall the ending to the short story ‘Builders’ as discussed in chapter two, with its refusal of notions of mastery, its string of qualifiers. In their shared emphasis on the tentative and provisional, both writers combine a representational impulse with a sense of uncertainty that owes its particular pitch to postmodernity.<sup>69</sup>

If Image Fiction, while realist in its intent to capture the realities of the TV age, is ultimately unable to lift the lid on television, as that lid has already been lifted

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66 Ibid.

67 Note the shared name between Bascombe and Frank Wheeler, who is also less than frank in his self-presentation.

68 *The Sportswriter* (New York: Vintage, 1986; repr. London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 7; 21; 22; 25,

69 A claim which should not be taken as a suggestion that uncertainty is a postmodern invention. While the reflexive uncertainty of the realist tradition has been established, this should not detract from the late-twentieth-century particularities of both writers’ work.

by television itself, what is the fiction writer of the television age to do? Another possible response, equally unsatisfactory to Wallace, is to revel in it:

young U.S. writers can ‘resolve’ the problem of being trapped in the televisual aura the same way French poststructuralists ‘resolve’ their hopeless enmeshment in the logos. We can resolve the problem by celebrating it. Transcend feelings of mass-defined angst by genuflecting to them. We can be *reverently ironic*.<sup>70</sup>

He singles out Mark Leyner’s *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* as an example of this kind of literary practice, a book he views as guided by a distinctly televisual logic:

[The] only standard of a particular construct’s quality is its weirdness, incongruity, its ability to stand out from a crowd of other image-constructs and wow some Audience. [...] The book does this by (1) flattering the reader with appeals to his erudite postmodern *weltschmerz* and (2) relentlessly reminding the reader that the author is smart and funny.<sup>71</sup>

This is ‘prose television’, literature entirely absorbed by the market-driven late capitalist machinery, whose challenge to the reader is simply a mocking repetition of the challenge presented by television, with its multiverse of consumer choices and mediated realities: ‘**ABSORB ME – PROVE YOU’RE CONSUMER ENOUGH**’.<sup>72</sup>

‘E Pluribus Unam’ sets out to perform a similar task to John Barth’s aforementioned essay ‘The Literature of Exhaustion’: highlighting the exhaustion of a certain form of literary practice, and by extension calling for a new approach. Where Barth’s essay hones in on novels written in the classically realist mode, for the patricidal Wallace it is precisely the literary postmodernism of Barth et al which has reached a point of exhaustion, a point he would reiterate in both a lengthy interview with *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (cited above), and in fictional form in *Girl with Curious Hair*’s concluding story, ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way’. Before looking at these reiterations, it is important to note what new form of literature Wallace was calling for, what guiding principles should inform fiction after the guarded detachment of postmodern irony:

The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti-rebels*, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the

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70 ‘E Unibus Pluram’, p. 76, original italics.

71 Ibid., p. 79

72 Ibid., p. 80

childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gap and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how *banal*.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law.<sup>73</sup>

The short story 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', a fictionalised version of the argument presented in 'E Unibus Pluram', can only be described as meta-metafiction: a lengthy dissection of the exhausted form of metafiction, a manifesto for a new kind of literature, and a thinly veiled job application for the role of spokesman for a generation and chief architect of this new form. The index page of *Girl with Curious Hair* reveals that 'Parts of 'Westward [...]'' was written in the margins of John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse' and Cynthia Ozick's 'Usurpation (Other People's Stories)', a formative strategy in Wallace's text. At one point, Wallace's text simply lifts a passage from Cynthia Ozick's story verbatim:

Occasionally a writer will encounter a story that is his, but not his. I mean, by the way, a writer of *stories*, not one of these intelligences that analyse society and culture, but the sort of ignorant and acquisitive being who moons after magical tales. Such a creature knows very little: how to tie a shoelace, when to go to the store for bread, and the exact stab of a story that belongs to him, and to him only.<sup>74</sup>

'Stealing' a text about stealing a story: very knowing, very reflexive. The epigraph is a simultaneously catty and self-deprecating juxtaposition of a statement by Anthony Burgess, concluding that 'only very minor literature aims at apocalypse', and the opening sentence from 'Lost in the Funhouse': 'For whom is the Funhouse fun?'.<sup>75</sup>

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73 Ibid., pp. 81-82

74 In *Girl with Curious Hair*, pp. 231-373 (p. 294); also in *The Collected Short Stories* (London: Weidenfeld & Nelson, 2006; repr. London: Phoenix, 2007), pp. 251-286 (p. 251), original italics. Further references to this story will be given after quotations in the text.

75 Due to matters of space I will not include a comprehensive catalogue of references to Barth's story, but let it be noted that Wallace's epigraph - 'For whom is the Funhouse fun?' - is Barth's opening sentence, and it shows up in various guises throughout 'Westward'. Its most pointed incarnation is as part of an angry poem written on the blackboard in the creative writing classroom by D.L. Eberhardt:

For lovers, the Funhouse is fun.

For phonies, the Funhouse is love.

For a full understanding of the cattiness of this juxtaposition, we should look to the interview Wallace gave to Larry McCaffery, where he stated that ‘the real end’ of metafiction ‘has always been Armageddon. Art’s reflection of itself is terminal’.<sup>76</sup> Placed right next to a quote by a famous metafictionist, then, Burgess’ statement becomes very tart indeed, lending Barth’s question a sharp, inward-facing edge: who, exactly, enjoys this stuff? But the joke is on Wallace too, of course, a fact he was well aware of:

I wanted to get the Armageddon-explosion, the goal metafiction’s always been about, I wanted to get it over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans, whether the transaction was erotic or altruistic or sadistic.<sup>77</sup>

This approach of fighting self-referentiality with self-referentiality ultimately renders the story a metaphor without a literal counterpart – how, exactly, will this project be undertaken? – but it nevertheless remains of interest as a companion piece to ‘E Unibus Pluram’, and as a literary manifesto. As an illustration of the inherently, yet interestingly doomed nature of this enterprise, it is worth noting that this story, designed to destroy metafiction, in fact became an unwitting accomplice in generating *further* metafiction, long after the vogue had passed. John Barth’s 2001 novel, or ‘narrative’, *Coming Soon!!!*, openly references Wallace’s story, much like Wallace’s story references Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*. In Barth’s narrative we meet a novelist and creative writing professor nearing retirement, author of a novel inspired by an old Chesapeake showbarge, just like Barth’s own debut novel, *The Floating Opera*. One of the professor’s students, ‘Hop’ Johnson, is also writing fiction about showboats, allegedly about his experiences working on board a showboat named ‘The Original Floating Opera II’. The professor takes ‘some avuncular interest’ in Hopkins, ‘who in certain ways reminds me (though I never had his chutzpah) of Yours Truly at his age’:

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But *for whom*, the proles grouse,  
Is the Funhouse a house?

Who lives there, when push comes to shove? (‘Westward’, p. 239)

It is a question which haunts Ambrose (which also happens to be the name of Barth’s protagonist), and makes him doubt the Funhouse franchise. Just as Rudy for all his media-literate sense of irony still needs his Xanax in ‘My Appearance’, Ambrose feels uneasy about the possibility that his literature is ultimately barren, uninhabitable.

76 ‘An Interview with David Foster Wallace’, p. 134

77 Ibid., p. 142

What I read, actually, were bits and pieces and ever-changing prospectuses of a draft of Mr. Johnson's shape-shifting 'novel,' earlier than the redone but still-uncompleted version that he'll presumably be submitting herewith as his Writing Sample. Although unmistakably the work of an able apprentice in need of further coaching, those prospectuses and excerpts (lost-and-found computer disks, jokey 'tables of contents' and manic 'casts of characters,' 'orientation sessions' and pseudo-prologues) I found rather audaciously imagined, architecturally and ontologically intriguing (you'll see what I mean), and, on the whole, entertainingly written.<sup>78</sup>

Barth is obviously nodding toward Wallace here, and his absorption of Wallace's patricidal gesture has been identified as a move toward 'postmodern nostalgia', an entropic recycling.<sup>79</sup>

The key players in the discussion of literature provided by 'Westward' are as follows:

**Mark Nechtr:** Creative writing student, loved by all his fellow students. Healthy, a promising archer, feels a great deal of unease about metafiction of the kind written by the programme's writing teacher, Professor Ambrose (see below).

**Drew-Lynn (D.L.) Eberhardt:** wife and fellow student of Mark. Unloved by the remaining student body (Mark himself has married her more out of a wish to do the right thing after impregnating her than out of love, an act of old-fashioned righteousness which not only echoes 'E Unibus Pluram''s concluding call for a literature which does not fear ridicule, but also 'Westward''s concluding story within a story, which I will discuss in more detail below.) Self-proclaimed postmodernist. Her fiction is described as having 'a certain 'Look-Mom-no-hands' quality' ('Westward', p. 234) by Ambrose.

**Professor Ambrose:** Teacher at the East Chesapeake Trade School Writing Program,<sup>80</sup> and author of *Lost in the Funhouse*, a classic of metafiction which, in this story, is in the process of spawning a series of franchised nightclubs, or Funhouses, in cooperation with the McDonald's Corporation – an unsubtle comment on the absorption of metafictional strategy by consumer capitalism.

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78 *Coming Soon!!!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), p. 10

79 Stephen J. Burn, 'The End of Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium', in *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*, ed. by Jay Grosser (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 220-234 (p. 223)

80 Note the Chesapeake connection.

**J.D. Steelritter:** Advertising executive *extraordinaire*, closely involved in the Funhouse franchise. Does not like stories about stories.

Steelritter, while generally embodying the logic of capitalism in his genius for shaping desire through advertising, is granted a short monologue which, while undermined by his own conflation of aesthetic and financial value, still stands as one of the story's most withering put-downs of metafiction, against some stiff competition:

'Do *not* like stories about stories.[...] Because never did and never will make an ad for an ad. Would you? A salesman selling salesmen? Makes no sense. No heart. Bad marriage. No value. [...] Stories are basically like ad campaigns, no? [...] Which they both, in terms of objective, are like getting laid, as I'm sure you know from trade school, Nechtr. [...] 'Let me inside you,' they say. You want to get laid by somebody that keeps saying 'Here I am, laying you?' Yes? No? No. Sure you don't. I sure don't. It's a cold tease. No heart. Cruel. A story ought to lead you to bed with both hands. None of this coy-mistress shit.' (Ibid., p. 330, original italics)

Sales imperative notwithstanding, Steelritter's views are not so different from Mark's, as will be demonstrated.

'Westward', like 'Lost', is largely devoted to a long drive, which in 'Westward''s case never reaches its destination, a deliberate withholding of a conclusion. The goal is a convention for everyone who has ever acted in a McDonald's commercial, all 44,000 of them, which will form the basis for a *new* commercial, an event which, unbeknownst to all but J.D. Steelritter, will also be a curiously unspecified apocalyptic event, literally a commercial to end all commercials, mass murder as advertising's ultimate goal: a literal manifestation of the Armageddon of self-referentiality Wallace talked about in the McCaffery interview. Just as the car winds its way towards a never-reached destination, the story itself is constantly interrupted by narrative digressions under occasionally arch headings: 'BACKGROUND THAT INTRUDES AND LOOMS: LOVERS AND PROPOSITIONS'; 'A REALLY BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION'; 'FINAL INTERRUPTION'; 'I LIED: THREE REASONS WHY THE ABOVE WAS NOT ACTUALLY AN INTERRUPTION, BECAUSE THIS ISN'T THE SORT OF FICTION THAT CAN BE INTERRUPTED, BECAUSE IT'S NOT FICTION, BUT REAL AND TRUE AND *RIGHT NOW*'; 'ACTUALLY PROBABLY NOT THE LAST INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION' (ibid., pp. 233, 264, 331, 334, 346, original

italics); and so on. Mark Nechtr has never acted in a McDonald's commercial, but is travelling by virtue of being married to D.L. Eberhardt, who has, when she was a child. Another former child actor and fellow traveller, Tom Sternberg, embodies the total dominance of television over the culture: he is deformed, to the point where people can rarely stomach to eat in his presence, yet he still desperately wants to be an actor. Their journey is interspersed with a number of observations on literature. Most important for the purposes of this discussion are Mark's ambitions. In a world where metafiction has been absorbed entirely by the culture it set out to critique, has become '*meatfiction*' (*ibid.*, p. 310, original italics), processed and consumed like so many hamburgers, with Chesapeake Trade School (how very prosaic, how utterly commodified literary production has become) feeding creative writing majors to the advertising industry, Mark longs to do something new:

Please don't tell anybody, but Mark Nechtr desires, some distant hard-earned day, to write something that stabs you in the heart. That pierces you, makes you think you're going to die. Maybe it's called metalife. Or metafiction. Or realism. Or gfhrytyu. He doesn't know. He wonders who the hell really cares. (*Ibid.*, pp. 332-333)

Mark is (correctly) perceived as 'a boy hotly cocky enough to think he might someday inherit Ambrose's bald crown and ballpoint scepter, to wish to try and sing to the *next* generation of the very same sad kids' (*ibid.*, p. 348, original italics). He wants to write stories that *love*. 'Westward' concludes with a paraphrased story of his written for the course, complete with comments from Ambrose and the other workshop students, about a young competitive archer named Dave (naturally), whose lover stabs herself to death during an argument. Dave is imprisoned for her murder. He is innocent, yet fatally so: after his lover stabbed herself with his arrow, he deliberately refrained from removing the weapon from her throat, not wanting to get his fingerprints on it and therefore falsely implicating himself.

The epistatic twist of the knife here is that Dave is Not Guilty, yet is at the same time *guilty* of being Not Guilty: his adult fear of the community's interpretation of his prints and shaft has caused him to abandon his arrow, to betray a lover, to violate his own human primal instinct toward honor. How ethically, craftedly clever is this double-bladed twist, Ambrose tells us as we take notes; and how charmingly unfashionable to hear *honor* actually used as a noun, today. (*Ibid.*, p. 360, original italics)

His cellmate, Mark, turns out to be 'horror embodied' (*ibid.*, p. 361), a physically repulsive, hardened criminal who frequently violates Dave in inventively sadistic

ways. Yet his sense of guilt over his failure to intervene in his lover's death, with being 'more concerned with how he is seen than with what he sees', drives him to accept, 'numbly but not passively, his unacceptable confinement' (*ibid.*). His legally dubious prison sentence takes on the nature of penance. Before escaping, Mark threatens to have him killed if he tells anyone where he is going. The prison warden (in the form of *Hawaii Five-0* actor Jack Lord, Image Fiction-style), on the other hand, threatens Dave with withholding protection from the prison population, who will suspect him of telling on Mark regardless, unless he talks. The question, then, which remains unanswered, even to Mark Nechtr himself, is this: '*does Dave rat?*' (*ibid.*, p. 370, original italics) – the type of conundrum Wallace would revisit in 'Octet'. Dave insists that he will not, as his honour – his ability to refuse – is the only thing he has left, the only thing which cannot be taken from him by others. Yet as a character defined by weakness, will he be able to stick to his decision? 'Westward' questions Mark's story's viability: 'Just a tad too long?' (*Ibid.*, 372) Yet its conclusion suggests that, at least as far as 'Westward' is concerned, Mark has succeeded in writing something that *loves*, something that moves beyond its own reflexivity to a world beyond the page: 'Listen to the silence behind the engine's noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It's a love song.'

For whom?

You are loved' (*ibid.*, p. 373, original italics).

### ***Richard Yates on Hollywood***

When considering Yates and Wallace in light of each other, it is important to immediately stress that whatever dialogue takes place between the two bodies of work is not a peaceful one: Wallace employed terms familiar from the introduction of this thesis in referring to 'the big-R tradition' (meaning realism) as 'soothing and conservative',<sup>81</sup> and argued that realism placed the reader immediately in the kind of

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81 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', p. 139

passively spectatorial role encouraged precisely by television, giving the reader a false sense of privileged access to truth and reality.<sup>82</sup>

Yet there are affinities between them, affinities to do with shared concerns (which have formal consequences for both writers), specifically with the ways in which the entirely mediated state of affairs that is American life in the second half of the twentieth century does not simply denote a wealth of entertainment options, but shapes subjectivity, thought, identities. It is in the two writer's conflicted relationship with metafictional strategies their bodies of work intersect; it is in the oscillation between representation and metacommentary we can trace Yates' anticipatory position. Some of Yates' texts that will be discussed here are also discussed at length in other chapters, to different ends.

While his concerns regarding the relationship between popular culture and subjectivity anticipate those of Wallace, they in turn are already emerging from a pre-existing literary preoccupation with Hollywood. There is a rich vein of scepticism towards the romantic myths and conventions of Hollywood running through his work, a strong sense that 'movies are for children'.<sup>83</sup> In *Young Hearts Crying*, Michael Davenport makes an entire gathering laugh on two separate occasions by making the observation that the most frequently uttered line in Hollywood history must be 'Look: I can explain everything' (*Crying*, p. 45). The same novel is similarly dismissive of television: as one of Michael's plays is adapted, the new version is disastrous, with 'dialogue [...] bloated to soap-opera proportions, the pacing [...] lost beyond hope', and the ending 'almost as much of a sell-out as he'd feared' (*ibid.*, pp. 290-291).

Through his somewhat stunted career as a screenwriter in Hollywood, Richard Yates occupies an intermediate space: the parts of his work that deal with the manners and mores of Hollywood, as well as with cinematic convention, emerge from, and self-consciously negotiate, the Hollywood phase of F. Scott Fitzgerald, all the while fusing the aims of realism and postmodernism. His Hollywood writings deliberately

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82 For the sake of fairness and nuance – and Wallace was a stickler for nuance, as I have already mentioned – it must also be pointed out that Wallace immediately qualified this description of realism, arguing that a binary model of realistic vs. unrealistic fiction is a false dichotomy: '[even] the goofiest avant-garde agenda, if it's got integrity, is never, 'Let's eschew all realism,' but more, 'Let's try to countenance and render real aspects of real experiences that have previously been excluded from art' (McCaffery, p.139-140).

83 'Some Very Good Masters'

appropriate lived experience (see also chapter four), yet are simultaneously involved in a constant discussion of convention in a manner resonant with postmodern knowingness towards literary form and pop-cultural convention. The short story ‘Saying Goodbye to Sally’ from *Liars in Love* offers a detailed treatment of the gap between ambition (or hope, or dream) and reality, a theme visited frequently by Yates. Its setting and cast ensure that this particular treatment is informed by the myths offered by Hollywood, both through the films produced there as fictions, and by the opportunities the film industry can offer. The story’s central characters can all be said to attempt a staging of their own particular Hollywood narratives. The story, clearly based on Yates’ own experiences adapting William Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*, charts the relationship between Jack Fields, a novelist commissioned to adapt a novel ‘he greatly admired’ (*Stories*, p. 322) for the screen, and Sally Baldwin, his agent’s secretary. From the beginning, Jack views the relationship privately through the prism of his F. Scott Fitzgerald fixation. Casting himself in the role of Fitzgerald – gifted but troubled, a heavy drinker, potentially ‘a tragic figure’ (*ibid.*, p. 321) – he somewhat condescendingly views Sally as Sheila Graham, Fitzgerald’s final lover, an ‘attractive blonde’ who ‘had spent most of her twenty-eight years getting away from the pinch and poverty of her childhood’.<sup>84</sup> As Andrew Turnbull points out, the two ‘were a curious pair – the broken novelist and the ambitious girl from the slums’.<sup>85</sup> It is revealing of Jack’s arrogance that he, as the author of one underperforming novel, reads his own case as a parallel of that of Fitzgerald’s, who only started working in Hollywood after his career as a novelist had effectively finished, and whose body of work was altogether larger and more greatly acclaimed than his own.<sup>86</sup>

Sally has her own mythology to live up to, of course – as usual, much of the conceptual impact of Yates’ fictions comes from the accumulation. Delusion, vanity, and incomprehension are treated as governing principles of existence, rather than

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84 Andrew Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald* (London: Bodley Head, 1962; repr. London: Vintage, 2004), p. 292.

85 *Ibid.*

86 The story, perhaps coincidentally, contains an eerie, encrypted echo of the Fitzgerald/Graham relationship: Fields ‘had tried for years to prevent anyone from knowing the full extent of his preoccupation with Fitzgerald, though a girl in New York had once uncovered it in a relentless series of teasing, bantering questions that left him with nothing to hide’ (*Stories*, p. 363). For comparison, Turnbull on Sheila Graham: ‘She had invented a story about her origins that included a family background in Chelsea, a finishing school in Paris, and presentation at court by a rich aunt. When the story broke down under Fitzgerald’s relentless questioning, she feared she had lost him, but instead he was touched’ (Turnbull, p. 292).

remediable character flaws of isolated individuals. And Sally's life does share certain characteristics with that of Sheila Graham: an unsuccessful marriage (which at least gave her a new surname to replace Munk, her loathed maiden name); an upbringing in an unnamed industrial town. As a teenager, she had been a supporting actress in a number of B-movies for teenagers until 'she grew too tall for the roles expected of her' (*Stories*, p. 329). It is clear she is invested in certain notions of glamour at odds with her life as a secretary. Living in Beverly Hills in the mansion of Jill, a rich divorcee friend, she says:

I knew the best I could do alone, on my salary, would've been some neat little place out in the Valley, and that's my definition of spiritual suicide. I'd rather eat worms than live in the valley. [...] It's really only one big room but it's about as big as three rooms put together, and it's all bright and sunny and you can see green things all around. I love it. I love going in there after a day at the office and taking off my shoes and sort of dancing around for a minute thinking Wow. Look at me. Gawky Sally What's-her-name from No-place, California. (*Ibid.*, p. 330)

This one, admittedly very nice, rented room is part of an ironically low-budget rags-to-riches fantasy where instead of making it big in Hollywood, Sally is reading novels and summarizing them for her boss, a literary agent who hates reading. The particularly American theme of reinvention is given an appropriate B-movie slant: the young girl moving to the big city, and specifically Los Angeles, in search of her fortune. At this point, consider Wallace's aforementioned assertion in '*E Unibus Pluram*' that the practices of watching and being watched have come to shape American identities. Sally is fully aware of the rich pop-cultural tradition into which she places her narrative: 'Look at me', indeed. Brought up on Hollywood mythology, she is doing her best to play her part; as Wallace put it, experiencing 'experiences'. That the reality does not match the expectations should not come as a surprise at this point of our discussion of Yates. Sally is ultimately aware of the frailty of the Hollywood story she keeps telling herself. When Jack angrily dismisses Jill's mansion as 'a fucking menagerie' that 'couldn't be *anybody's* home' (*ibid.*, p. 344, original italics), she quietly replies that it is the only home she has. That it is as fake as a stage set cannot be helped. And when the time has come for Jack to leave town, having finished his screenplay, she responds bitterly to him complimenting her on her dress: 'Thank you. [...] And I'm glad I've got it. Might be useful in helping me trap the *next* counterfeit F. Scott Fitzgerald who comes stumbling out to Movieland' (*ibid.*, p. 363,

original italics). Even while narrating her own life, she seems bound to a supporting role, repeating the pattern established by her youth in B-movies. Sally's position – and her awareness of it – is exemplary of the kind of synthesising Yates' work performs. On the one hand, Sally is a character very much in the realist, 'round' mode: she is based on a real person (his agent's secretary, Catherine Downing);<sup>87</sup> she is given characteristics both good (perceptiveness) and bad (a propensity for hollow gushing, see below) in order to generate a sense of three-dimensionality; and verisimilitude is achieved through that staple of realism both general and Yatesian, the telling detail (such as her prematurely grey hair). On the other, her character remains a site of pop-cultural artifice, of popular narrative staples knowingly employed. Sally Baldwin, alongside the Wheelers, Bob Prentice (both as soldier and as budding writer), John Givings et al, all stand in anticipation of Wallace's demand for fiction:

Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary US that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be.<sup>88</sup>

In his oscillation between representation and knowing use of convention, Yates draws on the realist tradition while remaining entirely contemporary: Emma Bovary, we recall, is too a canny construct of culture, with her romance novel worldview and vocabulary. Yates' characters frequently and deliberately appear as amalgamations of pop-cultural detritus, shaped entirely by the fraudulent claims and vocabularies of Hollywood, yet they are rendered in sufficient detail to counter any sense of postmodernist depthlessness. If Yates' work fulfils this dual purpose of art outlined by Wallace, as this thesis claims it does, it does not do so in spite of Yates' use of the realist mode. Rather, the duality of realism as mapped in the introduction and chapter one creates one space in which this fulfilment becomes possible. Continuing on the theme of the relationship between the mythology and language of show business and identity, Sally has adopted a number of mannerisms of speech which both Jack and the reader can identify as 'Hollywood jargon' (*Stories*, p. 338) by virtue of their insincerely gushing nature: an over-reliance on adjectives like

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87 *A Tragic Honesty*, p. 277

88 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', p. 131

‘wonderful’, ‘sweet’, and ‘dear’. Emotionally, too, Jack finds her prone to a somewhat theatrical form of empathy: when the wife of Cliff Myers, boss of her friend Ralph – ‘a very dear person’ (*ibid.*, p. 337) – dies of a heart attack, Sally is in tears, even though she had never met the Myers’ before; Jack accuses her of ‘overdoing it a little’ (*ibid.*, p. 341), implying that she is putting on an over-egged performance.

Just like Sally is playing the part of ‘little Sally What’s-her-face’ having come a long way, and Jack is indulging himself by viewing his Hollywood adventure through the prism of Fitzgerald, Carl Oppenheimer, the film director with whom Jack is cooperating, can similarly be read as enacting a fantasy, playing the role of larger-than-life director with some gusto, all the while anxiously courting approval. When he is first introduced, he is described as ‘a dramatic, explosive, determinedly tough-talking man of thirty-two’ (*ibid.*, p. 322). Note the use of the word ‘determinedly’. The initial description is backed up by a brief flash temper at his girlfriend Ellie, in which all these characteristics are made apparent:

‘Ellie, can you check the kitchen and find out what the fuck’s happened to all the bouillon?’

‘Well certainly, my love,’ she said, ‘but I thought it was in the *mornings* that you liked bullshots.’

‘Sometimes yes,’ he told her, straightening up and smiling in a way that suggested exasperation and self-control. ‘Sometimes no. As it happens, I feel like making up a batch of them now. And the point is simply that I’d like to know how the fuck I can make bullshots without any fucking bouillon, you follow me?’ (*Ibid.*, p. 323, original italics)

What will become clear later in the narrative is the self-conscious anxiety with which Oppenheimer negotiates his own position, suggesting an affinity with *Revolutionary Road*’s John Givings. While Givings displays some awareness of what his mental problems represent within a framework of countercultural dissent – the madman as truth-teller/sane person in a sick society – Oppenheimer displays a similar reflexivity surrounding his own artistic achievements and the position they grant him. During an evening with Jack and Sally, he repeatedly, conspicuously asks Sally what she thinks of his films, whether the casting was appropriate, whether ‘it kind of fell apart in the second half’ (*ibid.*, p. 358) and so on. As Sally is the only one there not connected with the film industry, she finds it ‘a bit much’ (*ibid.*), and it is indeed a deceptive gesture. On the surface, it would appear as the director consulting the viewing public,

humblly courting the layperson's approval. Ultimately, however, it simply reinforces the divide between them, as Sally is made doubly aware of her own position outside the film industry, while Oppenheimer self-indulgently reiterates his position as 'a brilliant man' (*ibid.*, p. 357). It is not enough for Oppenheimer simply to *be* a rising star director, he has to – and he knows he has to, and has to show he knows he has to – *act* like one as well. Again, recall the passage by Wallace quoted earlier on the 'exponential', 'expansive' nature of the practice of watching. Inundated with the iconography of showbiz success, the characters that populate 'Saying Goodbye to Sally' anticipate Wallace's assertion that '[pretty] soon we start to 'feel' ourselves feeling'.<sup>89</sup> That Wallace was writing about the results of watching television for six hours a day (the US national average at the time of writing), while Yates' story is concerned with the film industry is of secondary importance. Theirs is a self-consciousness borne out of inhabiting a media-saturated world.

Cliff Myers, the recently widowed "“man of iron”" (*Stories*, p. 341) who becomes Jill's lover mere days after his wife's death, is, like Sally, unconnected to the film industry. Yet like Sally, he, too, clearly interprets himself using the vocabulary and iconography of Hollywood. After Jill has left her lover Woody for Cliff, he amusedly tells Jack, Sally and Jill of an idea for a practical joke: to dress up as a delivery man and hand Woody a tub of roses, the tub being partly covered in industrial-strength glue and so getting permanently stuck to his hands. While Jack and Sally are entirely unamused, it is clear that this idea delights Cliff and Jill largely because it is the kind of prank you would see in some low comedy (Jill's terrible taste is firmly established at this point). The bungled, awkward, excruciatingly unfunny execution of this idea near the end of the story once again emphasises the discrepancy between mediated self-image – in this case Cliff Myers as wickedly charming prankster, perhaps as performed by Dean Martin – and actual projected self, and the self-conscious discomfort that arises from the dawning awareness of said discrepancy:

The truck came to a stop a few yards beneath the place where Woody waited on the terrace and Cliff Myers got out, red-faced, with a self-conscious little smile, into the sunshine. He hurried around to the rear of the truck in his coveralls, which were several sizes too small for him, brought out his glistening metal tub with its massed and wobbling heads of a great many roses, carried it up to Woody Starr, and thrust it into his hands. He appeared to be talking as he did this – seemed, in fact, to have been talking steadily and perhaps mindlessly since his arrival, as though compelled to do so by an unexpected spasm of embarrassment – but once the tub of

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89 'E Unibus Pluram', p. 34

roses was in Woody's possession he was able to stop. He drew himself exaggeratedly straight, touched two fingers to the neat visor of his cap, and made his getaway to the truck in a stiff-legged run that was almost certainly faster and clumsier than he'd planned it to be. (*Ibid.*, pp. 360-361)

### **Disturbing the Peace: *The nervous breakdown as tired lot device***

Through its treatment of cinematic convention, *Disturbing the Peace* stands as Yates' most openly metafictional work, as peripheral characters comment on the plot in a deliberately mocking fashion.<sup>90</sup> Again, it is cliché that forms Yates' target. As the novel revolves around John Wilder's mental illness, and his attempts at representing this illness through the medium of film, his life, and by extension, the novel's main narrative, are repeatedly mocked as Hollywood plotting by numbers, as a string of shop-worn storytelling staples cobbled together with a minimum of effort. Crucially, the metacommentary is disguised and contained, ensuring the text's duality: it is at once metafictional and representational. As such, the novel exists on an unbroken realist continuum while embodying an intensification of realist reflexivity that is shaped by the particular strategies of defamiliarization and subversion that is postmodern metafiction's stock in trade: exposing the mechanics of literary and Hollywood storytelling, questioning their viability, drawing attention to their exhausted state.<sup>91</sup> *Disturbing the Peace* and 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way' both grapple with combining postmodern metafictional strategies with an outward-facing sense of engagement. Where Wallace's approach of fighting fire with fire ultimately backfires (as his 'inclusion' in *Coming Soon!!!* demonstrates), Yates' method of containment is more successful in balancing its dual aims.

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90 The metafictional qualities of the novel have been pointed out by Bailey, although where Bailey reads the novel as standing apart from Yates' other work, my purpose here is to argue for the novel as an intensification of certain tendencies that are a near-constant presence.

91 This cloaking strategy provides another example of Yates' influence on A. M. Homes, whose novel *In a Country of Mothers* simultaneously draws on and mocks generic convention under a veneer of straightforward representation of a central character, Jody, who works in the movie industry. The novel contains knowingly ironic lines such as these, commenting on both Hollywood and the novel itself simultaneously: 'Sometimes Jody thought she was special, not in the usual sense, but like the young women in television movies – girls whose tormented pasts keep them from living normal lives until they meet the good doctor who knows just how to fix them, schizophrenics who end up being only slightly learning-disabled, cripples who become concert pianists' (*In a Country of Mothers* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993; repr. London: Granta, 2006]), p. 29). That 'the good doctor', the psychotherapist Claire Roth, turns out to be dangerously disturbed only adds to the deliberate TV movie quality of the novel.

Firstly, there is the recurring motif of the Christ delusion. During Wilder's stay in Bellevue, fellow inmate Dr. Spivack tells of the hospital's many 'religious nuts' (*Disturbing*, p. 30), including one who 'thinks he's the Second Coming of Christ' (*ibid.*), and who is probably not even alone in thinking so, as 'it's a common psychotic delusion' (*ibid.*, p. 31). While Spivack's purpose here is chiefly to provide prolepsis for Wilder's own, later Christ delusion, he also introduces the sense that this is far from rare, far from original. This sense will become heightened during the filming process (directly preceding Wilder's own first forays into believing he is Jesus), as the actors are arguing over which character could be seen as the Christ figure of the film. Is it Charlie, the strong, gentle head nurse, trying to save the patients? Or is it Klinger, Spivack's fictional counterpart, the crucified Christ frozen in suffering? Julian, the director, immediately punctures the discussion:

'Balls,' Julian said. 'Since when does every movie have to have a Christ figure in it? This is a movie about a madhouse and it's gonna stay that way. If anybody wants to read more into it they're welcome to – that's *their* business. Maybe it's society in microcosm – I might buy that – but I'm not even gonna shove *that* down their throats. Christ's sake, let the story speak for itself.' (*Ibid.*, p. 143)

And so unsurprisingly, Julian does not much care for Wilder's suggestion to include a shot of the deluded man mentioned by Spivack/Klinger: 'If he puts on a show, why don't we see it?' (*Ibid.*, p. 145)<sup>92</sup> While the actors find his suggestion 'marvelous' and 'tremendous' (*ibid.*) – and the novel is making it increasingly clear that these actors are obsequiously pretentious idiots – Julian, unconvinced, goes from calling it 'a little obvious' (*ibid.*) to dismissing it as simply 'cornball' (*ibid.*, p 146). When Pamela suggests the image of a patient trying to crucify himself 'could serve as the objective correlative for the whole-' (*ibid.*), Julian cuts her off mid-sentence: 'Ah, objective correlative my ass' (*ibid.*).<sup>93</sup> While Julian is ultimately outvoted by the cast, the argument is immediately followed by Wilder himself hearing a voice in his head, a

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92 Bear in mind Wilder himself did not see this man during his stay. As such, this is another of his embellishments of the kind discussed in chapter four.

93 As mentioned in the introduction, T. S. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative was a cherished literary device of Yates'. As such, Julian's dismissal of the Christ figure stands as a very Yatesian mockery of poor writing which places the novel's problematisation of representation squarely within the aesthetic parameters already established in earlier works such as *Revolutionary Road* and *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*.

voice which eventually tells him he is the second coming of Christ. This story we are reading about this character? A little obvious. Cornball.<sup>94</sup>

Further subversion of the narrative is found as the couple move to Los Angeles in an effort to sell their finished work. As they meet with Carl Munchin, ‘a kind of gentleman producer’ (*ibid.*, p. 212), his comments regarding their ‘nice little art-house piece’ (*ibid.*, p. 213) both comment on and drive the narrative forward, in a manner similar to the Christ argument both commenting on and triggering Wilder’s second breakdown. ‘[Like] a high-school English teacher’ (*ibid.*), Munchin holds forth, unwittingly parodying Wilder’s life as he outlines his vision for a marketable, feature-length version of their film:

‘Just as a guideline I’d say build him up for another breakdown – a real breakdown – in part two, and then in part three let him have it. Pull out all the stops. Oh, if this were Nineteen Forty-five or Forty-six I’d say play it differently; put him in the hands of a brilliant psychiatrist, let part three be his struggle to a miraculous recovery – but people aren’t buying that stuff anymore. Today’s audience is more sophisticated. I say let him go crazy. Wipe him out.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 214)

The novel, of course, hinges on three breakdowns, the final one indeed wiping Wilder out, leaving him a permanent resident at a mental hospital. As Munchin sets up a meeting with a screenwriter, the ‘tall, fat, nervous’ (*ibid.*, p. 218) Jack Haines performs a similar act of parodic clairvoyance in describing the film’s protagonist:

‘He’s unhappily married and he’s got kids he can’t relate to and he feels trapped. He’s solidly middle class. I don’t know what he does for a living, but let’s say it’s something well paid and essentially meaningless, like advertising. When he gets out of Bellevue he’s scared and lost but he doesn’t know where to turn. Maybe he gets involved with a quack psychoanalyst, that’d give us an opportunity for some humor – black humor – and then he meets a girl.’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 218-219)

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94 A similarly reflexive insistence upon the familiarity and artifice of the plot we are reading is found in *Young Hearts Crying*. After splitting up with Michael Davenport, Lucy Davenport finds herself in a relationship with Jack Halloran, the ambitious director of a theatre group taking up residence nearby. Jack, a self-taught Armenian – Jack Halloran is an assumed name – is openly scornful of Lucy’s privileged background: “My kind of people always feel superior to your kind, you see, because we’ve got the brains and the guts and all you’ve got is the money” (*Crying*, p. 145). As if to hammer this point home, to stress her faded glamour and budding alcoholism, he casts her as Blanche Dubois in a production of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, with himself in the role of Stanley Kowalski. Never more than an amateur actress, she tends to overact, to unwittingly display “hysteria” (*ibid.*, p. 163). The production becomes a knowing commentary on Lucy’s narrative arc: we have seen her kind before.

After unwittingly capturing Wilder's own life, all the way down to the girl, Munchin interrupts, as he 'can't help feeling there's a quality of cliché about everything you've said so far. Unhappy advertising man, gray flannel suit and all that' (*ibid.*, p. 219).<sup>95</sup> Bristling at such accusations, Haines goes on to outline the rest of the plot, which will become the rest of the novel, as well:

'The girl tries to help him. She offers him hope, and for a little while it's a happy affair – that gives us the upbeat flavor we need for the ending of part two; then, zap! In part three everything falls to pieces. He can't handle the hope the girl's given him; he's emotionally tied to the past. [...] He systematically destroys everything that's still bright and promising in his life, including the girl's love, and he sinks into a depression so deep as to be irrevocable. He winds up in an asylum that makes Bellevue look like nothing. And I think you'll see, Carl, when the whole thing's on paper, that there's an inevitability to it. The seeds of self-destruction are there in the man from the start.' (*Ibid.*, pp. 219-220)

Not only does Haines provide a neat synopsis of *Disturbing the Peace*, the 'inevitability', the 'seeds of self-destruction' should be familiar to anyone who has read other novels by Yates. His opening sentences frequently prophesy his characters' inevitable downfall, from the dress rehearsal of *Revolutionary Road* to *The Easter Parade*'s simple statement concerning the Grimes sisters and the unhappy lives they would have. The determinism which characterises all of Yates' work is here simultaneously accurate – it captures John Wilder precisely – and a hackneyed, ready-made narrative device, the shorthand of a jobbing Hollywood hack.

In this text-world, it is only right that characters' darkest, most private thoughts are well-worn cinematic images strung together, as when John Wilder broods over Pamela's sexual history:

Pamela shyly opening those legs for some oily nobleman at a champagne breakfast in the Bois de Bologne; Pamela delirious and clawing the back of some grunting Spanish peasant in dirty straw; Pamela sprawled and breathing 'Te amo' to some Italian racing driver on an Adriatic beach...(*Ibid.*, p. 114)

This is not life, it is soft-core pornography; jealousy taking its visual cues from the lower end of visual entertainment. From peasant to racing driver, these are stock characters, deliberately flat and unreal.

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95 In a pile-up of reflexivity, the 'gray flannel suit' here is an obvious nod to Sloan Wilson's novel, a novel standing in a peculiar relationship to *Revolutionary Road*, as discussed in chapter one.

### **Frank Wheeler: Sitcom dad**

Similar strategies are at work in *Revolutionary Road*. I have discussed elsewhere the drained discourses that make up Yates' first novel, the hollowed out vocabularies with which its characters try and make sense of themselves and the world. As mentioned, television informs Frank and April in ways they would never admit to: Frank may talk freely of Flaubert and Dylan Thomas, but his secret fantasies are just as frequently shaped by sanitised sitcom visions of American life mid-century. For a second time, I wish to draw attention to a passage early in the novel, in which Frank imagines how the Laurel Players' opening night should have panned out. The repetition is deliberate, as the passage warrants a second look through the prism of Wallace's ideas:

The trouble was that all afternoon in the city [...] he had drawn strength from a mental projection of scenes to unfold tonight: himself rushing home to swing his children laughing in the air, to gulp a cocktail and chatter through an early dinner with his wife; himself driving her to the high school, with her thigh tense and warm under his reassuring hand ('If only I weren't so *nervous*, Frank!'); himself sitting spellbound in pride and then rising to join a thunderous ovation as the curtain fell; himself glowing and disheveled, pushing his way through jubilant backstage crowds to claim her first tearful kiss ('Was it really good, darling? Was it really good?'); and then the two of them, stopping for a drink in the admiring company of Shep and Milly Campbell, holding hands under the table while they talked it all out. (*Road*, p. 13)

As implied by the careful choice of words – mental projection of scenes indeed – Frank's idealised vision of the evening is pure television, the bracketed snippets of imagined dialogue from April a parody of a deferentially happy housewife. Discussing the uses of irony in dismantling illusions, Wallace would evoke the 1950s sitcom *Leave It to Beaver* and its paterfamilias Ward Cleaver:

Irony and cynicism were just what the US hypocrisy of the fifties and the sixties called for. That's what made the early postmodernists great artists. The great thing about irony is that it splits things apart, gets us up above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicities. The virtuous always triumph? Ward Cleaver is the prototypical fifties father? *Sure*.<sup>96</sup>

Like Wallace, Yates is offering a sardonic dismissal of television's image of the American family, all the while demonstrating Frank's internalisation of pop-cultural

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96 'An Interview with David Foster Wallace', p. 147

myths – very much like his postmodernist contemporaries.<sup>97</sup> From his youthful desire to ride freight trains across America to the above daydream, Frank's identity is largely shaped by sentimental, popular narratives. Where his sources are more clearly highbrow – Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, Jean Paul Sartre – only their most sophomorically romantic aspects are emphasised in order to feed Frank's ego: the countess on the balcony, the tough young soldier in Europe, the cigarette-wielding Left Bank cafe philosopher.

A fruitful way of considering Yates' engagement with the televisual (and the cinematic) versus that of postmodernists such as Coover (see n. 97) may be found in evoking Robert Rebein's distinction between two incompatible positions adopted by modernism and postmodernism. In Rebein's argument, modernism adopts a 'heroic stance', displaying 'faith in the imagination's ability to create order out of chaos'. Conversely, postmodernism's stance is 'essentially antiheroic' in its 'loss of such faith and lapse into irony and language games'.<sup>98</sup> If we recall the duality of realism as argued by Furst, and the problems facing the Flaubertian realist as outlined by Peter Brooks, we may consider Yates' version of realism as embodying a strange, dual stance, both heroic and antiheroic. As I have argued, his realism is one in which fundamental elements of literary realism are subjected to entropic processes: recall the drained discourses of the everyday in chapter one, and the recasting of writing-as-work into writing-as-hack-work in chapter three. These processes both draw attention to Yates' ties with the realist tradition, and to his commitment to this tradition's continued development. But if this emphasis on exhaustion resonates with Barth's famous argument, and as such in part suggests antiheroic capitulation, his work remains simultaneously heroic in its continued effort to perform its work in the face of increasingly hostile conditions. The everyday language may have been drained of

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97 Consider Robert Coover's 'The Babysitter', for example, from *Pricksongs and Descants* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969; repr. London: Picador, 1973), pp. 165–193. Consider its deliberately two-dimensional suburban family, its blurred boundaries between television and reality as detailed descriptions of shows bleed into the narrative of the babysitter; with the remote control-style flicking between contradictory narratives without a hierarchy of plausibility (cf. Tichi's argument regarding television's influence on American fiction). While the distinction between reality and televisual fantasy is upheld more rigidly in *Revolutionary Road*, there is a shared concern with contamination in the two texts; a fear of the self being usurped which is inseparable from the material and cultural conditions of American post-war life: '[the] important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were' (*Road*, p. 20). The irony being, of course, that Frank already *has* been contaminated, does *not* remember who he is.

98 *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists*, p. 15

meaning, but he kept using it. The role of the writer may have been debased, but he kept writing. American reality may indeed have taken on an unreal quality, as Roth argued, but Yates kept treating it like it remained real nonetheless.

## **Conclusion**

Towards the end of *Young Hearts Crying*, we find the following exchange between Lucy Davenport – amateur painter, actress, and writer – and her ex-husband Michael:

“Fuck art,” she said. “I mean really, Michael. Fuck art, okay? Isn’t it funny how we’ve gone chasing after it all our lives? Dying to be close to anyone who seemed to understand it, as if that could possibly help; never stopping to wonder if it might be hopelessly beyond us all the way – or even if it might not exist? Because there’s an interesting proposition for you: what if it doesn’t exist?”

He thought it over, or rather made a grave little show of pretending to think it over, holding his own drink firmly on the table.

“Well, no, I’m sorry, dear,” he began, knowing at once that the “dear” should have been edited out of the sentence. “I can’t go along with you on that one. If I ever thought it didn’t exist I think I’d – I don’t know. Blow my brains out, or something.”

“No you wouldn’t,” she told him, putting her glass down again. “You might even relax for the first time in your life. You might quit smoking.” (Crying, p. 419)

Even within the context of a Richard Yates novel, this final note is a particularly disappointed, heartbroken one. That Lucy, who has spent years dabbling without success – all the while seeking out ‘exceptional’, ‘enchanted’ (*ibid.*, p. 26) friends and lovers – feels let down, has the same air of inevitability Yates would cultivate while designing his characters’ many disappointments. That Michael, the initially promising, but underperforming poet is unable to disagree convincingly only heightens the sense that this is the work of a writer whose career did not pan out as planned, whose promise was not fulfilled, and who was facing the very real possibility that his work would soon be entirely forgotten.

The last decade has shown a continuous move toward disproving his fears. As alluded to in chapter five, the rediscovery of Richard Yates has now reached industrial proportions. His books are reprinted in ever more visually appealing paperback editions (such as the current Vintage crop, their cover illustrations evoking the American 1950s through the power of kitsch). Alongside the high profile cinematic adaptation of *Revolutionary Road* appeared any number of high profile reappraisals: in the *Guardian*, Nick Laird questioned the adaptation’s viability, due to the novel’s

‘articulation of thought’ being ‘so precise, so acutely layered and full’.<sup>1</sup> James Wood hailed the novel as ‘both traditional and radical’.<sup>2</sup> Traditional in its sense of craftsmanship – ‘The book’s form is a solid delight of symmetry and repetition’; radical in its subtle reflexivity – ‘a novel all about artifice, and thus about its own artifice’.<sup>3</sup> Kate Charlton-Jones, herself writing a PhD thesis on Richard Yates at the University of Essex, presented readers of the *Times* with an interview with his daughters, highlighting the autobiographical nature of his work yet simultaneously stressing its fictionality, quoting his daughter Sharon on April Wheeler’s resemblance to Yates’ first wife, Sheila Bryant:

‘The April character resembles my mother so much in her mannerisms, in the way she mows the lawn when she was mad at him. But you know it’s not their story at all. It resembles them, but it’s not really a memoir’.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Charles Moore used the opportunity to ask ‘Why are creative people so down on the suburbs?’,<sup>5</sup> admittedly granting the novel a greater deal of sophistication on this subject than its cinematic counterpart. While a number of familiar trigger words appear and reappear in these widely circulated articles – realism, Flaubert, suburbia, alcohol, tragedy, and so on – it is possible to detect certain clues to how Yates is read now, and how he will be read in the future. That the autobiographical angle will continue to be exploited in the wider literary marketplace seems inevitable; focus on authorial intention and biography may long have been deemed suspect within academia,<sup>6</sup> but for the reading public authors’ lives have remained of interest,

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1 ‘Unhappily Ever After’, *Guardian* 17 January 2009, accessed online at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/jan/17/revolutionary-road-richard-yates>> [last accessed 18 October 2009]

2 ‘Like Men Betrayed’, *New Yorker* 18 December 2008, accessed online at <[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/12/15/081215crbo\\_books\\_wood?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/12/15/081215crbo_books_wood?currentPage=all)> [last accessed 18 October 2009]

3 Ibid.

4 ‘Living on Revolutionary Road’, *Times* 24 January 2009, accessed online at <[http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/film/article5573136.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article5573136.ece)> [last accessed 19 October 2009]

5 ‘Revolutionary Road: It’s just snobbery to say the suburbs lack passion’, *Daily Telegraph* 26 January 2009, accessed online at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/charlesmoore/4348788/Revolutionary-Road-Its-just-snobbery-to-say-the-suburbs-lack-passion.html>> [last accessed 19 October 2009]

6 Although, it must be noted, this stance of suspicion has itself not been without its detractors. See, for example, Wayne C. Booth, ‘Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?’, in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2005), pp. 75–88; *Death and Resurrection of the Author?*, ed. by William Irwin (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2002); Sean

especially those as full of poignancy, heartbreak and alcohol as Yates'. James Wood's sophisticated review of *Revolutionary Road* offers a serious engagement with the formal aspects of Yates' work, otherwise too often simply labelled 'realism' and left at that. The relative paucity of academic writing on Yates (at least so far) has made it difficult to identify separate schools of thought regarding his work and his position within American literature. It is my sincere belief and hope that this will change, that his work will become a permanent feature of reading lists in English departments everywhere, that a ferment of Yates scholarship will emerge, and that this thesis will find its place alongside an eclectic range of approaches embodied in articles, theses, and monographs.

By arguing that Yates fits in today's literary landscape in a way he did not in the 1960s, I am not making a simple claim that his work performs a covert rejection of the 'old-fashioned' realist mode in which he wrote, a rejection that would enable an apologetic re-examination of his work on the terms set by the very same postmodernist writers and critics who respectively overshadowed and ignored him during his career. Such an argument might take the following shape: Yates' work is not naïve, therefore it is not really realism, because all 'classic realism', be it a political speech, an advert for shampoo, *The Sound of Music*, or *Middlemarch*, is defined by its epistemological naivety, its lack of reflexivity surrounding its own artifice, its papering over the contradictions of the way we live by naturalising historical constructs. As Yates' work is highly reflexive, keenly aware of its own limitations as 'things made of words', as it repeatedly exposes contradictions and is far more interested in honing in on the fractures of societal constructs (such as the nuclear family) than in perpetuating their unexamined dominance, it must therefore constitute some kind of break from the realist tradition, an act of fifth columnist sabotage. To reiterate: that is not the claim of this thesis. Conversely, nor does this thesis simply discard the concerns and ideas of postmodernism as invalid: while I would strenuously argue that the model of 'classic realism' that gained such currency among poststructuralist critics remains a caricature when employed as a totalising vision, I will happily concede that such a thing as naïve realism does exist, and that the realist mode may at times indeed serve in a 'soothing' manner (to re-quote

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Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998)

Wallace), presenting a naturalised vision of ‘how things are’. However, this is far from true of all realist texts, and certainly not true of Yates’ work.

Mapping the climactic shifts that have helped create the conditions of Yates’ renewed popularity and influence reveals a widespread re-engagement with the aims and strategies of literary realism, both within academia and among writers (and readers) of literary fiction. By reviewing this re-engagement, it becomes possible to read Yates’ work as an agent of realism’s continued evolution, a realism tackling postmodernity, with all uncertainties and contradictions, head on.

As Peter Brooks makes evident through his sophisticated, radical reading of *Madame Bovary*, ‘linguistic self-doubt’ (to repeat a phrase quoted in chapter one) or a reflexive engagement with language, has been part of literary realism since the mode got its name in the mid-nineteenth century. The writer, like that novel’s heroine, is doomed to a futile struggle to commit acts of creative imagination with a limited, falsifying language; abandoning the struggle would mean ending up like Charles, that dullard with a language “‘flat like a pavement’”.<sup>7</sup> Worse still, the writer could write like Homais, unreflexively, with a firm, yet mistaken conviction of the unassailability of one’s available vocabulary. Yates openly acknowledges the debt to Flaubert, while offering a fully realised vision of how these concerns surrounding linguistic fraudulence and insecurity morphed during the century or so that passed between the publication of *Madame Bovary* and *Revolutionary Road*. Yates’ debut novel displays a profound scepticism towards its own methods, towards the vocabularies with which it was created, and towards the debates with which it engaged. While critics and novelists argued over suburbia as either a corrupting influence or as a refuge from the vicissitudes of the city, *Revolutionary Road* refused to land firmly on one side, opting for a stance of troubling irony and ambiguity instead. The suburban environment is repeatedly mocked and criticised as a contaminating influence, with the novel’s opening chapter offering a catalogue of symptoms of disease: vomiting, a feverish gaze. Simultaneously, the novel never fully embraces the notion that suburbia turned Frank and April into something else; their flaws were fully developed long before they moved there. The novel stages both a critique and a metacritique: a critique of both the suburbs and of popular critiques of the suburbs. The two do not cancel each

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7 Quoted in *Realist Vision*, p. 62

other out; rather, they stand as embodiments of the duality of realism as a mode that is simultaneously insistently representational and openly constructed. The novel is closely engaged with representing 1950s American middle-class life, yet it remains just as closely engaged with pondering the representation itself. This metadimension, then, is not a product of postmodernity, but an integral part of the realist mode that reaches its particular pitch during postmodernity, that draws on the vocabularies, representations, and debates of its own time, thus demonstrating the elasticity and adaptability of the mode in the face of fluctuating material and aesthetic considerations. This adaptability is perhaps best understood in light of the concept of entropy, as introduced in chapter one as a dominant preoccupation of American novelists of the post-war period. Whenever *Revolutionary Road* draws on *Madame Bovary*, which is often, it does so by staging that novel's methods, characters and linguistic preoccupations in a state of advanced deterioration. April invokes Emma in more ways than in their shared, cloistered dissatisfaction: the erotically charged set of gazed-upon fragments that is Emma would feed into the creation of April, but they do not stand in a simple 1:1 relationship. April is a highly elusive object of the gaze, inviting it and withdrawing from view in equal measure. She may look striking on stage, or holding forth holding a cigarette, but she can also take on a quality of total, illegible blankness, even disappear completely. The realist eye for detail, such a governing presence in *Madame Bovary*, remains a shaping force throughout Yates' work, but in April it encounters an insurmountable obstacle, is confronted with its own limitations. The void that is her death suggests a precipice: representation stops here.

The novel's engagement with the vocabularies of the day suggests a similarly entropic process. The corporate jargon of Knox Business Machines is language used up in the service of marketing, words rendered meaningless through their usage within this emerging white-collar world. Crucially, the critical vocabularies available to the 'embattled intellectual underground' that is Frank, April, Shep and Milly is equally spent: their rhetoric of non-conformity entirely hollow, whatever novelists and philosophers they have read now simply fashion accessories, Sartre and Dylan Thomas serving an identical purpose to April's 'too Villagey' (*Road*, p. 48) sandals. Engagement with emerging social and scientific vocabularies has shaped literary realism since the nineteenth century; here, the mockery of the scientific vocabularies

so apparent in *Madame Bovary* is aimed at the privileging of mediocrity encouraged by the corporation and suburbia so derided by William Whyte Jr. The Enlightenment emphasis on scientific fact, given parodic embodiment in Homais' cider research, has been replaced by the cant of the advertising-driven economy of the American 1950s, everything moving towards increased ethereality at the dawn of the digital age.

Yates' particular position within the realist tradition is in part established through his self-conscious evocation of that tradition, most notably, as already established, with Flaubert, but also with later, modernist writers such as Joyce and Hemingway. Through his use of intertextual play in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, Yates creates a realism that is in part its own object of enquiry by drawing attention to generic convention. Intertextual play and the investigation of literary convention are nothing new within realism: such strategies have been employed in order to establish the literariness and superior fidelity to reality of realist texts since the mode took shape, and the practice goes back to the birth of the novel itself, with *Don Quixote* standing as a prototypical example.<sup>8</sup> Where Yates differs from nineteenth-century practitioners of the form like Flaubert, Austen, and Thackeray is in his evocation of the realist tradition itself in order to establish the literariness of his stories, rather than other forms such as the gothic or the romance. As such, the reflexivity of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* does not subvert realism, but self-consciously enacts realism at a later evolutionary stage, simultaneously looking back and insisting on its own contemporariness. A second function of Yates' intertextual play is to perform an investigation of the short story form, the possibilities offered by its spatial and temporal limitations. Drawing attention to the formal particularities of the genre through an explicit manipulation of elements of influential novels, these stories use realist texts to emphasise their own status as short stories, to emphasise their own constructedness.

The sense of entropy is evoked in this collection through the subversive engagement with the structural narrative of Hemingway's short story collection *In Our Time*. That collection's concluding story, 'Big Two-Hearted River', with its narrative of triumphant affirmation in the face of trauma, gives the book a heroic arc. 'Builders', placed at the end of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, playfully dismantles this

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8 'Realist Synthesis in the Nineteenth Century Novel', p. 35

arc while acknowledging Hemingway's influence on the story's budding writer (and recurring Yates character) Bob Prentice. The story is a virtuoso performance, expansive and ambitious, which is involved in a continuous process of undercutting itself, drawing attention to its own flaws, the weaknesses of its protagonist. The heroic Nick Adams has been replaced by an altogether less confident creation, and in its open refusal of mastery, its carefully constructed sense of anticlimax, the story perfectly embodies Yates' anxiety of influence, his idiosyncratic grappling with his forebears. As such, it also illustrates the dually heroic and antiheroic stance of his work, its dogged determination in the face of overwhelming obstacles, its simultaneous self-affirmation and self-effacement.

Like Hemingway, Yates oscillates between Europe and America in his concerns, both formal and thematic. The romantic dream of Europe, be it in the shape of London, Paris or the French Riviera, that informs so many of his fictions – *Revolutionary Road*, 'Regards at Home', 'A Compassionate Leave', 'A Really Good Jazz Piano' – always displays some evidence of having gone sour, the glamour of Hemingway and Joyce abroad having long since given way to seediness and isolation. The budding American writer in Europe – in fact, the role of the writer more generally – is subject to the entropic processes seen elsewhere in Yates' work. The emergence of American realism in the late nineteenth century coincided with a new professionalization of the writer: 'the man of letters as a man of business', in the words of Howells. This turn functioned at once to ensure middle-class respectability and a secure masculine identity for the male writer, refashioned far away from the feminised parlour or from the realm of aristocratic 'men of letters' who did not need to work for a living. While this turn was fuelled by a great deal of anxiety around the imaginative, solitary work of creative writing, it was also fuelled by a dynamic optimism, a sense that the writer could go out in the world, report on it, make things happen. Realism as a mode was to be free of aestheticist concerns for style, 'preening and prettifying' (to re-quote Howells again). This was to be a form of literature written in a manly way, with a manly sense of utility. Both constructs – the writer as professional and realism as masculinist discourse – come under intense, at times subversive scrutiny in Yates' work. When it comes to style, his prose embodies a particular duality, in keeping with the conception of realism presented by this thesis. On the one hand, it is characterised by the extreme care taken in its composition, the

pacing, symmetry and economy of words evidence of a Flaubertian sense of aesthetic purity reached through endless hours of labour. On the other, the maturing of his style during his apprentice period as a short story writer saw a move away from conspicuous aesthetic strategies such as striking lyricism or lengthy monologues written in the vernacular, the better to flaunt the writer's ear for everyday speech. His style is at once idiosyncratic – it is always clear from the opening page, the opening paragraph, who the writer is – and deliberately plain. As such, it resonates both with Flaubert and Howells, two writers with seemingly opposing approaches to writing. Meanwhile, the writer as a recurring figure throughout Yates' work may be someone who makes his living from writing, but he is far from the skilled professional envisioned in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the writer is frequently a barely competent hack plugging away in a trade journal or some other unglamorous location, with a lacking command of his language, no professional pride, no social impact. When the writer is a poet, novelist or screenwriter, he is always underperforming, like Michael Davenport, whose not entirely convincing defense of art stands at the beginning of this conclusion.

The anxiously vigorous masculinity that helped shape American realism is a spent force in Yates' work, a point made equally clear in his writing on war as in his writing on work. The all-male environment of war becomes a site of investigation of values associated with masculinity, such as camaraderie and courage. Invariably, such values are held up as illusory or entirely absent, expectations created by Hollywood myth-making dashed on the rocks of disillusionment. War becomes another site of grappling with Hemingway's influence, as his wounded heroes are parodically evoked in the shape of Yates' recurring alter ego, Bob Prentice. The enforced impotence of *The Sun Also Rises* is recast as adolescent cowardice in the face of sex in 'A Compassionate Leave', while the heroic wound of *A Farewell to Arms* finds its lesser echo in *A Special Providence*. Much like the subversion of the triumphant arc of Nick Adams in 'Builders' contributes to that story's success, the frailty of Yates' war protagonists lend them their integrity as fictional characters through their deliberate deviation from their forebears. Through his exposure of the disavowals and contradictions of homosocial relationships, Yates highlights the same disavowals and

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<sup>9</sup> With the exception of Emily Grimes, notably another admitted alter ego of his, all Yates' writers are men.

contradictions in American realism itself, while remaining within its stylistic parameters. As such, his portrayals of all-male environments demonstrate realism's capacity for reflexivity, its potential for self-subversion.

Yates drew his material from lived experience: his childhood, family relationships, marriages, and writing career (including the various teaching jobs he held at creative writing programmes across the country) would all reappear in his work, represented at various degrees of encryption. This autobiographical impulse invites fruitful discussion regarding the relationship between reality and realism. The generic slipperiness of autobiography allows for a reading of his novels in light of biographical fact without lapsing into speculation around authorial intention. Gerard Genette's argument for the viability of dual readings of literary texts (in his example Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*) as both fiction and autobiography feeds into the duality of realism as advocated in this thesis. A fictional narrative may be factually correct, yet whatever metaphorical significance it may possess is derived from its fictional status, not its rootedness in material reality: in the world, a rainy day is just a rainy day. In a fictional text, it might suggest sadness, or it might evoke the biblical flood. In its open manipulation of biographical material, Yates' work draws attention to its own status as fiction, and stages the creative psychological work that goes into negotiating lived experience. The recycling of motifs, events and characters throughout his novels and short stories highlights their fictionality while inviting a reading along biographical lines in their obsessive circling of a 'half-acre of pain', to re-quote Robert Towers. By creating contradictory versions of events, and by creating differing, even contradictory versions of the same characters, Yates insists on the malleability of lived experience, on the layered nature of reality. For Yates, a fictional creation can contain truths that historical fact does not. In its repeated insistence on this point, his realism never approaches the unreflexive or naïve, never claims a documentary approach. Rather, this is a realism that fully acknowledges the role played by psychological processes in constructing reality, and the importance of art as an intermediate space in which adults may maintain the need, present since infancy, to negotiate reality through illusion. The duality of realism ensures the mode is particularly well suited for this kind of psychological work, as it maintains its integrity as illusion while obviously remaining a construct. The emphasis on detail in realism, and in Yates' work, feeds directly into this notion of literature as a form of

play. Nabokov's call to 'notice and fondle details'<sup>10</sup> highlights the active role of the reader, including the reader of realism, thus suggesting an acute, alert reading process which allows for an enjoyment of illusion that should not be equated with simple acquiescence or submission in the face of the text, such as Natoli's caricature of the realist 'mind-set which allows us to think that pictures of the world are not pictures but the world itself'.<sup>11</sup> The detail, then, already established as a fragment (with all that implies about realism's representation of material reality), also functions as a site of play, of active unpacking and meaning-making. Yates' emphasis on the detail, in keeping with realist convention, is an invitation to take part, rather than an attempt to establish a top-down hierarchy in which a particular 'way things are' is represented as naturalised and contradiction-free for the reader's passive consumption.

The widespread discovery of Richard Yates that has taken place in the twenty-first century invites a reconsideration of the widespread linear narrative in which realism is followed and superseded by modernism, which is in turn overtaken by postmodernism.<sup>12</sup> Rather, what his newfound popularity and acclaim indicate is a re-engagement with realist aims and strategies that does not simply collapse into an aesthetic conservatism, but which suggests its own evolution narrative. This re-engagement has taken many forms. There is the proliferation of minority voices – be they ethnic or sexual – for whom exhaustive representation has not thus far posed a serious concern. While significant in and of itself, this particular branch of the revival of realism is perhaps not of great relevance when discussing Yates – dead, white, heterosexual East Coast male that he is. Of particular interest to this thesis is the breakdown of the false dichotomy of realism vs. postmodernism, as seen in the work of writers who did in fact come of age under the influence of literary postmodernists like Barth, Coover and Pynchon. Studying the bodies of work of Richard Powers and Jonathan Franzen, for example, one is struck by the increasing emphasis on representation, on manneristic detail, on interpersonal and familial relationships, an emphasis that coexists with a keen and explicit sense of artifice, and a pronounced engagement with issues of postmodernity: the breakdown of the nuclear family,

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10 See chapter four.

11 See introduction.

12 See introduction.

dizzying technological advances, changing gender roles, environmental concerns, and so on.

In the work of David Foster Wallace, a writer whose formal strategies differ greatly from those of Yates, we nevertheless find resonances in his violent struggle between the meta and the representational, between introspection and engagement. Both writers attempted to engage with material reality through the employment of metafictional strategies, and both writers shared a profound concern for the corrosive impact of Hollywood cinema and television on those living in America in the late twentieth century. For both writers, self-consciousness becomes a kind of curse, a barrier between the ceaselessly self-conscious subject and reality, tainting all stances and statements with a touch of lifeless irony.

Much like Philip Roth did in his much-quoted essay ‘Writing American Fiction’, A. M. Homes finds contemporary reality deeply strange, a surreal landscape characterised by violent shock, constant uncertainty and a disturbing, gaudy, infantilising sheen of consumerism. Her open championing of Yates, and his obvious influence on novels like *Music for Torching*, are revealing of a shift in attitude which enables his work to be lauded for its troubling strangeness, as much as for its keen eye for detail, its sensitive ear for dialogue, or its accomplished sense of craftsmanship overall.

Richard Ford, another vocal champion of Yates (as seen in the quote from his introduction to *Revolutionary Road* that gives this thesis a title), has produced a realism that is acutely attuned to the vicissitudes of its time, and which may be read as a response to the influence of TV on the consciousness, much like Yates responded to what he perceived as the consequences of Hollywood myth-making. Like Yates, Ford is interested in suburbia, in the manners and mores of the middle class. Frank Bascombe, the slippery, vague, ironically named narrator of the trilogy of novels *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day* (1995), and *The Lay of the Land* (2006) presents a narrative of his life characterised by the provisional and tentative, by partially erased memories and withheld clues. It is in this refusal of certainty Ford displays Yates’ influence most fruitfully for this discussion – an appropriation of the epistemological uncertainty that is a near-constant in his fictions, and which forms a significant portion of his aesthetic identity.

Implicit to the governing argument of this thesis rests the claim that Yates is a writer who in various ways complicates attempts at categorisation. He was an unapologetic homophobe who perceptively and meticulously deconstructed homophobia in *A Good School*, then represented it as a relatively unproblematic fact of life in *Young Hearts Crying*. Unconvinced by feminism, he nevertheless wrote *The Easter Parade*, a novel expressing a furious dissatisfaction with the options available to women. Equally unconvinced by Freud, his books explicitly enact mental mechanisms charted by psychoanalytic theory. (They are, of course, also overflowing with the very stuff of psychoanalysis: dominating mothers, absent fathers, and what they do to their children, both by accident and by design.) He wrote slick short stories for the magazine market, and filled them with tragedy, discomfort and doubt. He wrote a war novel all about his mother. He wrote a coldly ironic, yet profoundly sad novel about an unhappy couple in the suburbs, a novel which also happened to make fun of novels about unhappy couples in the suburbs. He wrote deeply autobiographical fiction that remained steeped in literary history, nakedly confessional and elaborately artificial at the same time. He oscillated between merciless clarity and a troubling murkiness. When describing Richard Yates as a realist, this must not be a reductive gesture, but a statement carrying a full acknowledgement of realism's capacity to embody and enact all these contradictions and more.

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