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Reinventing the Self: The Construction and Consumption of Identity

Within Transatlantic Modernism

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

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2011

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University of California, San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Reinventing the Self: The Construction and Consumption of Identity Within
Transatlantic Modernism

by

Donald Edward Campbell, Jr.

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Michael Davidson, Chair

This dissertation examines four texts drawn from the realist and modernist periods, contemporaneous in many respects with the crucial shifts generally recognized as constitutive of consumer culture. It explores some of the dominant literary figurations of these shifts, and how, even as many authors derided this new

consumer-oriented urban landscape and what was frequently characterized as its manipulative use of idealized images in marketing and advertising, literary production in this era borrowed in a variety of ways from this new spectacular cultural logic in its own creations. More specifically, these chapters explore how conceptualizations of race, gender and class were influenced by new forms of mass production and advertising that coded its products according to a similarly stratified logic. In so doing they focus particularly on issues of specularly in the literature, advertising and popular media of the day, clarifying the sociological landscape of literary that modernism represented a crucial pivot point between high capitalism and its forms of identity based on one's relationship to the system of production, to our present era in which identity is understood to be something grounded more in one's patterns of consumption, and their relationship to our increasingly image-based culture and its investment in "virtual community," as recent phenomena such as YouTube and social networking sites like Facebook and Second Life demonstrate.

Introduction:

[T]he performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests. [. . .] The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing.

(Walter Benjamin; *Illuminations*, 228-9)

He had come on her that morning in a moment of disarray; her face had been pale and altered, and the diminution of her beauty had lent her a poignant charm. *That is how she looks when she is alone!* had been his first thought; and the second was to note in her the change his coming produced. (Edith Wharton; *The House of Mirth*, 82)

Thus the reader of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* discovers the novel's tragic heroine in a rare moment off the clock from her otherwise uninterrupted labor of constructing a public image of herself appropriate to her position as a beautiful, poised and dowryless young woman eager to reclaim a position amongst the highest stratum of Gilded Age New York City. Read alongside the Walter Benjamin's remark on some of the psychological effects of cinema on the viewing public, this fleeting glance behind the carefully composed charm and poise of Lily's public face that reveals the isolated and vulnerable creature within is intended to intimate the rationale organizing the following chapters.

Debates concerning the intersection of modernist literature and nineteenth century urbanization all but unanimously acknowledge the diffuse influence of a field of productive and demographic shifts gathered within the concept of "consumer culture" on the narrative form and themes associated with them. Establishing just what the psychological and sociological effects of these influences are remains, however, a contentious issue. The readings of four texts from the modernist period

that follow focus in particular on a subset of issues relating to the intersection of two interdependent aspects of this era, one demographic and the other technological. On both sides of the Atlantic this was a period characterized by the migration of large populations from agriculture-based economies and cultural forms into the industrializing urban centers as a result of the ongoing enclosure and privatization of formerly common lands. The introduction of lithography, photography and cinema introduced in this era would play an indispensable role in providing new narratives through which Americans of all ethnic and economic backgrounds would struggle to construct meaningful personal life narratives out of their disparate experience.¹

The following chapters examine four texts drawn from the realist and modernist periods, contemporaneous in many respects with the crucial shifts generally recognized as constitutive of consumer culture.² They also explore some of the dominant literary figurations of these shifts, and how, even as many authors derided

¹ “In 1861 the first lithographic poster suddenly appeared on walls here and there around London. It showed the back of a woman in white who was thickly wrapped in a shawl and who, in all haste, had just reached the top of a flight of stairs, where, her head half turned and finger on her lips, she is ever so slightly opening a heavy door to reveal a starry sky” (*The Arcades Project*, 876). This conflation of consumption (in this case Collins’ sensational tale, one of the foundational texts of the detective/mystery novel genre) with a voyeuristic sense of adventure and eroticism in the form of the sexual objectification of a woman arrested in a gesture of invitation is such a familiar aspect of the cultural logic of advertising that has characterized the expansion of consumer culture that it often appears to those who have grown up with it as a given, necessary extension of it. Benjamin’s note on the original appearance of the lithograph in the service of literature reminds us that this association is one that was forged only through the focused efforts of a rapidly evolving advertising industry.

² Though the specific productive and cultural components constituting it continue to be debated, scholarship in recent years agrees on the following as essential elements of such a consumer culture: “a radical division between production and consumption [and the social space devoted to these processes]; the prevalence of standardized merchandise sold in large volume; the ceaseless introduction of new products; widespread reliance on money and credit; and ubiquitous marketing and advertising.” (Williams, 3)

this new consumer-oriented urban landscape and what was frequently characterized as its manipulative use of idealized images in marketing and advertising, literary production in this era borrowed in a variety of ways from this new spectacular cultural logic in its own creations. More specifically, these chapters explore how conceptualizations of race, gender and class were influenced by new forms of mass production and advertising that coded its products according to a similarly stratified logic. In so doing they focus particularly on issues of specularity in the literature, advertising and popular media of the day, clarifying how the sociological landscape of modernism represented a crucial pivot point between high capitalism and its forms of identity based on one's relationship to the system of production, to our present era in which identity is understood to be something grounded more in one's patterns of consumption, and their relationship to our increasingly image-based culture and its fascination with "virtual community," as recent phenomena such as You Tube and social networking sites like Facebook and Second Life demonstrate.

In *The Civilizing Process* (1939) sociologist Norbert Elias examines a process he terms "the hardening of ego boundaries" stemming from an era of increasing socioeconomic interdependence that has continued to accelerate since the early modern period and the consolidation of a globalized commercial market. Through this era, he argues, the subject became a creature of increasing calculation and self reflection, a cognitive shift Elias suggests is underwritten by these broad economic and demographic shifts: "But it is already quite clear how human beings are becoming more complex, and internally split in quite a specific way. Each man, as it were, confronts himself. He 'conceals his passions,' 'disavows his heart,' 'acts

against his feelings. [. . .] Continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one's own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts, become more and more indispensable preconditions of social success" (Elias, 398). The readings of the novels that follow attempt to explore how the process of self-objectification implicit in this process was facilitated by the broadening array of commercial goods and accompanying cultural practices that became available to many consumers in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century.

Each of the texts represents consumer culture from a particular historical moment and a particular subject position within the narrative and the social world it represents, while exploring the shifting nature of the interface between this expanded field of material culture and the particular individual identities whose construction they facilitated. They also offer unusually nuanced dramatizations of their main characters' "imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence" (to borrow Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology) and how a nascent consumer culture figured in this relationship. The first two chapters seek to clarify some of these changes in the construction of identity and the dominant metaphors through which the individual "pictured" itself and its relationship to society at large, arguing that the tendency was increasingly to envision oneself from without, a self-objectifying relationship to identity facilitated by the advertising of the day. The remaining two chapters focus on America in the first three decades of the twentieth century, exploring in particular how popular conceptualizations and representations of gender and "race" were refracted through various regimes of consumption.

Though all these texts are drawn from American and French literature of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the aim of the present analysis is to describe a field of restructurings in the psychic economy of any society at both the subjective and intersubjective levels which virtually any community is likely to undergo in the transition from geographically circumscribed, subsistence-driven modes of production to those larger productive and economic forms characteristic of the modern globalized market. In reading these works alongside each other, this dissertation seeks to establish a deeper continuity which links them by examining their shared preoccupation with a field of anxieties focused around changing, often contentious attitudes towards the meaning and representation of gender, ethnicity and racial identity through these decades. The half-century from 1880 to 1930 is widely regarded as the crucial period of transition from a production to a consumption-based socioeconomic environment in Europe and the United States. It was in this as a period in which mass production, marketing and advertising rapidly came to dominate what had been economies based on domestic production for the home. From a preindustrial putting-out system in which work was contracted by a central agent to subcontractors who completed the work on their own, usually in their own home and based in a system where goods were necessarily sold within a relatively limited distance of their point of production, these decades saw a general shift in which these necessities were increasingly manufactured far afield and distributed through a rapidly evolving integrated global transport system that allowed both raw materials and finished products to be transported anywhere a market for these goods existed.

One paradoxical effect of these new centers of population concentration was to promote what many commentators a specifically urban experience of affective distance and isolation or *anomie* as sociologist Emile Durkheim would term it in his influential study *Suicide* published in 1897. Durkheim was one of a growing number of contemporary social scientists suggesting that the large populations of the industrialized nineteenth century city was incompatible with the biological hard-wiring of the human organism, structured as it was for life in the relatively small populations of archaic clan and tribe-based social forms found in the “primitive” societies such as those that had been recently discovered in Australia and which Durkheim and other social scientists of the day focused much of their work on. The approach of the present set of readings proceeds from the assumption that much of what the latter twentieth century would theorize under the rubrics of “the culture industry” (The Frankfurt School) “the society of the spectacle” (Debord), and of “manufactured consent” (Lippman/Chomsky) can be traced back in many respects to this common historical root—an era in which rapid change in the material foundations of many societies precipitated reconfigurations in the individual’s experience of selfhood. Having begun to grasp both the symbolic and economic potential of the image when coupled with mass reproductive technology, urban environments would continue to organize their visual appearance and built space itself according to a cultural logic founded on image production and consumption. Perhaps the most difficult challenge of the following readings is to establish a historically grounded method with which to interrogate cultural production in this transitional era—what sociologist Michael Taussig has described as “the consumerist

turn” of late nineteenth and early twentieth century developed society—as an index of the sorts of perceptual and cognitive shifts suggested above. In his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” Walter Benjamin writes:

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. The fifth century, with its great shifts of population, saw the birth of the late Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, and there developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a new kind of perception. The scholars of the Viennese school [. . .] did not attempt—and, perhaps saw no way—to show the social transformations expressed by these changes of perception. The conditions for an analogous insight are far more favourable in the present. (*Illuminations*, 222)

The seventy-five years that have passed since Benjamin wrote this essay have seen these social and perceptual transformations continue and, with the innovations of the World Wide Web and the Internet, even accelerate.

The following readings argue that part of this change in perception was provoked by the need to rethink the nature of personal identity and individuality in the face of a productive process and an increasingly standardized selection of mass produced objects that tended to problematize the very possibility of “individuality.” The Ford Company’s automobile assembly line production and Frederick Winslow Taylor’s theories of scientific management powerfully demonstrated capitalism’s tendency to rationalize the production process to the utmost possible degree, reducing it to a gestural syntax that atomized and mechanized the process, positioning the human worker as but one component in a larger productive mechanism. The present readings argue that the simultaneous historical appearance of mass production with

these various visual technologies threatened the possibility of a similar rationalization and implicit alienation at the level of subjectivity itself, and that the tension this threat generated palpably influenced the construction of the texts examined here. Benjamin suggests that “[t]he [film] audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing” (Benjamin, 228-9). Considering this point in terms of the following passage from Theodor Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* provides an opportunity to model some of the unique difficulties, as well as some of the insights to be found in interpreting these particular texts, both composed in and attempting to document certain moments in these formative years of consumer society:

[Mrs. Vance] soon departed and at one o'clock reappeared, stunningly arrayed in a dark blue walking dress and nobby hat to match. Carrie had gotten herself up charmingly enough, but this woman pained her by contrast. She seemed to have so many dainty little things which Carrie had not. [. . .]. Carrie felt that she needed more and better clothes to compare with this woman, and that anyone looking at the two would pick Mrs. Vance for her raiment alone. It was a trying though rather unjust thought, for Carrie had now developed an equally pleasing figure, and had grown in comeliness until she was a thoroughly attractive type of her color of beauty. There was some difference in the clothing of the two, both of quality and age, but this difference was not especially noticeable. It served, however, to augment Carrie's dissatisfaction with her state. (*Sister Carrie*, 368-9)

This passage recapitulates anxieties akin to those that motivate Benjamin’s analysis of a variety of unintended psychic and social consequences stemming from the innovations of photography and cinematography; in particular, that, as a result of the subject’s identification not with the actors within the frame, but with the simultaneously panoptic and voyeuristic gaze of the camera itself, cinema audiences

and, by implication, modern subjectivity in general were increasingly perceiving themselves from without—that is, from an exterior point mimicking the unsentimental and mechanistic gaze of the camera. In the early days of the Third Reich the playwright Bertholt Brecht wrote that “politics is the art of thinking through other people’s heads.” Taken together, the texts examined here suggest that the same might be said of identity within the rise of consumer culture in general. Learning not only to consume, but *how* to consume “correctly” require the cultivation of an attentiveness to the consumption patterns of others, and the semiotics of gender, ethnicity and class that structure these patterns. Advertising within transatlantic modernism served and nurtured this need, as it continues to do over a century later. Even when considered independently of each other, the innovation of film and of the relatively inexpensive mass production of commodities such as Mrs. Vance’s nobby hat or blue walking dress would still appear to possess a considerable capacity to induce substantial social changes, both in the texture of subjectivity and in the material practices of its construction within a given social network. Assessing what the effect of these transformations was in their combined effects requires a critical approach sensitive to the specific terms and figures through which these shifts were represented at all levels of cultural production.

At one level of analysis, then, the text offers a commentary on the mimetic character of human desire modeled in texts such as *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie*, as well as the power of mass production and advertising to channel collective desire into specific products and the racial and class positions they were associated with through design and advertising. Dreiser’s novel, for example, forcefully

demonstrates how, as with so many other newcomers to the city, Carrie had no idea just how much she *could* desire until encountering the theaters, shops, and the many fashionably attired men and women of Chicago. The text is suggestive of how this image-laden urban sphere brought forth by new advertising media utilized to nurture this environment does not simply offer the consumer what he or she wants as much as it shows them *how* to want. These considerations condition all the following readings, uniting them at a deep, historically conditioned level of composition, setting and similarly aesthetic concerns.

But there is clearly another level of analysis called for by this passage, one that interrogates the narrator's position in relation to the reflections being represented. Examined in the light of Benjamin's insights as to the perceptual, subjective changes precipitated by the rise of film, one might be tempted to argue that the most salient aspect of this passage from *Sister Carrie* in terms of mapping the key intersections of modernism, shifts in subjectivity and consumer culture is the narrator's observation that "there was some difference in the clothing of the two, both of quality and age, but this difference was *not especially noticeable*." This is a paradoxical narrative caveat considering that the description of Carrie's reaction to Mrs. Vance's attire unhesitatingly affirms the distinction-yielding power of the latter's dress and deportment. Traditionally it has been the novelist's role to isolate and study these moments of cultural interchange and the ambivalent affective responses they elicit. Here, however, Dreiser gathers up such sociologically revealing moments only to insist upon the folly of such distinction-making perception. Having modeled the inescapability of the process of invidious perception on which invidious consumption

is based, the narrative immediately places a prohibition on it, instructing the reader that such a perception is indicative of the decadent sensibilities cultivated by the excess and license of the modernist-era city. “Look, certainly,” the reader is advised, “but don’t touch” —counsel that models the potent ambivalence with which the growth of consumer culture was regarded.

Coded in the vast majority of the literature, art and advertising of the day as white, educated, and of a comfortably middle to upper class background, late nineteenth century women saw their culturally imposed role as shoppers for the household pathologized as nineteenth century medicine and psychology gendered conditions such as kleptomania and oniomania as inherently feminine conditions. As the key components of a consumer society consolidated their presence in nineteenth century society, literary and scientific texts alike gendered consumption as a feminine role associated with the private / domestic sphere of life as opposed to the putatively masculine realm of labor and the male-gendered public sphere while tacitly privileging factory and other forms of non-domestic labor over the often unquantifiable work required to maintain a household, raise a child, and other domestic forms of labor. Taken together social types from the dandy to the modern day “metrosexual” male suggest the historic variability of the relationship between the representation and performance of gender and the given, historically specific field of material and intellectual culture from which the subject must produce itself.

Swiss psychologist Ernst Bleuler first described oniomania or what is now commonly known as “shopaholism” or compulsive buying in 1915, characterizing it as a feminine disorder with symptoms akin to hysteria. First officially recognized as a

mental disorder in the 1960's, kleptomania is clinically defined as the condition of not being able to resist the urge to steal or hoard things, often of little or no monetary value, and thus distinguishing it from shoplifting *per se* (Bennet, 3). What is essential in this to the present set of readings above and beyond such theories' tendency to code consumption and mass culture more generally as a feminine activity, is kleptomania's manifestation in an unusually clear form of the way that consumption and the abstract concept of possession function as a remedy for a sense of lack that acts as an unconscious source of anxiety and instability in the subject's affective life. As we will see, texts such as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* are implicitly concerned with a new "structure of feeling" asserting itself in transatlantic modernist society in which, even in those cases where one's feudal or early modern counterpart within the social order found itself in a marginally more secure economic situation (which was not the case for many displaced peasants and craftsmen), the affective experience of many in the growing nineteenth century city was of a new field of experiential as well as material desires that yearned to be sated. This was a sense of lack carefully husbanded by the burgeoning advertising and marketing industries which modeled social life as a relationship between consumers predicated on the appropriation of certain consumption patterns as opposed to one which understood the subject as a political actor as well as a consumer. A diverse body of journalists, intellectuals and artists of the day attributed these developments to what they described as a growing difficulty in the individual's efforts to secure a sense of recognition within the unprecedented population concentrations in these new urban environments.

These chapters, then, are in part an introductory attempt to organize a body of concepts and vocabulary with which to explore these processes in which objective social and productive changes engender changes in the “structure of feeling” within specific social groups. Such an attempt would entail in particular clarifying the mediating role that consumption plays between the phenomenological space in which the subject produces itself—including the vast domain of fantasy created in the global advertising industries as well as the actual process of purchase and use of and engagement with the object—and the external sociocultural landscape that this subject must constellate itself within. By looking at these social shifts from four distinctly divergent subject positions in terms of race, gender and class the present set of readings attempt to underscore how potently these categories of identity individuate and overdetermine the experience and behavior of the individual characters.

The organization of the following chapters is mainly temporal, moving from the mid nineteenth century to the early stages of the Great Depression. The first chapter addresses the consolidation of consumer culture as a psychological as well as a material event through a reading of Poe’s “Man of the Crowd.” Chapter two builds on the analyses of Poe’s use of optical and reflective imagery in his short story and its relationship to the development of a consumer consciousness, examining how *The House of Mirth* and other contemporary works such as *Sister Carrie* preoccupied with the issue of urbanization and the increasingly consumption-focused temperament of late nineteenth century society at virtually every level of their composition. The realist and modernist literary project of an aesthetic that privileged “showing” rather

than “telling” In striving for a more verisimilitudinous form of literary representation the Realist school appropriated certain aspects of photography, just as earlier commentators had perceived in the rise of Impressionism a reaction against the encroachments of photography on the production of portraiture and landscapes, which had previously been the exclusive domain of pen and ink artists, painters, and the like. Within the modernist period, the Imagist aesthetic which demanded that emotion and meaning be metonymically reduced to an image that compressed and encapsulated these, and Eliot’s later influential concept of the “objective correlative” are two examples of literary attitudes and concepts that appear to partake of the modernist city’s more immediate, image-based forms of signification. Chapters three and four address the late modernist period, reading Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and George Schuyler’s *Black No More* alongside each other in order to examine the mutually imbricated dynamics of economics and identity, understood here as a system of subjective identifications and investments themselves overdetermined by the cultural and economic circumstances in which they function. As technologies from cosmetic surgery to genetic screening of the physical and mental characteristics of our children increasingly enable us to consume not only products, but identity itself, Schuyler’s novel presciently poses the question: what would happen if a technology were invented that could effectively erase “race”? Tellingly, it is the economic consequences Schuyler focuses on as much as the political and ethical ramifications.

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Chapter One:

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd": The Mental Landscape of Consumer Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century

The epigraph to Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 short story "The Man of the Crowd," from the writings of seventeenth century French author Jean de La Bruyere reads "This great misfortune—not being able to be alone." This chapter reads Poe's short story as an allegory representing the decline of a traditional form of recognition that had predominated in the affective life of smaller, non-urban communities.³ Read alongside Poe's text, this epigraph intimates a form of isolation felt most acutely amidst the teeming masses thronging the streets. "The Man of the Crowd" is valuable as a document of these shifts not least for its prescient representation of some of the effects the nineteenth century's shift towards industrialized forms of mass production produced in the psychic life of the individual and how these translated into new forms of identity construction and social practice.

The anonymity engendered by such crowds was accompanied by the intermingling of genders and ethnicities that earlier configurations of public space had discouraged. Such sights suggested the possibility that class divisions were not the expression of differences of station and class position ordained by God, but the outgrowth of specific historically circumscribed social forms. As a new mode of

³ The term is meant to connote recognition in the philosophical sense, i.e. that one implying the encounter of two unknown subjects, each of whom necessarily desires that their own value and meaning be acknowledged each for itself by the other, as modeled in Hegel's "Dialectic of Lord and Bondsman."

production far less dependent on the raw labor power of human beings and the nuclear family structure that supplied them, the industrializing nineteenth century city, regarded as a social phenomenon, displaced forms of gender identification that had remained relatively stable in their essential character since the early stages of feudalism. This was a model of social life which the industrializing city and these undifferentiated crowds (arguably the real focus of Poe's story) threatened to render obsolescent as the city was reshaped to better serve the needs of capitalism and an integrated global transport system that brought raw materials and producers as well as markets and consumers formerly divided by vast physical distances into communication with one another.

As the privatization and enclosure of common lands displaced those traditionally tied to the land and the cottage industries that preceded industrialization, vast populations migrated towards the cities and lives organized around factory labor. In general terms, the feudal mind of the priest and peasant had pictured their own life and that of the community as taking place within a cosmic framework understood in theological terms. Though the city dweller was not entirely unfamiliar with such a traditional worldview, the more instrumental and alienated relationship to the production process of these new laboring classes was antithetical to such a model. From the first the city has aspired to reflect a man made universe, much as a garden fulfills an idea of a man made nature. Beyond offering an ideal vantage point from which to survey transatlantic culture and history at the dawn of the consumer revolution, then, Poe's short story renders a powerful portrait of the excitement and anxiety that were part and parcel of the modernist city's influence upon the

construction of an urban working class consciousness. Central to the text's representation of the subject's altered relationship to its lived environment is the preeminence of the massed-produced article (in implicit contrast to the presumed intimacy of language and traditional made-to-order goods) both in generating a socially functional identity as well as in interpreting the character of those around one.

"The Man of the Crowd" as a Map of Affects

It is not due to its status as a locus classicus in the study of the rise of consumer culture alone that "The Man of the Crowd" has been selected as the first text to be examined, but more specifically to its intriguing association of a process of commodification and standardization in the sphere of production and consumption with a similar process in the realm of identity and social life. Published in 1840, Poe's tale likewise trenches upon the key themes that these four chapters will focus on, including debates around what some saw as a commodification of personality, the ways in which mass produced goods affected the pursuit and deployment of cultural capital, as well as their elaboration in the discourse around gender and sexuality often mediated through debates on women's rights in marriage and the workplace. Poe's story is one of the earliest published descriptions of a modern urban crowd represented in terms that foreground this new consumer culture. Enconced behind a pane of glass and thus safe from the hubbub outside, the narrator perceives a monstrous anonymity to these passing crowds described as "a tumultuous sea of human heads." The plot revolves around the narrator's fascination and horror with the

countenance of “a decrepit old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age” that inspires a host of associations in the viewer’s mind, “ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice [. . .]”—and so on.

Focusing on the text’s representation of commerce as well as of specular relations and the currents of a specifically urban intersubjectivity they model, Poe’s story performs a prescient evocation of the rise of consumer culture and some of the psychological and social dislocations it would engender in the coming decades. “The Man of the Crowd” is in many ways, as we can see with a century and a half of hindsight, an oracle of daily life on the streets in the adolescence of a globalizing world market. Though Poe’s story precedes the shift of consumer culture from an emergent to a dominant social condition by several decades in America, and somewhat sooner in large cities across the Atlantic, the following reading locates in “The Man of the Crowd” a critical dramatization of what George Simmel writing in 1903 described as a “frightful disproportion” between the expansion of material and intellectual culture in recent decades and the cognitive tools at the individual’s disposal to assimilate this expanded field of cultural production in a way that wouldn’t result in the sort of ruptured, self-alienated subjectivity Simmel and others were diagnosing as one of the fundamental characteristics of turn of the twentieth century life. As with the texts addressed in later chapters, the following essay reads “The Man of the Crowd” as an index of the ways that individual subjectivity and perception adapted themselves in order to negotiate the pervasiveness and flexibility of the commodity form and the new social structures that supported it.

Poe's short story is built around a series of aporias, narrative gaps that fail to close the hermeneutic circuit between signifier and signified, symbol and symbolized within the text. Certainly "The Man of the Crowd" leaves much leeway for critical speculation. What does the narrator intend to connote in concluding, once he is finally able to get a look full in the face of his quarry, that "here is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone" (188)? And how does one read this figure's intensely ambivalent relationship to the crowd, simultaneously attracted and repulsed as he is by it? The obscure crimes the narrator detects in the old man's harrowed countenance and the man of the crowd's apparent inability to secure any sort of meaningful human exchange in all of his perambulations about the city so forcefully foregrounded in the tale ask to be read against the narrator's derisive descriptions of "the host of buyers and sellers" (179), the "busy bazaars" (185) and "thronged marts" (187) of mid-nineteenth century London. These relatively new forms of public space are inhabited by individuals described predominantly in terms of their clothes, and, still more often, the character the narrator reads into these sorts of sartorial identity prostheses. These and similar details related through Poe's story demonstrate a sensitivity to the rapid shift in this era in changing forms of consumption and self-expression, particularly at a time when most production was still conducted on a basis of supply and demand within a local, regionally circumscribed market. "The Man of the Crowd" likewise gives sustained attention to this increase in the general populus's attraction to these places of consumption and entertainment spectacles, one that offers a clue as to the enigmatic "deep crime" that lurks enigmatically in the background of the text.

Fascinated by this elderly man's agonized expression and bearing, the narrator hurriedly departs the coffee house, doggedly tailing him that night, the following day and through to the next morning. During this pursuit, the man of the crowd is apparently driven by a compulsive need to be around the largest gatherings of people the streets and alleys of London offer. Usually these are found in the "marts" and "bazaars," and outside of the theaters where crowds mingle. "At no moment," explains the narrator, "did he see that I watched him" (185), a detail that hearkens back to the story's first lines in which the narrator scrutinizes and categorizes according to "type" the individuals making up the passing crowds from his window in the coffee house, much as a scientist might study cultures under a microscope: "At first [. . .] I looked at the passengers in masses and thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and the expression of countenance" (180). Here the window takes on the qualities of a camera lens, or the lens of the eye itself, transmitting optical data to a nerve center within; once more the narrator is positioned securely outside of the disindividuating, panoptic gaze he embodies.

This preoccupation with specular relations appears at several other crucial points in the story. Paradoxically, the man the narrator pursues is powerfully driven to seek out these crowds in whose absence some intolerable anxiety rises up within him. Yet when the maelstrom becomes sufficiently dense to impede his movement or render him an obstacle to those around him, he again betrays an intense illeaze: "A second turn brought us into a square, brilliantly lighted and overflowing with life. His

chin fell upon his breast, while his eyes rolled wildly from under his knit brows, in every direction, upon those who hemmed him in. [. . .] I was surprised, however, to find, upon his having made the circuit of the square, that he turned and retraced his steps. Still more was I astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times—once nearly detecting me as he came round with a subtle movement;” and a bit later: “[The theater] was about being closed, and the audience were thronging from the doors. I saw the old man gasp as if for breath while he threw himself amid the crowd. [. . .] I observed that he now took the course in which had gone the greater number of the audience [. . .]” (186).

Here the ocular relationship between narrator and protagonist is modeled upon that of a predator to its prey. Recognized as an early innovator of the detective story, in “The Man of the Crowd” Poe suggests how this form was a natural outgrowth of the broadening web of economic relations characteristic of the nineteenth century city, a genre that dramatized the anonymity that predominated in modern urban social relations and the latent curiosity about the “real” identity of these strangers one passed each day on the streets. From a more sociological perspective, Poe’s man of the crowd appears emblematic of a hunger not simply for proximity, but for a form of reciprocal, intersubjective recognition that maddeningly eludes him in his encounters with these urban masses. The narrative tone is derisive not only of what it represents as a herd-like, affected “mass” culture, but of the ambivalent freedom afforded by this new metropolitan social environment. The descriptions of these passersby resonate with the judgment levied upon this new urban freedom put forth in Simmel’s essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) where he writes:

[. . .] the bodily proximity and narrowness of space makes the mental distance only the more visible. It is obviously only the obverse of this freedom if, under certain circumstances, one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd. For here as elsewhere it is by no means necessary that the freedom of man be reflected in his emotional life as comfort. (279, Simmel)

Read alongside each other, Poe and Simmel's texts speak to a growing concern over a body of unintended psychic and social consequences stemming from such broad technological and demographic changes. These chapters are particularly concerned with exploring three interrelated questions: to what degree and in what ways did the volatile admixture of these shifts in the production-distribution-consumption cycle with the global transmission of what had thus far remained relatively discreet cultural forms precipitate changes in the psychological texture of daily life in late nineteenth and early twentieth century life? What specific methods and figures did the dominant literary forms of the day employ in their attempt to document these reconfigurations, and how were they differentially refracted by class, gender and race?

Roughly the first half of Poe's brief tale is focused on describing the crowds that pass just beyond the narrator's window. He is particularly at pains to condemn what he perceives as a variety of unsuccessful attempts to signify these individuals' association with a conception of aristocracy refurbished for use in a rapidly industrializing nineteenth century. These are expressions of identification with certain social forms and "lifestyles" made at the level of bodily adornment and cosmetic manipulation that have long since been deprived of the feudal social structures that once organized their social meaning. At one point the narrator glimpses within a fold of the old man's attire "a diamond and a dagger" (184), a detail that evokes the

increasing proximity and even, at points, intermeshing of social niches within these new urban social ecologies that had traditionally existed in relative isolation from each other.⁴ Passages such as the following demonstrate the narrator's avid transposition of these pedestrians' "habiliments" into indices of some essential identity:

There were many individuals of dashing appearance, whom I easily understood as belonging to the race of swell pick-pockets, with which all great cities are infested. I watched these gentry with much inquisitiveness, and found it difficult to imagine how they should ever be mistaken for gentlemen themselves. Their voluminousness of wristband, with an air of excessive frankness, should betray them at once. (181)

This seemingly compulsive reduction of these individuals to expressions of a type is a phenomenon characteristic of much nineteenth-century writing on such metropolitan masses, one Walter Benjamin notes in his essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century":

Within the man who abandons himself to it, the crowd inspires a sort of drunkenness, one accompanied by very specific illusions: the man flatters himself that, on seeing a passerby swept along by the crowd, he has accurately classified him, seen straight through to the innermost recesses of his soul—all on the basis of his external appearance. (*The Arcades Project*, 21)

The double-edged quality of urban "freedom" is an increasingly characteristic preoccupation of turn of the twentieth century modernism. Writing shortly before World War I, French poet and essayist Paul Valéry reiterates this characterization of

⁴ William Dean Howells recounts a comparable scene in postbellum America. Observing life on the horse-drawn taxis between the suburbs and Boston in 1872 he describes the "intimate associations of velvets and patches," as well as the "obvious contrasts of splendor and shabbiness" that became common in many urban areas in this era. (Howells; *Suburban Sketches*, 105)

modernization as a social system that sees production and technology refine themselves while those they putatively serve regress in their affective being to an atavistic affective state associated with an oppressive sense of social disconnection and atomization:

The inhabitant of the great urban centers reverts to a state of savagery—that is, of isolation. The feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism. Any improvement of this mechanism eliminates certain modes of behavior and emotion. (quoted in W. Benjamin; *Illuminations*, 174)

Valery's remark is indicative of a widely expressed modernist concern that, as social interchanges of all kinds were increasingly mediated through new technologies, such innate, unquantifiable faculties would decay, leaving human society dangerously dependent on external mechanical technologies for its functioning and reproduction. Valid as these fears were and remain, such characterizations of modernity as a centrifugal force that generates an affective distance between people in proportion to the degree of economic interdependence they individually achieve are almost all voiced by men of a class most immediately threatened by these socioeconomic shifts. An educated white male himself, Poe's text seems reluctant to consider the new opportunities for independence this relative anonymity afforded to those disenfranchised groups not inscribed in positions of autonomy such as the narrator enjoys, but falling instead under the scrutiny of this gaze. For many women, immigrants, and other marginalized groups, the anonymous and indiscriminate tenor of life on the streets of the mid nineteenth century city was a welcome respite from

scrutiny, not the sort of threatening assault on a position of socioeconomic privilege manifest in Poe's implicitly white, male narrator.

George Simmel's preoccupation with these divisive forces in his analysis of the psychological effects of urbanization and modernization more generally is characteristic of a broader field of sociological theory from the years preceding World War I. Several years before Simmel's essay was written, Emile Durkheim's analysis of the sociological implications of suicide published in 1897 introduced the concept of "anomie," described as "an erosion, diminution or absence of personal norms, standards or values, and increased states of psychological normlessness. It is a social condition in which norms are weak, conflicting, or absent." The effect of such normlessness is to introduce a pervasive intersubjective, affective distance between individuals as these norms are felt to have grown less binding. "The Man of the Crowd" models a similar lack of recognition between ostensible social peers; the haunted-looking elderly man's character remains undeveloped beyond descriptions of "the absolute idiosyncrasy of [his] expression" just as the narrator's description of the crowd never manages to penetrate the thoughts of the revelers and window-shoppers his pursuit carries him past, but remains at the level of generalized complaints against "men [. . .] who clutched with quivering fingers, as they strode through the crowd, at every object which came within their reach" (183).

Flanerie, Prostitution and the Rise of the Type in Nineteenth Century Urban Identity

"The flaneur seeks refuge in the crowd." (The Arcades Project, 21)

The vast literature on consumer culture would find some of its key touchstones within such new social types (the courtesan, the *flâneur*, the entrepreneur/capitalist, the commercial artisan, etc.) that sprang up around these new spaces. Recognizing that it was the first historical environment to manifest the main characteristics of a consumer-oriented social ethos that would soon come to dominate transatlantic culture, Benjamin focused in *The Arcades Project* on nineteenth century Paris as the seat of commodity culture” much as Marx had framed *Capital* around nineteenth century London as the most advanced instance of industrial capitalism in his own day. Benjamin’s work in this area did much to institute a tradition of writing that privileged the French capital in its modeling of the essential structure of these new consumerist, increasingly spectacular urban environments, a tradition to which the present readings are indebted. This appropriation of Benjamin’s thought is not wholly uncritical, however. Though influenced by his later work, part of the present project is to clarify how these key types and their discursive construction recapitulate the gendered distribution of nineteenth century urban public space. One such instance is in the construction and representation of the *flâneur* as a touchstone of the new urban, consumption-oriented public sphere. This figure and its treatment in twentieth century discussions of consumer culture models the ambivalence these new opportunities for the invention and expression of different identity engendered by these new environments. The persistence of such a reductive criteria d by the of identity expressed in the logic of these types is suggested by the fact that in his writings on the metropolis Benjamin fails at times to acknowledge the powerful erotic and moral ambivalence that gave the prostitute as a type both the fascination and the outrage she

inspired. In a discussion addressing Baudelaire's significance as an emblem of this new modern landscape and consciousness Benjamin reflects on this peripatetic urban species:

Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd. He [. . .] enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Like a roving soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes. (*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, 55).

In this imaging the *flâneur* occupies the hybrid position of predator and parasite, voyeuristically preying upon an unsuspecting host—a curious relationship to characterize as “empathetic” with its connotations of a mutual recognition between social peers. The freedom enjoyed by the *flâneur*, whose wealth, maleness and possession of a substantial store of cultural capital are so synonymous with such liberty as to require no remark, reads more as a constitutive detachment, at once liberating and truncating, in so far as it is only by virtue of his falling outside of the intersubjective circuit that would allow the same sort of reductive, taxonomic “typing” to be exercised upon himself that he maintains this unidirectional and self-enclosed relationship with his social environment. As with Baudelaire's formulation of the *flâneur* a half century before him, Benjamin's account occludes the crucial stipulation that this “incomparable privilege” is based upon this type's extremely liminal relationship to the social environment he moves within, Benjamin's passage, intended to extol the flaneur's poetic ability to divine the heterotopic potentialities within the more promiscuous social dynamics and built spaces characterizing these emerging environments, thus unintentionally suggests how the character of the

flaneur recapitulates the “fundamental break with reality” that distinguished normal from neurotic (i.e. interminable) grieving for Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia.” His influential essay on melancholia as a clinical condition published in 1914. These early formulations of *flanerie* thus occlude such hierarchies of gender and ethnicity-based exclusion underwriting his intersubjective adventures. Culturally coded as a properly male attribute, access to such subjectivity was effectively barred to women through a broad binarization of “instincts” particular to each gender. The careers of those female authors able to make a living at their craft demonstrate the restrictions female authors had to negotiate in order to appropriate some degree of such male-coded forms of agency. By demonstrating their possession and mastery of a body of cultural capital—worldly, as well as textual knowledge, exhibiting a familiarity with the occult spaces of the modern city generally restricted to the male author—such women were able to partially circumvent these restrictions.

The literature surrounding the flaneur can be roughly divided between analyses that read it as reflective of the dominance of a male gaze that structures social space at the level of gender (mutually inflected by class), effectively foreclosing women’s autonomous engagement with these new social ecologies, and another which emphasizes this urban consumer culture as a new social universe characterized by shifting, local and contextual cultural logics where new possibilities for signifying practice threatened to undermine the dominance of such a male gaze. This critical watershed stems from a privileging of the new opportunities for self-direction afforded by these social environments, or, alternatively, on the potential stigma that often still attached to the transgression of these often blurred boundaries between the

domain of respectably middle class “ladies,” or the French *femme honnete* or honorable woman, as opposed to working women of all sorts. The traditional association of “public women” —essentially any woman not of the working class who dared to be seen unattended by some male counterpart in the city—with prostitution raised questions as to whether such women were not, by association, comparable to prostitutes themselves. As both factory and white collar positions opened up for women through the nineteenth century, economic necessity exerted a strong, sustained pressure against the retention of such associations as laboring and middle class women alike increasingly ventured into these new public spaces under terms that public opinion would have formerly judged more harshly. Elizabeth Wilson speaks to this transition, stressing the degree to which the narrative of female confinement to the domestic sphere at this time is belied by the historical record:

Having in many cases almost no 'private sphere' to be confined to, they thronged the streets—this was one of the major threats to bourgeois order—and to read the journalism of the mid and late nineteenth century is to be struck by their *presence* rather than their absence. [. . .]. Prostitution comes to symbolize commodification, mass production and the rise of the masses, all of which phenomena are linked.
(Wilson, 31)

Why does Poe’s exhaustively detailed account of the crowd exclude any mention of women of any class? Undoubtedly they were there. As Mary Poovey explains in her work on the emergence and roles of women within the public urban spaces of nineteenth century England:

With the growth of white-collar occupations for women, there was a need, for example, for eating establishments where women could comfortably go on their own. The lack of these in London had long been felt. In 1852, one observer had noted that working-class women

did frequent public houses—places in which no middle-class person of either sex felt comfortable. By the 1870s guidebooks were beginning to list 'places in London where ladies can conveniently lunch when in town for a day's shopping and unattended by a gentleman. (Poovey, 163)

This being the case, how do we account for such a striking scarcity of women in Poe's text, one all the more perplexing considering how much of the narrative consists of an ongoing description of the people the narrator passes along his sojourn, each efficiently fitted into a limited field of types. Here again the narrator's representation consistently foregrounds what it perceives as a distinction-making binarization of taste secretly structuring these two opposed positions within the social field: "Of the first grade the leading features are long locks and smiles; of the second frogged coats and frowns" (182). One passage alone speaks to the presence of women along the miles of streets and alleys traversed in the text, itself bookended in a longer sentence in which, as in the rest of the text, it is the actions and appearance of men alone who register within the narrator's description :

[. . .] modest girls returning from long and late labor to a cheerless, and shrinking more tearfully than indignantly from the glances of the ruffians, whose direct contact, even, could not be avoided. Women of the town of all kinds and all ages—the unequivocal beauty in the prime of her womanhood, putting one in mind of the statue of Lucian, and the interior filled with filth—the loathsome and utterly lost leper in rags [. . .]—the mere child of immature form, yet, from long association, an adept in the dreadful coquetries of her trade, and burning with a rabid ambition to be ranked the equal of her elders in vice [. . .]. (Poe, 182)

The representations of these women are positioned along a continuum that ascends toward an absolute of vice, morally analogous to "the leper in rags." Like a tainted air dimming the repute of the girl eager to be "ranked the equal of her elders in vice," the

miasmatic morality of the commercialized city casts a shadow over the character of these street women like the soot coating the city walls.

The democratization of consumption made possible through the rise of mass production necessarily resulted in a profound destabilization of the fields of material culture through which individuality and social identity had traditionally been expressed. These chapters are an attempt to make a case for the existence of a pervasive if ill-defined awareness of a threatening gap between an “authentic” and a “performed” modality of identity that the burgeoning advertising and cinema industries were increasingly perceived to be opening up in these decades. The actress and actor were in this sense an expression of the greater affective distance characteristic of urban relations, a distance simultaneously liberating in its granting of a margin of anonymity in which those with sufficient disposable income might consciously construct their identity with the aid of the emerging consumer culture, yet isolating as well in so far as it rendered the experience of a developed affective connection between mutually recognized subjects more unlikely than in a rural or suburban area where, on the contrary, it was more often a sort of social claustrophobia and excess of such proximity that threatened to disturb the interface between individual and community.

Commentators on the city from Baudelaire’s time onwards have seen the commodification of sexuality and the erotic within these new urban environments as one of its central problems and one of its most powerful allegories. Walter Benjamin perceived in the prostitute the irreducibly dual character of the modernizing process, describing this type as “seller and sold in one,” remarking in an essay on Baudelaire

that this poet most responsible for exploring the new psychic terrain introduced by the modernist city “never wrote a poem from the perspective of a prostitute” (Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism, 52). The courtesan and prostitute embodied the ambivalence of the city, where liberty and license appeared inextricably entangled with one another; figures capable of inspiring both desire and panic not only because they applied the logic of market relations to sexuality itself, but because they revealed the lengths many women were willing to go to, and the degree of social stigmatization they were prepared to risk in order to establish an independent identity outside of the traditional nuclear family structure.

Feminist critics have pointed out how Baudelaire and Benjamin share the assumption that womanhood exists within late nineteenth century urban public space as a metonymy of sexuality itself, recapitulating the objectification of femininity characteristic of bourgeois cultural practice of the time from medical science to marketing and advertising. Accurate as this criticism may be, Benjamin’s mapping of the feminine within this social environment as a mobile locus of sexuality should also be read as a critique of the socioeconomic relations that work to produce her as a subject and citizen unable to achieve independence except through this sort of self-commodification. Edith Wharton describes Lily Bart, the tragic heroine of *The House of Mirth*, as “some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (329), an apt image for that plight that left women in Lily’s position with nothing to trade on but their beauty and—something for which there was a far more restricted market—their highly refined charm. Constructed as a keystone and guarantor of male sexual identity within

the Victorian era's model of gender and sexuality, the figure of the chaste woman was in many ways the "sublime object" of this era's cultural machinery. In her willingness to transgress the taboo against the calculated economic use of sexuality in order to at least partially circumvent these structural gender inequities, the prostitute thus represented one of the most threatening sources of anxiety and social instability to dominant contemporary discourse on feminine sexuality:

Could not the prostitutes themselves be seen, ultimately, as the '*flâneuses*' of the nineteenth-century city? Such a suggestion may seem mere romanticism, and no feminist should ever romanticize the prostitute's lot in the way that men have so often done. Certainly, prostitutes, 'women of the streets', never inhabited the streets on the same terms as men. Yet to be a prostitute was not inevitably to be a victim—this notion was, and is, a feminist as well as a male romance of prostitution. (Wilson, 15)

In her essay on late nineteenth century urban women's relationship to *flânerie* Elizabeth Wilson explores the ambivalence generated by the prostitute as constructed in the contemporary literature on the subject, arguing against reading the figure of the prostitute solely as an image of victimization and the commodification of the erotic. On the contrary, Wilson argues it was women's ability to earn their own livelihood through various forms and degrees of selling their sexual attention within the relatively unregulated space of the nineteenth century city, and the prostitute's embodiment of that power, essentially beyond the reach of a hegemonic patriarchal logic, that rendered her such an inflammatory figure. It is on the basis of such logic that debates addressing the problem of prostitution, whether framed as a medical or a moral issue, invariably addressed the supply side of the transaction. Solutions centered on sequestering and surveilling women, leaving possible strategies of

channeling male sexual desire in some more morally satisfactory way unexplored.

Are these discrepancies between textual representation and historical fact a calculated choice of the author, a mere oversight, or can we locate a symptomatic pattern of similarly suggestive moments in the text indicative of a textual repression related to the demographic and economic displacements characteristic of this era? In the introduction to *The Invisibile Flaneuse?* (2006) editors Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough observe of the mid nineteenth century urban public sphere:

[while] the workforce was becoming increasingly feminized, with the massive expansion of a tertiary sector of service labor, the culturally dominant representations of women were decidedly domestic, with a return to idealized images of homemakers and mothers. The city was [represented as] a potential threat to bourgeois femininity—even as lived experience provided examples of a tremendous variety of spatial practices across different genders, classes, and ethnicities. (D'Souza and McDonough, 2)

“The Man of the Crowd”’s reduction of women’s increasing visibility in the work force and on the city streets of the mid-nineteenth century to the brief passage cited earlier is symptomatic of the narrator’s desire to compartmentalize such sites of excessive libido into a compact state that facilitates the process of repression the narrative exercises upon them. Functioning as a sort of prescriptive realism, these asymmetries between text and what historical documents and research reveal to be the actual social terrain are an index of the underlying sense of instability and anxiety stemming from these sudden shifts in social norms which the text struggles to mediate by sublimating this sense of threat onto the more abstract concept of “mass culture.” Chaste and cultivated femininity having traditionally functioned in the west as an emblem of the level of civilization achieved within transatlantic modernism, the

prostitute desublimates sexuality through her appearance in the less rigidly differentiated social spaces of the department stores, arcades and malls. Beneath all the moral and political debate surrounding the prostitute and courtesan, these types were emblematic of a spectacular mediation of the erotic through a sort of interminable visual foreplay embodied in the window displays, advertising and other popular media of the era—a logic that would be pushed to radical extremes in the following century.⁵

“The Man of the Crowd” and Cultural Capital in the Modernist City

At several points Poe’s narrator labors to elaborate a concept of cultural capital that might stand apart from the purely economic basis of social hierarchy he reads into the dress and bearing of the crowds passing by on the sidewalk beyond his coffee house window. The text’s references to “the race of pick-pockets” and “[t]he tribe of clerks” are suggestive of an increasing propensity to conflate the semantic valence of race and ethnicity with that of class as they are perceived by the narrator. These descriptions of an atomized urban populace coursing over the streets with no apparent destination encourage in the reader a conceptualization of these individuals as migrants attempting to cross borders of class and ethnic identity engaged in what are to the narrator’s discriminating gaze failed attempts to pass as members of a more exalted socioeconomic position than they actually occupy. The narrator’s predilection

⁵ It is worth noting in connection with this tendency towards a visual mediation of the erotic in the modernist city that the French term for window shopping translates literally as “window licking.”

for taxonomically categorizing these traits can be read as an early example of the sort of will-to-distinction making sociologists use as a tool to analyze these displacements and their role in reproducing given social forms.

The model put forth in George Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" attributes subjectivity to the individual's relationship with a body of social values symbolically mediated through a host of institutions, objects, and practices which are in turn channeled through the sphere of consumption. This model stresses that it is not mass production *per se* that precipitates the sort of alienated "unhappy consciousness" Hegel modeled in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which the subject is unable to experience recognition in its given social environment, but rather a short-circuiting of these dialectical poles of interiority and externality between which subjectivity structures itself. The result—personified in the compulsively peripatetic protagonist of the tale—recapitulates what Benjamin would later refer to as the "petrified unrest" he argued was an increasingly common characteristic of human psychology within commodity culture. The exploration and attempt to textually represent this process at the register of individual subjectivity and the terms in which the subject "pictured" itself in relation to its social reality functions as an unconscious subtext to Poe's 1840 short story. The man of the crowd's inability to endure even a moment's solitude, when read against a series of interpretive clues scattered through the text, represents a prescient dramatization of the unique dissonance generated between the subject and its social and cultural environment once commodity culture moves from a position of emergence to one of dominance. This reading will draw in particular on Simmel's diagnosis of what he describes as a "frightful disproportion"

that intrudes itself upon a traditional relationship between the “mental life” of the individual and the material and cultural frameworks it is embedded in:

The development of modern culture is characterized by the preponderance of what one may call the 'objective spirit' over the 'subjective spirit.' [. . .] The individual in his intellectual development follows the growth of this [objective] spirit very imperfectly and at an ever increasing distance. If for instance we view the immense culture which for the last hundred years has been embodied in things and in knowledge, in institutions and in comforts, and if we compare all this with the cultural progress of the individual during the same period [. . .] a frightful disproportion in growth between the two becomes evident. (*The Sociology of George Simmel*, 280)

Simmel judges these "immense," abruptly expanded horizons of cultural production, —intimated in Poe’s tale by repeated and pointed reference to the “busy bazaars” (185) and “thronged marts” (187) — as symptomatic of an alienating imbalance between these subjective and objective realms. Concern and at times outrage with the broader social consequences of such a disproportion run in various forms through the work of Marx, Thorstein Veblen, Theodor Adorno, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and other theorists of “spectacular” or “mass” culture and the modes of consumption particular to them. This position tends to regard the ongoing expansion of material culture, both in psychic depth and global scope, as one necessarily representing a loss of agency or authenticity on the part of the subject. Simmel’s model of alienation is therefore particularly useful in this context for its reluctance to stigmatize the commodity and consumption in general as invariably emblematic of such estranged social relations. His model of these relations between the subject and society, and that portion of self-production grounded in the appropriation and consumption of material culture stands closer in influence to Hegel

than to Marx in regarding as necessary a certain degree of alterity in the object world and the means through which it is appropriated by the subject; that it is precisely in this overcoming of a certain highly specific form of Otherness within these external (natural and social) realms that human subjectivity produces itself.

As we have seen, Poe's tale is peppered with allusions to this nascent commodity culture, and its narrator shows a particularly acute sensitivity to the performative function of much of the "habiliments" and other accoutrements of the crowds bustling past the window he is seated before. We are told that he is convalescing after having been ill "for some months," spending the afternoon "poring over advertisements" and "observing the promiscuous company in the room," followed by a pointed description of a new found harmony and self-sufficiency in the character of his own desire: "Merely to breathe was enjoyment; and I derived positive pleasure even from many of the legitimate sources of pain" (Poe, 179). This placid self-sufficiency of the narrator appears in sharp contrast to the shopping "throngs" passing just beyond his box window, and his description of it puts a sustained effort into reducing these bustling pedestrians to a herd-like anonymity:

There was nothing very distinctive about these two large classes beyond what I have noted. Their habiliments belonged to that order which is pointedly termed the decent. They were undoubtedly noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers—the Eupatrids [landowners in ancient Athens] and the common-places of society [. . .] conducting business upon their own responsibility. They did not greatly excite my attention. [. . .] I watched these gentry with much inquisitiveness, and found it difficult to imagine how they should ever be mistaken for gentlemen themselves. Their voluminousness of wristband, with an air of excessive frankness, should betray them at once. (Poe, 180-1)

This insistence that these “common-places of society” fail to “excite the attention” or inspire any sense of empathy within the narrator reiterates the affective divide embodied within the text by the narrator’s position relative to these crowds, one that echoes a similar divide structuring the affective relationship between nobles and commoners in an earlier period. In this way Poe’s narrator represents an attempt to update such outmoded modes of distinction-making for the more porous social hydraulics of an era dominated by mercantilism. Safely cordoned off from the hubbub just outside the window of the coffee house table he occupies, the passage suggests how, though only a few feet separate them physically, there is a vast gulf between them in terms of any affective connection, recapitulating Simmel’s argument, cited earlier, that “the bodily proximity and narrowness of space [in this new consumption-oriented urban sphere] makes the mental distance only the more visible. Interestingly, the narrator seems to revel in this sense of distance, suggesting none of the anomic isolation that Simmel argues to be one of the dominant psychological qualities of the modern urban subject; on the contrary, he seems intent on nothing so much as maintaining this sense of separation.

This unyielding impulse towards distinguishing himself from the faceless crowds bustling past his window serves to align him—and, by association, the reader who registers this work of distinction-making—with what is coded as an authentic upper class, one based not on economic wealth, but on a certain acuity of vision, one that can distinguish between these would be class immigrants committed in the narrator’s mind to a performance of identity based in material display, and another implied class with which these disparaging descriptions implicitly align the narrator,

one based not in material display but in an ideal of “cultural capital.” Making distinctions is the corollary of grouping; by seeing through the false signs of identity in this crowd the narrator implicitly aligns himself with a group that “knows better.”⁶ The narrator’s focus on the performance or mimicry of aristocracy in their dress and demeanour—a performance that the narrative repeatedly denounces in its reference to a social form that had been defunct for at least a century prior to the moment in which the story is set:

The manner of these persons seemed to me an exact facsimile of what had been the perfection of *bon ton* about twelve or eighteen months before. They wore the cast off graces of the gentry—and this, I believe, involves the best definition of the class. [. . .] Theirs was the affectation of respectability—if, indeed, there be an affectation so honorable. (181)

This description models the dovetailing of goods and services (jewelry, clothes, hairstyles, etc.) with the body itself in the narrator’s reading of what are presented as components of an essential identity. The passage suggests how the population concentration as well as the extreme division of labor anonymity characteristic of these industrializing urban environments creates an acute ambivalence as the narrator struggles to reduce these masses of individuals to some “type” that will permit him to position them within a social map in terms of which he can exert his own subjectivity.

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu argues that “the whole language of aesthetics is contained in a fundamental refusal of the facile [and] that pure taste, purely negative in its essence, is based on the disgust that is often called ‘visceral’ [. . .] for everything that is facile. (*Distinction*, 486). In his essay on Leonardo da Vinci English (1869) author Walter Pater offers an aphoristic compression of Bourdieu’s assertion, arguing that “the path to perfection is a series of disgusts.” The following chapter on Huysman’s *A Rebours* attempts to position these formulations of culture as a negative process rooted primarily in a process of exclusion and discrimination as outgrowths of various social factors including the rise of consumer culture.

This subjectivity is characterized in particular by a gaze that, in the narrator's mind, pierces through these performative "affectations" to the essential subject with the penetrating force of an X-ray revealing the skeletal structure within. His need to know possesses a compulsive character that tautologically allows him to base his assessment of these figures in terms of these superficial characteristics which he ostensibly rejects as misleading—the deception the narrator locates in these superficial qualities become themselves the foundation on which he erects his judgment of them.

Poe's narrator's disdain for what he insists are the inauthentic identities of these passersby bears affinities to Veblen's influential critique of what he termed the "brute wealth" of his Gilded Age, a phenomenon that has had profound consequences which Rosalind Williams intimates in her 1982 study of consumer culture: "The essential ambiguity of the civilizing ideal is that it inevitably includes a material component; its potential tragedy is that the material forms can survive and even flourish while the vitality of the ideal withers" (*Dream Worlds*, 24). This "potential tragedy" stems from what Williams suggests is the disarticulation of the possessed / consumed object as a sort of social speech act or *parole* from the social *langue* it has grown out of. Assaying the anxieties and insecurities that attend this disarticulation and how literary theory and practice was shaped by this process will also be a point of focus in this and later chapters' analysis of the social processes fuel the ongoing expansion of mass consumerism, even as the dire political and ecological consequences of this become more ominous.

In establishing himself as the expression of such an ideal subjective locus—"a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other," as James' preface puts it—Poe's narrator simultaneously grounds his sense of entitlement to such a privileged habitus (reinforced by his central positioning at his table behind the lens/window of the coffee house) by means of reading between the lines of the performative strategies of self-presentation of those who pass across his field of view.⁷ His skillful debunking of the wealth-based social hierarchy that organizes his perceptions of the world beyond this window in favor of one grounded more in terms of aesthetics and what Pierre Bourdieu termed "cultural capital" is suggested in the following passage from the latter's book *Distinction* (1979): "The definition of the legitimate means and stakes of struggle is in fact one of the stakes of struggle, and the relative efficacy of the means of controlling the game (the different sorts of capital) is itself at stake, and therefore subject to variations in the course of

⁷ "The habitus is not only a structuring structure which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division of the social classes. Each class condition is defined, simultaneously, by its intrinsic properties and by the relational properties which it derives from its position in the system of class conditions [. . .]" (Pierre Bourdieu; *Distinction*, 170). The concept of habitus links these readings in its effort to clarify how social identity is articulated and expressed through difference. That is, the "individuality" of the subject, whether in matters of dress, speech, comportment, or artistic production, is necessarily the expression of the subject's self-inscription into a system of differential positions within an objective social structure. As we have seen much of the anxiety expressed in the face of the less rigidly partitioned relations between different strata of society in terms of class as well as gender and ethnicity (symbolized in the monstrous loss of individuality implicit in Poe's description of the crowd as a "tumultuous sea of human heads" (180) speaks to a fear that these new social forms predicated on the preeminence of capitalist forms of trade were unraveling what many held to be the natural distinctions which reflected themselves homologically in the economic and racial stratifications of society. Poe's narrator is one of many who adopt a similar sort of panic position in the face of these demographic and economic upheavals that threaten to irreversibly undermine the very worldview from which their dominance derived.

the game” (Bourdieu, 246). It is only when he has established within the text and the mind of the reader the “legitimate means” of this esthetically-dominated assessment of the London street scene before him that the narrator exits the coffee house to be swept up in these masses of pedestrians himself.

Continuing his pursuit of this man whose disturbing expression has so aroused his curiosity, the narrator pursues his quarry to “a busy bazaar [where] he forced his way to and fro, without aim, among the hosts of buyers and sellers” (185). Shortly before arriving at this marketplace the reader is presented with a description of the surrounding environment where “ragged artisans and exhausted laborers of every description, and all full of a noisy and inordinate vivacity which jarred discordantly upon the ear, and gave an aching sensation to the eye” (183). Such passages offer a window onto the lived experience of this transitional period, where changes in production and distribution seem to destabilize not only the existing social forms that rest upon them, but the behavior of the individuals within them. Like bees buzzing aimlessly about their gored hive, “The Man of the Crowd” allegorizes a moment in which the very medium of social discourse and engagement was moving beyond the home, out into the “thronged marts,” theaters and shops of the expanding cities. The narrator describes the man of the crowd “enter[ing] shop after shop, [where he] priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all the objects with a wild and vacant stare” (185). At no time in the short story are we told of its haunted protagonist exchanging one word with another person, despite the crowds of people he mills about amongst, and the apparent longing for some sort of communication with them. Writing almost three decades prior to the publication of *Capital* in 1867, Poe’s short story can be read

as a prescient allegory of what Marx termed “commodity fetishism,” a body of social relations his work diagnosed as specific to market-based societies in which “human beings have human relations with objects and material relations with human beings.” Such moments in “The Man of the Crowd” dramatize the sort of alienating disproportion outlined in Simmel’s essay, where we see a palpably physical relief coming over “the man of the crowd” as he is able to position himself amidst a group of theater goers and thus relieve the acute anxiety that any prolonged solitude precipitates in him: “I saw the old man gasp as if for breath while he threw himself amid the crowd; but I thought that the intense agony of his countenance had, in some measure, abated” (186).

What, then, we might ask in conclusion, is this “deep crime” that is merely alluded to in the final paragraph of Poe’s short story? This reading has stressed Poe’s apparent preoccupation with a dissolution of a form of reciprocity common to other less capitalistic/commodity-based social forms as a means of suggesting that the sort of anonymity and social atomization the text focuses on represent an environment inducing the sort of anomie that motivates such deep crime (understood in Durkheim’s work as itself a sort of critique of a dysfunctional social environment expressed through anti-social violence or even suicide). Poe’s text intimates a powerfully asocial element lurking at the core of this new consumption-oriented society itself. “The Man of the Crowd” could be said to represent in this sense a prescient diagnosis of the direction nineteenth century consumer culture was moving towards, one succinctly expressed in Margaret Thatcher’s frequently cited assertion that, ultimately, “there is no society” beyond a body of material interests and

appetites that bring human beings together in an effort to satisfy these. Written at a transitional point between these two economic forms, Poe's text looks ahead with foreboding to such a society based on market relations and the inviolability of the free market. This chapter has read Poe's short story through the lens of Simmel's "frightful disproportion" in order to demonstrate how a text creates a cognitive space in which to pose questions regarding the relationship of the individual to its community and the different strata on which this relationship takes place. The following chapters build on Benjamin's metaphor of the domestic interior as a "cockpit," using it as a means of clarifying the psychological transformations taking place in these years as immigration into the city and factory life continued to radically reshape industrializing economies.⁸

⁸ As we will see in the chapters that follow, this cockpit analogy is similar to that employed by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process*. Elias examines a process he terms "the hardening of ego boundaries" stemming from an era of increasing socioeconomic interdependence between the height of feudalism and the early modern period. Through this period, he argues, the subject became a creature of increasing calculation and self reflection, a cognitive shift Elias suggests are underwritten by these broad economic and demographic shifts: "But it is already quite clear how human beings are becoming more complex, and internally split in quite a specific way. Each man, as it were, confronts himself. He 'conceals his passions,' 'disavows his heart,' 'acts against his feelings. [. . .]. Continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one's own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts, become more and more indispensable preconditions of social success." (Elias, 398)

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Chapter Two:

Against the Grain and the Democratization of Luxury in the Nineteenth Century

‘It wasn’t all work, of course. Two or three times a week Max would haul up the enormous oil painting that had been presented to her by some Nevada chamber of commerce. And we’d see a movie. Right in her living room. ‘So much nicer than going out,’ she’d say. The plain fact was she was afraid of that world outside, afraid that it would remind her that time had passed. [. . .] I don’t need to tell you who the star was. They were always her pictures. That’s all she wanted to see.’

Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* was published in 1899, as final preparations were made for the opening of the Paris International Exhibition. The book documents what Veblen termed the “conspicuous consumption” of late nineteenth century Gilded Age America, when vast, newly minted industrial fortunes were intermingling with older more established wealth, creating a class tension that texts such as Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth*, as we will see in the following chapter, and Huysmans’ *A Rebours* (*Against the Grain*) both symptomatically perform (Wharton was herself from a staid Hudson River Valley family) and represent. The novels examined in these chapters all address the tensions inhering upon this crucial transitional period from a nation of self-identified producers in the postbellum era to one that, by October 1929 and the outset of the Great Depression, had grown far more aware of and invested in consumption not only as a means of effecting the sort of ostentatious display of individual wealth analyzed in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, but of the new possibilities it offered for creating forms of socially recognized identity grounded in mass produced forms. These possibilities existed more

independently of the narrowly defined luxury modeled by the feudal nobility or the newly dominant merchant middle class's attempt to reproduce it, as in the successful tradesmen's dream of residing in a chateau or *hotel*.

At the World Exhibitions, and particularly that of 1900 in Paris, a new dialect of luxury was being elaborated that encouraged the consumer to experience the purchased item as a sort of prop that would take its rightful place in the purchaser's performance of an ostensibly individual lifestyle. The degree to which this fantastical imaginary aspect of the purchased good would increasingly be collapsed with its immediate use value is likewise a characteristic aspect of these "mass" systems of production and consumption. Advertising and marketing drew upon the insights of psychology to bring unconscious desires to bear upon consumer choice. By the 1930's marketing experts like Ernst Dichter, a psychologist trained in Vienna, were explicitly calling upon the businesses they were employed by to appreciate the power of the unconscious and the efficacy of these symbolic identifications in creating a bond with consumers that would translate into an increase in higher sales and higher customer retention rates. Emil Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* offers a particularly vivid account of the dawn of the era of the great department stores and the unbounded imagination and expense that went into turning these concerns into fairy tale environments where the commodities for sale took on a pseudo-divine character. J.K. Huysmans' novel *Against the Grain* (1884) stands as one of the first literary replies to mass production in its social implications and to the democratization of luxury that this new system of production and increasingly global distribution made possible. Its protagonist's immersion within this world of fragmented, narcissistically self-

reflective symbols functions as an allegory used to explore the new pleasures and pitfalls related to this growing excitement with the cultivation of lifestyles based on certain patterns of consumption.

For Veblen conspicuous consumption involves a wasteful spending grounded in spectacle and focused on an effort to associate oneself with a lifestyle initiated by the aristocracy of an earlier day, forms later appropriated and imitated by an economically and politically rising middle class. *The Theory of the Leisure Class* critiques a socioeconomic structure in which production still conforms to a relatively stable socioeconomic stratification of society, kept in place not only by technological limitations, but by limitations on the frequency and efficiency of pre-steam power modes of travel that imposed more stable and localized forms of consumption. The Paris Exhibition, on the contrary, showcases the triumph of Art Nouveau, *Jugendstil* (literally “young style”) and related forms emerging through these years. Recognized as a “total” style that impacted interior design, architecture, and the decorative and fine arts, Art Nouveau represented a transitional point between the Neoclassicism of the mid to late eighteenth century and modernism, one that deviated palpably from established aesthetic criteria and the class stratified semiotics informing them. In its dynamism and its eager appropriation of new architectural materials such as iron and glass by iconoclastic young architects such as Anatole Boileau and Gustave Eiffel, it often served to express in terms of built space the optimism many felt before such technological innovations and the promise of a more egalitarian and convenient society it held out, hopes that had been expressed since the dawn of the century in the utopian social theories of figures such as Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier,

and, in a more popular form, in Emil Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*), published in 1883. Of his plans for the novel Zola writes:

What I want to do in *The Ladies' Paradise* is write the poem of modern activity. Hence, a complete shift of philosophy: no more pessimism, first of all. Don't conclude with the stupidity and sadness of life. Instead, conclude with its continual labor, the power and gaiety that come from its productivity. In a word, go along with the century, express the century, which is a century of action and conquest, of effort in every direction. (*The Ladies' Paradise*, ix)

It was this sort of popular zeal for the innovations enabled by new productive technologies that the international exhibitions sought simultaneously to consolidate and to capitalize upon. These exhibitions are particularly important in their modeling of what was at the time a decidedly new form of consumption which departs from that described in Veblen's essay, embracing as it did not the forms of invidious consumption examined in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, but a far more unrestrained form of wasteful consumption practiced by an economic stratum beneath that of the leisured class. Though such categorizations of individual or group consumption patterns necessarily represent idealized types that overlap one another in actual social practice, they are useful nonetheless in articulating a continuum of attitudes relating to the advent of mass production and its broader social impact that remain active in most developed post-industrial societies today; one exemplified by dandies such as George "Beau" Brummel or Robert de Montesquiou that could be called neo-aristocratic, and another form characterized by the appropriation of mass produced goods by a non-leisured class.

Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Against the Grain* has often been read as a dramatization of the sort of neo-aristocratic consumption exemplified by dandies such

as George “Beau” Brummell and Robert de Montesquieu. As with these exemplars of dandyism and their rigorously materialist aesthetic, the efforts of the novel’s main character to establish an autonomous reality created through the careful selection of *objets d’art* and simulacral decors were paralleled in reality by an attempt to manufacture a similarly autonomous sphere of artistic production in the nineteenth century literary field by a group of economically disenfranchised artists and intellectuals. Like the conspicuous consumption of Gilded Age America critiqued in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the protagonist of *Against the Grain* possesses the wealth required to engage in a conscious construction of identity through a highly symbolic regimen of consumption. Above and beyond all this, however, and despite the enormously expensive and elitist character of consumption described in the text, Huysmans’ novel elucidates some of the larger sociological implications of the nineteenth century’s democratization of luxury in that mass production made affordable to the economically better off strata of the working class a field of objects that made available to them a similar means of constructing and performing identity, albeit one based in the standardized output of a mass productive system.

Against the Grain (1884) tells the story of the wealthy aesthete Jean Des Esseintes, “a frail young man of thirty, anemic and nervous, with hollow cheeks, eyes of a cold, steely blue, a small but still straight nose, and long, slender hands.” The text echoes the discourse and practice of social engineering and eugenics being articulated in the same period, in its dense encoding of characterological meaning into its descriptions of individual physiognomies. The preceding description of Des Esseintes which opens the novel introduces the conflation of frailty (“anemic and nervous, with

hollow cheeks”) and femininity (the “small but straight nose and long slender hands”) that will function as one of the fundamental metaphors structuring this highly allegorical text. The opening paragraphs of the novel reinforce this association of market-based, bourgeois social forms with an increasing decadence, itself coded as feminine in character:

To judge by such family portraits as were preserved in the Chateau de Lourps, the race of the Floressas Des Esseintes had been composed in olden days of stalwart veterans of the wars, grim knights with scowling visages. [. . .] These were ancestral portraits; those representing subsequent generations were conspicuous by their absence. There was a gap in the series, a gap which one face alone served to fill and so connect past and present—a mysterious, world-weary countenance. The features were heavy and drawn, the prominent cheekbones touched with a spot of rouge, the hair plastered to the head and entwined with a string of pearls, the slender neck arising from amid the pleadings of a stiff ruff. Already in this picture [one discerned] the vitiation of an exhausted race, the excess lymph in the blood, were plainly to be traced. (*Against the Grain*, 77)

The narrator’s consistent metaphorization of this decline in vitality of the family line in terms of a “progressive effemination” (77) is indicative of an increasingly common association of femininity with urbanization in general and a decay in the rise of mass culture in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Whereas in America this crisis of masculinity revolved more around issues stemming from the closing of the American West and the rising immigration of the period, across the Atlantic the question of nineteenth century decadence would be attributed to urbanization and its secularizing and industrializing tendencies. *Against the Grain* coincides with this trend. In the above passage Huysmans couches this devivification of the Des Esseintes’ family line in a physiological metaphor. The vigorous and robust

countenances captured in the early family portraits dating from the late feudal era, consistently encoded in the narrative as inherently masculine in their nature, soon give way to the frail and bejeweled appearance of those relatives of Jean's own time, once more metaphorically coding femininity as something at once frail with decay and ornamental.

Underlying this analogy is the suggestion that a qualitative shift in a society's systems of production and self-reproduction must necessarily effect a corresponding shift in the affect structure of most individuals living within that process. Huysmans' description of this latest product of the Des Esseintes family line speaks to the distinct character of the commodity in that it is by definition an entity that exists outside of the more immediate relationship to utility characteristic of production in mercantile society. Implicit in the narratives' presentation of these portraits is the suggestion that decadence—coded here as the physical decline of a family line—is the necessary by-product of a social shift that relieves its wealthiest class of “the tedium of being useful,” a phrase used by Walter Benjamin to distinguish commodity-based from other systems of production. Hence the physiological coding of cultural decadence in the work of its most prominent exponents from Baudelaire, Nerval to Poe and Huysmans find expression in the waifish, etiolated and morbidly hypercultivated appearance that dominate in *Against the Grain's* descriptions of Des Esseintes and his immediate forebears. While the aristocratic nobles of the feudal era had fought to achieve and sustain their ascendancy within the socioeconomic totality, their modern forebears are able to merely live off the fruits of those labors while keeping up the appearance of nobility through strategic (i.e. aristocratic) consumption and an abiding

preoccupation with the performance of aristocratic grace in dress, speech, choice of establishments patronized, etc.. Evocative of the conventional dichotomization of gender in terms of man as warrior and provider (now in the marketplace rather than on the battlefield) against Veblen's characterization of the woman of the luxury class as the ornamental appendage and "vicarious consumer" of male-earned wealth, Huysmans' portrait of his protagonist suggests that it is Des Esseintes' exemption from the imperative to earn his own living that has divested him of his masculinity. As with many representations of gender in this era, it is tacitly assumed that the Darwinian struggle for resources is the necessary social foundation that grounds masculinity.

But Huysmans' novel is exemplary not only as an examination of the subterranean intersections of commodity fetishism, mass production and literary decadence. It is an allegory of the divisive, anomic forces that often lurk in our cultural artifacts and the social processes that govern our appropriation of them. It is also a document of the profound subjective disturbances that result from an unrestrained materialism, one for which social life as an affective, lived experience is experienced in a way radically mediated through objects and the complex canons of taste that organize them into an aesthetic field. Henry James' sinister characterization of Gilbert Osmond and his overweening pride in his ultra-refined taste in *The Portrait of a Lady* represent a personification of these forces. In describing his enormous egotism James writes:

It implied a sovereign contempt for every one but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied, and for everything in the world but half a dozen ideas of his own. [. . .] But this base ignoble world, it

appeared, was after all what one was to live for; one was to keep it forever in one's eye, in order not to enlighten or convert or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority. [His wife] had thought it a grand indifference, an exquisite independence. But indifference was really the last of his qualities; she had never seen any one who thought so much of others. (James, 479)

For those such as Osmond all culture and social intercourse is a sort of stock market in which savvy investing yields not capital per se, but a reputation for a discerning taste with a social value all its own—for it is such a reputation that piques Isabel's romantic interest in her future husband. Despite the significant differences between them, the respective characterizations of Des Esseintes and Osmond are striking, for the similar complex of concerns that shape their author's construction of them. Regarded at this angle Des Esseintes' tribulations read as an admonition to the reader to be wary of a similarly monstrous abuse of culture as that embodied in James' characterization of Gilbert Osmond. For Des Esseintes and Osmond alike, culture, something traditionally assumed to function as a social adhesive serving, however contentiously, to define a sense of a shared identification and overlapping affect between subjects works in the opposite, works in these disturbing personalities into a black hole of anomic self-absorption.

The democratization of consumption that resulted from the rise of mass production in the late nineteenth century—reducing costs while raising the capacity of productive apparatuses—not only broadened the demographic stage upon which consumption took place, but also individuated the element of fantasy that would increasingly underpin the logic not only of marketing and advertising, but of the very idea of use value; in retrospect we can recognize in *Against the Grain* a detailed

dramatization of the historical moment in which the imagination and fantasy began to play an important role in marshalling consumer desire. With the dominance of bourgeois forms of consumption increasingly denuded through these years, others were rapidly engendered. Unprecedented productive capacities called for similarly expansive capacities of consumption. Taking its place in the larger nineteenth century discourse of progress and enlightenment, the international exhibitions offered a stage on which to link the concepts of efficiency and convenience with civilization and progress in general. Walter Benjamin's influential essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" argues that "world exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish [which] glorify the exchange value of the commodity" (*Arcades Project*, 17-8). Benjamin is not alone in characterizing these exhibitions as mass training grounds for a public, amusement parks where industry and aesthetics are fused into a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "total art work" in order to exalt the commodity as the dominant locus of social being and to encourage these masses to take up the call to an imagining of new lifestyles prompted by these new forms.

Art historian Phillipe Julian's more recent account of the exhibitions in *The Triumph of Art Nouveau* describes the sort of popular utopianism they sought to embody. In a section headed "The Gospel of Work" he writes: "Most of the artists who received commissions for the decoration of the exhibition had to glorify the workers, for the movement initiated by Napoleon III had become an act of faith: the workers were to take part in the Great Festival of Progress which their energies had made possible" (Julian, 26). The subdued irony of Julian's account hints at the degree to which the idealism for the dawning century the exhibition strived to embody was

meant to downplay a crucial if largely unspoken goal of this and earlier exhibitions to educate the working masses in consumer culture and the broad fascination with the commodity it required in order to secure a market for the age's ever expanding productive capacities. Writing of the first exhibition held on the Champ de Mars in 1798, Benjamin references a German history of French workers' movements published in 1864: "it arose from the wish 'to entertain the working classes, and it becomes for them a festival of emancipation.' The workers would constitute their first clientele" (*The Arcades Project*, 17). This "their" would presumably refer to the large banks and investment firms that had provided the capital to mount the exhibition. In this transitional period between the rise of mass production and the consolidation of the entertainment and advertising industries that would do so much to shape the tenor of twentieth century modernism, the exhibitions function to introduce the laboring classes to these new modalities of production and consumption. *Against the Grain* models a new elitist form of consumption that took shape in large part as a reaction to the threatening encroachment of these working masses into forms of consumption and social self-presentation once the exclusive domain of the leisured classes. In doing so it also examines how the new forms of consumption becoming available to many in this period are increasingly appropriated as a means of expressing a shifting conception of individual identity and personality based on a distinctive appropriation of this expanding field of mass-produced goods, a sort of democratic dandyism.

This interpenetration of formerly discreet patterns of consumption dominates the historic framework informing this chapter's reading of *Against the Grain*. For those of Des Esseintes' social background, the rise of the middle class to a position of

economic dominance has undone the socioeconomic framework that provided the basis of its cultural and economic dominance in the feudal era. This breakdown in the traditional aristocracy's social ascendancy can be seen in retrospect as the result of a concatenation of several shifts in production and consumption, not least of which is the creation of an integrated global transport system that exposed the lower classes to objects and styles of consumption formerly available only to those able to afford travelling to these distant locales in person. Importantly, the design of many mass produced goods mimicked the appearance of goods formerly only found in the homes and on the backs of the wealthiest adding to an environment that understood identity as a matter of volition rather than a necessary externalization of some inner essence or nature. This sort of democratic dandyism was regarded by those of Des Esseintes' background as the arrogance of a rising middle class bent on vaunting its new found wealth, a sentiment much akin to that of the narrator of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" as we saw in the introduction. In order to retain this sense of inherited superiority he retreats to the virtual social environment of Fontenay, where he can shield himself from the evidence of that breakdown and artificially prolong his sense of aristocratic superiority sequestered within the simulacral society he erects through the elaborate and expensive environment he buys for himself there. (The quotation from Sunset Boulevard at the head of the chapter suggests how the construction of such an artificial social environment is not a theme unique to *Against the Grain*, as demonstrated by twentieth century film from Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) to *The Matrix* (1999). In these works, paradoxically enough, actual social and productive institutions are put to work in the name of dramatizing

and rendering commodifiable the element of fantasy and artificiality that has underpinned a psychological constellation prevalent in modern market-based societies.)

Recognizing that access to a growing selection of relatively inexpensive material goods was one of the primary means through which the globalizing free market system legitimated itself in the eyes of those living within it, *Against the Grain* is useful in its sustained and detailed focus on the dark side of a subjective investment in consumption, a face of the free market hidden from the consumerist utopia imagined first in the world expositions and later in the marketing and advertising industries which grew rapidly towards the end of the nineteenth century. Focusing on the contradictions inherent in the tantalizing promise of commodity culture and driving them to a crisis, Huysmans' novel foregrounds the fundamental limitations of consumption practiced as a form of self-expression exclusive of any more meaningful role within or relationship to society. At this level, the title of the novel (*A Rebours* translates as "against the grain" or "against nature") metaphorizes the new market-based nineteenth century social forms as a threat to the very fabric of society itself, a catastrophe in the original Greek sense of a transgression that provokes a radical dissolution of those values and practices that had previously bound the community together as a stable productive unit. Walter Benjamin's remark that the "world exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish" is similarly suggestive of a fundamental shift in the nineteenth century in the terms through which the individual metaphorized society and the nature of the individual's relationship to it, terms that saw life, and city life in particular, as a Darwinian struggle conforming

to an abstract, impersonal form of collectivity embodied in Adam Smith's pseudo-divine "invisible hand" at the expense of earlier theologically-based models of social organization and narratives. In describing the religious fervor these exhibitions sought to inspire and the highly diverse character of the visitors they attracted art historian Philippe Julian writes:

Places of pilgrimage have always attracted mountebanks. The word 'pilgrimage' is not used ironically. With the same fervor as the peasant going to Lourdes, hordes of respectable middle-class citizens, chemists, notaries, teachers and gendarmes, took the train to Paris to meditate in the temple of Progress where miracles abounded. Foreigners came to see if their country was rendering sufficient homage to the new God and above all, to enjoy themselves in Paris. (Julian, 10)

Like many commentators on this era, Benjamin and Julian suggest that the commodity, understood as a psychosocial event as much as a change in a system of production, is appropriating a cognitive space formerly the domain of religious thought and belief. Both speak to a new psychological relationship particular to these mass produced articles in which, through the act of purchase and use, the consumer appropriates the charmed aura that enfolds the commodity, annexing it to its own personality. It is the encroachment of this new pseudo religion of commerce and consumption that provides the impetus for Des Esseintes' move to Fontenay. Having decided to flee the indiscriminating society of Third Empire Paris, Des Esseintes purchases a house in the small village of Fontenay, a short distance from the capitol. His independent wealth allows him to enjoy the solipsistic luxury of a conventional dandy in terms of his clothes and his books, his home and its furnishings, though he soon tires of life in society, convinced such an environment is unable to satisfy his

degree of refinement. He buys a house in Fontenay, a village not far from Paris. The furnishings and decorations for his new residence are all chosen with an eye to creating a shrine to his own exquisite taste; he evinces a penchant for composing virtual realities, arranging one room as a monastic cell, and another as a ship by means of a false wall fitted with portholes, and filled with water and “mechanical fish” between it and the outer wall. He has the walls of his library covered with expensive morocco leather generally only used for book binding, an effective symbol of the dandy who exists under a compulsion to make the subjective world of sensation, imagination and “fancy” the primary locus of his experience or else to expose himself as a mere pretender to true taste. Des Esseintes compulsively experiences every object and the effect these produce as an aesthetic gesture in every detail, producing the meticulous insouciance that Brummell was famed for. The ability to maintain such a carefully contrived attempt at the performance of a superior, aestheticized subjectivity on the stage of society, presupposes the possession of such personal wealth as Des Esseintes’, as Baudelaire underscores in a section devoted to dandyism in his 1845 essay “The Painter of Modern Life”:

The English more than others have cultivated the society-novel, and French writers [. . .] of love stories have taken immediate and very proper care to endow their characters with fortunes ample enough to pay without thinking for all their extravagancies; and they have gone on to dispense them of any profession. [. . .] If I have spoken of money, it is because money is indispensable to those who make a cult of their emotions. (Baudelaire, 27)

Such a passage helps us grasp how the intense elitism of the dandy/aesthete outlook is motivated in part by a fear of falling below that economic threshold at which, from

the perspective just described, life—synonymous for Des Esseintes with high culture and luxury—could be said to begin. Huysmans too “dispenses” with any occupation for his protagonist. As we will see, his obsession with creating this “cult of the self” results in his sequestering himself from society to a degree that drives Des Esseintes to a series of physical and emotional crises: “comfort isolates” (*Illuminations*, 174), as Benjamin observed in one of his essays on Baudelaire, and in part *Against the Grain* models a decided shift in social consciousness towards the new realm of consumption brought about by a palpable expansion in the breadth of goods, from ready-to-wear clothes, mass reproduced art works, and home furnishings, which provided opportunities for a pursuit of individuality previously the domain of the leisured class alone. Asking himself just what has brought about such a broad interest in dandyism in his era Baudelaire replies that “it is first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality, bounded only by the limits of the proprieties” (Baudelaire, 27). This description of dandyism symptomatically suggests how Des Esseintes’ conception of “personality” is specific to the depersonalizing environment of the industrial city where difference can only be expressed through outward signs (i.e. collectively recognized patterns of consumption) rather than modes of distinguishing oneself through speech or other forms of expressivity requiring longer periods of interaction between the participants or “social actors” characteristic of life in more rural environments.

Huysmans is known to have drawn on a variety of contemporary figures in his characterization of Des Esseintes, including Robert de Montesquiou, held by many to be the preeminent exemplar of dandyism and the aestheticist “art of living” mid-

eighteenth century. In fact it was Montesquiou's friend the poet Stephan Mallarmé who first described Montesquiou's unusual domestic décor to Huysmans, having seen it first hand. He recounted to Huysmans how one room was furnished as a monastic cell and another as the cabin of a yacht, while a third contained a Louis Quinze pulpit, three or four cathedral stalls, and a strip of altar railing, extravagances Huysmans transferred wholesale to Des Esseintes' Fontenay retreat. Montesquiou's divestiture of a variety of interior decors from the larger cultural and economic structures that had produced them in order that they might be more conveniently consumed as sign values is expressive of Decadent consciousness's affinity with what have come to be known as post-modern forms of consumption.

There are striking similarities between Des Esseintes' decontextualizing appropriation of these domestic interiors, each evocative of a whole lifestyle and habitus which he may then plug himself into as his fancy might dictate, and the sort of art of living outlined in Walter Pater's *The Renaissance* a foundational text of British Aestheticism. In his conclusion he writes "[n]ot the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite their purest energy?" (*The Renaissance*, 152). Pater would probably not have appreciated the suggestion that the arcades and department stores of the day aspired to embody precisely these vital forces of modernity, teeming as they did with human life and with goods manufactured from raw materials originating from every corner of the

globe as the reach of European colonialism continued to expand. As with Huysmans' depiction of Des Esseintes, Pater imagines the individual here solely as a consumer of cultural artifacts and the sensations they invoke, one whose implicit wealth frees him (Pater has his fellow educated Englishmen in mind as his audience) from the need or even, apparently, the desire to participate in the production of culture. Writing at the height of British colonial dominance, Pater naturally envisions himself as a reservoir of economic and cultural capital, seated comfortably at that point of focus where these "vital forces" focus their "purest energy."

Des Esseintes squanders both his health and almost all of his considerable wealth in a quest to position himself—in his own mind, if not in reality—within a similar sort of economic and cultural focal point as that described in Pater's essay. In essence he commissions the construction of what amount to a series of theatrical sets in which he performs certain historically specific roles, ritually identify himself with specific eras and identities, generally those in which his depreciated cultural capital and tastes still retained their value. *Against the Grain* models a less democratic form of consumption-based identity construction than the form addressed in most twentieth century critiques of consumer culture; the exotic furnishings, artworks, clothes, perfumes and the like that Des Esseintes surrounds himself with are made to his personal specifications whenever possible. Nevertheless, the text—essentially a novelistic dramatization of a distinct psychological posture—intimates the degree to which the subjective realm of affect, desire and trauma with the objective historical context of a nascent nineteenth century consumer culture. At the international exhibitions and in the arcades the vast wealth funneling into European markets as a

result of colonization and industrialization was put to work in designing and constructing new forms of social space that might offer the public at large a mass facsimile of these vital forces' point of intersection. For Des Esseintes as for many Symbolist and Decadent figures the answer to Pater's question lay in the liberation of aesthetic experience from its confinement to books, paintings, sculpture and other objects similarly sanctioned by tradition as the sole proper receptacles of culture, in order that it might be diffused into a rapidly expanding frontier of mass produced goods.

The Tragedy of the Common: Des Esseintes and Distinction

The path to perfection is a series of disgusts.

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*

There are striking resemblances between the various embellishments Des Esseintes' outfits his Fontenay retreat with and many of the popular urban amusements that combined technological innovation with entertainment that were introduced in these years. The huge fish tank that he has built in between two rooms and stocks with mechanical fish, for example, calls to mind the "Mareorama" which reproduced for audiences a sea voyage from France to Constantinople (*The Arcades Project*, 474). His flight from what he experiences as the threatening social changes of Third Empire Paris into a self-created environment filled with soothing images and

objects parallels a more general specularization of culture, a shift that Huysmans, like so many artists and intellectuals of his time, felt a deep hostility towards.⁹

Des Esseintes' compulsive need to constantly shore up his beseeched self-identification as a man of unique culture and taste forecloses for him the possibility of participating in such new entertainments, or even venturing into the sort of establishment where they were found. He remains wholly unaware of the similarity between these forms, committed as he is to an unquestionable split between high and low culture; Huysmans, one may assume, was not so unaware, however, and these links between Des Esseintes' Decadent décor and the popular spectacles available in the city suggest that it is less some innate inferiority in the aesthetic content of these new entertainment technologies that Des Esseintes finds so intolerable as much as it is their "mass" character that arouses his distaste. As a result of the undifferentiated aspect of the crowds gathered to admire these inventions whose innovations were as much technical as they were aesthetic, such environments were manifestly incapable of generating the sort of prestige or "cultural capital" that redound to a wealthy viewer able to secure the same sort of spectacle in his own home as Des Esseintes does. That such a taste, manifestly the product of a displaced class habitus, is overdetermined by a reaction formation in the face of an encroaching mass culture is

⁹ Recounting the period in which he had conceived *Against the Grain* in a preface written for a new edition of the novel published in 1903 Huysmans writes: "I pictured to myself a Monsieur Folantin [the protagonist of his previous novel *A vau-l'eau* or *Downstream*] more cultured, more refined, more wealthy and who has discovered in artificiality a relief from the American habits of his time [. . .]." (*Against the Grain* [author's introduction], 57)

suggested at various points in the novel, as when he describes his relish for his private collection of Goya prints:

The savage vigour, the uncompromising, reckless talent of this artist captivated him. Yet, at the same time, the universal admiration his works had won put him off somewhat, and for years he had always refused to frame them, fearing, if he exhibited them, that the first noodle who might happen to see them would feel himself bound to talk inanities and fall into an ecstasy in stereotyped phrases as he stood in front of them. (*Against the Grain*, 196)

This confession is followed by similar ones—with respect to his Rembrandts, for example, which, due once more to their popularity, “he would only examine now and again on the sly.” All these descriptions foreground what could be called an Aestheticist/ “*art for art’s sake*” taboo upon the popular. Here Des Esseintes demonstrates considerably more self-consciousness than elsewhere in the novel of just how much his own tastes are shaped by popular taste in general, something betrayed in the endless energy and attention he devotes to performing his unimpeachable taste, even after he has deprived himself of any audience to admire it. Living in an age where the level of civilization has long since shed the archaic practice of expressing one’s expertise in accruing both economic and cultural capital through the ritual destruction of personal wealth, Des Esseintes’ hoarding of these and other priceless works functions as a sort of avant-garde analogue to the practice of potlatch given so much attention in anthropologists’ studies of non-modern economic forms. Fontenay could be said to represent a form of potlatch adapted to the individualism of modern rationalized economies, where to put it in anthropological terms the destruction of wealth no longer returns it to the sphere of the sacred,

symbolically performing the preeminence of the social bond above and beyond the interest of the individual. Rather, private property effects a similar destruction of the exchanged object (and the artwork in particular) by restricting access to the product of the group's labor according to a logic privileging the individual over that of the group: "The exclusive appropriation of priceless works of art is not without analogy to the ostentatious destruction of wealth" (*Distinction*, 282).

This phobic aversion to vernacular cultural forms represents a nascent expression of modernist "difficulty" and aesthetic autonomy cultivated by the Decadent and Symbolist schools, and retooled for the twentieth century by theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg. By refusing to share his appreciation of these popular and thus tabooed artists Des Esseintes is able to retain his faith in the superiority of his own taste. In terms of cultural capital, it is never simply *what* one enjoys, but the protocols governing *how* one appreciates and appropriates the aesthetic object that is crucial. His polemic against the popular in these passages represents the consolidation of an ideal of aesthetic difficulty that would exert an increasing influence on the cultural production of future decades:

Indeed it is very true that, just as the finest air in the world is vulgarized beyond all bearing once the public has taken to hum it and the street organs to play it, so the work of art that has appealed to the sham connoisseurs that is admired by the uncritical, that is not content to rouse the enthusiasm of only a chosen few, becomes for this very reason, in the eyes of the elect, a thing polluted, commonplace, almost repulsive. (*Against the Grain*, 196)

The aristocratic, and thus socially grounded taboo that structures the putatively individual aesthetic disinterest of his judgment, and the stigma that would result in his

transgression of it, is rendered explicit in the texts' reference to pollution. Des Esseintes' frenzied elitism is echoed in Nietzsche's attack on 1888-9 essay, *Nietzsche contra Wagner* where he writes "[n]o one brings along the finest senses of his art to the theatre, least of all the artist who works for the theatre—solitude is lacking; whatever is perfect suffers no witnesses." This visual metaphor situates the artist and cultivated individual as an active, masculine figure to the passive femininity of the visually consumed object, Des Esseintes too instinctively grasps this first principle of aristocratic self-sufficiency: for the true aesthete to desire an audience is to betray a self doubt that turns to the group for confirmation of the legitimacy of one's own taste. As we will see, this is a revealing link between Des Esseintes and the figure of the dandy, both of whom share a commitment to acknowledging no legitimate arbiter of taste or fashion save their own intuition—an intuition whose relationship to a socially derived set of values and biases must always be occluded according to the logic of an art that attempts to turn life itself into art.

Escape from Paris: The Cultural Geography of Against the Grain

The narrator describes Des Esseintes' Fontenay dwelling as "a hermitage combined with modern comfort, an ark on dry land and nicely warmed, whither he could fly for refuge from the incessant deluge of human folly" (*Against the Grain*, 77). As we have seen, this is an ark that floats upon the buoyancy of Des Esseintes' inherited wealth. Of his decision to reside so near to Paris rather than seeking a more remote location, further beyond the reach of this unseemly "deluge," the narrator remarks:

As he thought over the new existence he meant to make for himself, he experienced a lively sense of relief, seeing himself just far enough withdrawn for the flood of Paris activity not to touch his retreat, yet near enough for the proximity of the metropolis to add spice to his solitariness. (*Against the Grain*, 88)

This physical map plotting the proximity of Des Esseintes' avant-garde retreat from Paris, the heart of bourgeois conventionality, reflects the discursive map of late eighteenth century European aesthetic theory, demonstrating the parasitic dependence of avant-garde cultural production and discourse on the bourgeois values it so vehemently decries. In *The Theory Death of the Avant-Garde* (1991) Paul Mann writes "[. . .] the avant-garde evolved in the centers of western culture, in major capitols such as Paris, Berlin, and New York. The avant-garde is first of all an internal site, a movement of these centers" (Mann, 13). In effect, Des Esseintes' decision to "add spice to his solitariness" by choosing a residence so close to Paris recapitulates the discursive reciprocity between "high" and "low" culture: "The avant-garde is the outside of the inside, the leading edge of the mainstream," and thus exists as "a centralized margin, an internalized exterior" (Mann, 13). Certainly *Seul* (*Alone*), the working title of *Against the Grain*, is meant to ironically refer to this aspect of Des Esseintes' characterization. In this aspect of his personality Des Esseintes manifests that disorder Henry James models in his character of Gilbert Osmond when he writes of him that "indifference was really the last of his qualities; [his wife] had never seen any one who thought so much of others." Like Osmond, other people are conceived and experienced as nothing more than competitors in a battle of taste which he must win at any cost: "But this base ignoble world, it

appeared, was after all what one was to live for; one was to keep it forever in one's eye, in order not to enlighten or convert or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority" (James, 479). It is this state of affairs that doom his efforts to enact a program of distinction-making undertaken in his self-created social vacuum, for no matter how absolute the isolation, all of his decisions concerning the construction of this sensory playground carry a whole history of the human valuations that have been placed upon them in the past.

Huysmans carefully codes the vitriolic demeanor of his protagonist as that of the displaced elite who finds that his inherited cultural capital has been rendered virtually worthless with the rise of the merchant middle class to sociopolitical dominance. He takes pride in exaggerating this cultural impasse between the elitist model of culture he instinctively embraces and the more egalitarian, commercially-oriented forms—for Des Esseintes, merely vulgar—of 1880's Paris. In doing so he repeatedly demonstrates how these taste-driven choices through which he intends to express a unique and autonomous individuality through a meticulously composed domestic environment ultimately serve only to reinscribe him within the very social structure he imagines he is eluding. *Against The Grain* draws a revealing parallel between the dependence of individuality and personal aesthetic style on a larger social matrix of taste and values from which it draws its form on the one hand, and on the other the overdetermination (aesthetic autonomy notwithstanding) of aesthetic and cultural forms by the economic and political forces of the society in which they are embedded.

Inverting the objectively existent situation, he experiences his family's ruptured habitus and the socioeconomic displacement that characterizes it as the very nucleus of his identity and purest evidence of his aristocratic nature:

At the Jesuit school [. . .] he would spend hours daydreaming, enjoying his fill of solitude until night fell. [His instructors] realized that this particular pupil of theirs would never do anything to add to the glory of their house; and as his family was rich and apparently uninterested in his future they soon gave up any thought of turning his thoughts towards the primordial careers open to their successful scholars. [. . .] He worked at his Latin and French books in his own way and in his own time. (19-20)

Born unto wealth, Des Esseintes is free to manifest an aristocratic derision of those plebeian exertions in his aversion to the potentially lucrative careers available to him. Good taste for him is expressed in disdain for all consideration of where his wealth comes from, as though it were an expression of his distinction, rather than the raw material from which such distinction is derived. As Thorstein Veblen suggested fifteen years after the appearance of *Against the Grain*, for such as Des Esseintes, labor itself must function as a sign of distinction, wealth, and an "abstention from productive labor":

Such material evidences of past [or accumulated] leisure are quasi-scholarly or quasi-artistic accomplishments and a knowledge of processes and incidents which do not conduce directly to the furtherance of human life. So, for instance, in our time there is the knowledge of the dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and prosody; of the various forms of domestic music and other household art; of the latest properties of dress, furniture and equipage [. . .]. (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 29)

Veblen was raised on a small Wisconsin farm his parents, immigrants from Norway, had purchased, building the family home from the trees they cleared from the site. His

impatience with such wealth or the esoteric cultural attainment associated with it, so far removed from the sort of struggle life on the American frontier had required of his own forebears, is apparent in the vitriolic irony that has helped to grant *The Theory of the Leisure Class* such longevity as a classic work of economic and a sociological analysis. As we will see, it is Des Esseintes' independent wealth that paradoxically allows him to retreat to the luxurious seclusion of Fontenay while driving him to a near fatal nervous collapse as a result of the radical detachment from any larger social network he effects for himself in his Decadent "ark." In his 1903 preface to a new edition of his novel Huysmans describes his protagonist as a wealthy recluse who has "discovered in artificiality a specific for the disgust inspired by the worries of life and the American manners of the time" (*Against Nature*, 7). "Americanization" sums up what Des Esseintes finds to be the most onerous aspects brought about by the innovations and transformations of this era. America was, after all, assuming its place as an international power in these years, having recently expanded its frontiers through purchase in the western frontier, and through war in Mexico and the Philippines. Still more stinging for Des Esseintes than the abstract offense caused by a shift towards these new market-based social forms is the haughty swagger of these new urban masses who, in his eyes, flaunt their rejection of traditional attitudes towards the performance of class and now defunct canons of aristocratic taste.

As with the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd," it is the indiscriminating, distinction-diluting tendencies of modernity and its new forms of public space—the boulevard, the department store, theaters showcasing the rapidly evolving visual technologies of the day—that motivates the intense reactionary spleen at the core of

Des Esseintes' characterization. For Poe's narrator, a bit "too much wristband" is adequate cause for a stranger passing by to be condemned as all the more barbarous for his misguided attempts at civilization. Many who readily yielded to his critical opinion in other matters would balk at Baudelaire's praise of Poe's work, associating the latter too closely with what many on the further side of the Atlantic saw as the unpolished manners and rapacity of American society. Thus the concept of "Americanization" performs a considerable amount of ideological work as an umbrella term encompassing all those diverse threads of modernization that together so aggressively undermine the structural integrity of his own self-image. In the artificial habitus he manufactures for himself at Fontenay Des Esseintes is comparable to the astronaut who ventures into the vacuum of space protected only by the suit that allows him to remain enveloped in a subjectively viable social atmosphere. The vehemence of his hostility to all things modern is likewise expressive of a survival instinct of the ego itself. As it comes to an awareness that its relationship to the network of people, places and practices that constitute the individual as an identity are themselves in imminent threat of decomposition, the ego lashes out (here through language) in a reflexive attempt at self-preservation.¹⁰

¹⁰ Freud argued for such a survival instinct at the level of subjectivity analogous to that found in somatic life in his final summation of his theories in the final months of his life:

We have already learnt that the ego protects itself against the invasion of undesired elements from the unconscious and repressed id by means of anticathexes, which must remain in tact if it is to function normally. The more hard-pressed the ego feels, the more convulsively it clings (as though in fright) to these anticathexes, in order to protect what remains of itself from further irruptions. (*An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, 57 [see also 97])

The conclusion to the second chapter of the novel offers a particularly suggestive formulation of “Americanization” and the lens of ideological and economic disaffection the narrative filters it through. Here Des Esseintes describes his last months in Paris before fleeing to Fontenay, where his profound anomie drives him to pathologically extreme levels of hostility towards perfect strangers:

During the last months of his residence in Paris [. . .] he had been reduced to such a state of nervous sensitivity that the sight of a disagreeable person or thing was deeply impressed upon his mind and it took several days even to begin removing the imprint [;] the human face as glimpsed in the street had been one of the keenest torments he had been forced to endure. [. . .]. (*Against Nature*, 39)

Such spleen functions as an index of the devaluation his stock of cultural capital has undergone in the industrializing, increasingly mercantile nineteenth century. For Des Esseintes “evil is in the eye that sees evil all around it,” as Hegel put it; his anxiety is projected outward, structuring the besieged mental posture that organizes his perception. Much in the manner of the narrator of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” practicing his critical botanizing of the pedestrian crowds laboring just beyond his café window, Huysmans’ protagonist perceives with an unerring eye the social “evil” of these expressions of flawed taste in dress, speech and comportment in most everyone they settle on. The narrator asserts that “it was a fact he suffered actual pain at the sight of certain physiognomies, that he almost regarded the benign or crabbed expressions on some faces as personal insults” (39). Suggestive of the classificatory distinction-making strategies of nineteenth century eugenic and social engineering discourse which translated such class and culture-bound aversions into a scientific discourse that gridded out individuals according to physical traits and

linking them to a hierarchical discourse of race and ethnicity articulated along a continuum of barbarism and civility, we find in Huysmans' characterization an object lesson in taste as something that is positively expressed based on a set of negative or hostile associations inculcated in the subject's formative period. His deep identification with the Latin decadence of the early medieval period represents the flip side to his ostentatious disdain for an indiscriminating and Americanizing society. Whereas his ostentatious aversion to "the American manners of the time" allows Des Esseintes to define himself in terms of a privileged exclusivity, his deep identification with authors of the decline of Rome and the Latin decadence such as Petronius, the "*arbiter elegantiae*" or arbiter of elegance within Nero's court, permits him to articulate a distinguished subjectivity based on a direct identification, allowing him to perceive himself not as the obsolescent residuum of a historical epoch long past, but as the member (by virtue of his display of those forms of cultural and material consumption that demonstrate such membership) of a group of erudite and politically influential men bound across the centuries by their shared (albeit in this case an imaginary) habitus.

In such passages we find more than just a powerful representation of the sort of class-inflected anxiety that the radical pace and scope of social and material change within the nineteenth century could inspire such as we saw in the preceding chapter's reading of "The Man of the Crowd." Des Esseintes' consistent coding of these discreet phenomena as a general process of Americanization constellates the immediate experience of many living amidst this transitional period in terms of an

otherness that threatens the narrator at the level of habitus: that is, something experienced viscerally, beneath and before the level of consciousness or logic:

So the search for distinction has no need to see itself for what it is, and all the intolerances—of noise, crowds, etc.—inculcated by a bourgeois upbringing are generally sufficient to provoke the changes of terrain or object which, in work as in leisure, lead towards the objects, places or activities rarest at a given moment.

(Pierre Bourdieu; *Distinction*, 249)

In spite of his sustained discussion of the role of individual “strategy” in social practice, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has been charged with producing a putatively balanced model of social reproduction, one that finds an equipoise between the determining influence of environment versus that of genetic inheritance (something that always exists in dialogue with its environment none the less), that ultimately proves to be either “another version of [structural] determination in the last instance, or a sophisticated form of functionalism” (Jenkins, 82). When he writes that “lifestyles are thus systematic products of habitus, which, perceived in their mutual relations through the schemes of the habitus, become sign systems that are socially qualified (as distinguished, vulgar, etc.)” one might question just how such a model accounts for social change through time, considering individual “lifestyle” is here unambiguously derived from the habitus or ambient lived social environment in which the subject is nested (*Distinction*, 172). Such moments are suggestive of a latent privileging of a functionalist methodological perspective that invests itself in developing its treatment of subjective agency only in so far as it allows it to be inscribed within a preexistent social network that effectively produces it. These essays’ selective appropriation of Bourdieu’s work is intended not only to show how

individual consumption is indeed often overdetermined by these sorts of oppositional, distinction-making strategies, but how the objectifying gaze of such an expert observer itself models the sort of compulsive gravitation towards distinction-garnering social acts in its formal method. So it is that, in contrasting “typically bourgeois” modes of responding to interviewer’s questions (professionals, the independently wealthy and other members positioned in the uppermost economic strata) and the expressions of habitus and the “dispositions” that characterize them against those of the petit-bourgeois (artists and intellectuals, generally speaking), Bourdieu appears to project the classifying gaze of the sociologist, who *must* introduce such quantifiable difference into his or her data in order to render it analyzable, onto the behavior of his subjects:

By contrast, ease, a sort of indifference to the objectifying gaze of others which neutralizes its powers, presupposes the self-assurance which comes of the certainty of being able to objectify that objectification, appropriate that appropriation, of being capable of imposing the norms of apperception [. . .]. (*Distinction*, 208)

Had Henry James’ Gilbert Osmond pursued a career in sociology we can imagine him producing work reflecting a model of social reality similar to Bourdieu’s in its stressing of culture and aesthetics as “nothing but” an *agon* in which individuals struggle for forms of cultural capital they might then parlay into more material gains of some kind.

In its preoccupation with the intersubjective struggle for recognition and the possession of the objectifying power of the gaze this passage at the same time echoes Walter Benjamin’s comments on the far-reaching psychic effects engendered by the

innovation of photographic and film technology in terms of the categories perception organized itself around: “[t]he audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing” (*Illuminations*, 228-9).¹¹ In Bourdieu’s model of differentially structured patterns of consumption it is not the omniscient and thus alienated position of the camera that has come to be identified with as much as that of the publishing academic who must structure his own productions in a similarly mediated opposition to those already active within the sociological field. Benjamin’s remark is useful in suggesting how Bourdieu’s methodology at points overlooks the historical and demographic forces that have produced this tendency for lifestyles to define themselves in increasingly conscious opposition to one another. The rise of photography, film, television and the Internet, and the ever more psychoanalytically refined marketing and advertising techniques devised in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries worked together to create a facade of images evoking a network of lifestyles and “types” that, accurate in their representations or not, are increasingly understood to be a common social currency which can be taken up and exchanged with other subjects. A sort of Decadent retelling of Plato’s allegory of the cave, Des Esseintes’ convinces himself that the objects and images he fills his Fontenay home with embody an inhabitable reality. By the close of the novel, however, and the collapse of his physical and emotional health, he is forced to accept the misguided and delusive nature of his project.

¹¹ The contemporary form known as “the reality show” is perhaps a purer expression of this logic than Benjamin himself ever envisioned.

That said, such suggestions of a fundamentally opposition-driven morphology of taste and style at all levels of fashion are not, as some commentators have suggested, exclusive to the cultural microcosm of nineteenth century Paris. Widely regarded as a foundational text of British Aestheticism, Walter Pater's essay on Leonardo Da Vinci in his *Studies in the Renaissance* (1873) characterizes the morphology of taste as a social phenomenon in terms strikingly similar to Bourdieu's where he writes that Leonardo's departures from traditional themes and techniques in his work inspired some of his contemporaries to suspect the presence of certain irreligious propensities in the master: "The suspicion," Pater reassures his reader, "was but the time-honored mode in which the world stamps its appreciation of one who has thoughts for himself alone, his high indifference, his intolerance of the common forms of things" (Pater, 63). Pater reiterates this association of individual genius with an "intolerance for the common" a few paragraphs later where he writes that, for Da Vinci (and implicitly for all similarly singular souls) "the path to perfection is a series of disgusts" (66), a motto that captures the abject solipsism at the heart of the Decadent ethos.

It is such sweeping, doctrinaire statements as these which Bourdieu seems to have particularly in mind in asserting that "the whole language of aesthetics is contained in a fundamental refusal of the facile [and] that pure taste, purely negative in its essence, is based on the disgust that is often called 'visceral' [. . .] for everything that is facile." (*Distinction*, 486). Individual tastes in the arts and fashion more generally, then, are the positive expression of all the negative impulses and biases internalized in the acculturative process. The suggestion that such visceral,

“gut-level,” repulsion or disgust is somehow constitutive of a truly discriminating taste is itself indicative of the increasingly jeopardized economic position of artists and intellectuals through the nineteenth century as economic rather than cultural capital becomes increasingly dominant in terms of how value was collectively conceived. Like Des Esseintes, Pater’s tone evokes the *ressentiment* of the culturally and economically disenfranchised artists and intellectuals, who make a virtue of necessity by insisting that contemporary culture has deteriorated to a point at which no self-respecting artist (including aesthetes and dandies, those artists of “lifestyle”) would dare participate in it.

Huysmans’ characterization of the neurasthenic, fatally overbred Des Esseintes, offers a compelling dramatization of the internalization and expression of habitus as a body of beliefs and dispositions that, absorbed in the acculturative process of earliest youth, constitute a shared cognitive and affectual environment with those raised in the same environment. It is this acute lack of recognition, expressive of the radical disparity in the social affiliations and allegiances of those he comes into contact with as opposed to the one inculcated during the formative early years of childhood briefly recounted in the novel’s prologue, that dominates these descriptions of his abortive attempts to live in any closer proximity to actual late nineteenth century Paris:

Last but not least he hated with all the hatred that was in him the rising generation, the appalling bores who find it necessary to talk and laugh at the top of their voices in restaurants and cafes, who jostle you in the street without a word of apology, and who, without expressing or even indicating regret, drive the wheels of a baby-carriage into your legs.
(39)

Here again it is Des Esseintes' reactionary ire against the promiscuous intermingling of classes and genders in these new urban masses, as well as the lack of aristocratic bearing or self-presentation of these would-be peers, that functions as the target of his righteous indignation. His outrage is always framed in terms of a personal insult, suggesting a megalomaniacal fixation on the idea that fate and history themselves have conspired to foil the possibility of personal satisfaction or contentment in his life. Ultimately he comes to feel that even the artificial habitus he manages to create in Fontenay is uninhabitable as he succumbs to one spiritual and physical crisis after another in his quest to turn sublime aesthetic experience into a kind of religious vocation.

Des Esseintes as a Personification of Aesthetic Autonomy

I shall refuse myself everything, then go on as if I hadn't.

Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*

The complex admixture of ascetic denial and unrestrained indulgence that inform Des Esseintes' characterization represent a conscious personification of the modernist fetishization of aesthetic difficulty and distance. The novel's thoroughgoing metaphorization of aesthetic sensibilities in alimentary and gastronomic terms would be taken up again by later authors in terms similar to those established in Huysmans' novel. Food is indeed "the only act through which Des Esseintes lets the outside world enter him" (Pierre Jourde, quoted in Donato, 155), symbolizing the body's dependence on nourishment and the natural processes that it

implies, and by association the individual's dependence on the group to equip oneself with the necessities of life, to produce and maintain a family, etc.. In his 2004 essay Robert Zeigler draws attention to this aspect of *Against the Grain*, noting that "[w]hile he is at home, Des Esseintes is undernourished and unstimulated, sustaining himself instead on purely intellectual fare; he 'sank his teeth into certain works' [and] spends his holidays alone where he 'drank his fill of solitude until nightfall'" (Ziegler, 143). Des Esseintes' tendency to attempt to conduct the nourishment of his body solely in terms of its potential to further elaborate his cult of personal emotion are yet another means through which he registers a refusal of the well-fed bourgeois and his commitment to monetary wealth and the uncomplicated bodily pleasure it can provide. Such pleasures, of course, lack the distinction-making attributes of rarity and "difficulty" that are the foundation of Des Esseintes' criterion of value. Situating this synaesthetic substitution of intellectual pleasure with bodily nourishment within his psychoanalytic analysis of Des Esseintes' characterization, Ziegler concludes that "in Huysmans constellation of oral images, Des Esseintes' lonely, meditative introspection [. . .] corresponds to the infant's experience of drinking and nursing" (143). This interpretation not only clarifies the significance of *Against the Grain* as a contribution to the growth of psychological fiction in this period, but suggests the process whereby the inculcation of a feudal/aristocratic habitus that is historically outmoded leads Des Esseintes to express these atavistic identification in terms of consumption, both cultural and alimentary.

The following section argues that, above and beyond these correspondences with psychoanalytic theory, Huysmans' repeated figuring of aesthetic taste and style

as bodily sustenance speak to the function of culture as the food (or poison) of the subject just as actual food sustains life at the somatic level. Huysmans is again careful to demarcate a certain distance between himself and his description of Des Esseintes' dietary experiments, underscoring the cognitive impracticability of the sort of extreme disarticulation of the subjective, culture-bound self from the body that he attempts. Thus food and his ostentatious abstention from conventional forms of nourishment express his desire to distance himself from the common run of humanity in every facet of his existence. His outrage with nineteenth century Parisian mass culture's adulteration of virtually all cultural forms results in an obsession with abstinence; surrounded by imitations, his demands for total authenticity compel him to do without. These experiments result in an acute gastric disorder that spurs his doctor to prescribe a "peptone enema" containing a mixture of cod liver oil, beef tea, burgundy and egg yolks, allowing him to dispense with eating altogether:

[. . .] Des Esseintes could not help secretly congratulating himself on the event which was the coping stone, the crowning triumph of the life he had contrived for himself; his predilection for the artificial had now, and that without any initiative on his part, attained its supreme fulfillment. A man could hardly go farther; nourishment thus absorbed was surely the last aberration from the natural that could be committed. (*Against the Grain*, 325)

Huysmans' use of free indirect speech in which the voice of the narrator and the character it narrates seem to overlap one another ("A man could hardly go farther . . .") subtly reinforces Des Esseintes' construction as a symbol of the impossibility of any avant garde producing a genuinely autonomous aesthetic sensibility; by this late point in the novel, after so many similar projects have backfired, it would appear

certain that such radicalism can only serve to further elaborate Peter Mann's "outside of the inside." In any case, it is certainly one of the greater ironies of the novel that the "breviary of the decadence" should prove to be one of the earliest and most rigorous literary critiques of aestheticism understood as a cult of individual emotion.

Against the Grain and Consumption as an Immanent Religion

In his Fontenay retreat Des Esseintes attempts to exalt the dandy's cult of the self to the level of a religion, a project mediated through an elitist form of consumption symbolically expressing an identification with relationship to consumption. The following section considers some of the questions raised by this discussion, situating them in relationship to his construction of an immanent religion based on the ritualized consumption and engagement with a range of objects charged with symbolic meaning, all of which speak exclusively to his own experience and taste. *Against the Grain* is an important contribution to the nineteenth century discourse that grew up around the emergent consumer culture, one that models the conservative, backward-looking aspects of much Decadent thinking. The novel dramatizes what it characterizes as a perversion of religious sensibilities and practices through their appropriation by the increasingly dominant logic of consumption expressed in the rapid expansion of a commercial sensibility into areas of culture formerly beyond its reach.

Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) organizes its analysis around an opposition between a transcultural human practice of dividing the

content of the material and the mental worlds alike into the counterpoised spheres, one sacred and the other profane:

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred (profane, sacré). This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things. But by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred. (Durkheim, 33)

For Durkheim religion is best understood as a projection of the collective identity of a social group, one that links the individuals within it through their internalization of a shared ethical code. In totemic forms of religion, this communal bond is embodied in a symbolic object which functions as the outward and visible form of the totemic principle or god. In its function of distinguishing one clan from another Durkheim sees the use of flags in modern society as analogous to the totems of more primitive forms of social organization. This symbolic objectification of the group in the form of the fetish is characterized not as primitive irrationalism but as a primary form of human cognition on which more modern forms of rationalism are superimposed. *Against the Grain* can be read as an attempt to document the trauma stemming from a shift in the productive material foundation of a society and the rupture this creates between the subject and the field of material culture from which it

generates a sense of its own individuality. The novel effectively argues that such a shift necessitates a corresponding alteration in the terms through which the community symbolically represents itself to its members. The spleen and maladjustment that structure Des Esseintes' characterization are symptomatic of that anomie specific to the nineteenth century as an emergent consumer culture penetrates areas of life traditionally circumscribed from the influence of economic or other worldly concerns. Despite the monastic décor he chooses to furnish one of his apartment's rooms in, it is clear that in Des Esseintes' heart and mind it is the fine arts and aesthetics more generally, rather than theology, that occupies the domain of the sacred. By virtue of the volume and relative affordability of the goods it produced, as well as its ability to restructure social forms according to its particular needs, mass production and the consumer culture it made possible would come to assume for many the character of a sacred plane of existence. This is a development the novel characterizes as a dangerous inversion of the established relationship between the sacred and profane spheres. The variety of ailments Des Esseintes endures in his efforts to exist in a purely aesthetic realm are represented as the sort of apparently psychosomatic but nonetheless life-threatening afflictions of a member of a tribe who has transgressed some taboo.

Against the Grain and Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* both express a sustained concern with this transgression of the traditional borders demarcating the profane and sacred spheres of being, a theme given one of its earliest and most influential iterations to readers of Karl Marx's analysis of a cognitive process he termed commodity fetishism. Underpinning this analysis is the infiltration of these new

productive processes into that portion of human subjectivity formerly the domain of religious (and thus social) modes of thought. In its enormous power to restructure social bonds and public space around its own needs, mass production—and the commodity as its totemic symbol—came to stand as the primary emblem of human social organization above and beyond the transcendent planes of reality in which the sacred is stationed in the major world religions.

A commodity is [. . .] a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor.

The *camera lucida* analogy Marx illustrates this cognitive process through reflects his sense of a cognitive inversion in which the spheres of the sacred and the profane are inverted.¹² Mass produced commodities exist not only as use values in the traditional sense, nor in their ability to symbolically assert one's identification with a certain social group or period (all of which is carefully encoded into the commodity through design, marketing and advertising), but also as an embodiment of the existence of a human collectivity and *socius* as such. The child of a deeply religious family whose grandfather was himself a rabbi, the significance of this coincidence of mass production and a radical secularization of society was not lost on Karl Marx. His metaphorization of the commodity as *eine sinnliche Ubersinnliche* or “sensually supersensual thing” endowed with an auratic element constructs the commodity

¹² “In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself” (Marx and Engels Reader, 247).

implicitly as an object belonging to the realm of the sacred according to Durkheim's dichotomization of human existence into sacred and profane spheres: "There it is a definite social relation between men that assumes in their eyes the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world" (Marx and Engels Reader, 246).

It is worth noting that Marx uses the term "labor" four times in the short passage cited above, a number expressive of his eagerness to ground human identity in the productive process and the labor power that fueled it. Mass production promoted a standardized labor process embodied in the assembly line model developed in Henry Ford's factories even as these same techniques served to lower the price of a whole spectrum of goods now available to a growing, rapidly urbanizing middle class. As Fordism and Taylorist scientific management compromised the ability of the average, increasingly replaceable factory or office worker to construct an identity and accompanying sense of social recognition out of its role in the productive process, the sphere of consumption offered itself as a compensatory medium with which to remedy this deficiency. The aesthetics of modernist literature reflect this social process with striking veracity, elaborately theorizing this new relationship to identity and to the very concept of human sociality, for it is with modernism that consumption itself becomes serious work. Flaubert's axiomatic expression of modernist aesthetics places the author in the position of a deity commissioned with the task of aesthetically reinventing the world, of fabricating a retelling of the world that reveals to the layman

the hidden truth that dictates its structures and the fate of individual lives.¹³ This is a project that involves a displacement of religious sensibilities into the sphere of aesthetics:

What I would like to write is a book about nothing, a book held together by nothing but the strength of its style, like the earth suspended in space. [. . .] From the standpoint of pure art, one could say there is no such thing as subject, style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things. (Steegmuller, 131)

For Flaubert the author must assemble his text *ex nihilo*, in imitation of the God of Genesis, bestowing light and order upon the chaos that reigns in the *teraa incognita* beyond the borders of human narrative. This canonical formulation of aesthetic disinterestedness captures the intense ambivalence constituting this emerging authorial persona, one obliged to impose a structure upon its creative output based neither on inherited aesthetic traditions and their calculated deformation nor the moral lesson to be garnered from the events and reflections presented, but rather on the formal character of the work as a constructed object. In producing the text the author simultaneously produces the autogenetic and aura-ensconced Artist. This shift is synonymous with the democratizing social environment of the nineteenth century. As opportunities to “improve oneself” in terms of wealth and social standing became more available to certain well positioned sectors of the laboring classes, and as the commercial sphere increasingly served as the locus of collective life and consciousness, modernist conceptions of the author conceived him (women generally being confined to the consumption of literature) as a *laborer*, if a laborer in the fields

¹³ Or for that matter, Baudelaire’s description of the modern author’s task as “a sort of evocatory magic” in “The Painter of Modern Life.”

of “pure literature”: “We are workers of luxury,” writes Flaubert. “Thus nobody is rich enough to pay us.” (quoted in Bourdieu; *The Rules of Art*, 45). This concept of creative labor simultaneously refuses the alienating wage labor of the factory or sweat shop and the exploitative machinations of the bourgeois capitalist and his philistine exaltation of material wealth above and beyond the aristocratic values of taste and “good breeding” that counted for so much in an earlier time.

This is a key aspect of *Against the Grain*’s significance not only as a portrait of *fin de siècle* attitudes towards the rapid social change of the later nineteenth century, but more specifically on how an increasingly dominant consumer culture might alter the processes through which individual identity was constructed in Huysmans’ own time and in coming generations. In a society where collective norms and a sharply limited diversity in the products available to the consumer were increasingly dissolving into the pursuit of individual “lifestyles” and the specific ensemble of goods and services that would animate these, newcomers to these centers of the growing consumer culture navigated these new fields of material culture, often without the benefit of clearly defined norms to guide them. Fashions changed with accelerating rapidity and the consumer was increasingly thrown back upon his or her own resources in terms of responding to these changes, though not without help from marketing and advertising firms.¹⁴

¹⁴ As Rosalind Williams observes, “[d]andyism began as a revolt against the dominance of bourgeois culture, but by the end of the century it also had to resist mass culture” (Williams, 126). In the eight decades that passed between Beau Brummel’s time as the *arbiter elegantiae* of early nineteenth century England and the publication of *Against the Grain* the democratization of luxury associated with the emergence of mass production was largely achieved. Thus the dandy’s evocation of lifestyle through consumption as well as other forms of social posturing was necessarily performed towards a

Throughout the novel we are given evidence of Des Esseintes' desire to invest himself in some sort of organized religious system, one that would provide him with a regimen of ritual worship offering him a more consistent and effective means of addressing the severe psychic dissonance that afflicts him. The church represents an authenticity no longer available in his own age of derivative and thus adulterated cultural forms:

For years, the holy oils had been adulterated with goose grease; the taper wax with burnt bones; the incense with common resin and benzoin. But worse than all, the substances indispensable for the holy sacrifice, the two things without which no oblation was possible, had likewise been falsified—the wine by repeated diluting and the illicit addition of Pernambuco bark, elder-berries, alcohol, alum, salicylate, litharge; the bread [. . .] by ground haricot beans, potash and pipeclay.

(335)

This facet of Des Esseintes' characterization is more than a commentary on the sacralization of aesthetic ideology within the Aestheticist school and the *l'art pour l'art* ethos it espoused. It also speaks to the instrumental logic that encroaches upon

wider audience in terms of class, income, and access to cultural capital. Where Brummell had known virtually down to a man whose opinion in London “mattered” in terms of achieving the sort of prestige he coveted (a small, hermetically sealed group whose lives had little if any meaningful contact with any circles beyond their own), figures such as Robert de Montesquiou, the Comte D’Orsay or other dandy/aesthetes of the late nineteenth century such as moved in a more porous social world where the criteria differentiating tastefulness from vulgarity were less clear and far more contextual. There was an increasingly unified voice to be heard in novels and journalism of the decades spanning the turn of the twentieth century in which Huysmans and Durkheim wrote in that as a result of the increasing volume of inhabitants and accelerating pace of life in general, social contact in the city streets and public spaces in these decades grew more fleeting, often consisting of no more than an exchanged glance in the street, material show rather than expressions of speech or bodily deportment and grace becoming the dominant means of pursuing distinction in these late nineteenth century urban environments.

religious forms and rituals within this historical period committed to a model of progress and civilization understood as synonymous with economic growth, commercial expansion and a faith in science and rationalism. The above passage reiterates Des Esseintes' conviction that the sort of emotional catharsis he yearns for is only achievable by means of an external prompt instrumentally triggered by a ritualistic arrangement and consumption of a symbolically charged constellation of objects and materials. This is a species of consumption-mediated "magical thinking" that reaches an apotheosis in the character of the dandy. It is not unique to this social type, however, as Des Esseintes character is constructed as a sort of case study in the practice of consumption as an act of religious faith, albeit of a private, radically desocialized form. The novel represents this as a dangerous misapprehension of the nature of religious ritual and worship by means of his protagonist's vitriolic outrage before these adulterations of the holy sacrament, and his pointed disregard of the fact that religious practice is not meant to unilaterally induce the cathartic moment so much as to facilitate it by symbolically expressing the psychic process involved, which would otherwise remain an entirely subjective affair; ritual brings religion into the sphere of the social, but the solipsistic imaginary that dominates Des Esseintes' construction of these rituals forecloses this social aspect of the process, ironically permitting religion to be reduced to one more index of his affective distance from any actual social network. This exceedingly instrumental conception of religion recapitulates one of the novel's central themes in which the objects that Des Esseintes commissions and collects to *express* his nature ultimately come to *embody* it in a radically externalized and alienated fashion. Huysmans clearly intends these

theological exertions to be interpreted as a perversion of the religious impulse, representing as it does a regression to a more primitive conception of the relationship between the individual and the sphere of the sacred.

In his discussion of the role of the cult in archaic religious practice Durkheim writes:

In every cult there are practices that act by themselves, through a virtue of their own, without any god mediating between the individual who executes the rite and the goal pursued. When [in prebiblical times] the Jew stirred the air at the feast of Tabernacles by shaking the willow branches in a certain rhythm, it was to make the wind rise and fall. He believed that the rite produced the desired result automatically, provided it was correctly performed. (*Elementary Forms*, 35)

The regressive element in Des Esseintes' conception of the sacred as diagnosed by Durkheim, then, is its dissociation from a communally grounded horizon of beliefs, myths and an ethical posture deriving from these. Implicit in both authors' position is the assumption that in its more highly developed manifestations religious ritual functions to facilitate a socially functional constellation of affects, a "structure of feeling" in the individual who undertakes them. With the breakdown in traditional models of religious belief, the text suggests, consumption and the aura of collectivity exuded by the mass produced commodity are increasingly taken up in a dubious attempt to reestablish this interior sense of an affective social bond.

Des Esseintes stands as an archetypal expression of this recurrent theme of modernist avant-garde literature, as for example in Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy*. Jacques Moran has just recalled that it is Sunday, too late to catch late Mass. As a result he finds himself unable to settle down to a comfortable day at home until he has

gotten this irksome duty out of the way. At this point, however, a difficulty presents itself:

I remembered with annoyance the lager I had just absorbed. Would I be granted the body of Christ after a pint of Wallenstein? And if I said nothing? Have you come fasting, my son? He would not ask. But God would know, sooner, or later. Perhaps he would pardon me. But would the Eucharist produce the same effect, taken on top of beer, however light? I could always try. What was the teaching of the Church on the matter? What if I were about to commit sacrilege? I decided to suck a few peppermints on the way to the presbytery. (*Malone Dies*, 97).

Like Beckett in his facetious portrait of Moran, Huysmans bases the characterization of his protagonist on a solipsism that models the effects of a process sociologist Norbert Elias describes in *The Civilizing Process* as “the hardening of ego boundaries,” one he sees as coextensive with the advance of civilization and the ever increasing self-scrutiny it has tended to impose on the individual at virtually all levels of society.¹⁵ Like Moran, Des Esseintes exists closed off not only from other subjects but from any vital affective connection with his faith, personifying the extreme introversion characteristic of such an incapacity to invest itself in a transcendent (and thus communally grounded) element of religious ritual. In Des Esseintes’ case this incapacity appears attributable to the effects of rationalism and the increasing influence of secularization and scientific discourse more generally on the libidinal economy of the individual. Thus Moran ponders whether he will “be granted the body

¹⁵ “But it is already quite clear how human beings are becoming more complex, and internally split in quite a specific way. Each man, as it were, confronts himself. He ‘conceals his passions,’ ‘disavows his heart,’ ‘acts against his feelings. [. . .] Continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one’s own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts, become more and more indispensable preconditions of social success.” (Elias, 398)

of Christ after a pint of Wallenstein” much as a patient might ask their doctor if a prescribed medicine must be taken with or without food in order to be effective. Des Esseintes likewise falls afoul of a disastrous confusion of means and ends. *Against the Grain* suggests that in its original archaic form the art work, like the host in the Catholic mass, symbolized a transcendental relationship between the finite subject and the field of social relationships that both allowed it to survive as well as endowing it with this very individuality. By foregrounding the mental anguish that sees rituals not as the instrumental cause or inducement of catharsis and a cyclical release of tension, but as a methodical attempt to induce in the individual a more harmonious emotional landscape, a dynamic but ordered constellation of affects.¹⁶ Conceived as a ritual identification with his forebears through them the displaced feudal aristocracy more generally, Des Esseintes’ inverts Durkheim’s model in which religion functions as a means by which individuals are able to establish an affective bond denoting a shared set of ethical and cultural values, exercising his aesthetic faculties in a campaign of disidentification with the democratizing social landscape of late nineteenth century Paris which is unable to furnish him with the form of recognition his profound identification with an obsolescent aristocratic world view constrains him to. Thus every aspect of his Fontenay retreat’s furnishings is chosen to connote a distance from the vernacular social forms he feels his very identity

¹⁶ Beckett’s enduring interest in Huysmans is expressed in his comments in his 1929 essay “Proust,” where he finds a similarity between these two authors who are both regarded as avant-garde yet show strong “retrogressive tendencies. [..] Huysmans loathed [this impulse] in himself and repressed it. He speaks bitterly of ‘the ineluctable gangrene of Romanticism,’ and yet his Des Esseintes is a fabulous creature, a Lord Alfred Baudelaire” (“Proust,” 80).

threatened by. However the desperation and financial recklessness with which he throws himself into this project belies the truth of the situation: it is out of a need to create such a distance more so than to indicate the given nature of the social/taste-based “distance” that drives this particular mode of consumption.

Writing in the wake of the wave of totalitarian fascism that swept across Europe in the 1930’s installing military dictators at the helm of several major European nations Albert Camus was moved to write that, “[m]uch more than the cult of the individual, Romanticism inaugurated the cult of the personality.” Regarded for a moment outside the context of twentieth century fascism, Camus’ remark is revealing not only in its foregrounding of the performative character of all identity, but for its suggestion that it was the Romantic era in particular in which the concept of a consciously constructed identity and “personality” took on a distinct form. The distinction drawn between the connotations of “individuality” as opposed to those of “personality” are suggestive of the sort of commodification of identity that informs so much of the splenetic narrative tone of *Against the Grain*. Fictional works like Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold* and Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* provided vivid models of a sort of romantic, non-aristocratic nobility of character in which much of the German middle class would find an identificational template that helped cognitively position them in the shifting socioeconomic terrain of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As a movement implicitly tied up in the encroachments of European industrialization, the Romantic era was one in which the individual felt with a renewed urgency the need to produce itself as something more than an as yet untapped reservoir of inexpensive labor, qualities that might render the individual

unamenable to absorption by the standardizing tendencies of an increasingly industrialized and deskilled production process.

Tellingly, Des Esseintes expresses neither a deep knowledge of nor interest in church doctrine or the methods of expiation and spiritual catharsis commonly seen as the primary goal of worship. His interest is rather in the former role of the Catholic church as the preeminent patron of the arts and a model for the sort of exclusivity of spirit which dandyism tries to express, if in thoroughly secularized and worldly terms: all traces of transcendence as religion traditionally conceives it are absent from his religious identifications. Des Esseintes' idiosyncratic identification with the church is indicative of the double bind confining him to the abject solipsism that dominates his character: filled with a biological need for communion with other human beings, his culturally acquired intolerance for even the most culture-bound strata of society leaves him forced to seek out these sorts of simulacral communities permitting him as they do a "virtual" relief from his isolation, one mediated through cultural artifacts, whether a sculpture, an exotic plant, or a priceless religious tome. In so far as the dandy and aesthete by definition acknowledge no mode of taste or "lifestyle" as superior to that expressed in their own lives, they aspire to be founders of their own social worlds. Figures like Brummell and Montesquiou disregarded the legal and financial conventions of their day, and many of their milieu funded their extravagant lifestyles if they were not independently wealthy by living on credit and a gambler's instinct for bluffing. *Seul* ("Alone"), the working title of *Against the Grain*, suggests the intense solipsism and misanthropy that inform Huysmans' portrait of the Decadent character, of a piece with the Nietzsche of *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*:

“What is sublime suffers no witnesses.” Des Esseintes embodies the *l’art pour l’art* taboo against any suggestion of conforming one’s artistic output (and with such an acute case of dandyism as Des Esseintes’ every breath must be handled as an aesthetic event) to an established market—the job of the “hack.” He attempts to ensure the truly exalted singularity of his own lifestyle and taste by assuming himself both the role of performer and that of audience, quite literally “taking himself for an object,” as Freud’s essay on melancholia describes the process (Freud, 249).

Like the dandy, Des Esseintes applies Flaubert’s dictum of style as “an absolute manner of seeing things” not only to the sphere of aesthetics, but to every aspect of life and the physical environment he lives it in. He secures his superiority only on pain of constantly registering and externalizing his appreciation of the ambiguous line between taste and affectation, between authenticity and its imitation. Des Esseintes’ efforts to enlist art and his own aesthetic sensibilities to fill the role formerly occupied by religion dramatize Walter Benjamin’s observation that mass production “liberates the art work from its parasitic dependence on ritual” (*Illuminations*, 224). The novel’s treatment of these religious themes suggests a process whereby religion within this era of disenchantment does not simply evaporate like a fog under the rising sun of rationalism. Rather, as Huysmans’ characterization suggests, it is displaced onto cultural forms of an ostensibly secular character: the quasi-religious character of the *l’art pour l’art* ethos is a literary instance of this, whereas the new iron and glass architecture of the day flooded the arcades with natural light even more effectively than the medieval cathedrals, whose innovative design had been developed with this as a primary goal. The world exhibitions were likewise recognized by astute

observers as early as the 1840's as "shrines to the commodity form" (*The Arcades Project*, 7).

From the outset of the novel we find references to Des Esseintes' leanings towards a more genuinely ascetic, even monastic life, all of which are jarringly displaced onto a more urgently felt need to create an environment exalting his ultrarefined aesthetic sensibilities, as in the following description of a scene preceding his retreat to Fontenay:

His final caprice had been to fit up a lofty hall in which to receive his tradesmen. They used to troop in and take their places side by side in a row of church stalls; then he would ascend an imposing pulpit and preach them a sermon on dandyism, adjuring his boot makers and tailors to conform strictly to his encyclicals on matters of cut, and threatening them with pecuniary excommunication if they did not follow to the letter the instructions contained in his monitories and bulls. (*Against the Grain*, 91)

Here the monstrous coupling of religious terms with material goods and commercial functions recapitulates the encroachment of market-based socioeconomic forms upon those preindustrial forms that dominated in the days of the Des Esseintes family's prime. He struggles throughout the novel to ritualize his consumption in a way that might enable it to perform what he presumes to be the same anxiety-quelling function as the Catholicism his forebears had practiced. His "mouth-organ" and bejeweled tortoise prove distracting for a time. Invariably, however, his attacks of panic and an incapacitating spiritual vertigo return with redoubled force. Lacking as they do any trace of the transcendental properties of more traditional forms of religious thought and practice, consumption as the sort of autogenetic "personal theology" he practices at Fontenay and the exaltation of lifestyle to the status of a religious practice cannot

provide the sort of cyclic psychic discharge of anxiety characteristic of the catharsis found in more traditional forms of worship. For Des Esseintes, consumption remains a relentlessly self-enclosed religion. His plight recalls Max Weber's discussion of the psychological effects of Calvinism's abolition of confession in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, seen as it was as an attempt to encourage the favorable outcome of a divine judgment that in so far as the Calvinist doctrine of predestination was concerned, had been established at the foundation of the world:

In its extreme inhumanity this doctrine must above all had one consequence for the life of a generation which surrendered to its magnificent consistency. That was a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness [. . .]. No one could help him. No priest, for the chosen one can understand the word of God only in his own heart. (Weber, 61)

Weber concludes that the effect on the day to day life and psychology of most individuals was to create a profound uncertainty coupled with a palpable decline in the social apparatuses available to address or resolve those tensions. With the outlawing of the confessional in particular “[t]here was no place for the very human Catholic cycle of sin, repentance, atonement, release, followed by renewed sin” (Weber, 71).

Undoubtedly there is a substantial difference between the inexorable Puritan rationality Weber explored and the sort of spiritual vacuum that Des Esseintes inhabits, but the role of consumption in the text in facilitating the sort of emotional catharsis Weber alludes to here is unmistakable. Deprived of anything resembling faith or actual belief, religion exists for him only as a signifier disarticulated from the transcendental level of signification it can only gesture towards from a distance—the monk's quarters he reproduces in his Fontenay home, for example, in which he passes

a few hours perusing his priceless volumes from the Latin decadence of the early medieval period when he is visited by a spirit of religiosity. Such an environment may satisfy his wandering desire for an afternoon or so, but disassociated as it has been from the socially grounded system of rituals and social relationships that the daily life of the monastery life was organized around, his efforts in this direction prove equally unsuccessful. Predawn prayers and flagellation are clearly beyond the power of Des Esseintes' enervated will, as is the spiritual reward yielded up to the individual capable of such discipline, or so Huysmans' text implies. In contrast to the imaginative world inhabited by his ancestors represented in the family portraits described in the opening scenes of the book, Des Esseintes' is thoroughly rationalized and "disenchanted," necessarily regarding such forms of belief as relics of an obsolescent age:

In short, although he had no vocation for the state of grace, he was conscious of a genuine fellow-feeling for those who were shut up in religious houses, persecuted by a vindictive society that cannot forgive either the proper contempt they feel for it or their averred intention of redeeming and expiating by years of silence the ever-increasing licentiousness of its silly, senseless conversations.

(*Against Nature*, 76-7)

This is a paradoxical "fellow-feeling" based, it would appear, in a mutual misanthropy and forcefully expressing the fundamentally narcissistic character of Des Esseintes' identification with the Church. In so far as its protagonist runs the gamut of Decadent indulgences only to find himself despondent and physically wasted by the close of the novel, *Against the Grain* attempts in the cultural context of *fin de siècle* France the same sort of allegorical lesson as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did in early sixteenth century Protestantism. His reflection on procrastination might be read as an

account of a similar pilgrimage but cast in Huysmans text in the style of Simmel's blasé attitude: "At bottom, human wisdom might be summed up in the precept: drag things out indefinitely, say no, then, after a long time, yes; for indeed there was no way of managing mankind half so good as procrastination" (285). The text rejects William Blake's assertion that "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" as we find him at the close of the novel the victim of the same conundrum on which it opened; by now, however, he has squandered most of his fortune, and has damaged his health to the point where his doctor insists he must give up his life at Fontenay or face an imminent death:

'In two days time I shall be in Paris,' he told himself. 'Well, it is all over now. Like a tide-race, the waves of human mediocrity are rising to the heavens and will engulf this refuge, for I am opening the flood gates myself, against my will. Ah! But my courage fails me and my heart is sick within me! Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who would fain believe, on the galley-slave of life who puts out to sea alone, in the night, beneath a firmament no longer lit by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope!' (220)

Though Huysmans himself insisted he saw nothing of this at the time, *Against the Grain* appears to leave Des Esseintes at the threshold of a religious conversion. This one, however, is not the fruit of an epiphany, possessing much more the character of a chess player being check-mated. Bested by fate in this contest of wit, he must renounce the exceptionalist logic that drove him to create his Fontenay "ark." This entails his return to a life in conformity, if only in external appearances, with the blandly wholesome pursuits and morality of that very social world he has spent the novel struggling so desperately to divorce himself from.

Against the Grain has much to say to our own era regarding the historical malleability of identity both in those aspects of the individual's life it was presumed to reside in and in the relative variety and inexpensiveness of the material culture characteristic of mass production. At a broad level, the historical trajectory suggested by the international exhibitions, arcades and department stores of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the digitized Internet-based communications systems of today describes a process that tends towards a deep anthropomorphosis of being, a sort of "allegory of the cave" at the level of culture and its spectacular reproduction. Culture, traditionally understood as a protective buffer against the entropic forces of barbarism and social chaos, was felt by increasing numbers to be a primary source of social discord as it came increasingly to be associated with the ambivalent role urbanization and increasing mechanization played in transatlantic society as a whole. As Huysmans' countryman, poet and essayist Paul Valéry wrote in 1900:

Just as water, gas and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.
(*Illuminations*, 219).

Huysmans' novel can be read as a critical anthropological analysis of aesthetics and what Pierre Bourdieu termed "the dynamics of the field" couched in the style of late nineteenth century French Aestheticism. *Des Esseintes* is a case study of the human animal's tendency to surround itself with and at times to lose itself with cultural artifacts that reflect back an idealized image of itself, a tendency admonished in allegories from the myth of Narcissus to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and beyond. *Against the Grain* is strikingly prescient in its dramatization of such a withdrawal of

the individual into a simulacral sociality that takes place via You Tube, Second Life and other Internet-based forms of virtual community. The Internet advances the logic of mass production to the level of the digitized image, infinitely plastic, infinitely reproducible. In its design and in the semiotics of “lifestyle” which we know as marketing and advertising, mass production represents more than a fundamental shift in the production process of modern society. It should also be understood as a movement away from centuries-old forms of identity construction towards our present day’s growing investment in virtual communities and the avatars that inhabit them. These Internet-based forms of community encourage the disarticulation of identity and personality into the realm of consumable objects and images and decors and practices that serve to prosthetically enhance and extend individual identity. As we will see in the following chapter, newer technologies such as racially coded cosmetic surgery packages or the commodification of physiological traits made possible through trait-specific prenatal genetic screening do not return identity to the body so much as they draw the body into the logic of consumption in a new way.

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Chapter Three:

Through the Looking Glass: Consumption and Identity in *The House of Mirth*

The window mirror is a characteristic furnishing of the spacious nineteenth-century apartment. [. . .] The function of the window mirror is to project the endless row of apartment buildings into the encapsulated bourgeois living room; by this means, the living room dominates the reflected row at the same time it is delimited by it. (T. W. Adorno quoted in *The Arcades Project*, 542)

He had come on her that morning in a moment of disarray; her face had been pale and altered, and the diminution of her beauty had lent her a poignant charm. *That is how she looks when she is alone!* had been his first thought; and the second was to note in her the change his coming produced. (*The House of Mirth*, 82)

These quotations are meant to outline the intersection of turn of the twentieth century mass culture with an increasingly performative and self-conscious production of identity fostered in part by the rapid expansion of mass reproduced visual culture and its dissemination through marketing and advertising. This was an era in which mass produced goods were increasingly coded in their design and in the marketing and advertising that supported them to reflect dominant social hierarchical of class and race. In the United States the so-called “race records” of the 1920’s and 30’s were but one example of a growing number of industries attempting to tailor their product to a growing black urban working class. In these environments formerly discreet cultural forms and attitudes confronted one another and were reshaped in the process. The increased efficiency of mass production meant lower prices on a variety of products that were often more affordable imitations of fashions formerly only within the means of the luxury class. Advertising agencies exerted themselves to provide the proper models of lifestyle with which these products were affiliated. These Fordist

models of production encouraged a process whereby identity would be increasingly understood less in terms of the individual's place in the production process and more in terms of various patterns of consumption.

The Great White Hope: Lily Bart as an Emblem of Gilded Age White America

Realist and Naturalist authors are consistently preoccupied with these new highly visual urban environments' effects on individual subjectivity, though their respective assessments of the ramifications of those changes are widely divergent. The consistent preoccupation with specularity and the representation of individual identity in early twentieth century American works such as Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Theodor Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* reflect a historical moment in which an encroaching mass culture, rapid urbanization and increased immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe and Asia would encourage many of Wharton's privileged background, herself included, to reject the more fluid and class-mobile social forms emerging in early twentieth century America for the oligarchic conservatism in which her New England youth had been steeped. The present reading of *The House of Mirth* focuses on Wharton's construction of her heroine as the expression of a kind of socially-generated "mirror stage." A concept that has proven to be more influential in literary analysis than clinical psychology, the notion of the mirror stage was first put forth by psychoanalyst Henri Wallon and later taken up by Jacques Lacan who described it as the moment at which the individual, confronted with its own reflected image, is first able to recognize itself in this reflected, external body. In doing so, Lacan argues, the subject is able to objectify itself in a way that

allows it to transcend the primary narcissism of infancy and conceive of itself as an ego among others.¹⁷ The tragic heroine of Wharton's 1904 novel pushes this sort of self-objectification to a radical extreme. In doing so demonstrates the economic dependence of women on their spouses according to convention and law alike created a social atmosphere that all but compelled women to conceive of identity and personality as consciously constructed masks designed to be consumed by those on whom they depended materially. The narrative represents Lily Bart's compulsively externalized and objectifying vision of selfhood as the inevitable result of her acculturation as a socially polished and attractive young woman of the Gilded Age luxury class. This state of affairs is all the more pronounced due to Lily's lack of the dowry resulting from the failure of her father's business that would have given her some leverage in her choice of a husband.

The House of Mirth was Wharton's first widely read work, selling over 140,000 copies in the first three months of its publication. It is the story of Lily Bart, her ill-fated attempts to manage a suitable marriage after her father is financially ruined, and her protracted falling away from the social environment she so fatally identifies herself with throughout the novel. Compelled by these reduced financial circumstances, she accepts what she believes to be an innocent offer from a friend to invest some of her money in a promising stock. When the investment fails to yield the

¹⁷ That the experience of a primarily visual self-recognition implicit in the term "mirror-stage" should not be taken in a rigidly literal sense is implied by the obvious fact that the blind go through the same process of ego objectification as the sighted. Rather, the image of the toddler first apparently "recognizing itself" in a mirror or other reflective surface is itself symbolic of a cognitive moment of self-objectification that symbolizes the movement of the individual subject into the sphere of the social.

hoped for return, Gus Trenor, eager to gain greater favor with her, takes the liberty of giving Lily a sum of his own money in its place, without telling her these details. Later, when Bertha Dorset stands in jeopardy of being discovered in an infidelity she uses her knowledge of this morally ambiguous exchange—of which everyone but Lily is aware—to give credence to her innuendo of an affair between her husband and Lily for the sole purpose of concealing her own and with full knowledge of the devastating consequences it cannot fail to have on Lily's already compromised prospects. Not only does Lily fail to expose Bertha in this lie, she also declines to use a bundle of letters she unexpectedly comes into possession of documenting Bertha's extramarital liaisons with George Selden, the lawyer who the sentimental storyline running through the text figures as the only suitable marital partner for Lily. Unable to quell his doubts over Lily's feminine purity in the light of a series of misleading innuendoes circulated about her, Selden fails to come to Lily's aid when (in her own mind, at least) she is no longer in a position to save herself. After their final meeting, during which she secretly burns Bertha's incriminating letters to Selden, Lily returns to her boarding-house room to die of an accidental chloral overdose.

Handled for most of its critical history as a traditional novel of manners, criticism in more recent years has focused increasingly on the text's Naturalist elements, in particular the role of environmental determinism in the novel's use of plot and character development as well as the ways in which Wharton's extensive reading in social engineering and eugenic theories of the day influence them. In a letter written in the same year as *The House of Mirth's* publication Wharton remarks that "far-sighted altruism savours of the romantic Northern races; beneath a hot sun

there is less weighing of remote contingencies" (*Uncollected Letters*, 112; Kassanoff, 38). Such language demonstrates a personal investment in the theories of Nordicism and Aryanism popularized by works such as Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), in which he recapitulates Wharton's sentiments. According to Grant, "Nordics" probably evolved in a climate which "must have been such as to impose a rigid elimination of defectives through the agency of hard winters and the necessity of industry and foresight in providing the year's food, clothing, and shelter during the short summer. Such demands on energy, if long continued, would produce a strong, virile, and self-contained race which would inevitably overwhelm in battle nations whose weaker elements had not been purged by the conditions of an equally severe environment" (Grant, 167).

Published in the wake of American colonial expansion into the Phillipines after a four year war concluded in 1902 and into Puerto Rico and other regions following the Spanish-American War of 1898, the novel's characterization of Lily Bart represents a singularly well developed literary elucidation of such turn of the century imagings of America as first and foremost a white nation. The first details the reader is offered as to Lily Bart's appearance, as well as her suggestive first name, encode her physicality with the stamp of both economic and genetic privilege. Lawrence Selden unexpectedly meets her in a New York train station: "He led her through the throng of returning holiday-makers, past sallow-faced girls in preposterous hats and flat-chested women struggling with paper bundles and palm-leaf fans. Was it possible she belonged to the same race?" (*The House of Mirth*, 6). This juxtaposition of what the authorial gaze insists are these eugenically deficient

figures with the indiscriminating consumerism signified by the paper bundles and the unfashionable fans they carry produces a pointed association of a rapidly expanding mass culture with the increased immigration of the period and of Lily's function in the text as a symbol of class distinction, whiteness and an implicit American nativism: a metonym of turn of the twentieth century conservative ideals of an exclusively white, "Nordic" America. These initial descriptions also effect a conflation of economic and genetic metaphors in Selden's "confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to make her," positing her as the furthest point of development yet achieved in a long process of natural selection as well as suggesting such refinement's dependence upon what remains in the text a dimly apprehended laboring class (*The House of Mirth*, 6).

Lily as a Model of Habitus

Theodor Adorno's quotation at the head of the chapter finds in the "window mirror" an architectural analogy for the psychological process of acculturation and the internalization of a habitus that constellates the values, desires and fears that motivate the subject as a social actor.¹⁸ The window-mirror embodies this dialectic,

¹⁸ The window-mirror here acts not only as an optic analogy for the process of cultural internalization or acculturation, but as a model of habitus that would grasp this process in terms of the larger structure it is embedded within:

In order to escape the realism of the structure, which hypostatizes systems of objective relations by converting them into totalities already constituted outside of individual and group history, it is necessary to pass from the *opus operatum* to the *modus operandi*, from statistical regularity or algebraic structure to the principle of the construction of this observed order [. . .]. [T]his is the

modeling as it does the projection of an exterior social environment onto an interior which it structures. This is a model of acculturation elaborated in *The House of Mirth* through Lily's meticulous performance of an identity intended to secure her a more secure position in the social niche her upbringing has cognitively bound her to—one that proves not only to “delimit” the horizons of her affections and ambitions, but, as represented by Wharton, to severely truncate them.

This figuration of the subject as a psychic organism fundamentally dependent for survival on its immersion within a particular social environment composed of a complex network of people, places, practices, shared memories and associations which sustain the subject as a stable ego-identity shares a striking correspondence to the concept of habitus developed in sociological studies such as Marcel Mauss' (*The Gift* [1923-4]), Norbert Elias (*The Civilizing Process* [1939]) and Pierre Bourdieu (*Distinction* [1979]), among others. The previous chapter laid out the particular usage of the concept of habitus deployed in these chapters, stressing the way in which it confines the subject to a particular social niche and to which its culturally specific values and modes of perception are attenuated. Building on this model, the present chapter focuses on Wharton's depiction of Lily Bart's relationship to the ultra-wealthy social milieu she moves within as one which she remains uncritically

precondition for establishing an experimental science of the *dialectic of the internalization of the externality and the externalization of internality*, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification. (P. Bourdieu; *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72 [author's emphases]).

Wharton's characterization of Lily Bart models this internalization of externality, representing a close-up case study of such a process of acculturation and its consequences as it is lived. Much of the tragic pathos of the novel rests in the fact that Lily ultimately falls prey to these very tastes, values, biases and aspirations that structure what might be called “the Bellomont habitus.”

admiring of and eager to position herself within, even as the narrative constructs this relationship between subject and the web of social relations it inhabits as intrinsically asymmetrical and even unnatural in terms of what the text represents as the superior, authentically American taste she embodies.

Lily's characterization models an idealization of femininity as an ornamental addition to the masculine sphere of trade and politics, one that functions as a means of confining women of her socioeconomic background to a state of ignorance equated with feminine purity, one that condemns her to a fatal lack of self knowledge. *The House of Mirth* grounds its critique of such gender-based truncations of identity in a metaphorization of the habitus—her upbringing, the crucial relationships and experiences that have served to shape her psyche—as an artificial, womb-like world that confines her to a state of prolonged infancy by concealing from her the real socioeconomic foundations on which that reality is founded. As such, the novel represents an interesting problematization of the concepts of class and class identification by foregrounding the depth of the roots that bind the subject to those interrelated systems of values and taste, of ethics and aesthetics, that one is exposed to in the earliest stages of the acculturative process, reminding us of “the privileged character of what comes first” (Adorno, 163). Fiction or no, *The House of Mirth* offers a vivid sociological portrait of how the instincts and impulses that take root in Lily's formative early years only serve to further her own undoing when acted upon from her disadvantageous economic position.

The narrative consistently stresses the dependence of Lily Bart's sense of self-worth upon the degree to which her own lifestyle conforms to a body of values

inculcated in her childhood, values organized around an aristocratic exemption from productive labor and the related regard of life as an essentially aesthetic project—a “decorative mission,” as Lily herself puts it (163). She is a creature “relieved from the tedium of being useful,” a phrase Walter Benjamin used to describe the particular social character of the commodity, and one that articulates a similar commodification of identity imposed on female identity at all levels of society. At a broader level, the novel represents a penetrating examination of the nature of agency in terms of the individual as a social actor and the complex relationship between the exercise of one’s free will in the face of social structures they are interpellated by. “Why,” Lily ponders early in the novel, “why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?” (*The House of Mirth*, 18) Wharton’s novel argues that her protagonist’s unmarried and financially dependent status effectively compels Lily to exist behind such a “structure of artifice” in order to restore herself to the social milieu her father’s financial ruin has debarred her from.¹⁹

Likened to “some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty” (329), Wharton’s characterization of Lily Bart demonstrates how the very privileges imposed on most non-working class women of the day, such as abstention from virtually all productive

¹⁹ In their introduction to *The Invisible Flaneuse?* editors Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough observe that “[i]n one sense the literature of modernity may be understood as a controlling mechanism for regulating *the ways in which women became visible in public*” (D’Souza and McDonough, 4; eds. italics). Texts such as *The House of Mirth* and Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* go further, suggesting not only ways in which women’s participation in the public sphere was carefully regulated, but the strategies with which women responded to these marginalizations.

labor and participation in only the most restrained sorts of recreation, paradoxically reinforced their socioeconomic dependence on their husbands and male relatives. It is this dependence, the result of this prohibition placed upon women of her class background from participating in any aspect of the non-domestic labor process, that drives Lily to her fateful decision to invest in the stock market at the suggestion of one of her closest friend's husband, Gus Trenor. Ironically, it is this transaction and the potential familiarity it suggests between Lily and Trenor that undoes her efforts to wed Percy Gryce, ushering her another step further in her incremental descent to the boarding-house she has moved into by the end of the novel.

Wharton constructs Lily as the conspicuously consumed object *par excellence*. Her position of economic dependence virtually compels her to regard herself through the eyes and in terms of the desires of those others who hold the means to resituate her in this, the only social atmosphere she can recognize herself as such within. Wharton's characterization stresses the gender-specific character of this crucial stage of development in the subject, something Lacan's original formulation of the "mirror-stage" leaves unexplored. Descriptions of Lily such as her "art of blushing at the right time" (6), or Selden's confusion as to whether her hair was "ever so slightly lightened by art" (5) present Lily's as a sort of ideal femininity whose charm lies in its expression of a nature rehabilitated through its subordination to a thoroughly aestheticized cultural matrix. Such details position her as an American counterpart to *Against the Grain's* Des Esseintes in so far as both are conceived as striving at every level of life to refashion the natural, given self to the demands of a

carefully performed identity, one thoroughly mediated by the cultural and economic imperatives particular to their beseeched social position.

Through her consistent underscoring of Lily's seemingly compulsive self-consciousness and the superficial judgments that result in her false appraisal by Selden and others, Wharton works to reproduce for the reader the anxiety and uncertainty inherent in a subjective position where class-specific societal norms methodically reduced women such as Lily to the role of being viewed, a passive object of visual consumption. Crucially, it is Lily's lack of attention to appearances that undermines her efforts to reestablish herself within the luxury class her upbringing has accustomed her to. It is her fatally naïve hope that several essentially innocent but readily misconstruable encounters—her meeting with Selden at the Benedick Hotel, discovered by Simon Rosedale, and her financial dealings with Gus Trenor in particular—will be taken as such by others that results in her missing what opportunities she has of marrying into the sort of great wealth she has been brought up to aspire to. So it is that, whereas the face-saving cunning exercised at Lily's expense by Bertha Dorset in the near-scandal surrounding her involvement with Ned Silverton proves thoroughly effective, Lily's good works count for nothing to those in whose hands her fate rests, remaining unknown to them.

But *The House of Mirth's* characterization of Lily hints at a deeper truth: that modern image-based forms of knowledge embodied a new semiotic system through which to represent a uniquely modern idea of reality, a semiotics more immediate in the meanings it produced and less exclusive both in its form of expression and the level of cultural literacy required to interpret it. Moreover the text demonstrates how

those who proved most proficient in mastering these new spectacular codes could, with some ingenuity, translate that mastery into tangible gains. There is a striking continuity to be found in this increasingly dominant logic of appearance over any deeper reality with the rhetoric of early American entrepreneurialism typified in the writings of Benjamin Franklin. At the outset of chapter four of book one, Lily awakens to a summons to help her Aunt in answering some correspondence while her secretary is away. Aggravated by this reminder of her continued economic dependence upon people she feels herself superior to in terms of taste and a capacity for appreciating their ostentatious surroundings, Lily allows her frustration to impede the self-possession required for her to strategically adapt her behavior to her immediate audience:

Mrs. Trenor's summons, however, suddenly recalled her state of dependence and she rose and dressed in a mood of irritability that she was usually too prudent to indulge. She knew that such emotions leave lines on the face as well as in the character, and she had meant to take warning by the little creases that her midnight survey had revealed.
(44)

Wharton's representation of this moment superficially suggests in Lily a virtually instinctual faculty that attenuates her appearance in every detail to represent herself in the most advantageous light to her audience. It also intimates how, from Lily's perspective, everyone she encounters in her radically circumscribed social horizon appears to be part of an audience she feels herself to have been trained to perform for. Ultimately, however, this insistent self-objectification is situated in a social context that explains this character trait in terms of an objective socioeconomic structure whereby the reader can recognize the degree to which such self-objectification is the

psychological legacy of Lily's uncertain social position in relationship to the other characters, virtually all of whom are on a surer financial footing than herself.²⁰ As Benjamin Franklin, that bard of American Revolution-era free market entrepreneurship wrote in his autobiography: "The most trifling actions that affect [one's] credit are to be regarded. Beware of thinking all your own that you possess, and of living accordingly. It is a mistake that many people who have credit fall into" (quoted in Weber, 15-6). For Lily, whose beauty and social poise are her only wealth, the body, like her own reputation as an untarnished young woman, is a capital that must not be drawn upon or compromised in any way; not until it has served to reestablish her in the only social environment in which her aristocratic sensibilities and graces can hope to function as an approved social currency.

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This chapter builds on the discussion of habitus begun in the preceding chapter while anticipating the following chapter's analysis of George Schuyler's 1931 novel *Black No More*. *The House of Mirth* is generally accepted as a canonical work of American literature set in the wealthiest strata of New York society, the latter a

²⁰ This passage reiterates the process Norbert Elias described in *The Civilizing Process* as "the hardening of ego boundaries" within human society and subjectivity as a consequence of an ever-expanding web of socioeconomic relations: "But it is already quite clear how human beings are becoming more complex, and internally split in quite a specific way. Each man, as it were, confronts himself. He 'conceals his passions,' 'disavows his heart,' 'acts against his feelings. [. . .]. Continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one's own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts, become more and more indispensable preconditions of social success." (Elias, 398)

largely overlooked work of picaresque science fiction told from the perspective of a young man named Max Disher who, along with most of black America, undergoes a new procedure that renders them “white.” Beneath these differences, however, lie several important continuities related particularly to their respective commentaries on the role an increasingly mass form of consumption and material culture in general play in organizing the desires and life strategies of characters like Lily Bart and Max Disher, the protagonist of *Black No More*. More specifically, Wharton and Schuyler’s texts suggest how consumption in early twentieth century America was structured around a semiotics of white privilege that was in part an effort to consolidate a national identity impervious to the threats of hybridization and radical demographic change characteristic of the era. It also seeks to demonstrate some of the ways in which Wharton’s novel—in many ways a critique of the dominant monopoly capitalism of the day’s tendency to commodify identity in order to render it accessible to the market.

Criticisms of the luxury class in *The House of Mirth* often represent the ultra-wealthy as a class fuddled by its excesses, coddled and pampered to a point where it has lost the capacity to exist in any less rarefied element. Wharton’s characterization of the arriviste Wellington-Brys consistently lampoons their ostentatious performance of wealth as serving certain evidence of a constitutional poverty of taste. Struggling one evening to decide on the “correct” restaurant to patronize Mrs. Bry notes “[o]f course one gets the best things at the Terrase, but that looks as if one didn’t have any other reason for being there” (147). Such passages encourage the reader, regardless of their social background, to join Wharton on the heights of what the narrative frames

as the unquestionably superior taste embodied by the narrative's quiet ridicule of such *arrivistes* as the Wellington-Brys and their conscious performance of wealth. Her noting that dining at the Terrace "looks as if one didn't have any other reason for being there" efficiently casts her as a performer rather than an embodiment of the sort of truly aristocratic essence that Lily signifies in the text. Such moments demonstrate how *The House of Mirth* functions as an outstanding novel of manners while simultaneously transcending the traditional parameters of the genre by incorporating a potent and sustained element of critique into the narrative. While suggesting a decadent affectation which shapes their individual desires according to a symbolics of differentiation and distinction-making expressed primarily along lines of consumption, such moments in the novel serve to imply that, in contrast to this clumsy appropriation of aristocratic identity, Lily, and by association Wharton and other arbiters of literary taste of the day such as her friend Henry James, embody it in some ontologically essential way. Implicitly at stake in these competing models of a virtue at once noble, democratic, and essentially American is the right to take up the reins of the nation as it assumed a position of increasing influence on the international stage.

Lily's betrayal at the hands of those who, in so doing, demonstrate their unfitness to wield the social authority their wealth nevertheless endows them with is contrasted by her own refusal to use Bertha Dorset's letters as a means of reestablishing herself within their social strata. This refusal functions as positive proof of Lily's magnanimity and innate nobility as opposed to the duplicity and underhandedness characterizing the conduct of the wealthier acquaintances she

moves amongst. Formally similar to the position of the narrator in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd," Wharton's narrator constitutes itself first and foremost as a subject possessed of an instinct that compulsively distinguishes between authentic versus performed modalities of consumption and "lifestyle." What appear to be critical commentaries on the undeserved and ill-used privilege of the luxury class function at a deeper level to position Lily's subjectivity as coextensive with a genuinely aristocratic spirit, one expressed not in terms of "mere" wealth, but of a certain delicacy of spirit and moral rectitude.

This refinement of spirit is qualified by Wharton's repeated suggestion of the degree to which Lily's is (to borrow Milton's phrase) "a cloistered virtue." Having been assiduously sequestered from all but the most luxurious society, Lily is only dimly aware of the working classes on which that world is built as a distasteful but necessary reality perched obscurely upon the periphery of her consciousness. As a result, she experiences a lifestyle of enormous privilege as one of deprivation, comparing her lot as she invariably does to that of the Trenors, Dorsets and her similarly ultra-wealthy associates. This lack of perspective on Lily's part, rooted in her upbringing and the resultant fact that she can experience the sort of ego-nourishing recognition required by the subject in social dialogue with this stratum of society alone, is an essential component of her tragedy. This relative poverty functions at several points in the novel as a narrative device symbolizing Wharton's insistence upon the non-essential relationship between great wealth and the body of qualities that might qualify a specific group to possess great political power. Any elements of class critique in the novel are thus subordinated to this struggle within the

luxury class itself. The terms of the struggle recapitulate what the narrator of Huysman's *A Rebours* describes as a conquest of "the aristocracy of money" over a traditional form of nobility rooted in "blood," a criterion of distinction the narrative unfailingly invests itself in.

Nancy Armstrong (*Desire and Domestic Fiction*, 1987) and others have persuasively argued in reference to the period of American literary realism extending roughly from 1890 to World War I that changes related to urbanization and the rise of the middle class produced new normative ideals of femininity which valued the individual woman in terms of her embodiment of a certain form of female sentimentality as opposed to more traditional conceptions of femininity more closely related to nineteenth century American society's "cult of domesticity" and its stress on piety, purity and submission. The domestication of desire Armstrong documents entails a "struggle to represent sexuality took the form of a struggle to individuate wherever there was a collective body [. . .] and to evaluate these according to a set of moral norms that exalted the domestic woman over and above her aristocratic counterpart. [That is,] the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies" (Armstrong, 5). Early analyses of *The House of Mirth* and their tendency to regard Lily Bart as an emblem of crisis at once national and moral underscore the degree to which she represented a fictional embodiment of such discursive contention. Armstrong's argument helps us constellate Wharton's position as a wealthy female author of the upper classes within the discursive intersections of mass culture, the changing terms of gender and of

femininity in particular, and the debate around the question of an authentic American identity.

That Lily's boldness and self-assertiveness in the face of the obstacles ranged against her end in tragedy foregrounds her role in the text as an emblem of moral rectitude and compassion that stands in sharp contrast to the duplicity and self-interest of Judy Trenor, Bertha Dorset and others. Lily's refusal to use the letters documenting Judy Trenor's infidelity when she herself has falsely accused Lily of this very thing in order to draw attention away from her own extramarital affair likewise positions Lily on a plane of moral superiority to her milieu. As Armstrong's thesis suggests, the text insists on Lily's value as something independent of her aristocratic identifications and aspirations; it is these, after all, that result in her inability to successfully negotiate a transition out of the social habitat of dependence she finds herself trapped within throughout the novel. As allegory the text lays the blame for Lily's death at the hands of what it represents as a decadent American ruling class that is unable to recognize Lily's intrinsic merits due to its chronic fixation with status and luxury. Lily's failure to secure a husband despite the availability of several wealthy men in her own circle speaks to the validity of such a model, in so far as the fatal hubris Wharton inscribes in Lily's character—that is, her attempt to secure a life of independence rather than serving as an appendage to her marital partner and his estate as do all the other most powerful women in the novel—is implicitly structured around her failure to conform to this ideal.

Lily, Gilded Age Whiteness and Anti-Immigration Legislation

At a broader level *The House of Mirth* affords valuable insight into the practices of self-presentation formulated by those who lived in the pre-World War I era, how the literature of the day negotiated the representation of these strategies, and how women of various socioeconomic positions responded to the new opportunities and threats embodied in these new social ecologies. The present essay, then, reads Wharton's tale as an allegory for the performance of an ideal not only of cultivated femininity (in both the eugenic and the cultural sense of "good breeding"), but as a trope for a conception of whiteness specific to the political and historical context of turn of the twentieth century America. The content and terms of performance of this whiteness was shifting in response to the striking demographic shifts characteristic of this era, in which hundreds of thousands of Europeans arrived in America annually—more than fifteen million between 1885 and World War I. Such a rate of immigration aggravated tensions around what American identity consisted of, reinforcing the triangular relationship between consumption, an increasingly efficient, rationalized and deskilled mass production and the relatively new advertising industry that helped to code new products from clothes and cleansers, to dishware and home furnishings as goods no proper middle class home should be without. Newcomers to America eager to fit in were often responsive to such advertising, and advertising, design and production would continue to work together to refine this process (Ewen, 54-60).

Prior to 1885 England, Germany, and Scandinavia had been the primary regions of origin for these émigrés. In the three decades prior to World War I immigrants were primarily Italian, Russian, Polish, Slavic, or Jewish, populations turn of the century social engineering discourses marked as non-white, or at best only liminally

so. If there had been any doubt in the United States as to the implicit encoding of “pure America” not only as white, but as an Anglo-European form of whiteness, the immigration laws passed in the 1920’s laid these to rest. 1921 legislation set quotas at three percent “for immigrants already represented in the United States population” (Duster, 14). Eugenic organizations, selectively drawing from IQ tests administered by the Army in the years during the universal conscription in response to World War I, sought to persuade Congress that immigrant populations from Southeastern regions of Europe were “genetically inferior” to those comprising the majority of pre-1885 immigration. Their success resulted in the passage of a still more restrictive Immigration and Restriction Act of 1924 setting quotas at 2% of those nations represented in the 1890 census, when Britain and Northern Europe had been the primary regions of origin for immigration. Signing the Act into law, President Coolidge explained that “America must be kept American.” (Duster, 14).

Lily Bart’s embodiment of such an implicitly American whiteness is suggested in the text both through the images and metaphors that Wharton constructs her tragic heroine through, as well as through her preoccupation with taste and manners, as expressed in Lily’s attitudes towards and relationship with clothes, furnishings, and people. The present reading focuses on Wharton’s figuration of race, class and gender in terms of her use of biological allegories and metaphors in the text, and how these attempt to logically ground the particular model of class identification the novel models. In doing so the chapter examines how both the social problems diagnosed as well as the remedy suggested for their treatment were molded by the contentious

debate around immigration, eugenic theory and the politics of representation in the construction of an American identity.

Wharton subtly models the process of othering in its discourse and behaviors that constitute and maintain the Bellomont crowd's sense of sharing a "possessive investment" not only in whiteness but in the rituals of conspicuous consumption that are essential to rendering such an economically-inflected conception of whiteness socially legible. In one such scene, sensing she is close to negotiating an engagement with Percy Gryce, before an ill-timed outing with Selden derails her designs, Lily expresses an admiration for the ostentatious display and smug demeanor of Gryce and the Van Osburgh's that is in inverse proportion to the outrage she had recently felt for the power their wealth gave them, and their irresponsible use of it. Once more Wharton describes Lily's sense of her undergoing a sort of cultural acclimatization to the exalted heights inhabited by these monied families; imagery that likens great wealth and the effects of protracted exposure to it to a highly rarefied biosphere, and the characters who inhabit it such as the Gryces and Van Osburgh's as overbred creatures effectively trapped in their social hot-house of opulent dinner parties and sailing excursions, being incapable of existing for any length of time in any other:

In the rosy light, her companions seemed full of amiable qualities. She liked their elegance, their lightness, their lack of emphasis; even the self-assurance which at times was so like obtuseness now seemed the natural sign of social ascendancy. They were lords of the only world she cared for, and they were ready to admit her to their ranks and let her lord it with them. Already she felt within her a stealing allegiance to their standards, an acceptance of their limitations, a disbelief in the things they did not believe in, a contemptuous pity for people who were not able to live as they lived. (54)

As long as Lily manages to regard her friends from within the benevolent aura of this “rosy light,” the rightness and unquestioned desirability of their social forms and values go unquestioned. In such passages Wharton’s text likens the effect of a protracted acquaintance with luxury as inducing an insidious moral senility characterized by an inability to be motivated by any other logic than that one dictated by their all-consuming fixation with shoring up whenever possible there established positions of socioeconomic ascendancy. Here as elsewhere Wharton maps Lily’s imagined relationship with her social environment in terms that hybridize the terminology of tribalism with that of the drawing rooms of Gilded Age New York’s Brahmin class. Organizing her affections is a consuming sense of dependence on “her companions,” fueled by what remains for most of the novel a vaguely apprehended awareness of her total inability to secure her own livelihood, even after having overcome the profound taboo against work that her upbringing has instilled in her, a class-specific taboo Simon Rosedale neatly expresses through his incredulity at the news of Lily’s search for wage labor:

“Out of work—out of work! What a way for you to talk! The idea of your having to work; it’s preposterous.” He brought out his sentences in short violent jerks as though they were forced up from a deep inner crater of indignation. “It’s a farce, a crazy farce,” he repeated, his eyes fixed on the long vista of the room reflected in the blotched glass between the windows. [. . .].

“I don’t know why I should regard myself as an exception—” she began.

“Because you *are*; that’s why; and your being in a place like this is a damnable outrage. I can’t talk of it calmly.” (309)

A sentimental reading might be tempted to read this as an expression of some genuine affection finally asserting itself against Rosedale’s earlier regard of Lily as no more

than the means of endowing him with a new degree of social buoyancy. Examined against the wider fabric of the novel, however, Rosedale's outrage reveals itself as an objection to Lily's decision to participate in earning a living through productive labor in so far as it threatens to subject Rosedale himself and his class to a sort of ritual pollution simply by virtue of having been even so distantly associated with these lesser social substrates. Rosedale's calling Lily's efforts towards financial independence as a "damnable outrage" and his incapacity to "talk of it calmly" are evocative of the danger women such as Lily are subject to within patriarchal social structures where they function as a symbolic lynch pin within these intersecting systems of economy and desire. Her efforts to find an honest way to extricate herself from her questionable financial involvement with Gus Trenor are regarded by Rosedale only as a mutiny against the values and collective attitude that constitutes them as a social group, manifesting as it does Lily's willingness to disregard convention and decorum in her effort to achieve independence outside of the established sexual and financial economy.

Though *Against the Grain* and *The House of Mirth* both speak to the emerging discourse of eugenics and social engineering, the issue is visualized in each through the mediating lenses of political ideology including issues of citizenship, immigration and American efforts towards colonial expansion, as well as aesthetic investments of genre and national tradition. Wharton's narrative construction of Lily Bart shares several significant traits with J.K. Huysmans' treatment of Des Esseintes in *Against the Grain*. Huysmans' representation of Des Esseintes as the product of an intensive process of artificial selection, one that leaves Huysmans' protagonist unable to

participate in the modern, increasingly heterogeneous (for Des Esseintes, vulgar and herdish) character of public life and space. His dilemma is in this respect much akin to Lily's in terms of their struggle to maintain a foothold in a social world that recognizes the value of the rapidly declining, pre-bourgeois-era social consciousness their upbringing has instilled in them. Like Des Esseintes, Lily feels she is "not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in" (*The House of Mirth*, 29).

Such metaphors cast Lily's relationship to her social world in terms that in many ways overlap the concept of habitus, understood as a social niche to which the subject is minutely adapted. Invested in the various theories of social engineering and social Darwinism being disseminated at this time, this and many other figurations of the lived experience of subjectivity in *The House of Mirth* draw on the language and concepts of evolutionary theory, undertaking their uneasy projection onto more sociological terrain. But the present reading argues for a crucial distinction between Wharton and other canonical Realist authors. For where texts such as *Sister Carrie*, *The Ladies' Paradise* or *McTeague* stress the overwhelming influence of heredity and environmental conditioning in shaping the character of the human individual, Wharton's text posits the possibility of the subject's gaining an extrinsic perspective upon these constitutive forces, a liminal position on the margin between the self that has never seen its foundations threatened by external upheaval and that which sees those foundations laid bare, such as Lily does after her failed attempt to achieve financial independence by taking up a job as a hat trimmer. Often criticized for its

lack of attention to the lives of the working class, this chapter argues that Wharton's story of Lily's failure to disidentify herself from a social group which is only capable of using her as an object of amusement before her betrayal and final exile symptomatically suggests a similar inability in Wharton herself to achieve a truly objective critical perspective on her own class. The text's highly selective critique tends to cast such racial and class divisions in terms of biological and botanical metaphors that work to dehistoricize them, disregarding the influence of demographic and economic factors that originally brought them into being.

Wharton's biological metaphors for habitus and the internalization of identity through acculturation are consistently fashioned under the sign of confinement and restriction. These acquisitions become the fatal impediments that condemn Lily to an identification with the very values and biases that, following her betrayal by Bertha Dorset and consequent ostracism from her liminal position in the Bellomont social constellation, doom her efforts to achieve financial independence through supporting herself. Most of these biological and botanical tropes represent female characters and tend to naturalize identity as a biologically imposed system of beliefs, values and desires. When she writes of Lily that "inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product she was: an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea-anemone torn from the rock" (301), or describes the social reality Lily has been raised in as a "hot-house of traditions and conventions," there is an association of this confinement to such a "narrow range" of the social hierarchy with the finer stuff the text implies her character is fashioned from. In a crucial scene near the end of the text Lily regards her future, now bereft of any hope

of achieving the brilliant life she had only a few years earlier felt herself to be destined for. What is more, she proves unable to negotiate her abrupt transition to this new life as a boarder in a working class rooming house struggling to find work despite her lack of marketable skills. Tellingly, it is “the sense of being swept away like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of years” that most disturbs her (331).

Lily’s lack of personal wealth or dowry results in the dependence and deference she must show to her more advantageously positioned relatives and friends, a subordination all the more keenly suffered due to her conviction of her own superiority in taste and social grace alike than those around her. As we will see, this ambivalent relationship to the wealthy social milieu she moves in sets the stage for her repeated but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to break free of these old associations, especially after her betrayal and ostracism from this particular social niche. Modeling the intellectual distance from the New York Brahmin class that Wharton cultivated as an aspiring female author in a male-dominated literary world which Wharton cultivated in her life and work, *The House of Mirth* has proven a particularly rich site in which to explore the intersections between the growing consumer culture and the changing parameters of identity and the individual conception of selfhood in turn of the twentieth century America, both in its conception and performance. At the same time, however, this reading of *The House of Mirth* looks at Lily’s story as a symptomatic reflection of the limits to which its author was able to develop a genuinely critical perspective on her relationship to her own privileged New England background.

Wharton renders this fatal facet of Lily's character in vivid detail. Late in the novel, when Lily is compelled to try and earn her own living as a ladies' hat trimmer, her friend Gerty Farish reflects that "she could see no hope for her friend but in a life completely reorganized and detached from its old associations, whereas all Lily's energies were centered in the determined effort to hold fast to those associations, to keep herself visibly identified" (277). Unable to exist outside the cultural and economic horizons around which her own self-identity is irrevocably bound up, and equally unable to regain access to this domain through the appropriate marriage, Lily withers and ultimately perishes as would a plant succumbing to root trauma after being too abruptly introduced to a new soil. As we will see, however, the complexities of Wharton's characterization model Lily's complicity in her own destruction in so far as she herself fails to reject or disidentify herself with the double standards that stymie her efforts to reestablish herself within a social stratum in accord with the one she had known before her father's financial demise.

Lily, Realism and Environmental Determinism

It comes as a surprise to many students of American literature that in the first half of the twentieth century *The House of Mirth* was read almost exclusively as an outstanding "novel of manners," rather than as a naturalist work concerned with assaying the role of environmental determinism on the character formation of individuals and the social organizations they composed, as criticism would increasingly come to write of the genre in the latter half of the twentieth century. This change was due not least to a shift in the critics' understanding of naturalism as a

genre implicitly dealing with content focused on the seamier side of life—the characterization of life as a drama of drives and instincts that propelled characters into one another’s lives where, more often than not, discord or outright violence was the result—to a conception of the genre that deemphasized content and setting in order to focus more on studies in environmental determinism and its relationship to contemporary theories of social Darwinism, both influential sites of debate at the turn of the century. The lack of compunction naturalist authors’ such as Wharton permit themselves in using these terms consistently is suggested in passages such as the following, where they seem to be semantically if not methodologically interchangeable:

“From the beginning?” Miss Bart gently mimicked her. “Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have! Why the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for. Oh no, I won’t blame anybody for my faults: I’ll say it was in my blood, that I got it from some wicked, pleasure-loving ancestress, who reacted against the homely virtues of New Amsterdam, and wanted to be back at the court of the Charleses!”

(*The House*

of Mirth, 234)

Lily and Gerty’s exchange recapitulates the methodological impasse the concept of habitus has traditionally attempted to bridge within sociology. Marcel Mauss, one of the earliest theorists of the concept, described it as a set of inculcated dispositions and psychic postures “anchored in the body;” a body controlled not by an autonomous ego, but by a subject itself conceived as the product of an acculturative process that instills within the individual a cluster of values, attitudes and “dispositions” (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action) towards the objective world. The

result of the process is to simultaneously enable the subject to conceive and carry out strategies of self-advancement within that objective structure, while fundamentally circumscribing the character of those strategies in terms of a series of local, regional and national cultures. Describing neither complete determination by social factors nor individual autonomy, the habitus stands between “objective” structures of social relations and the forms of material and intellectual culture that mediate them, and the individual “subjective” behavior of actors within that network of relations. In this way sociologists and anthropologists model the inculcation of objective social structures into the subjective, mental experience of agents, and reflecting the dialectical (i.e. simultaneously subjective/psychical and objective/institutional) processes whereby social institutions reproduce themselves.

Such an approach to the question thus affords a means of going beyond the conundrum Lily’s reply to Gerty expresses. Lily recasts this methodological impasse in various terms, usually following a mishandled liaison with a wealthy marital candidate in which she struggles to ascertain whether her failure has been the result of a social world pitted against her relative impecunity, or of a simple lack of discipline or cunning on her part. Oppressed by the prospect of marrying Percy Gryce, whose only attraction for Lily is his great wealth, and reflecting on the road that has brought her to this point, Lily reflects: “[Marrying Percy Gryce] would be a rest from worry, no more—and how little that would have seemed to her a few years earlier! Her ambitions had sunk in the desiccating air of failure. But why had she failed? Was it her own fault or that of destiny?” (32). These and similar passages go beyond the pointedly one-directional model of “environmental conditioning” often found in the

naturalism of Norris, Dreiser and Crane, allowing Lily herself to play a role in assaying the specific relationship of social conditioning to heredity and genetics (and where, if anywhere, individual agency fits in) in shaping the behavior of the individual. Through Lily, Wharton argues that such naturalistic theories of environmental determinism are useful metaphors to describe the action of the modernist city on the individual, while avoiding a totalizing model of identity formation

As suggested earlier, the various social cliques depicted in Lily's time at Bellomont, with the Gormer milieu, Miss Hatch, and others are repeatedly metaphorized as celestial bodies that exert their own sort of gravitational attractions and repulsions for Lily, as when she describes her sense of excommunication from the Bellomont circle early in chapter eight of part two:

If one were not part of the season's fixed routine, one swung unsphered in a void of social non-existence. Lily, for all her dissatisfied dreaming, had never really conceived the possibility of revolving about a different center; it was easy enough to despise the world, but decidedly difficult to find any other habitable region. Her sense of irony never quite deserted her, and she could still note, with self-directed derision, the abnormal value suddenly acquired by the most tiresome and insignificant details of her former life. (*The House of Mirth*, 27)

The final sentence of the passage stresses how important a role contrast plays in conditioning Lily's desire to secure a position within what her upbringing has conditioned her to regard as the empyrean heights of society occupied by the Dorsets, Gryces, and Mrs. Penistons of the world. Thus it would appear to be the very fact of being debarred from a certain social group she has grown to identify herself with that

her desire for it consciously asserts itself. Sociology and anthropology show us that (to borrow George Simmel's formulation) "value is a function of the resistance something puts up against our possession of it," and personal wealth, which has always played such a big role in Lily's thoughts and desires, has always proved elusive for Lily. So it is that shortly after Brenda Dorset betrays Lily in order to suture up some rents in her marriage caused by her dalliance with Ned Silverton that the latter realizes that "if she slipped, she recovered her footing, and it was only afterward that she realized she had recovered it each time on a slightly lower level" (272). Such a vertically stratified metaphorization of Lily's imagined social world ultimately need not undermine the aforementioned cosmological model where different social spheres are situated like individual nebulae orbiting the central brilliance of the Bellomont crowd. Rather, it stresses how Lily regards these worlds not as distinct, but as intrinsically associated in a hierarchy based in terms of the degree of distinction and social refinement they evoke for her. Wharton is careful to suggest how Lily's youth and the teachings of her mother have resulted in the misapprehension that it is their delicacy of taste and "sensibility," their intolerance for all but the finest things that explains their vast wealth. So it is that when Lily is first introduced to a branch of the family only marginally less wealthy than Lily's parents at this time, and thus displaying in their domestic life a façade of unmitigated luxury and splendour, she immediately cognizes it as an expression of a plebeian streak in her aunt's and cousins' character. Relative to the obsessive attention to propriety vigilantly practiced by her mother, irrespective of how inaccurate a reflection of their

actual economic state it might be, Lily finds the tenor of life in these homes excruciatingly demotic:

Lily knew people who ‘lived like pigs,’ and their appearance and surroundings justified her mother’s repugnance to that form of existence. They were mostly cousins who inhabited dingy houses with engravings from Cole’s *Voyage of Life* on the drawing-room walls, and slatternly parlour-maids who said “I’ll go and see” [. . .]. The disgusting part of it was that many of these cousins were rich, so that Lily imbibed the idea that if people lived like pigs it was from choice and through the lack of any proper standard of conduct. This gave her a sense of reflected superiority, and she did not need Mrs. Bart’s comments on the family frumps and misers to foster her naturally lively taste for splendor. (34)

Wharton’s description of this process of inculcation as an “imbibing” of the values of the luxury class is particularly evocative, likening the process as it does to the consumption of some intoxicant that produces a *camera lucida* effect on the individual’s perception whereby such differences resulting primarily from economic stratifications are interpreted as manifestations of individual character, not least due to Lily’s parents conventional practice of concealing from their daughter any contact with or developed awareness of any socioeconomic strata below their own. An insoluble tension drives the development of Lily’s character: too authentically noble to condescend to the bland materialism of Percy Gryce and Gus Trenor, and effectively debarred from marrying Simon Rosedale in so far as the text frames it as an intrinsically dysgenic union (Rosedale being Jewish), Lily is equally unable to adapt to a social reality that might permit her to support herself.

All this leaves her at an impasse crudely resolved by Lily’s accidental overdose. More recent analyses of this conclusion have critiqued the Victorian

morality that suddenly grips Lily in these closing pages of the book, finding it implausible that Lily would not devise some way to pay off her debt to Trenor in a timely manner while still pursuing some business venture that would allow her to secure her independence. Valid as these reservations are, they discount the degree to which Wharton employs this device as a means of recapitulating (not only in terms of the pride and recklessness of Lily's character, but at the formal level of the novel) this recurrent thematization of acculturation and the internalization of habitus as a process that overdetermine the horizon of choice and volition according to which the mature social actor behaves. Trained as she has been by her mother to keep her attention rigidly fixed upon the sort of social conquests through which Lily might recover the economic and cultural capital lost to them upon Mr. Bart's financial ruin, Wharton presents Lily to the reader as having no real alternative but to attenuate her highly specialized skills to the only social sphere they hold any value for. Wharton's characterization of Mrs. Bart is dominated by these references to her careful training of Lily to regard her physical charm as a tool—a weapon, even—with which to storm the gates of unrestrained luxury that had been closed to her since her father's financial ruin. The narrator's description of the element of calculation and "design" even in what appear to be Lily's most spontaneous gestures takes on the appearance of a by-product of her mother's influence in the light of certain recollections dating from the time of her father's financial ruin: "She remembered how her mother, after they had lost their money, used to say to her with a kind of fierce vindictiveness: 'But you'll get it all back—you'll get it all back with your face'" (32). Such references to her childhood foreground a process whereby Lily internalizes a body of culturally

specific values and dispositions towards her social reality that will serve not only to shape the designs and strategies she will use to make her way in the world, but to dictate the particular ethical and aesthetic value systems within which those goals are pursued²¹. These early scenes form a backdrop to the apparent recklessness and pride with which Lily handles her attempts to secure a fortuitous marriage later in the novel. It is precisely because her upbringing has conditioned her to feel she deserves not only wealth in a husband, but the same sort of abstract delicacy and charm that form the dominant note in so much of Wharton's characterization:

She was almost sure she had "landed" Percy Gryce, a few days' work and she would win her reward. But the reward itself seemed unpalatable just then; she could get no zest from the thought of victory. It would be a rest from worry, no more—and how little that would have meant to her a few years earlier. [. . .] But why had she failed? Was it her own fault or destiny? (32)

At this point the scene shifts from Lily's reflections on her deteriorating marital prospects to memories from her childhood, thoughts that underscore the degree to which her appetite for luxury is an environmentally determined characteristic:

A house in which no one ever dined at home unless there was 'company;' a door-bell perpetually ringing; a hall table showered with square envelopes which were opened in haste, and oblong envelopes which were allowed to gather dust in the depths of the bronze jar [. . .]—such was the setting of Lily Bart's first memories. (32)

Later in the novel when she has been forced by reduced circumstances to move into a working class boarding house we read that "[s]omething of her mother's fierce shrinking from observation and sympathy was beginning to envelop her [. . .]" and

²¹ Here both local level influences such as that of Lily's mother, Aunt Peniston and extended family, as well as more diachronic forces such as inherited religious and political sensibility come to bear on shaping the subject's experience of its habitus, and the parameters of the possible.

she finds herself instinctively following a path from the door of her bedroom to the hat shop where she works that allows her “to come and go unremarked by other workers” (297). By this late point in the novel Lily is living wholly outside of the only social environment she has any real familiarity with. Here she comes to sense the degree to which her life has been a performance, implicitly conceived and carried out as a sort of spectacular commodity meant to be consumed by the wealthy crowd whose favor she struggles to secure. Exiled from this world she denies a similar transaction to the laborers she shares the boarding house with; Lily tacitly insists on their inability to properly read her performance of privilege. Lily suffers from an inability to experience recognition as an individual in any less economically exalted social stratum than that her early childhood has accustomed her to: “Why the beginning was in my cradle, I suppose—in the way I was brought up, and the things I was taught to care for” (*The House of Mirth*, 216).

These early insights into Lily’s character will serve to color the careful reader’s appraisal of her later conduct, appearing less in the light of these early experiences as an expression of a proud character than of a set of dispositions and attitudes towards wealth and labor inculcated in her formative early years. Conditioned as she has been to be satisfied with nothing but the very best of all things by her upbringing in general and her mother in particular, even at the expense of allowing debts to go unpaid, Lily’s horror that her debt to Gus Trenor and the dishonor attached to it might become tolerable to the point that she might neglect to actually pay it back offers further confirmation of her authentic nobility of character, so different from her mother for whom such social elegance and grace remain a matter of performing a

series of acquired gestures and postures, all of which are laid aside as soon as one has passed beyond the scrutiny of the public. In so far as he has allowed his business interests to be overborne by Mrs. Bart's formidable skill in conspicuous consumption it can be said that Lily's native integrity permits her own character to transcend such limitations as these. Here as elsewhere Wharton avoids adopting a simplistic model of acculturation and individual character development embraced by less nuanced Naturalist or Realist novels of the era. Carrie Fisher's remarks on her friend's fatal vacillations in her attempts at "landing" a suitable husband succinctly connote the narrator's complex relationship to Lily: "Sometimes I think it's just flightiness and sometimes I think it's because, at heart, she despises the things she's trying for. And it's the difficulty of deciding that makes her such an interesting study" (196).

Such questions remain unresolved in the face of Lily's accidental overdose, but not before she unambiguously rejects diminishing herself to the level of dishonor displayed by Bertha Dorset and Gus Trenor by writing out a check returning the money she owes Gus Trenor. It is Lawrence Selden who finds this check beside Lily's lifeless body the morning following her overdose, forcing him to acknowledge his mistake in giving credence to the rumors surrounding Lily's recent past. This final encounter recalls Lily's reflections on Selden during their first conversation at Bellomont and her impressions of him: "[. . .] he had preserved a certain social detachment, a happy air of viewing the show objectively, of having points of contact outside the great gilt cage in which they were all huddled for the mob to gape at. [The door] stood always open; but most of the captives were like flies in a bottle, and having flown in, could never regain their freedom. It was Selden's distinction that he

had never forgotten the way out” (59). The passage’s closing simile reiterates the novel’s insistence on the corrosive effects of great wealth, in particular wealth too quickly accumulated. In objectifying this network of socioeconomic relations Wharton positions her narrator at a point outside of the decadent values and motivations characteristic of her heroine’s habitus—a point similar to the one Wharton saw herself as heir to as a child of a staid New England family as opposed to the more recently minted fortunes of Percy Gryce and the Wellington-Brys.

Lily’s unshakeable commitment to the very attitudes and practices that lead inexorably to her social downfall and ultimately her death likewise model how individual agency, having been fundamentally structured and circumscribed in its considerations of possible strategies with which to navigate a course through a given social landscape can unwittingly play into the hands of the very fate it struggles to avoid. Much of the complexity of *The House of Mirth*’s treatment of Lily’s story derives from the fact that she never suffers a blow sufficient for her to cultivate any sustained contempt for the society she struggles in vain to secure herself a place in. After Bertha’s betrayal, however, Lily’s ostracism by her circle is sufficiently acute to produce the beginnings of such a disidentification with these people and their protean ethics:

She did indeed leave cards in plenty; she kept to herself, with a smiling and valiant persistence, well in the eye of her world, nor did she suffer any of those gross rebuffs which sometimes produce a wholesome reaction of contempt in their victim. Society did not turn away from her, it simply drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favour. (271)

Here again, Lily's disappointment is based as much if not more on a fundamental loss of status and social standing within her community than on any specifically economic loss. The helplessness expressed here underscores her growing realization of a more fundamental dependence on this community which has cast her aside, one resulting from an upbringing that has methodically deprived her of any opportunity of developing skills that might allow her to support herself. Whereas Lily's marital designs on Percy Gryce run aground upon a general aversion to his personality, Gryce being a young man whose massive wealth is matched only by an equally titanic blandness of character, the novel clearly presumes Simon Rosedale's unsuitability as a husband for Lily due to his Semitic background, something the text codes as standing in a dysgenic relationship to the Nordic purity of Wharton's tragic heroine. Wharton draws Rosedale from a palette of stereotypical traits that would have been familiar to most of her audience. He is initially presented as "a small glossy-looking an with a gardenia in his coat," a "plump rosy man of the blonde Jewish type with smart London clothes fitting him like upholstery and small sidelong eyes which gave him the air of appraising people as if they were bric-a-brac" (14). His demeanor is "a mixture of the artistic sensibility and business astuteness which characterizes his race" (17). Towards the end of the novel, a point at which he represents a more immediate threat to Lily's immaculate taste, genetic background and, in a word, her superior "breeding," Rosedale is described as "gross, unscrupulous, rapacious," his bearing that of a "predatory creature" (261).

Though living in a state of chronic impecunity relative to the circle she moves in, Lily is nevertheless clearly intended to embody an aristocratic essence based on a

set of criteria that transcend an exclusively economic criterion of value. In this sense Wharton's text constructs Lily as an ethical test to gauge the fitness of her wealthier friends to act as custodians of the values of both genetic and economic pedigree that are woven into her character—a responsibility Lily's death signals their fundamental inability to live up to. At this level her wealthy friends symbolize the new industrial fortunes driving the rapid expansion of the American economy and in turn stoking its imperial ambitions. In her autobiography Wharton remarks that "[a] frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implications lie in its power of debasing people and ideas" (*A Backward Glance*, 207). In the gauntlet of missed opportunities that compose Lily's story the Jewish Rosedale is represented as the final threat to the integrity of Lily's character as well as the genetic purity of her children, one the text permits her to elude only in death. Here again, Lily's instinctive identification with the values (and thus, as her relationship with Rosedale demonstrates, the prejudices) of the wealthiest and most influential members of her social world is so absolute the question of Rosedale's suitability as a potential husband never forms itself as a conscious possibility in her mental maneuverings. Such moments in the novel model the unconscious selectivity Lily exercises in her appraisal of the Bellomont crowd's actions and their determining influence on her fate. Whereas Selden's lack of wealth and unremarkable performance in his career as a lawyer are read by Lily as signs of his embrace of a more refined conception of ambition than that displayed by the Dorsets and Trenors in their ostentatious display of wealth, Rosedale's Jewish background encourages

Lily to read his wealth and business success as indices of a gross materialism and worldliness.

The following section, then, examines how the particular lens of value that Lily sees the world through fatally undermines her efforts to accept that her old life is at an end. Unable to disidentify herself with a social world that has trained her to regard life as a “decorative mission,” in which her financial security is possible only within a marital relationship, Lily’s overdose represents Wharton’s allegorical condemnation of a class whose decadence has blinded them to her merits and its glaring lack of them. But what is perhaps most interesting about Lily’s struggle to find her own identity amidst the competing claims of decorum and necessity is how her failure to successfully make the transition to an autonomous and economically independent life at points echoes Wharton’s own struggle to effectively critique a class and a certain ideal of taste despite the fact that, like Lily, it constitutes the sole audience for her aesthetic productions.

The Ties That Bind: Lily and the Vicissitudes of Identification

Several weeks after Lily comes into possession of Bertha Dorset’s intimate letters to Lawrence Selden she is asked by Bertha’s husband George to join the group that will be staying with them at Bellomont for an extended stay. Accepting, she reflects that keeping the letters has allowed her resentment against Bertha to exhaust itself in a way it could not have had she simply destroyed them, rendering their possible use against her antagonist out of the realm of possibility. The realization that her resentment against Bertha has—for the moment—expired recalls to her mind a

Malayan proverb she has read some where, long lost in her memory until now: “If you would forgive your enemy, first strike him a blow” (125). Ironically, however, this is the crucial symbolic act of rejection of her identification with the Bellomont crowd and its fickle, self serving morality which Lily never manages to express. The sentiment paradoxically embodies her tragic failure to recognize the fatal degree to which her unique fund of cultural capital is at the same time the instrument and expression of her continued captivity in a life where she is plagued by a sense of dependence due to her financially precarious position. As a result she dies abandoned, without anyone having known of Bertha’s letters to Selden, or of Lily’s possession of them for roughly two years prior to her death. It is in passages such as these that Wharton’s characterization of Lily so minutely explores the subjective processes that permit the individual to remain embedded in habitual forms of thought and practice that ultimately redound to their own victimization and, in Lily’s case, despair, addiction, and death. The door to other strategies of achieving independence lie open to her; Selden himself has asked her to room with Gerty Farish until Lily is financially back on her feet. But Lily’s distaste for the pious utilitarianism of Gerty’s world, and her incapacity again renders this option effectively unthinkable for her. The ambiguities in Wharton’s characterization of her heroine as to whether it is her mother’s insistent glorification of wealth as a value unto itself or simply something inherent to Lily’s nature effectively models the way these spheres (environmental versus genetic influences, “nature versus nurture,” etc.) overlap and mutually influence one another. Pierre Bourdieu describes this process of constitutive

repression or overdetermination of identity through the powerful influence it exerts on the scope of possibility ultimately presented to the conscious subject.

It is not easy to evoke the subjective experience associated with this world of the realized ought-to-be, in which things that could scarcely be otherwise nonetheless are what they are only because they are what they ought to be, in which an agent can have at one and the same time the feeling that there is nothing to do except what he is doing and also that he is only doing what he ought. (*Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 166)

In what the text suggests is an environmentally determined eagerness to seize on the illusory pleasure of status and wealth, Lily remains oblivious to what the text encodes as the only path by which a woman in her situation might achieve the financial and emotional stability she lacks. Late in the novel, having just left Lawrence Selden's apartment where, unbeknownst to him, she has destroyed Bertha Dorset's letters to him and where, for the last time, Selden is again unable to overcome the constraints of decorum impinging on him and revealing by his allegiance to the ambiguous (and in Lily's case, overtly hypocritical) values of the social world he moves in. For though he lacks their staggering wealth, and despite his insistence to Lily early in the novel that he is able to exist in such close proximity to the fantasy-world inhabited by the Dorsets, Gryces and others without being seduced by it, we find in this, their final encounter with each other, that his feelings have indeed been swayed by the misleading innuendoes he has heard regarding Lily in the months since he has seen her, in particular George Dorset's dubious "loan," her questionable affiliation with the irremediably undistinguished Miss Hatch who also functions in the text as yet another example of the new indiscriminating vision of America Wharton's novel expresses so much anxiety before. When Lily accuses him of this outright she does so

through a metaphor that once more likens class to discreet sociocultural ecosystems whose inhabitants' minute attenuation to existence in these social ecologies renders them unable to exist in any other.²²

Having magnanimously destroyed the letters in Selden's apartment and under his very nose, while never betraying her possession of them, Lily departs: "When she rose he fancied that he saw her draw something from her dress and drop it into the fire; but he hardly noticed the gesture at the time" (321). After her death Selden does indeed come to see all his doubts about Lily's character dispelled; seated beside her dead body the morning after their final conversation Selden feels it is himself more than anyone else who is to blame for Lily's demise in light of his belated realization that they are destined for each other by virtue of their taste and faculty of discrimination consistently coded as genuine in their nature as opposed to the merely performed modes of taste evinced by their peers. This conclusion establishes Lily once and for all as Wharton's tragic symbol of an implicitly Anglo-Saxon American

²² "It seems to me," she said at length, "that you spend a good deal of your time in the element you disapprove of."

Selden received this thrust without discomposure. "Yes, but I have tried to remain amphibious; it's all right as long as one's lungs can work in another air. The real alchemy consists in being able to turn gold back again into something else; and that's the secret that most of your friends have lost." (74)

In their conversations Lily and Selden repeatedly engage in such verbal sparring in which each tests the other for signs of inauthenticity or affectation in their character much as two boxers might search for flaws in their opponents' technique. Whereas Selden's bachelorhood is accepted as not abnormal in a man of his age and career as a lawyer, the text leaves no doubt that the onus is upon Lily to justify her unmarried state and the appearance of a reckless and impulsive character that looms over her reputation following her two terminated engagements.

aristocracy destroyed by the corrupting influence of *arrivistes* such as the Dorset's and Wellington-Brys.

Much more similar to the traditional Victorian sentimental novel in terms of plot and style than what has preceded it, this concluding episode of the novel posits a new life for Lily within the sort of self-sufficient, heterosexually reproductive nuclear family modeled in Nettie Struther's marriage and the child it has produced, rather than the implicitly false fecundity of "mere" economic wealth that has been Lily's primary focus up until the scenes immediately preceding her death. On her way back to the boarding house following this final conversation with Selden Lily crosses paths with Nettie again. She is a working girl Lily knows through helping her friend Gerty Farish in her philanthropic work: "Yes: Lily was beginning to remember. [. . .]. She had furnished the girl with the means to go to a sanatorium in the mountains; it struck her now with a peculiar irony that the money she had used had been Gus Trenor's" (324). Finding Lily in a state of near collapse, Nettie brings her to her home. Its description as "extraordinarily small and almost miraculously clean" (326) embodies the sort of conventional feminine domesticity of the era the text holds out as the antidote to the poisonous influence of luxury and decadence that has dominated Lily's experience. In the Struthers' home Lily finds "[a] fire that shone through the polished flanks of the iron stove and near it stood a crib in which a baby was sitting upright [. . .]" (326).

In an ironic twist Nettie returns the favor Lily had shown her through the money that had allowed her to recover her health after an illness that had rendered her unable

to keep working. Beginning to appreciate how dire Lily's circumstances actually are, Nettie confides:

“I only wish I could help *you*, but I suppose there's nothing on earth I could do,” she murmured wistfully.

Lily, instead of answering, rose with a smile and held out her arms; and the mother, understanding the gesture, laid her child in them. [. . .]

At first the burden seemed as light as a pink cloud or a heap of down, but as she continued to hold it, the weight increased, sinking deeper and penetrating her with a strange sense of weakness, as though the child entered into her and became part of her self. (328)

Here in the novel's final scenes Wharton constructs an implicit parallel that establishes the content of the happy ending that should have been but for Lily's premature death. On the one hand, the nuclear family: Nettie, her husband George and their daughter; the mother's face “irradiated” with maternal joy; on the other Lily dying of a chloral overdose alone in her dingy boarding-house room. In those last moments she recollects her impassioned talk with Selden earlier that evening. Telling herself “there was some word she felt she must say to him,” she hallucinates a child of her own which she holds in her arms as she had Nettie's baby earlier that evening. Recounting her friend's account of the years that had passed since their first brief encounter Lily reflects that “it had taken two to build the nest; the man's faith as well as the woman's courage. Lily remembered Nettie's words: *I knew he knew about me*” (*The House of Mirth*, 332). This passage concretizes a parallel between Lily and Nettie; unlike the latter's husband, however, Selden has proven unable to overcome his own doubts about Lily and the rumors that have been circulating about her conduct after Bertha's betrayal. And unlike the authentically aristocratic magnanimity

of spirit evinced by Lily in her secret destruction of Bertha's letters, Selden ultimately gives the lie to his earlier insistence upon his own distance from the hypocritical morality of her wealthier acquaintances. For him, unlike Nettie's husband, the objective power of reputation and public opinion ultimately outweigh the powerful attraction Selden and Lily share for each other, foreclosing any possibility of the sort of reconciliation embodied in Nettie's marriage. Even such a savvy individual as Selden proves unable to keep his judgment, or, by implication, his finer nature unspoiled by contact with the self-serving morality of Bellomont that has claimed Lily. According to the allegorical logic of the text, Lily is necessarily sacrificed to Wharton's fears of an America whose Anglo-Saxon hegemony has been compromised before the influx of immigrants and the new industrial fortunes being generated on both sides of the Atlantic.

Wharton deploys two other important biological/botanical metaphors that liken the individual's habitus to a soil that the subject can be displaced from only through a radical deformation of identity. As Lily slips into sleep for the last time her thoughts rise up to regard her life from above, as a whole. With this superior position comes a final epiphany:

It was indeed miserable to be poor, to look forward to a shabby, anxious middle age, leading by dreary degrees to an economy of self-denial to gradual absorption in the dingy communal existence of the boarding-house. But there was something more miserable still—it was the clutch of solitude at her heart, the sense of being swept away like a stray uprooted growth down the heedless current of years. [. . .] And as she looked back she saw there had never been a time when she had had any real relation to life. Her parents too had been blown hither and thither by every wind of fashion. (331)

The narrator tellingly links the “dinginess” of the boarding-house with its “communal existence,” reiterating Lily’s unshakeable association of any but the most privileged society with a squalor at once moral and material. As she slips towards unconsciousness she finds:

[i]n the mysterious nocturnal separation from all outward signs of life, she felt herself more strangely confronted with her fate. The sensation made her brain reel, and she tried to shut out consciousness by pressing her hands against her eyes. But the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize her future; she felt as though the house, the street, the world, were all empty and she alone left in a sentient universe. (333)

Deprived of the only audience she is able to recognize as her own, Lily experiences the working class environment of the boarding-house as quite literally incredible, a terra incognita somewhere over the horizon from the fading memories of Bellomont, the garden parties and yachting outings that had functioned as a natural foil to her charms. We can compare Lily’s blindness to the working class world that surrounds her at this late point in the book with the novel as a whole and the fact that, but for Lily’s brief employment as a hat trimmer that laboring class world remains for Lily what it appeared to in many respects for Wharton herself—a threatening other to be blotted out through a mode of repression the text repeatedly performs. Simon Rosedale exists chiefly as an expression of turn of the century Anglo-Saxon fears of rising Southern and Eastern European immigration, and not one person of color makes an appearance in the novels cast of characters. Her fatal failure to extricate her allegiances from the social world whose self-serving duplicity ultimately overwhelms her fate—to strike the blow of forgiveness alluded to in the Mayan proverb from the

text cited earlier—forecloses the possibility of her awakening to the existence of a world beyond the social world she has been expelled from. In the last moments of her life she seems to feel such an awakening taking place:

In whatever form a slowly accumulated past lives in the blood—whether in the concrete image of the old house stored with visual memories or in the conception of the house not built with hands but made up of inherited passions and loyalties—it has the same power of broadening and deepening the individual existence, of attaching it by mysterious links of kinship to all the mighty sum of human striving.
(331)

This communalist vision must be read in the light of the racist turn of the century eugenic “science” and social Darwinism which Wharton, like so many influential figures of the day, embraced. The references to “accumulated past lives in the blood” and “inherited passions and loyalties,” far from arguing for some future social form in which “all” of humanity is to participate, metaphorizes racial identity and consciousness as something passed down through hereditary lines by genetically discreet groups.

Perhaps one of the more unremarked reasons for *The House of Mirth*’s critical and popular success is the manner in which the setting of the story and the dominant metaphors it employs mutually reinforce one another. The materialism and conspicuous consumption of Gilded Age New York speak to a cultural logic in which the sort of commodification of identity Lily represents appears as quite natural. The text’s assertion that Lily is somehow made from some finer stuff than her wealthier acquaintances or the hard working but lustreless Nettie Struthers of the world is established in Selden’s description of Lily on encountering her in the train station in

the opening scene of the novel: “The dinginess, the crudity of this average section of womanhood made him feel how highly specialized she was” (7). Crucially, his praise of her is expressed in terms of a “specialization,” likening Lily to a carefully engineered cultural product that underscores the outmoded design of the women around her. Selden goes on to reflect that “the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external, as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine but that circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?” (6). Here in the reader’s first encounter with Lily Wharton establishes the reciprocal relationship between consumption, mass production and the shifting character of identity within a growing turn of the century consumer culture.

Selden’s inability to establish whether Lily’s unique charm is the result of artifice and the prosthetic enhancements of beauty she makes use of through cosmetics, expensive dresses, jewelry and the like, or the expression of some authentically superior nature reiterates the growing importance of consumption habits in the individual’s construction and performance of a socially valid identity through these years. His discovery of Lily’s ill fated financial involvement with George Dorset and her extraordinary efforts to make good her debt only after she has died suggests that Selden has failed to appreciate some necessary relationship between the veneer of artifice surrounding her and what the text insists to be the genetically and culturally superior creature within. Lily’s overdose symbolizes Wharton’s conviction that true American aristocracy, coded as both Anglo-Saxon and above the tainting

influence of commerce, cannot survive in the undifferentiated social chaos of an encroaching mass culture. Her inability to extricate herself from her identification with the luxury her youth accustomed her to is paralleled by Selden's failure to recognize in Lily an authentically American form of nobility. Both are figured as the victims of a protracted exposure to an idolatry of wealth that has lost touch with the virtues of moderation and industry on which economic vitality is founded.

The closing scene of the novel reinforces the association of eugenic preservationism of an Anglo Saxon American identity with a growing consumer culture by depicting Lily as a genetically *de luxe* product that cannot coexist with the dominant mass culture of the day. Seated beside her lifeless body Selden reflects on "this moment of love, this fleeting victory over themselves, which had kept them from atrophy and extinction." Lily's self-annihilation is represented as a preemptive maneuver that enables her to elude the debasing and miscegenative contact with George Dorset or Simon Rosedale.

Looking Ahead: The House of Mirth and Black No More as Commentaries on the Changing Character of Identity within a Dawning Consumer Culture

As we'll see in the following chapter, Wharton's narrative posits the reproduction of the nuclear family as the remedy to the gendered and racialized injustice depicted in *The House of Mirth*, much as the tongue-in-cheek utopian conclusion to *Black No More* deploys Max and Helen Disher's mulatto child as a symbol not only of a couple, but of a whole society that has transcended both the cognitive and affective bonds that sustain such racist social institutions and practices.

Interestingly, both novels problematize their conclusions in a manner that brings into question the very possibility of such a broad paradigm shift around individuals' conception of race and gender.

Schuyler's conclusion employs childbirth as a symbol for the possibility of a resolution of the race question through an apparent dissolution of race itself, but does so in order to expose and dissolve the sort of privileged whiteness Wharton's representations of Lily and the Bellomont crowd so richly articulate. Wharton and Schuyler are both invested in a project of exposing the structural role these categories of race, gender and class play in perpetuating the particular forms of economic and political exclusion and exploitation Lily Bart and Schuyler's Max Disher undergo. As they do each models in their own way the critical intellectual process required in order for the individual to perceive the broader framework of historical forces that work together to produce the subject within the socially-generated meanings that underpin these categories.

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Chapter Four:

Black No More: Race, Technology and the Modernist Commodification of Identity

It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. [. . .] The newspapers specialized in news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule. (W.E.B. DuBois; *Black Reconstruction*, 700-1)

Several weeks ago, walking alongside a rush hour street as I struggled in my mind to come to a decision as to how to open this chapter on George Schuyler's 1931 novel *Black No More*, I noted a car with a bumper sticker that caught my attention. Printed between two American flags was the phrase "I honor those who honor me." It struck me as an epiphany, suggesting as it did one of the central achievements of Schuyler's remarkable novel, a science fictional satire on American race relations and the discourse surrounding them at the close of the Harlem Renaissance. This was *Black No More's* concerted effort to map out the subterranean linkages conjoining race and class in the American cultural logic, and the persistent association of American identity and citizenship with newly evolving iterations of whiteness. Schuyler's novel demonstrates a keen eye for the effects of a historical dovetailing of racial segregation in the political sphere with an accelerating shift towards the use of

mass produced goods in a nation that had traditionally depended on items produced in the home or obtained locally. Though Fordist models of production encouraged a standardization of “lifestyles” and the forms of identity these sought to evoke, the effect of such segregation was to encourage a racialized practice of consumption that found in it a means to express one’s identificational proximity to or distance from these stigmatized subject positions.

Here in early twenty-first century United States, where the notion of a “post-racial” world has become an increasingly common theme in both popular media and journalism in spite of the failure to enact as law much legislation aimed at legally enacting such “race-blindness,” *Black No More* reminds us that race has not been historically transcended but only rendered more fluid in its social distribution.²³ It likewise demonstrates that such slippages in the field of signifiers associated with marginalized identities have a history of their own whose trajectories reflect the malleability of racialized categorizations of identity over time. Rather than ceasing to exist as a functional term in the construction of identity within the ongoing globalization of capitalism, *Black No More* foregrounds the terms of race as a semiotics of sociopolitical power hierarchies that are continually displaced onto various economically conditioned forms of identity. It also demonstrates the degree to which identity and political recognition were becoming increasingly mediated by consumption in this era, not only in terms of the main character of the novel’s ability

²³ The Voter Information Packet for California’s failed Proposition 54 (2003), for example, explained that the measure “amends [the] Constitution to prohibit state and local governments from using race, ethnicity, color, or national origin to classify current or prospective students, contractors or employees in public education, contracting, or employment operations. Does not prohibit classification by sex.”

to buy whiteness, but in the degree to which identity and political recognition were understood and expressed through patterns of consumption coded according to a complex semiotics of economic and racial stratification in these decades. The period from 1900 to 1930 in America is generally described by cultural historians as having been characterized by a shift towards a Fordist model production in which standardized, mass goods are produced by and for a body of ethnically and culturally diverse men and women. Nevertheless it is important to bear in mind how this process was mitigated in the South by the Jim Crow laws of 1876 and elsewhere through less heavy-handed but nonetheless effective means of segregating the practice of consumption itself.

A previous chapter examined Joris-Karl Huysman's characterization of Des Esseintes and his efforts to sustain a besieged identity through the construction of an artificial social habitat that permits his identification with a set of obsolescent artistic and religious traditions. Dr. Crookman's procedure functions in the opposite performative direction in *Black No More* as black Americans pursue this newly afforded opportunity to unburden themselves of the economic and political constraints imposed on them under Jim Crow. Current debates in America surrounding immigration and the legislative double standards addressing undocumented labor that allow immigrants to find work so long as they accept poverty-level wages without any benefits recapitulate a body of issues that inspired Schuyler to produce *Black No More*, demonstrating as they do the historical variability of those exploited categories of identity and the crucial role they have played in reproducing the asymmetrical economic and political power relations that,

like most others, have traditionally characterized industrial production-based (and more recently information-based) economies. Such considerations not only help us towards a deeper understanding of Schuyler's controversial self-construction as a staunch conservative and member of the John Birch Society, but more broadly to recognize how the consolidation of a consumer society in the decades around the turn of the century rendered race not only something inscribed upon the body, but also as a network of consumer practices and product identifications.

The plot of Schuyler's novel revolves around Max Disher's efforts to capitalize on a newly devised treatment that permanently lightens skin pigment. Virtually overnight Dr. Crookman's procedure creates the means for an assimilation of the black population that is both feared and longed for within contemporary debate on "the race question." In his preface to the 1931 edition of *Black No More* Schuyler recounts his encounter with a newspaper article outlining the innovation of a process that would allow non-Caucasians to effectively "become white":

With America's constant reiteration of the superiority of whiteness, the avid search on the part of the black masses for some key to chromatic perfection is easily understood. Now it would seem that science is on the verge of satisfying them.

Dr. Yusaburo Noguchi, head of the Noguchi Hospital at Beppu, Japan, told American newspaper reporters in October 1929 that as a result of fifteen years of painstaking research and experiment he was able to change a Negro into a white man. [. . .] The racial transformation, he asserted, could be brought about by 'glandular control and electrical nutrition.' (*Black No More*, 14)

In *Black No More* such a procedure does indeed become widely available and within four months, the vast majority of black Americans have "vanished [. . .] into the great

mass of white citizenry” (*BNM*, 94).²⁴ But rather than resolving the issue of race in America Dr. Crookman’s procedure dissolves the phenotypical traits out of which eugenicists and others would produce a hierarchy of racial identities only to see it reproduced at another social register. Having undergone the doctor’s regime of skin whitening treatments, Max journeys to Atlanta to consummate his designs of racial reinscription by joining a white-supremacist group fashioned along the lines of the Ku Klux Klan. In this way he is able to use his experience as the object of the sort of white supremacy embodied in such groups to quickly put together a small fortune in organization dues. Meanwhile Dr. Crookman and his associates set up sanatoria across the country to accommodate the overwhelming demand for their services. In one of the novel’s many ironic twists, after most dark-skinned Americans have undergone the Crookman treatment, it becomes generally known that a pronouncedly white skin is telltale evidence of having undergone the procedure, at which point a host of skin darkening creams appear on the market as whiteness itself becomes a stigmatized

²⁴ At this level *Black No More* should be included among the “passing” novels of the early twentieth century, where a character socially looked on as black possesses (or in the case of *Black No More* assumes) an appearance enabling them to enter and move within the white social world. Being preceded by Schuyler’s 1931 novel, James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1915) and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) look ahead to *Black No More*.

²⁵ The novel’s satirical characterization of Snobbcraft and Buggerie represents a sustained counterattack on the influential theories of “Nordicism” and white supremacy put forth in influential works such as Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tides of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920). Like Grant, Snobbcraft is an aristocrat with a colonial pedigree and the author of “numerous racial integrity laws adopted in Virginia and many other states” (*BNM*, 154). This is a thinly-veiled allusion to Virginia’s Racial Integrity Laws of 1925 which legally established two racial categories of “pure white” and all others. Grant not only helped to write this legislation, but was likewise instrumental in garnering support for the bill from the Klu Klux Klan and the Anglo-Saxon clubs of America (Hoyrd, 32; see Williams, ed.: *African American Humor, Irony and Satire* (2007)).

social position around which a host of products and services at once “scientific” and cosmetic accrue:

Those of the upper class began to look around for ways to get darker. It became the fashion for them to spend hours at the seashore basking naked in the sunshine and then to dash back, heavily bronzed, to their homes, and, preening themselves in their dusky skins, lord it over their paler, and thus less fortunate, associates. Beauty shops began to sell face powders named *Pudre Negre*, *Poudre le Egyptienne* and *L’Afrique*. (BNM, 221)

In this way racial boundaries are restored. While a Crookmanized Max Disher (Max takes on the name Matthew Fisher following his “treatment”) and his wife leave America, white supremacists Arthur Snobbcraft and Malcolm Buggerie are lynched in a rural Mississippi town after being taken for patients of Dr. Crookman according to the inverted logic of *Black No More*’s satirical dystopia.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, to clarify *Black No More*’s lucid analysis of how various patterns of consumption are inscribed within American culture as indicators of racialized identity and how these function as crucial terms in the construction and maintenance of an industrialized economic structure. Dr. Crookman’s treatment demonstrates how a politically and economically disenfranchised minority functions as the arch stone that bears an inordinate amount of the weight in the production process both in terms of wages as well as the skill level of the employment available to them. Secondly, the following essay seeks to situate Schuyler’s defamiliarization of racialized identities within the preceding chapters’ examination of an emergent (and in many urban regions by the time of *Black No More* a dominant) consumer culture. In keeping with the methodology

articulated in the preceding chapters, this reading of *Black No More* attempts to offer an example of the conditioning of identity according to shifts in the economic reality the individual is embedded within, and the processes through which identity became increasingly to be understood as and expressed through a series of consumption patterns. Inverting the foreclosure of opportunity and the strategic shifts in the performance of identity we saw in *Against the Grain* and *The House of Mirth*, Schuyler's protagonist proves to be the beneficiary of an expanded field of liberty and opportunity following his visit to Dr. Crookman's clinic—but a field of opportunity that, as we will see, does not come without problems of its own.

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Black No More's *Subject-based Theory of Value*

In the introduction to his influential sociological work *The Social Life of Things* (1986) Arjun Appadurai cites the early twentieth century sociologist George Simmel:

Commodities can provisionally be defined as objects of economic value. As to what we ought to mean by economic value, the most useful (though not quite standard) guide is George Simmel. In the first chapter of *The Philosophy of Money* Simmel provides a systematic account of how economic value is best defined. Value, for Simmel, is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects. Yet the key to the comprehension of value, according to Simmel, lies in a region where "subjectivity is only provisional and not very essential." (Appadurai, 3)

Appadurai's references to Simmel's methodology stress the protean character of subjectivity in the face of value, understood here as something in which the desire of the subject is intrinsically bound up. This is a propitious point to begin the present reading of *Black No More* from, foregrounding as it does the novel's dramatization of

the process whereby political and economic forces come to influence individual desire and tending to canalize it around certain privileged identities and the material and cultural accoutrements that signify them. Appadurai also cites Simmel's assertion that "objects are not difficult to acquire because they are valuable, 'but we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them.'" (Appadurai, 3). Whereas *The Philosophy of Money* is invested in analyzing the historical mutations of the concept of economic value in various times and regions in order to compare these with attitudes to the subject in the contemporary western world, Schuyler's novel performs a sort of reverse engineering of the process whereby the possession of whiteness came to be regarded in Jim Crow America as synonymous with an individual's entitlement to the full spectrum of opportunities associated with full citizenship. Through its modeling of these processes, Schuyler's novel demonstrates the "provisional and not very essential" character of identity in its efforts to assume those privileged sites of subjectivity through the cultural performance of whiteness.

Schuyler's childhood was a period of great demographic shifts as western European immigration to America in the closing decades of the previous century was followed by a rising influx from Eastern Europe and Asia. Within America the ongoing industrialization of production in the North coupled with the violent oppression of blacks in the south, failing soil, falling cotton prices, and increased instances of crop pest infestation promoted the so called Great Migration of black Americans from their homes in the South to Northern cities like Chicago, New York and Philadelphia and the factory jobs that were becoming available in them. This process, accelerated by the outbreak of World War I, exacerbated questions about the

content of an “authentic American identity.” U.S. census data showed that in the months preceding the Great Depression, thirty-four percent of American’s aggregate savings were possessed by the wealthiest tenth of one percent of the populus while 2.3 percent of Americans controlled 67 percent of the nation’s total savings (Duster, 57). In these years many black American’s hopes for self-determination shifted increasingly from a focus on individual ownership of land to a more assimilationist model based on an increased stake in industrial production, especially in the North. In the years around the outbreak of World War I, roughly one quarter of Northern black Americans lived in New York, Chicago and Philadelphia (Grossman, 38). The emergent political univocity of these black migrants was felt to represent an unprecedented threat to long standing forms of white privilege in America, registered in the growth and increased vociferousness of groups such as the American Eugenics Society, the Population Association of America, the American Sociological Society and others devoted to meeting these threats of miscegenation and the dissolution of established racial boundaries they perceived in them. *Black No More* dramatizes the interrelated economic and psychological ramifications of such a social environment, where the incentives for performing those privileged racial and class identities through which access to such wealth and the life opportunities attaching to it function to polarize white identity around a field of privileged practices and possessions.

In one of the novel’s opening scenes Schuyler represents the complex relationship between the American discourse on race in the era of Jim Crow through a scene in which an attractive white woman whom the novel’s central character Max

Disher sees in a Harlem bar on New Year's Eve. Max and his friend Bunny examine the group of four women and two men, all white, of which she is a part:

They were all in evening dress and in their midst was a tall, slim, titian-haired girl who had seemingly stepped from heaven or the cover of a magazine. [. . .]

“Now that's my speed,” whispered Bunny.

“Be yourself,” said Max. “You couldn't touch her with a forty-foot pole.”

“Oh, I don't know, Big Boy” Bunny beamed self-confidently, “You never can tell! You never can tell!”

“Man, I can tell a cracker a block away. I wasn't born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia for nothin', you know. Just listen to her voice.”

Bunny listened. “I believe she is,” he agreed. (*BNM*, 20-1)

Several points in this brief exchange foreshadow the multi-leveled defamiliarization of racial essence the novel will undertake. First, the narrative's conflation of religious and popular media imagery in describing her beauty as having “seemingly stepped from heaven or the cover of a magazine” –a mode of perception even more familiar to our own era of reality television and America's Next Top Model, where the gaze of divinity would appear to be located not in some transcendent theological sphere, but in the magazines and satellite feeds of multinational media conglomerates. Secondly, Bunny's warning of Max to “be himself” demonstrates at the outset of the novel the degree to which black identity is structured in a differential relationship with a concept of whiteness that nevertheless remains effectively invisible within American culture. As the novel progresses it traces the roots of this racial binarization of identities, institutionalized in the “separate but equal” era following *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896 (the year following Schuyler's birth), to the inequities entrenched within American economics and the

enduring legacy of slavery decades after its ostensible legal dismantling. The methodical denial of the wealth, access to literacy, or to the credit and land many black Americans required in order to start up a small store or farm according to rigid racial boundaries functioned as an indispensable means of maintaining the state-sanctioned economic and political slavery of the nation's first century of independence.

The human propensity towards attributing the possession of certain kinds of performed cultural capital to an individual's ontological essence Schuyler alludes to in this passage is usefully developed in a remark of Theodor Adorno's in *Minima Moralia* where he suggests that "[t]he sound of any woman's voice on the telephone tells us whether the speaker is attractive. It reflects back as self-confidence, natural ease and self-attention all the admiring and desirous glances she has ever received" (*Minima Moralia*, 111). Whether precisely true or not, Adorno's remark helps us grasp the reconceptualization of racial essence within the context of Jim Crow America implicit in this exchange between Bunny and Max on this woman's "cracker"-ness. The passage suggests it is not merely the accent or idiom of this woman's speech that renders her recognizable as white, but the presence of an assuredness denoting certain presumed entitlements, one that Bunny and Max's ears are suited to detect precisely because it comes to them as a sort of bodily, extralinguistic idiom from an unfamiliar region beyond their usual experience, and something that denotes a fundamental boundary upon the terms of these subjects' interactions. Privilege as performed through the acquisition and use of such identity prostheses the privileged take for granted shape an individual personality that is often

misrecognized by others as the expression of an ontological singularity or superiority. Thus it is essential to note how Adorno's reference to the effects of the "desiring glances" directed to women such as the titian-haired object of Max's affections fails to delve down to the political and economic factors that help to construct them as an embodiment of privilege. Implicit in Adorno's reflection is a latent awareness that the entitlement expressed by such "natural ease and self-attention" is itself the result of an always already racialized conception of beauty: the privilege enjoyed by whiteness is indeed beautiful, and thus whiteness a uniquely beautiful thing. It is this sort of superficial and reductively materialistic conception of beauty that Schuyler mocks when Max reflects on first encountering the girl in the night cub that "[girls like her] were so sought after that one almost required a million dollars to keep them out of the clutches of one's rival" (*BNM*, 19). Demonstrating the limitations of Marxist labor theories of value of value which privilege objects as the observation stresses the essentially mimetic, culturally mediated character of human desire intimated in Appadurai's assertion that value is not an innate property of objects, but "a judgment made about them by subjects."

Max's assertion that this woman's true racial identity can be discerned through close attention to her speech initially suggests the existence of some primary difference between the linguistic neurological hardware between members of different groups. Certainly many influential race theorists of the era such as Madison Grant and Lothrop Stoddard used speech patterns as one means of generating what were argued to be biological differences through which distinct racial types might be delineated. Reiterating the work of Franz Boaz and others, Schuyler is quick to correct

such arguments. In the following scene Dr. Crookman explains to his assistant why his whitening machine need not alter the speech patterns of his patients for them to pass as white:

“Dear Foster,” explained the physician, patiently, “there is no such thing as Negro dialect, except in literature and drama. It is a well-known fact among informed persons that a Negro from a given section speaks the same dialect as his white neighbors. In the South you can’t tell over the telephone whether you are talking to a white man or a Negro.” (*BNM*, 31)

Here as elsewhere Schuyler employs Dr. Crookman as a means for disseminating the insights of early twentieth century anthropologists whose research demonstrated the inadequacy of the concept of race in light of recent developments in the study of genetics. Dr. Crookman’s observations function as a corrective narrative to the overtly racist theories espoused in the novel by groups such as the Knights of Nordica, a thinly veiled parody of the Ku Klux Klan. Insisting on the reality of genetically distinct races provided eugenicists with a pretext for cultivating a discourse insisting upon African American’s incapacity for self-government. The paternalistic governance that such rhetoric sought to justify methodically denied blacks’ and many poor whites’ access to the education and literacy that might mount an opposition to these claims. This tautological reasoning was effective, along with resort to brute force and intimidation where necessary, throughout the post Reconstruction decades; by methodically denying the disenfranchised access to education, affordable housing and the means to making one’s own livelihood, the narrative of black American’s incapacity for self-governance would remain a self-fulfilling prophecy, particularly in the rural South.

Seen through the eyes of the newly whitened Max Disher, the degree to which social and economic privilege and the cultural capital requisite for their possession are granted in Jim Crow America only to those able and willing to conform to those behaviors and identifications associated with the privileged character of whiteness soon become manifest. Like the flag on the bumper sticker, such a conception of whiteness “honors those who honor it,” while limiting or wholly refusing access to such privilege to those who question these identities and the conceptions of citizenship and national belonging embedded in them. *Black No More* dramatizes those social processes whereby whiteness functions in these contexts as a thinly veiled compensation for those who agree to embrace and perpetuate such exclusionary forms of privilege. This process of misrecognition is integral to maintaining the functionality of the racial hierarchy organizing so much of the imaginary of popular desire in these years between World War I and II.

The scene sequence in the opening chapter functions according to a similarly defamiliarizing logic in its characterization of racial identity as a consciously performed identity assumed by the individual as a means to accessing various socially desirable “objects” in the broad sense suggested in Arjun Appadurai’s formulation cited earlier. The scene in which Max is snubbed by the “titian-haired” woman in the nightclub (“I never dance with niggers!”) is immediately followed by one in which a phone call from his friend Bunny wakes him the following morning with the news of Dr. Crookman’s invention. Max is able to exploit a chance acquaintanceship he shares with Crookman in order to be one of the first to undergo the new treatment in his Harlem clinic. In a narrative time compressing these events into a few pages Max

Disher (who assumes the name Matthew Fisher to go along with his new white identity) has “vanished [. . .] into the great mass of white citizenry” (*BNM*, 58) after following through on the plan he devises the day he first hears of the Crookman procedure: “Two objects were uppermost in his mind: To get white and to Atlanta. The statuesque and haughty blonde was ever in his thoughts. He was head over heels in love with her and realized there was no hope for him to ever win her as long as he was brown” (30). The adjectives “statuesque and haughty” work here to underscore how, from Max’s marginalized perspective, this woman is an embodiment of the entitlement and privilege that Max is convinced await him once he has “gone white.” In compressing all these events into the first chapter of the novel Schuyler efficiently establishes a textual stage on which to explore some of the different configurations desire and racial identification might assume if unbound from within the racialized discourses that continue, if in metamorphosed form, in our own day. Decanalized from the strictures imposed on it by the needs of an industrialized interwar America (primarily cheap labor in the form of a racialized labor “caste” [*BNM*, 63]), we see the development of social patterns both economic and erotic taking a course quite different from that described in the popular discourse of the day which characterized miscegenation as tantamount to “race suicide. Schuyler’s defamiliarization dramatizes Simmel’s observation that value is not a thing objectively present in an object (Simmel’s *The Philosophy of Money* was in part an effort to retool Marxist formulations of value for the twentieth century) but is better understood as a judgment made by subjects—individual subjects who are nevertheless strongly

influenced in the trajectory and character of their desire by the particular webs of cultural meaning they inhabit.

Late in the novel a study sponsored by a white supremacist group known as the Anglo-Saxon Association meant to establish once and for all the superiority of a white blood line reveals that in reality virtually every American possesses some black ancestry. This development provokes the plot of the novel to refract along two discreet narrative trajectories, one utopian and the other decidedly dystopic. The former thread plays out in the moments following the revelation that Max/Matthew and his wife Helen's newborn son is of a "suspiciously brown color," a development attributed to "some hidden Negro drop of blood in her veins" (191) as no one suspects the possibility that Max/Matthew, Grand Exalted Giraw of the Knights of Nordica, is in reality a Crookmanized black man. Rather than allowing his in-laws and wife to continue under the impression that Helen is the source of their son's "suspicious" color, Max reveals the racial masquerade that has brought him into their lives. Far from infuriating Helen, however, the realization results in an enormous mental burden being lifted from her:

Helen felt a wave of relief go over her. There was no feeling of revulsion at the thought that her husband was a Negro. There once would have been but that was seemingly centuries ago when she had been unaware of her remoter Negro ancestry. She felt proud of her Matthew. She loved him more than ever. They had money and a beautiful brown baby. What more did they need? To hell with the world! To hell with society! Compared to what she possessed, thought Helen, all talk of race and color was damn foolishness. She would probably have been surprised to learn that countless Americans at that moment were thinking the same thing. (*BNM*, 192-3)

Here in this utopian conclusion to the story the radical destabilization of race effected by Dr. Crookman's procedure creates a caesura in the hegemonic racial narrative of the day, placing these characters in a discursive space where those normative narratives of racial essence are suddenly inactive. This gap in the established discourse of racial identity allows Helen to move away from the "grasping," defensive attitude associated with whiteness and its structuration around the shoring up and maintenance of an exclusive access to those privileges reserved for it in the "separate but equal" racial environment of the post-Plessy vs. Ferguson. Schuyler's characterization of Helen's epiphany spatializes this subjective reconstellation in terms of a turning outward of what had always been a self-scrutinizing state of mind, vigilantly keeping her own train of thought and action along the tracks laid down for it by organizations such as her father's Knights of Nordica or the Anglo-Saxon Association. In this sense we can read the narratives foregrounding of the "forced" quality Max/Matthew senses in his visits to white-only places of amusement as testimony to the constraint imposed on these individuals in their social practice, confined as it must be to those rigid canons of deportment and consumption that demonstrate one's entitlement to access such white-only "public" spaces.

Schuyler's depiction of this scene stresses Helen's crucial moment of disidentification from the racial status quo, an identification the narrative suggests is held in place by a knowledge of the profound loss of social position and even the positive stigma and ostracism from the community that at any other time would have befallen her for voicing such a scandalous belief as the illusory nature of racial difference. Just as the workers in Blickdoff and Hortzenbopp's cotton mill initially

greet the news that most of the black population has been whitened by the Black-No-More procedure with “a sense of relief,” sensing as they do that from now on “strikes will not be able to be broken along the color line” (143), Helen responds to the discovery of her black ancestry not with dismay but “a great wave of relief” (191). In both scenes Schuyler associates this relief with the return of a repressed knowledge of the profound economic and political disempowerment for working class blacks and laboring whites alike that result from America’s investment in racial hierarchies, a knowledge that has remained hidden from both Helen and the workers through the methodical diffusion of racist propaganda by groups such as the Knights of Nordica and the Anglo-Saxon Association. *Black No More* models a form of racialized capitalism in which whiteness “honors those who honor it.” Helen’s grasp of this truth has been effectively obscured by a repressed but latent knowledge that any questioning of established race relations in the Jim Crow South will result in retribution upon her and her family. In Schuyler’s utopian alternative ending to the novel this repressed awareness of such systematic injustice is able to surface not only in Helen’s consciousness, but in the minds of masses of Americans around the nation, a process likened to a “great awakening” underscored by the narrator’s noting that “Helen would probably have been surprised to learn that countless Americans at that moment were thinking the same thing” (*BNM*, 192-3).

This and similar episodes in the novel represent a significant contribution to our understanding of how such social systems, in which economic privilege and political agency are distributed according to a racialized hierarchy, manage to erect and reproduce themselves through time. Such a system thrives on the time-honored

strategy of divide and conquer, maintaining a social environment where the sparse privileges and life opportunities for blacks under the status quo are nevertheless readily accessible and, indeed, often all that stands between the individual and destitution, while undermining any forms of social activity or expression that might lead to some form of organized resistance—all of which Schuyler makes manifest in the truly double consciousness that informs Max/Matthew's characterization:

The attitude of these people puzzled him. Was not Black-No-More getting rid of the Negroes upon whom all of the blame was placed for the backwardness of the South? Then he recalled what a Negro speaker had said one night on the corner of 138th Street and Seventh Avenue in New York: that unorganized labor meant cheap labor; that the guarantee of cheap labor was an effective means of luring new industries into the South; that so long as the ignorant white masses could be kept thinking of the menace of the Negro to the Caucasian race purity and political control, they would give little thought to labor organization. It suddenly dawned upon Matthew Fisher that this Black-No-More treatment was more of a threat to white business than to white labor. (*BNM*, 65)

In contrast, the decidedly dystopic alternative ending of the novel—and, unfortunately, the one that reads as by far the more plausible of this pair of alternative endings—suggests that the technological erasure of a politically disenfranchised labor class only provokes a displacement and reconstitution of racial hierarchies allowing a new set of indicators to reestablish a similarly stratified social structure; as we will see in the following section, race as a semiotics of social power would be interpreted increasingly not only by these phenotypical categorizations but by patterns of consumption in an era of rapid urbanization for blacks and whites alike. In his essay on the literary emergence of working-class whiteness Eric Schocket models the logic that encourages laboring whites to invest themselves in what is ultimately a self-

damaging acceptance of racism, arguing that “[t]heir racial identity does not redouble their class identity (contrary to what some maintain) but evades it, becoming a blank screen for the projection of those American fantasies of uplift” (Schocket, 57).

This alternate ending pivots around the Anglo-Saxon Association-funded study intended to establish once and for all which sectors of the American populous have no black ancestry. Working to secure a victory for a Democratic presidential nominee in the White House in the upcoming 1936 election and supported by “those who were fanatically positive of their pure Caucasian ancestry,” the study is spearheaded by the Association’s President, Arthur Snobbcraft, and his aide Dr. Samuel Buggerie, who are eventually nominated to share the Democratic presidential ticket.²⁵ The party’s platform has been revised in the face of the Black-No-More corporation’s activities and now overtly supports the abolition of intermarriage and the segregation of social life between those with black ancestry and those without. However, when the study reveals only days before the election that all Americans share some black ancestry including the Democratic candidates, outrage and racial panic erupt; Matthew receives a telegram that “Senator Kretin has been “lynched in Union Station stop Snobbcraft and Buggerie reported in flight.” That evening’s newspaper headline,

²⁵ The novel’s satirical characterization of Snobbcraft and Buggerie represents a sustained counterattack on the influential theories of “Nordicism” and white supremacy put forth in influential works such as Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and Lothrop Stoddard’s *The Rising Tides of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920). Like Grant, Snobbcraft is an aristocrat with a colonial pedigree and the author of “numerous racial integrity laws adopted in Virginia and many other states” (*BNM*, 154). This is a thinly-veiled allusion to Virginia’s Racial Integrity Laws of 1925 which legally established two racial categories of “pure white” and all others. Grant not only helped to write this legislation, but was likewise instrumental in garnering support for the bill from the Klu Klux Klan and the Anglo-Saxon clubs of America (Hoyrd, 32; see Williams, ed.: *African American Humor, Irony and Satire* (2007)).

complete with accompanying photographs, reads “Democratic Leaders Proved of Negro Descent: Givens, Snobbcraft, Buggerie, Kretin and Others of Negro Ancestry, According to Old Records Unearthed by Them” (*BNM*, 189). Snobbcraft and Buggerie themselves prove unable to carry out their escape plan of flying to Mexico as their private plane runs out of gas over Mississippi. The novel reaches a zenith of macabre irony as the pair don blackface in an attempt to avoid being recognized as the race traitors pictured in the newspaper: “Well,” explained [Buggerie], “you know real niggers are scarce now and nobody would think of bothering a couple of them, even in Mississippi. They’d probably be a curiosity” (201). But Buggerie has tragically miscalculated the functional role of racism in the American cultural logic and the ritual violence that so often characterize it, particularly in the Jim Crow South. Far from reducing white anxiety, the sudden scarcity of blacks has deprived Happy Hill’s True Christ Church of the catalyst through which their race-based self-identity can express and reaffirm itself.

As Judith Butler has argued, “Privileged identities are perpetually at risk” (Butler, 15 [quoted in Halsam, 18]). Schuyler’s account of Matthew’s strike-breaking technique models the process by which the unmarked and socially transparent identity of whiteness constitutes itself through a projection of its own anxieties, rooted in large part in a repressed awareness of its perpetuation of a manifestly unjust social order. Contrary to the doctor’s hopes, the townspeople of Happy Hill are all the more eager in their attack on the blackfaced pair since the success of the Black-No-More corporation has deprived them of the traditional object of their hostilities. Schuyler’s unsentimental portrait of Happy Hill, Mississippi stresses the double role, economic

as well as psychological, that blackness plays in its social life, as well as the inhabitants pride in their conviction that “the people for miles around were with very few exceptions old residents and thence known to be genuine blue-blooded caucasian for as far back as any resident could remember which was at least fifty years” (203). This is a pride outshone only by that felt for “the True Faith Christ Lovers’ Church, which made the prodigious boast of being the most truly Fundamentalist of all the Christian sects in the United States.” Also stressed in Schuyler’s grim satire of rural Jim Crow America is the strong link between religious identification and racial xenophobia as the arrival of Snobbcraft and Buggerie provides the “sign” the town has awaited. Blundering into the middle of a church gathering the pair is spared at the last moment from the violent designs of the church’s leader Reverend McPhule when it’s revealed they are in blackface. The intense frustration of the crowd and the Reverend’s outrage at being deprived of the object of the ritualized violence through which he consolidates his own authority within the community captures how such violence functions as a threatening collective performance of the abstract privilege of whiteness and the “psychological wage” it provides otherwise marginalized poor whites with, a situation suggested by the “inordinately high illiteracy rate and [. . .] lynching record of Happy Hill” (203). As Snobbcraft and Buggerie prepare to depart a newspaper about the Anglo-Saxon Association’s study including pictures of the candidates appears: “The crowd came closer. Buggerie protested that he was really white but it was of no avail. The crowd had sufficient excuse for doing what they had wanted to do at first” (216). Schuyler depicts the elaborate violence visited on the pair and culminating in their being burnt at the stake in painstaking detail, bringing home

to the reader in these final pages the intense and ritualistic violence that characterizes such organized violence. The narrator notes:

There were in the assemblage two or three whitened Negroes, who, remembering what their race had suffered in the past, would fain have gone to the assistance of the two men but fear for their own lives restrained them. Even so they were looked at by some of the Christ Lovers because they did not appear to be enjoying the spectacle as thoroughly as the rest. Noticing these questioning glances, the whitened Negroes began to yell and prod the burning bodies with sticks and cast stones at them. This exhibition restored them to favor and banished any suspicion that they might not be one hundred-percent Americans. (218)

This displacement and reconstitution of racial identity models the flexibility of American racial semiotics and the contested power relationships that animate them. “I guess we’re all niggers now,” [193] concedes Reverend Givens after the news of the Anglo-Saxon Association’s report on the genealogy of the American population is published. In *Southern Horrors*, her groundbreaking indictment of Jim Crow “lynch law,” Ida B. Wells’ describes her reaction to the lynching of her friend Thomas Moss along with two other well-known black businessmen and social activists:

Thomas Moss, Calvin MacDowell, and Lee Stewart had been lynched in Memphis, one of the leading cities of the South, in which no lynching had taken place before, with just as much brutality as other victims of the mob; and they had committed no crime against white women. This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and “keep the nigger down.” (Wells, 4)

Rather than undermining this analysis of the deep psychological factors that underpin the race-based mob violence so prevalent in these decades, the lynching of two men revealed at the last minute to be white in *Black No More* actually reinforces Wells’

logic.²⁶ Embedded in an atmosphere of artificial economic scarcity resulting from the wealthy Southern planter / Northern industrial political interests' objective control of the vast majority of the collective national wealth, working class whites are locked in a zero sum game in which a minority identity stands as the only cognitively available threat to an already precarious sociopolitical position. The doxic, given social character of the wealthy planter class's dominance in Southern society coupled with the poor white's desire to identify himself with this wealthy planter class (in terms of culture and "blood," if not economic status) and reinforced by the sort of preemptive symbolic violence Wells's chilling accounts document, produces the social conditions that position blacks as the ultimate object of this violence, both overt and symbolic. Legally and politically dispossessed, Southern blacks are not only economically indispensable to the American economy as a source of inexpensive labor, but psychologically, as a release valve for the aggressivity stemming from the exaggerated importance of whiteness in the Jim Crow era. In its radical excess as well as the ritualistic symbolism that structures it as an object of spectatorial consumption lynching expressed the collective need to concretely manifest this abstract privilege of whiteness, even if this required the construction of a scapegoat. It was this enclosed system of economic stratification and institutionalized violence that journalism and essays by Wells', Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman and many others revealed to a national and international audience. Schuyler's narrative undertakes a

²⁶ The years between 1882 and 1968 saw 4,473 lynchings recorded, including fifty African American women (Wells, 10).

satiric exploration of this process in Snobbcraft and Buggerie's lynching, demonstrating how, deprived of its traditional object, such intense aggressivity is quite capable of displacing itself onto other stigmatized subjectivities. "It's you and you're a nigger accordin' to this here paper, an' a newspaper wouldn't lie," exclaims Reverend McPhule when Snobbcraft and Buggerie reveal that they are in blackface, suggesting the essential role mass media plays in shaping individual attitudes about various racial and ethnic identities and the rights and privileges that may or may not be due each.

*

Max Fisher's Narcissistic Scar and the Harlem Renaissance "Vogue for Things Negro"

At a press release to announce his new invention Dr. Crookman reflects on the origins of his interest in American racism, explaining to the roomful of reporters "[m]y sociology teacher had once said that there were but three ways for the Negro to solve his race problem in America [. . .] To either get out, get white, or get along" (27). Crookman's recollection informs Max's thoughts as he stands before a mirror for the first time after undergoing the procedure:

He felt so thankful that he had survived the ordeal of that horrible machine so akin to an electric chair. A shudder passed over him at the memory of the hours he had passed in its grip, fed at intervals with revolting concoctions. But when they reached the elevator and he saw himself in the mirror, he was startled, overjoyed. White at last! [. . .] He was free! The world was his oyster and he had the open-sesame of a pork-colored skin! [. . .] He was through with coons, he resolved, from now on. He glanced in a superior manner at the long line of black and brown folk on one side of the corridor, patiently awaiting treatment. (*BNM*, 35-6)

Immediately following Max/Matthew's treatment in Dr. Crookman's first clinic this pivotal moment of disidentification and affective distancing dramatizes the reciprocally constitutive character of racial identity and the social entitlement attached to them; Matthew redeems the social buoyancy Crookman's procedure has made possible by cognitively disidentifying himself with these subordinated strata of the racial hierarchy. This theme in the novel has been read more than once as an expression of Schuyler's disbelief in a uniquely black American culture (for a recent formulation of this position see Halsam, 2008). The Crookman treatment having removed the barrier that stood between him and the privilege enjoyed by most whites Matthew then undergoes a corresponding psychological reconstitution of self-identifications towards the domain of entitlement and privilege formerly excluded to him.

Though Dr. Crookman's procedure acts only on the visible body, the sight of his whitened self as he regards his reflection nevertheless initiates a subjective, affective metamorphosis in Max, a belief strongly encouraged by his newfound access to social environments formerly denied him and his interactions with a social environment that will now interpolate him as a privileged subject based on this superficial change. It was Freud who described certain fixative states of mind usually ascribed to a physical debility or disability, and taking on in Schuyler's characterization of Max the aspect of a racial disability as an expression in the subject of a "narcissistic scar." The term is intended to connote a psychic scar or crutch in which a stigmatized self-perception related to some disability, whether real or imagined, socially or physically manifested, comes to assume a disproportionate and exaggerated role as a cause for

many if not all of the individual's disappointments and unrealized aspirations in life. This aspect of his protagonist's characterization functions as an implicit criticism of what Schuyler saw as a nefarious appropriation of African-Americans unique history in America in an attempt to satisfy a market that had developed with an interest in "authentic" black art. As Jeffrey B. Leak writes in his introduction to a collection of Schuyler's journalism and essays published in 2001:

given the harsh realities of modern urban life, African Americans, most of whom were in the lower economic groups, embraced idealized and unrealistic notions about African history and culture. This desire to reclaim a glorious history was instrumental in the nominal success of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. (Leak, xxii)

Schuyler's satirical characterization foregrounds whiteness's symbolic coextensiveness with access to a lifestyle which an increasingly consumption-focused society equates with the rights and privilege of full American citizenship. For Max/Matthew as for everyone in the novel, success is implicitly measured in terms of material wealth and the political power that attends it and around which all action and motivation in the text are oriented as a result. Having always equated the ability to consume as one will and the wealth required to do so with the whiteness that he now possesses, Matthew is surprised to find that satisfaction continues to elude him even after undergoing Dr. Crookman's "electrical and glandular treatment," even after he has amassed a small fortune through his shady dealings with The Knights of Nordica.

Almost immediately after undergoing the Crookman procedure and beginning his new life on the other side of the color line, Max senses that something is amiss. Walking down Broadway with a white female reporter to whom he has agreed to tell

his story for a thousand dollars, Matthew exults in a new sense of security, remarking to himself “[h]e had strolled through the Times Square district before but never with such a feeling of absolute freedom and sureness” (39). But by the end of their dinner Max must admit that “[d]espite his happiness [he] found it pretty dull. Either there was something lacking in these ofay places of amusement or else there was something present that one didn’t find in the black-and-tan resorts of Harlem. The joy and the abandon here was obviously forced” (40). This description stands in pointed contrast to the third sentence of the novel where we read that Max’s “negroid features had a slightly satanic cast and there was an insolent nonchalance about his carriage” (*BNM*, 17). Rather than reading the text’s description of Max’s features as “satanic” or his bearing as one of “insolent nonchalance” as a sympathetic allusion to the paternalistic discourse asserting black American’s intrinsic inability for self governance (the satanic *non serviam* expressed as a bodily disposition), Schuyler’s description suggests a parallel between whiteness and its performance as an only partially conscious seizing upon the privileges associated with its possession. Thus Max’s “insolent nonchalance” reveals itself upon a second reading of the novel as a disinclination to adopt those performative stances signifying an entitlement to white privilege according to the racialized political and economic hierarchy of interwar America. Here the identificational locus of the narrator is poised upon the racial divide; while the white gaze that Max has already begun to internalize is inclined to perceive as a disturbing bodily lack of docility and refusal to be interpolated by the racially overdetermined identities of the community, the more deeply rooted subjective roots of his pre-Crookman life in Harlem find in these wites’ demeanor an

oppressive formality and circumspection. Max's nonchalance and lack of self-consciousness form a stark counterpart to the "hard and materialistic" society of whites" (63) whose "joy and abandon" are part of a performance—largely unconscious, being the outcome of a lifelong process of acculturation—of the social privilege reserved for those able and willing to pass as white.

By framing this disturbingly forced performance of a "possessive investment" in and entitlement to whiteness in terms of such an "either/or" relationship (40) Schuyler foregrounds the mutual generation of blackness and whiteness as lived, experiential social categories out of a reciprocal opposition; Max laments what he sees as an idolatry of conspicuous consumption that leaves him momentarily wistful for the less materialistic and "grasping," more fraternal community he recalls from his life in Harlem preceding the Crookman treatment. Juxtaposing the mutually reinforcing stereotypes of "Nordic"/Anglo anality to black "unselfconsciousness" in this way allows them to be recognized as the expression of a constitutive opposition in the evolution of American racial and class identity.

Early in the novel Dr. Crookman elaborates on the utility of his new procedure by reflecting that there are "but three ways" to evade the social stigma of blackness in interwar America: "'you can either 'get along, get white, or get out'" (*BNM*, 23). But the Dr's assertion is belied by the text's account of Max's treatment. The description of the "horrible machine akin to an electric chair" in which the Crookman treatment is administered underscores how the socially overdetermined character of racial identity requires not only the effective execution of the subject as a social being, but also calls for this dermalogically rehabilitated individual to take up a social identity appropriate

to its new appearance by seizing on the legal privileges associated with whiteness in the Jim Crow era. Such an interpolation requires not only the erasure of a dark skin pigment, but its refiguring as a participant in the exploitative privilege characteristic of whiteness in the American cultural logic; in effect, Dr. Crookman's clients find that they must not only "get white;" they must also "get out of" Harlem and other urban "Black Belts" (as suggested by the mass exodus from these areas as most of the black population of America and "get along" by taking up the dreary labor of turning the abstract possession of whiteness in America into tangible gains. Returning to Harlem several months after his metamorphosis, Max is pained at the sight of "For Rent" signs visible in most of the apartments and an equally precipitous decline in black business:

Gone was the almost European atmosphere of every Negro ghetto: the music, laughter, gaiety, jesting and abandon. Instead, one noted the same excited bustle, wild looks and strained faces to be seen in a war time soldier camp, around a new oil district or before a gold rush. The happy-go-lucky Negro of song and story was gone forever and in his stead was a nervous, money-grubbing black, stuffing away coin in socks, impatiently awaiting a sufficient sum to pay Dr. Crookman's fee. (*BNM*, 87)

Schuyler's description of "every Negro ghetto" as possessing a "European atmosphere" pushes this destabilization of the associative content of blackness and whiteness to the point where the binarization on which they are based collapses. By characterizing European culture and progress not primarily in terms of colonial wealth or the degree of achieved industrialization, but in the non-economic values of "music, laughter, gaiety, jesting and abandon," Schuyler discloses the ideological distortion that affiliates European enlightenment with such a specifically industrial-

economic criteria by which to gauge a culture's progressiveness or "civilization," as well as a conception of culture that regards the economic and political subjugation of minorities (whether globally, as within colonization, or internally, as in the context of slavery in America) as a primary indicator of a population's level of cultural development. Against these criteria, based in measurements of economic as well as educational disparity, the preceding passage associates European culture with a sense of ease and a lack of calculation that values a social environment which allows one to stop strategizing one's next social move—clearly the implied critique in the tension and self-consciousness stressed in Schuyler's representation of white social mores—in order to embrace present pleasures. Coding the qualities of spontaneity and an appreciation for culture not only as a vessel of cultural capital but as an end and pleasure in itself as "European" qualities, Schuyler disentrenches the conventional cognitive link between Europe and whiteness, associating the former with the culture of black America by foregrounding the relative unstudiedness and lack of a conscious performance of a personae that is as much a social strategy as a lived identity.

Schuyler's critique parallels Max Weber's criticism of modern Euro-American culture and its increasing absorption by a Protestant work ethic which views success in terms of a capacity to defer the pursuit of immediate pleasures in the hope of maximizing one's gains in the long run; applying the logic of the free market to the one makes an investment of repression in the hope of reaping a greater yield of pleasure. Max/Matthew's stereoscopic view of the American character, encompassing both sides of the color divide, suggests the constraint and oppressive preoccupation with staying ahead of the economic curve that results in the sort of deformation of

character highlighted by Schuyler's descriptions. Weber's criticisms of Benjamin Franklin's advice as to how young entrepreneurs might get ahead in colonial America are implicitly aimed at a concern with the gap between what are viewed as two discreet strata of identity: the authentic as opposed to the performed, public identity and what Weber casts as the crude opportunism Franklin counsels his reader to exploit. In his autobiography Franklin admonishes his reader that:

[t]he most trifling actions [bearing on] a man's credit are to be regarded. The sound of your hammer at five in the morning, or eight at night, heard by a creditor, makes him easy six months longer; but if he sees you at a billiard-table, or hears your voice at a tavern, when you should be at work, he sends for his money the next day.

It shows besides that you are mindful of what you owe; it makes you appear a careful as well as an honest man, and that still increases your credit. (quoted in Weber, 15)

Weber's main object in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is to suggest "an ethos particular to capitalism," one unique in the degree to which it saw "the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself" (Weber, 17). What is particularly relevant in this excerpt to the present discussion is the degree to which Franklin's account so succinctly articulates the intersubjective logic of the passing subject, and how it helps us more fully appreciate the prescience of Schuyler's defamiliarization of racial essence. Rather than exhorting one (as Plato once did his students) to "be that which you would seem," Franklin consistently stresses that it is only the *appearance* of trustworthiness and the credit it grants with one's neighbor's that should concern the individual. Whereas Franklin writes of a colonial and Schuyler of an interwar America, both these depictions of the national character are in agreement in stressing the degree to which American identity

and citizenship are experienced as property interests to be invested as one would any other form of capital, whereas *Black No More* is alone in depicting this economically conditioned structuration as so pervasive a force in interwar American society as to result in an acute truncation of individual character and the social reality rising from it.

Schuyler's protagonist weathers all the sudden twists and turns of plot in the novel with the wry wit and elasticity of spirit suited to the protagonist of a novel with so many corkscrewing twists of plot. Considering the insights his journey across the color line have granted him, one might expect Matthew to have pursued a more politically conscientious path following his visit to Dr. Crookman's visit and his decision to head to Atlanta, one more akin to that of Walter White, or at least show some sort of outrage or disgust with the self-defeating character of American race relations. On the contrary, however, we read that after his recovery from his visit to Dr. Crookman's clinic his only thought is to "get white and get to Atlanta."²⁷ Max's relative indifference to these larger political and economic issues beyond their bearing on advancing his own designs brings them home with all that much force to

²⁷ As an African American able to pass as white, White investigated 41 lynchings and eight race riots while working with the NAACP before succeeding James Weldon Johnson as its chairman in 1931. The circumstances of the lynching of two white men initially thought to be black that concludes *Black No More* recall the events in October 1919 in Elaine, Arkansas where White went to investigate the lynching of around 200 black men over a series of race-inflected labor disputes in the area. His biographer writes that White was in Phillips County for only a brief time before his identity was discovered, when he took the first train back to Little Rock. The conductor told him that he was leaving "just when the fun is going to start," because they had found out that there was a "damned yellow nigger passing for white and the boys are going to get him." Asked what they would do to him, the conductor told White that, "[W]hen they get through with him he won't pass for white no more!"

the reader, who is left to make the connections that he leaves unexamined. In this sense the text undertakes a dramatization not only of the “double consciousness” W.E.B. Dubois’ described in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1897), but of a third subjective position superimposed upon these, one that is precipitated by Matthew Disher’s journey of disillusionment through his adventures within white society. Dubois wrote of:

this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Black No More is carefully structured to position the reader at the intersection of these three discreet and ultimately irreconcilable identities. As it chronicles Max/Matthew’s fortunes the narrative gathers up the materials needed for the racial defamiliarization the novel embodies, laying these clues alongside each other as the plot progresses while leaving it to the reader to fill in the hermeneutic gaps that his unshakable self-absorption leave in the narrative. Max’s overestimation of the social ascendancy that would be his upon “getting white” is one of the key leitmotifs Schuyler employs in *Black No More*’s critique of reified racial identity, throwing into relief how impoverished white identity is within the context of Jim Crow America in so far as it exists as an inverted reflection of the institutionalized disenfranchisement of black Americans. The sort of racial stereoscope through which Max/Matthew views the complex series of events brought about by the Black-No-More

Corporation's effective erasure of black Americans as a cultural and economic force functions in the structure of the text to highlight the abstract racialized privilege described in Dubois' quotation at the head of this chapter. This is a privilege as much affective and emotional, and paid in the currency of social recognition, as it is purely economic. Time and again race functions in the mental economy of the individual in *Black No More* to create a powerful source of misrecognition of the deeper ideological and institutional structures that produce the environment of artificial economic scarcity endured in interwar America by most blacks and poor whites alike. Following his treatment by Dr. Crookman Max is able to experience first hand life free of the social stigma of blackness, and how the possession of whiteness alone represents for him only one rung negotiated as he climbs the vast latter of the social hierarchy:

He was not finding life as a white man the rosy existence he had anticipated. He was forced to conclude that it was pretty dull and that he was bored. As a boy he had been taught to look up at white folks as just a little less than gods; now he found them little different from the negroes, except that they were uniformly less courteous and less interesting. (*BNM*, 63)

Schuyler's main object in these moments where Max/Matthew experiences a white reality against the backdrop of his earlier experience in Harlem as Max Disher is to demonstrate how mutually impoverishing these racialized aspects of identity performance are for blacks and whites alike. Structured as these identifications are around the imperative of seizing upon and husbanding whatever privileges attach to them within the given social order, they result in the reproduction of the same systems of political and economic inequality through time. The text's semiomniscient

narrator positions the reader upon the frontier between these irreconcilable regions of Max/Matthew's personality, a point where one is able to share epiphany as he experiences first hand how poor whites too fall prey to the same systematic foreclosure of opportunity that has become a way of life for most of their black neighbors. The racial stereoscope generated in the narrative by Matthew's ability to not only pass but to excel socially in the white-dominated world of interwar American politics brings into heightened relief the heavy if invisible price paid by Americans in failing to address the radical economic (and consequent political) inequities of this period, one that conceives of privilege as a zero sum battle to be waged between competing marginalized identities split along lines of race, class and gender.

In so far as black identity is not structured around shoring up an exclusive access to privileges reserved for propertied whites, Max perceives in Harlem a culture relatively unmarred by the rigid and arbitrary boundaries drawn around the issue of race. His nostalgia for the sort of unself-conscious social environment he is now able to recognize in contrast to "the hard, materialistic, grasping, inbred society of whites" (63) leads him to Atlanta's Auburn Avenue where he "stroll[s] around the vicinity, looking at the dark folk and listening to their conversation and banter. But no one down there wanted him around, he was a white man and so suspect" (63). At moments such as these Schuyler seems to contradict the sentiments put forth in his well known essay "The Negro Art Hokum" (published in the June 16, 1926 issue of *The Nation*) in which he argues against what he characterizes as a reductive commodification of black identity that risked further entrenching a body of

demeaning stereotypes attempting to justify blacks' second-class citizen status.

Schuyler's outspoken conservatism in later years must be judged against his lifelong distrust of any cultural or political production that tended to engage in anything resembling such an essentializing of black identity. Indeed, some of *Black No More's* most scathing satire is devoted to leading black political figures including W.E.B. Dubois (a.k.a. Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard) and Marcus Garvey and what the novel represents as the opportunistic double standard between their espousal of black emancipationist rhetoric and their decidedly self-interested action in the novel.

Upon Matthew's arrival in Atlanta he hears of a white supremacist organization that has just been formed in response to the perceived challenge to white dominance posed by Dr. Crookman's sanatoria, which by now have been established in all American cities with a sizeable black population. Max decides to put his new appearance to the test by presenting himself to a Mr. Givens, the "Grand Exalted Giraw" of the organization, known as The Knights of Nordica. In this as in many other scenes in the novel Max's ability to pass among such groups as the Knights of Nordica functions as a form of whiteface. Max mimetically performs what George Lipsitz has described as a "possessive investment in whiteness" based on a lifetime of observing whites seizing upon such race-based social entitlement. Schuyler's account of Max's most challenging test of passing in whiteface stresses its performative aspects; as a popular Alcoholic's Anonymous slogan puts it, "Fake it 'til you make it;" that is, act the part with all the sincerity one can and in time one will ultimately become the desired subject; Max need only play the part of white entitlement as though he believed in its authenticity for it to be taken as reality by those around him,

whether black or white. When Max first enters the offices of the Knights of Nordica he finds:

[a] rather pretty young stenographer [who] asked him his business as he walked into the anteroom. Better be bold he thought. This was probably the best chance he would have to keep from working, and his funds were getting lower and lower.

“Please tell Rev. Givens, the Imperial Grand Wizard, that Mr. Matthew Fisher of the New York Anthropological Society is very anxious to have about a half-hour’s conversation with him relative to this new venture.

“Yassah,” almost whispered the awed young lady, “I’ll tell him.” She withdrew into an inner office and Matthew chuckled softly to himself. He wondered if he could impress this old fakir as easily as he had the girl. (*BNM*, 67)

Having been ushered into Reverend Givens office, his confidence boosted by the stenographer’s ready acceptance of Matthew’s new identity, he outlines for Reverend Givens the threat to white authority in America posed by Dr. Crookman’s Black No More Incorporated. He speaks “in his best salesman’s croon,” quite literally selling his performance. Max musters up all the grandiloquence he can, explaining to Givens that “as an anthropologist [. . .] it has always seemed to me that there is no question in American life more important than that of preserving the integrity of the white race.” He goes on to assure the Reverend, “knit[ting] his blond eyebrows,” that “we all know what has been the fate of those nations that allowed themselves to be polluted with that of inferior breeds” to which the narrator adds that Max “had read some argument like that in a Sunday supplement not long before, which was the extent of his knowledge of anthropology” (*BNM*, 69). The authenticity of this privileged white identity is seen to lie in a seamless fusion of a certain combination of bodily traits with the expression of a certain entitlement (not only political and economic) that

experiences any examination of the historical or biological validity of these claims as an attack on its own integrity, a questioning of its social superiority. Max concludes his monologue to the Reverend by asking “[d]on’t you see that Congress must be aroused; that these places must be closed?” (69):

Reverend Givens saw. He nodded his head as Mathew, now glorying in his newly discovered eloquence made point after point, and concluded that this pale, dapper young fellow, with his ready tongue, his sincerity, his scientific training and knowledge of the situation ought to prove a valuable asset to the Knights of Nordica” (*BNM*, 69-70)

Such identity prostheses as his grandiloquent language, newly lightened eyebrows and skin, and some appropriately tweedy garb permit this Harlem hustler to pass himself off as an Ivy League-educated anthropologist sympathetic to the Reverend’s views on race and segregation. Reverend Given’s conviction of the superiority of “the white race” is so fundamental to his self-image and his very sense of reality that the possibility of this paragon of white respectability actually being one of Dr. Crookman’s patients passing as such is quite literally unthinkable for him. Committed as he is to a faith in an ontological and essential difference between the races, Max’s racial masquerade need only reprise the essential tenets of the Knights of Nordica’s obsessive white supremacist preoccupations to secure the Reverend’s credulity. Fittingly, at the close of the novel, when it has been revealed that all Americans possess some black blood, it is Reverend Givens who is unable to accept the news:

But Givens was greatly depressed, much more so than the others. He had really believed all that he had preached about white supremacy, race purity and the menace of the alien, the Catholic, the Modernist, and the Jew. He had always been sincere in his prejudices. (*BNM*, 94)

Max's realization that the success of this whiteface performance rests in a consistent confirmation of the Reverend's assumptions about race in America gives him the confidence to overcome his fear of speaking to a gathering of the Knights of Nordica that evening on the threat posed by the Black No More Corporation, though it has only been a matter of weeks since he left Dr. Crookman's clinic with a new name and identity. Seated on the platform alongside the audience before giving his talk to an auditorium of "hard-faced, lantern-jawed, dull-eyed adult children" Matthew reassures himself that all that is necessary for the success of his efforts to pass as a leader of the foremost white supremacist group in the nation is to confidently reflect back to the audience the same sort of praise of whiteness as an abstract value that characterizes all such orations: "He quickly saw that these people would believe anything that was shouted at them loudly and convincingly enough. He knew what would fetch their applause and bring in their memberships and he intended to repeat it over and over" (77-8). Their appraisal of racial ascendancy over the black community having always implicitly been appraised on a higher level than economic equality with the owners of the means of production (whether factory owners or Southern plantation owners), the audience of poor white workers at the Knights of Nordica rally are readily persuaded of the need to join together in the name of racial purity while leaving the issue of the economic exploitation on which the system is founded largely ignored. In exchange for this "psychological wage" these white workers are obliged to forfeit the possibility of organizing some sort of collective resistance to this exploitation. As we have seen in previous chapters, the survival instinct of the ego as a system of identifications and associations is able to

effectively trump the communalist claims of class consciousness, failing to embrace the deep affective bonds established through lifelong contact with a specific habitus as the rhetoric of white supremacy proves so often able to do.

Matthew's adventures in the world of strike breaking model the sort of rhetorical deflection of such race-based systems of disenfranchisement onto questions of class identity that W.E.B. DuBois described in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880*:

White labor saw in every advance of negroes a threat to their prerogatives, so that in many districts blacks were afraid to build decent homes or dress well, or own carriages, bicycles or automobiles, because of possible retaliation [. . .] Thus every problem of labor advance in the South was skillfully turned by demagogues into a matter of inter-racial jealousy. (Dubois, 701)

Having effectively rendered blackness invisible, the Black No More Corporation has deprived groups like the Knights of Nordica of the indispensable scapegoat that has so often served to deter working class whites from recognizing white industry rather than poor black laborers as the true source of their subordinate social position. In a scene that foregrounds the elasticity of race as a semiotics of social position and power Matthew, now Grand Exalted Giraw of the Knights of Nordica, is informed by "a secret operative" of an imminent strike at a cotton mill owned by two Germans. The letter closes by noting that "[m]ost of the hands belong to the Knights of Nordica and they want the organization to help them unionize" (120). As usual, Matthew approaches the situation solely in terms of its profit-yielding potential. After first meeting with the mill owners, from whom he demands a large sum of money in

exchange for his promise to defuse the strike, Matthew then organizes a meeting of the mill's work force at which he is the keynote speaker:

He reminded them that they were men and women; that they were free, white, and twenty-one; that they were citizens of the United States; that America was their country as well as Rockefeller's [. . .]; that nothing should be dearer to them than the maintenance of white supremacy. He insinuated that even in their midst there probably were some Negroes who had been turned white by Black-No-More. Such individuals, he insisted, made poor union material because they always showed their Negro characteristics and ran away in a crisis. (*BNM*, 125)

Through Matthew's oration Schuyler captures the sociohistorical durability of white privilege, bound up as it is with the development of a white-coded laboring class in the century between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. In *The Wages of Whiteness* David Roediger argues that "the words *white* and *worker* [. . .] became paired during a time in which the United States, whose citizens were taught by their revolutionary victory and republican ideology to expect both political and economic independence, became a nation in which, by 1860, roughly half the nonslave labor force was dependent on wage labor and subject to new forms of capitalist labor discipline" (Roediger, 20). Masterfully manipulating such racial preoccupations, Matthew and his associates go to work behind the scenes, employing a system of hearsay, innuendo and racist propaganda in a campaign meant to foment discord among the workers. They are able to fatally compromise strike organization efforts by suggesting several of the leaders of the unionizing movement from amongst the workers are actually Crookmanized black workers: "The erstwhile class conscious workers became terror-stricken by the specter of black blood" (127). A mill worker erroneously assumes a labor organizer's identity to be black solely because he is from Harlem, insisting "we

won't have no nigger leadin' us [. . .]. You aint the first white nigger whut's been aroun' these parts,' was the reply," underscoring once more the plasticity of racial identity in the face of organized resistance. Whereas the specific object of exclusion may oscillate, Matthew and the mill owners are able to deflect attention from their central role in maintaining the racial and economic status quo onto the newly fabricated threat of Crookmanized whites and their potential infiltration of the work force.

The Harlem Renaissance and "The Negro Art Hokum": Situating Schuyler's Conservatism

Until the discovery in 1991 of Schuyler's serials "The Black Internationale" and "Black Empire" written under the pseudonym Samuel I. Brooks, it had been assumed that *Black No More* represented all of the fiction written by Schuyler. This rediscovery has provoked a renewed discussion regarding the position of Schuyler's work within the Harlem Renaissance and to twentieth century American racial discourse more generally. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1992 New York Times review of these reprinted texts undertakes a reassessment of Schuyler's volatile reputation. Entitled "A Fragmented Man: George S. Schuyler and the Claims of Race," Gates review stresses what he sees as the social pressures encouraging an ideological conformity to a conception of "race loyalty" which entailed a foregrounding of the particular experience of blacks in America and the cultures that had been shaped by it. Thus for Schuyler, as with his associate and mentor H.L. Mencken, "skepticism, independent critical thinking and iconoclasm were part and parcel of the intellectual's

calling, and [. . .] ‘race loyalty’ depended on just these qualities of mind” (Gates, 18).

Such a discursive position was characteristic of much of the work associated with the Harlem Renaissance—as we will see, one perhaps no more forcefully stated than in Langston Hughes’ 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

Schuyler’s critical assessment has fluctuated dramatically over the decades, not least due to his criticisms of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement in general during the late 1950’s and into the following decade, when such sentiments were felt by many to be radically out of step with the zeitgeist. Criticisms of Gates’ review recapitulate the critical divide established at the close of the Harlem Renaissance. For example, Jeffrey A. Tucker resists Gates’s readiness to read Schuyler’s not infrequently dismissive attitude toward the concept of a unique “black identity” as a sort of reaction formation against calls to accept the popular aesthetic which sought to build on the particularity of blacks’ cultural experience by attempting to return to some authentic black identity that had been lost amidst the collective trauma of slavery and the bitter and often bloody disappointments of Jim Crow. In his reply to Gates’s review Tucker argues that “by portraying Schuyler only as a victim of ‘race,’ Gates’s portrait deactivates Schuyler’s agency. As ‘victim’ Schuyler seems less accountable for his always provocative but frequently fallacious, insupportable and ultimately dangerous claims” (Tucker, 140). Gates’s review inclines towards a valorization of Schuyler as an emblem of radical individuality in a period where the raw material of personality and identity are seen to be taking on a mass character similar to the process taking place in the sphere of material production. In contrast,

Tucker condemns Schuyler's extreme anti-essentialist position for its undermining of the uncertain foothold that black Americans have achieved in their quest for some measure of self-determination and political recognition in postbellum America.

Often referred to as "the black Mencken," both Schuyler's fiction and journalism approach the issue of race with an iconoclasm and lack of sentimentality that would prove all the more incendiary for being published at a time when the existence of a distinctively black identity had come to be taken for granted by most black artists and those who worked with them to distribute their work to a growing urban market, white as well as black.²⁸ In Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York, where one fourth of Northern blacks resided by the end of World War I, as well as many smaller towns, a uniquely African American habitus had managed to carve out a niche for itself. Much of the literature of the Harlem Renaissance responded to a growing vogue within certain white audiences for these new black cultural forms from blues and jazz to the neo-African forms that proved so influential to transatlantic modernism, and in responding to that growing market, helped produce the idea of an ontologically distinct and authentic blackness. Schuyler's refusal to identify himself with contemporary movements organized around racial uplift as well as black nationalism, or with Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement two decades later would render him an increasingly marginalized figure. Critics offer a

²⁸ As editor of the *American Mercury* Mencken wrote "I am more and more convinced that [Schuyler] is the most competent editorial writer now in practice in this great free republic." Mencken first published Schuyler in December 1927. Mencken biographer Charles Scruggs notes that "[h]e became the most published *Mercury* writer, black or white, in Mencken's tenure as editor." (*The Sage in Harlem*, 35)

range of explanations as to the origins of Schuyler's iconoclastic and at times combative journalistic demeanor. Ann Rayson has argued that the roots of this conservatism lay in what his reporting for *The Pittsburgh Courier* argued was the misguided strategy of the legal defense for the nine black youths accused of sexually assaulting two homeless white women in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931. In April 1933 in his "Views and Reviews" column he wrote that "[a]nybody who is at all familiar with the Southern psychology knows that no class issues are involved [in the case] save of the most remote and inconsequential kind. It is a race issue pure and simple" (Rayson, 1978) Reading such statements against *Black No More* we are able to grasp Schuyler's particular usage of the term "race" here, his implication being that in the popular white mind of the time it was the larger symbolic role of race which overdetermined the character of the trial, one that effectively outweighed in many poor whites' minds any class-based affinities between the jury and the nine defendants.

In her recent essay on *Black No More* Sonnet Retman observes that "the particular currency of [Afro-American] primitivism occasioned a further self-consciousness for these writers about what constituted blackness and, moreover, what it meant to perform blackness for personal gain. [. . .] Although primitivism was defined as something outside of the marketplace, it was situated thoroughly within it" (Retman, 1452).²⁹ The much-discussed 1926 debate between Schuyler and Hughes in

²⁹ Retman's observation calls to mind Paul Mann's description of the structural role the nineteenth century avant-garde played in functioning as "the outside of the inside" of modernism (Mann, 13). As in the earlier discussion of J.K. Huysmans' *Against the Grain* and Des Esseintes' decision to flee Paris for a nearby suburb in order to escape a threatening otherness associated with an encroaching mass

The Nation demonstrates an implicit grasp of the Harlem Renaissance represented the moment from which black experience and sentiment were taking on mass marketable commodity forms. The first three decades of the twentieth century in America saw the attempt to establish a democracy of consumption based in Fordist methods of production. Though rooted in mass production, the goods characterized by this model of production were coded as reflective of a commercial culture coded as white both in its design and the advertising that strove to control the specific practices through which these goods were appropriated.

Schuyler's 1966 autobiography *Black and Conservative* downplays his gravitation towards an increasingly conservative position through the Cold War, characterizing himself as already skeptical of the socialist project in the 1920's despite his joining the Socialist Party of America in November 1921. Kathryn Talalay's recent biography of Schuyler's daughter Philippa revealed a crucial experience involving his military service. Commissioned as a first lieutenant in 1918, Schuyler was refused service by a Greek bootblack in Philadelphia while travelling to Fort Dix. Outraged, Schuyler went AWOL. Working his way westward three months would pass before he presented himself to military authorities in San Diego. That this

culture: "[He felt] himself just far enough withdrawn for the flood of Paris activity not to touch his retreat, yet near enough for the proximity of the metropolis to add spice to his solitariness. (*Against the Grain*, 88); thus Des Esseintes' relationship with Parisian mass couture is at many points homologous with the visitor/tourists who increasingly filled Harlem's bars and night clubs as the "roaring '20s" progressed towards the Wall Street bust of October 1929 and the Great Depression, and who Schuyler lampoons in his characterization of the group from Atlanta Max and Bunny encounter at a night club in the opening scene who were "up here trying to get a thrill in the Black Belt, but a thrill from observation instead of contact" (*BNM*, 23).

crucial experience goes unmentioned in the voluminous criticism related to Schuyler as well as his autobiographical writings suggests Schuyler himself struggled throughout his life to fully invest himself in the perspective he put forth in essays like “The Negro Art Hokum,” in which he asserts that “the Aframerican is subject to the same economic and social forces that mold the actions and thoughts of white Americans. He is not living in a different world as some whites and a few Negroes would have us believe” (Leak, 15). Tellingly, in the next paragraph Schuyler has begun to qualify this assertion of an identical social environment shared by both blacks and whites, writing that “when the jangling of his alarm clock gets him out of his Grand Rapids bed [he eats] a breakfast similar to that eaten by his white brother across the street” and “toils at the same or similar work in mills, mines, factories and commerce” (15). Certainly his experience in Philadelphia in 1918 forced him to question such assertions which ultimately seem part of Schuyler’s larger rhetorical strategy of maximizing future black political and economic progress by stressing what had already been achieved by the community even in the face of the intense racism it had met with in the decades following the failure of Reconstruction.

Discussions of the much discussed 1926 exchange between Schuyler and Langston Hughes on the issue of an authentic “black art” often regard Schuyler’s position as an incipient expression of the staunch conservatism that he would gravitate towards in the coming decades. Several commentators on this disparity between the political allegiances of the Schuyler of the Harlem Renaissance versus that of the Cold War have attacked what they perceive as the hypocrisy of the later writings, suggesting that his “basic assimilationist impulse” (Bone, 168) reveals the

mature author to have grown well out of touch with the realities of race in America in the intervening years. “The Negro Art Hokum,” published in the *Nation* on June 16, 1926, and Hughes reply, included in the following week’s issue and entitled “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” are interesting documents not least for their articulation of the broad spectrum of attitudes surrounding racial identity at the close of the Harlem Renaissance within the black community and beyond, and the growing role consumption patterns and their expression as “lifestyles” played in popular attitudes towards race. Read alongside one another, one detects both authors’ need to somewhat overstate their position in order to clarify the distinctions between their respective positions. Whereas Schuyler’s “Negro Art Hokum” argues against the existence of an ontologically primary black identity, Hughes—whose essay was specifically commissioned as a rebuttal to the iconoclastic views Schuyler’s essay puts forth—insists on the distinctive perspective of black America resulting from the collective legacy of slavery, Emancipation and the failure of Reconstruction.³⁰

In one of the essay’s most provocative passages Schuyler asserts that “Negro art there has been, is and will be among the numerous black nations of Africa; but to suggest the possibility of any such development among the ten million colored people in this republic is self-evident foolishness. [. . .] This, of course, is easily understood

³⁰ In his introduction to a collection of Schuyler’s essays and journalism, Jeffrey B. Leak notes that “[t]he leadership of the *Nation* was so concerned about Schuyler’s essay that it enlisted Hughes to issue, if not a direct response to Schuyler, at least an alternative perspective on the nature of black cultural expression” (Leak, xxiv)/

if one stops to realize the Aframerican is merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon³¹” (Leak, 14-5). Read in the light of related articles from this period such as “The Negro and Nordic Civilization” (1925) and “Uncle Sam’s Black Stepchild” (1933) one detects the same vehemence that would drive him to write an admonishing editorial on Dr. Martin Luther King’s role in the civil rights movement on the occasion of King’s receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Both gestures proved enduringly polarizing, positioning Schuyler at the extreme conservative point of the debate on the debate over the meaning of African American identity. His description in 1926 of African Americans as “lampblack Anglo-Saxons” is a typically unsentimental image through which to represent the erosion of cultural difference that takes place as formerly discreet communities live alongside each other generation after generation. His position would seem to be more clearly expressed when he goes on to ask:

If the European immigrant after two or three generations of exposure to our schools, politics, advertising, moral crusades, and restaurants becomes indistinguishable from the mass of Americans of the older stock [. . .] how much truer must it be of the sons of Ham who have been subjected to what the uplifters call Americanism for the past three hundred years? (quoted in Leak, 14)

In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” Hughes rejects this suggestion that black American culture has already been assimilated to the point of indistinguishability from mainstream white America and lauding “the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be

³¹ Schuyler adds with a characteristic rhetorical recklessness: “[b]ecause a few writers with a paucity of themes have seized upon imbecilities of the Negro rustics and clowns and palmed them off as authentic and characteristic Aframerican behavior, the common notion that the black American is so ‘different’ has gained currency.” (Leak, 14)

praised!” He suggests middle class respectability for black Americans all too often entails little more than the “aping of things white.” What is most important to note in terms of the present discussion is the assumption shared between both authors that racial identity is expressed in large part through patterns of consumption much as Schuyler does in the preceding passage. The Schuyler-Hughes debate took place at a moment when minorities were first beginning to receive the attention of trade journals and advertisers³² as niche marketing became an indispensable tool in the effort to stimulate demand sufficient to keep abreast of the ever increasing productive capacities of the era, due not least to the rigorous instrumentalization of labor characteristic of Charles Taylor’s influential theories of scientific management. Hughes’ “Racial Mountain” sees “the African American common element” that neither knows much of nor cares to emulate white middle class criteria of success, expressing instead a form of culture that eludes the parallel standardization characteristic of Fordism and Taylorist “scientific management” in the field of production.

Though Schuyler may overstate his anti-essentialist stance in his rhetorical skirmish with Langston Hughes in *The Nation*, it should be read alongside *Black No More*’s prescient critique of new forms of technology and their ability to render race commodifiable in a culture that would become increasingly invested in the appropriation of racial signifiers. The twentieth century musical field and the appropriation of jazz, rock and roll and hip hop. Along with an expansion in breadth

³² See for example Robert E. Weems Jr.’s *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (1998).

of the variety of commodities made possible through mass production has come an increased articulation in the variety of race-coded commodities available to the consumer, from music and automobiles to cosmetic surgery packages and on-line avatars that interact with others in virtual social worlds such as Second Life, Twinity and Smallworlds. *Black No More* methodically resists such appropriation. By narrating the vicissitudes of the Black No More Corporation through the racial stereoscope of Max/Matthew's experience Schuyler discourages the reader's identification with the central characters of the novel, all of whom are represented as equally duplicitous and opportunistic in their efforts to wrest whatever booty they are able to from their particular position within the nation wide economic shake up Dr. Crookman's procedure provokes.

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Afterword:

The object of these chapters has been to clarify the modernist period as a crucial point of transition in the relationship between the consumption of material as well as intellectual and aesthetic culture and the individual's construction and maintenance of a socially viable identity. In doing so it understands consumption in most post-industrial societies as a means of prosthetically enhancing identity in its function as a sort of strategy through which the individual attempts to negotiate a path for themselves along those various social channels that lead to the relationships, social position, and material and emotional security upon which these are built. They have attempted at the same time to suggest some possible forms this interface between identity and consumption might take in the future. As biomedical and genetic research make it increasingly possible for those with the financial means to influence the specific physiological profiles of their children, and, with the aid of new prosthetics and reconstructive surgical techniques, themselves, we have seen a contemporaneous shift in popular media and culture in which the individual's genetic material comes to be metaphorized as a kind of human capital seeking to increase its objective value in a market of individual's trying to do the same.

In a lecture from March of 1979 Michel Foucault makes a case for the larger sociopolitical significance of these developments, framing his discussion in terms of the neoliberal global economic market ethos emerging at the time:

In neo-liberalism—and it does not hide this, it proclaims it—there is also a theory of *homo economicus*, but he is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neoliberal economic analyses is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as partner

of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of him [or her]self, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings.

(*The Birth of Biopolitics*, 226)

Foucault's description of the neoliberal economic landscape being laid out in these years stresses its exceedingly individualistic character. Here the putatively self-regulating system of market relationships and the "rational self interest" that has dominated economic thought since Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* has been substituted with a consumer and social actor exerting him or herself in isolation as "the producer of his [or her] own satisfaction" (225-6). This theoretical evacuation of any larger social bond and cultural order that precedes and frames such an economic relationship by effectively removing the partner of exchange from the equation seems a fulfillment of the pall of disaffection and lack of recognition or emotional contact dominating Poe's portrait of bustling mid-nineteenth century London streets. It likewise recalls Norbert Elias' remarks on "the hardening of ego boundaries" within human society and subjectivity as a consequence of an ever-expanding web of socioeconomic relations: "But it is already quite clear how human beings are becoming more complex, and internally split in quite a specific way. Each man, as it were, confronts himself. He 'conceals his passions,' 'disavows his heart,' 'acts against his feelings. [. . .]. Continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one's own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acts, become more and more indispensable preconditions of social success" (Elias, 398). Elias and Foucault's commentaries are at one in their concern with the tendency of modern socioeconomic

theory and forms to define society as a cluster of human wants, needs, and the economic activities that express them, divested of any sense of mutual dependency or a code of reciprocity, however rudimentary, that might embellish them.

One of Foucault's main concerns in his lecture of March 14, 1979 is to suggest how new developments in genetics and biomedical engineering have expanded the terrain on which this sort of enhancement of one's "human capital" takes place. Written at a time when research that would become the foundation for the Human Genome Project was beginning, Foucault's reference to what we now know as genetic screening clarifies the logic of reading these four texts alongside each other. "The Man of the Crowd" and *Against the Grain* have been read as reflections on the role of the market and consumption in facilitating the subject's experience of social belonging and how this relationship is disturbed by the advent of mass production. *The House of Mirth* and *Black No More* have served as prescient commentaries on the complex and mutually supportive relationship between racial and ethnic identity, consumption and eugenic/genetic theory and we understand our present relationship to these issues. One of the first remarks that Selden makes to himself upon encountering her in a New York City train station in the opening scene of *The House of Mirth* is of his "vague sense that she must have cost a lot to make" (*The House of Mirth*, 7). Wharton's novel models both the durability and flexibility of such a model of "human capital" as Foucault describes in his 1979 series of lectures, not least in the fact that, even as it mounts its critique against the sort of commodification of identity Lily is forced to perform in her efforts to achieve a position of material security, it enacts just such a commodification in its consistent metaphorization of Lily's "finer

nature” as a luxury class alternative to the inferior, mass-produced quality dominating the descriptions of the other women in the text, regardless of their relative economic position.

Juxtaposed alongside one another these texts are also meant to articulate a disturbing inertia that drives the evolution of the various canons of consumption a culture may generate, pass through and discard in its historical evolution towards new forms. What has endowed Thorstein Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption with such enduring value to sociologists and social anthropologists in the past century is its perspicacious rendering of the specifically mimetic aspects of what had traditionally been discussed as purely economic behaviors and forms of rationality. The objectification and externalization of identity and of an affective allegiance to certain subcultures through patterns of consumption is a virtually transhistorical and transcultural fact of human culture. Studies of consumer culture in the twenty-first century and on must recognize the significance of this era not only in its cultural and aesthetic aspect, but also for its profound ecological impact on the planet. Industrialization and urbanization; the completion of an integrated global transport system linking raw materials, producers and consumers in one global network; the innovation of a marketing and advertising industry equipped with all the insights of modern psychology in order to facilitate the increased demand mass-production called for; the era of modernism was one shaped by the explosive concatenation of these forces. With the global population passing seven billion and the recent production of the billionth automobile, the study of consumer culture comes to be

understood as a field with immediate demographic and ecological concerns for all of humanity.

Foucault's influential analysis of discipline and power in the modern era focused on modern institution's exercise of a panoptic logic in a shift in focus "from crime to criminality." His description of the movement into modernity as "an entering [into] the age of the infinite examination and of compulsory objectification" (*Discipline and Punish*, 189) suggests how consumption itself has become an essential moment in the production of a competitive social identity able to secure a niche for itself in an increasingly digital, high-tech labor environment. Buying and mastering the steady stream of new technologies and the new forms of social networking they are creating is increasingly regarded as a sort of minimum not only in terms of marketability within the contemporary urban labor force, but in terms of what popular opinion would appear to recognize as possessing full recognition as a citizen and subject as well. In buying these technologies and integrating them into one's work and private life with unusual proficiency (in terms of how it improves one's work efficiency or increases their social network skills, etc.) the modern subject moves subtly but unmistakably towards conceptualizing its life as a series of "examinations." For many, performing the "compulsory objectifications" Foucault refers to is experienced simply as being "in style," whether this refers to dress, transportation choices, or which devices one uses to communicate with.

Consumer consciousness has been first and foremost an urban phenomenon. The preceding chapters have focused on examining the encroachment of the standardizing logic of mass production on the processes of identity construction

within transatlantic modernist culture from four subject positions distinct in terms of their gender, racial and class location. In doing so they have also tried to suggest the self-exciting dynamics of cultural evolution and canons of taste within modern urban societies. “The Man of the Crowd” and *Against the Grain* were written when the project of translating Western culture into a series of visual signs and market-ready metonyms was just beginning, in the era of the great International Exhibitions, those great training grounds of consumer consciousness.

Contemporary forms of on-line “virtual community” such as You Tube, Facebook and Second Life are frequently cited as harbingers of a new radically democratic means of community development. Such technologies provide a whole new arena in which to socializ, and to construct and consume new forms of identity within. Videos like “It Gets Better” that offer advice to young gays ambivalent about the prospect of coming out to parents or friends while still living in rural or other areas where intolerance towards minority identities can still provoke outraged or violent reprisals offer readily accessible advice to young people who traditionally have had to negotiate these complex dilemmas on their own. Other videos feature those with physical or cognitive disabilities speaking out about the ostracism and ridicule their conditions have burdened them with, and how for some this socially generated aspect of their condition can be one of the most frustrating aspects of living with a disability. Facilitating understanding and the compassion that comes with it between these communities is certainly a positive aspect of these cultural and technological innovations. Recently, however, You Tube has had to respond to some unexpected situations. In March of 2011 it reported on its home page that a group of

videos involving young people cutting themselves on camera, many with elaborately staged and ritualized presentation, had “gone viral,” becoming some of the most viewed videos at the time and achieving a popularity that appeared to encourage other viewers to try their hand at this disturbing practice. Psychologists estimate that between fifteen and thirty-five percent of those between the ages of ten and twenty engage in self-laceration or some similarly self-destructive sort of behavior. But sociological inquiries into these developments and their larger social implications are necessarily skewed in the face of You Tube’s video aggregation programs which automatically group similarly themed videos together, offering them as suggested viewing in a column running along the right margin of the screen. The development of these new social interfaces requires a broad reevaluation of what the construction of identity, the consumption of culture and their study mean today. These chapters are intended as an early contribution to that project.