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Andrew Hoberek: The Twilight of the Middle Class

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The Twilight of the Middle Class

“ . . . privileged and deprived, an American sort of thing.”

—Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (1997)

MORRIS DICKSTEIN POSES his recent study of post–World War II American fiction *Leopards in the Temple* (2002) as a corrective to the by now standard tendency to emphasize the cold war in accounts of this period.¹ But while Dickstein takes the critics of cold war culture to task for what he sees as their oversimplification of both art and politics, he concurs with them on at least one major point. “If social suffering, poverty, and exploitation topped the agenda of the arts in the 1930s,” Dickstein writes “neurosis, poverty, and alienation played the same role in the forties and fifties when economic fears were largely put to rest.”² The idea that postwar culture abandoned the economic for the psychological has likewise been central to studies of cold war culture, where it underwrites the argument that postwar culture was characterized by a (deeply political) rejection of the more overtly political concerns of the thirties. Thus Thomas Hill Schaub argues in *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991) that postwar authors, participating in “the anti-Stalinist discourse of the new liberalism,” prioritized “psychological terms of social analysis . . . over economics and class consciousness as the dominant discourse of change.”³ While they differ on how to interpret the shift from economics to psychology—from capitalism and class struggle to “psychological nuance and linguistic complexity” (Dickstein 20)—Dickstein and critics like Schaub agree that this shift is the defining characteristic of postwar fiction.

It is perhaps for this reason that critics of cold war culture themselves downplay the very questions of “economics and class consciousness” for whose omission they take postwar writers to task. We might expect these critics to see Dickstein’s more neutral, and at times even celebratory, account of this shift as continuous with cold war triumphalism—a latter day version of Richard Nixon’s economic boosterism in his 1959 “kitchen debate” with Nikita Krushchev.⁴ Yet when they mention the postwar economy, it is often in similar terms. In his account of the postwar vogue of wide-screen movies like Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 *The Ten Commandments*, for instance, Alan Nadel reads these films as visual analogues of “the expansive economic and technological growth of America in the 1950s.”⁵ Nadel’s brief mention of the economy is rare, moreover. Often critics of cold war culture simply bracket the economy, restricting their analyses to the political and cultural realms. Even the Marxist critic Barbara Foley succumbs to this tendency,

arguing that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) engages in the red-baiting endemic to postwar anticommunism but nowhere addressing the economic framework within which—we might expect a Marxist to believe—the novel's politics are embedded.⁶ “If Ellison's own experiences with the left during the years represented in the Harlem section of *Invisible Man* was not one of unremitting bitterness and betrayal,” she asks, “what then might have been the source of the novel's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of the Brotherhood?” (541). Foley's answer is political bad faith and careerism. While Ellison's successive revisions of the draft certainly support this contention,⁷ Foley does not consider that Ellison might also be responding (as I will argue in my own chapter on *Invisible Man*) to economic issues relevant to the world of the fifties rather than the thirties. Her essay on Herman Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener,” by contrast, exhaustively describes the economic and class issues that rove New York City during the period of the story's composition.⁸ The implication is that such issues mattered during the antebellum period but were less important, or even unimportant, in the 1950s. Despite their helpful attention to the political backsliding of the cold war era, accounts like Nadel's and Foley's either explicitly or implicitly accept Dickstein's assertion that following World War II “economic fears were largely put to rest.”⁹

This book argues, by contrast, that economics and class remained central to postwar writing, belying our standard assumptions about the irrelevance of such matters in the postwar period. Of course, there is good evidence for these assumptions. Statistics compiled by the business historian Jeffrey Madrick make it clear that the postwar years were indeed prosperous ones, and not just in comparison with the lean years of the Depression. Along with the fact that “family incomes doubled . . . between 1947 and 1973,”

By 1970 four out of five American families owned at least one car, two out of three had a washing machine, and almost all families had a refrigerator. About 65 percent of American families owned their own homes, and almost all had flush toilets and running water. The proportion of white males who had graduated from college rose from 6 percent in 1947 to 11 percent in 1959 and to about 25 percent in the 1980s. More than half of working Americans had a private pension, compared with only about 15 percent after World War II, supplementing Social Security benefits, which themselves were only a generation old.¹⁰

As Paul Krugman and others have noted, moreover, the postwar economy not only grew at a remarkable rate, but its fruits were—by the standards of either pre-Depression America or our own time—remarkably evenly distributed.¹¹

Given such real and relatively widespread prosperity, the elision of economic matters in accounts of postwar writing seems understandable. As early as 1962, to be sure, Michael Harrington had called into question the assumption that “the basic grinding economic problems had been solved in the United States.”¹² In *The Other America* Harrington argued that postwar social criticism's focus on “the emotional suffering taking place in the suburbs” (1) belied the existence of an

“invisible land” (1) inhabited by “the dispossessed workers, the minorities, the farm poor, and the aged” (17). But Harrington’s objection to such criticism was that it disregarded those who remained on the margins, not that it misrepresented the mainstream. Similarly, recent accounts of the postwar period, such as George Lipsitz’s *Rainbow at Midnight* (1994), Alan Wald’s *Writing from the Left* (1994), and *The Other Fifties* (1997), edited by Joel Foreman, have turned from the mainstream to the various class and racial subcultures that existed during this period.¹³ But while such revisionist accounts usefully remind us that not everyone in the fifties had equal access to the fruits of the economic boom, they leave untouched our sense that those who did have such access somehow transcended the economic realm.

This assumption is reinforced by the fact that while postwar prosperity is generally associated with a particular class, it is one that is traditionally understood in the United States as classless. This idea of American “middle-classlessness” has proven especially compatible with our understanding of the postwar boom,¹⁴ as Jack Beatty’s account of the boom suggests:

The expanding middle class had in it two distinct kinds of workers: white-collar and blue-collar. Back then, thanks to the wages won for him by his union, the blue-collar man (the gender specification is unavoidable) could live next door to the white-collar man—not to the doctor, perhaps, but to the accountant, the teacher, the middle manager. This rough economic equality was a political fact of the first importance. It meant that, in a break with the drift of things in pre-war America, postwar America had no working class and no working-class politics. It had instead a middle-class politics for an expanding middle class bigger in aspiration and self-identification than it was in fact—more people wanted to be seen as middle-class than had yet arrived at that state of felicity. Socialism in America, the German political economist Werner Sombart wrote in 1906, foundered upon “roast beef and apple pie,” a metaphor for American plenty. The expanding middle class of the postwar era—property-owning, bourgeois in outlook, centrist in politics—hardly proved him wrong.¹⁵

The myth of America as a classless—because universally or at least potentially universally middle-class—nation has a long history, as Beatty’s reference to Sombart suggests. But in its current incarnation it is inseparable from what Krugman calls the “middle-class interregnum” that lasted from the New Deal thirties through the late seventies, and has been succeeded by a “new Gilded Age” characterized by a vast and growing gap between rich and poor.¹⁶ The postwar middle class, Beatty argues, “muted the class conflict that Marx had prophesied would one day destroy capitalism” by providing “a reproof to the very idea of class” (65).¹⁷

We might expect accounts of the middle-class dimensions of postwar literature and culture to undermine this conception of the middle-class as a nonclass. Yet these accounts, while usefully skeptical about what Dickstein calls the “deep discomfort at the core of American affluence and power” (16), tend—by reading the middle class solely in the light of privilege—to affirm its putative transcendence

of the economic. “This was a time,” Barbara Ehrenreich writes in her 1983 study *The Hearts of Men*, “when the educated middle class worried about being *too* affluent.”¹⁸ Jackson Lears, reading some of the same texts as Ehrenreich, argues that “‘a new class’ of salaried managers, administrators, academics, technicians, and journalists” achieved cultural hegemony in the postwar period by identifying its “problems and interests with those of society and indeed humanity at large.”¹⁹ Through frequently popular works of social and cultural criticism, Lears argues, this class falsely universalized its own concerns about “the bureaucratization of bourgeois individualism in America” (46–47), in the process rendering others’ concerns “marginal or even invisible to the wider public culture” (50). Catherine Jurca, finally, imputes a similar disingenuousness to postwar accounts of middle-class “suffering” and “discontent,” which she views as self-interested counterfeits designed both to ratify middle-class affluence vis-à-vis less fortunate groups, and to allow individual members of the middle class a sense of distinction vis-à-vis their less self-aware counterparts.²⁰ While properly chary toward “exaggerated claims about postwar affluence” (139), Jurca is not chary about such claims as they relate to the middle class.²¹

To a certain extent, these accounts all continue—from a perspective more sophisticated about race, gender, and, less decisively, class—the project of the social criticism they describe, which in the words of one intellectual historian was preoccupied with “the problems of prosperity.”²² Thus William H. Whyte writes in *The Organization Man* (1956)—a locus classicus of postwar social criticism cited by Ehrenreich, Lears, and Jurca—that “it is not the evils of organization life that puzzle [the organization man], *but its very beneficence*.”²³ More concretely, Whyte argues that the comfort and security enjoyed by the members of the middle class blunt their ambitions and render them all the more susceptible to the pressures toward conformity that characterize the organizations in which they work and, increasingly, do almost everything else. While some critics continue to see the problems of prosperity as authentic, and others have redescribed them as strategies for achieving or maintaining cultural dominance, most concur that they were not “material.”²⁴

Richard Ohmann’s 1983 essay “The Shaping of a Canon: U. S. Fiction, 1960–1975” at first glance seems to belong in this category, although Ohmann departs from the consensus about the middle class’s transcendence of the economic in a crucial way. Ohmann argues that middle-class gatekeepers in the publishing industry, the media, and the academy awarded “precanonical” status to fiction that translated middle-class insecurity into the narrative of individual breakdown that he calls the “illness story.”²⁵ He thus concurs with Lears that the middle class exercised cultural hegemony by falsely universalizing its specific concerns, which for Ohmann, too, have to do with the pressures exerted by society on the individual. But Ohmann understands the resulting cultural products not simply as an expression of privilege, but also as symptomatic registers of the middle class’s less than fully dominant role in the postwar economy. The postwar middle class, in

Ohmann's account, was a "subordinate but influential class" (397) that exercised control over the content of postwar culture at the discretion of the "ruling class" that actually "own[ed] the media and control[led] them formally" (386). Ohmann, to be sure, emphasizes the novel authority of the middle class—or what he calls, following Barbara and John Ehrenreich, the "Professional-Managerial Class" or "PMC"—at this juncture. In the Ehrenreichs' influential description, the PMC is the class of "salaried mental workers" that "emerged with dramatic suddenness [*sic*] in the years between 1890 and 1920" and that constitutes an authentically new class with interests opposed to those of both owners and workers.²⁶ Drawing on the Ehrenreichs' essay, Ohmann insists that his account "turns upon class but not just upon the two great traditional classes" (387), though his own reference to ruling-class media-owners suggests that at least one of the two traditional classes was alive and well.

Moreover, with the demise of the postwar boom (which began faltering shortly before the mid-seventies end date Ohmann selects for his study), the members of the middle class have increasingly entered the other great traditional class of those who sell their labor. Beatty and Krugman both extol the postwar middle class in contributions to the crisis-of-the-middle-class genre that has been a journalistic staple (with the exception of a brief hiatus during the late nineties tech boom) for several decades. As such accounts suggest, this crisis has taken the form not simply of the disappearance of median incomes, but also of white-collar workers' new vulnerability to the sorts of workplace exploitation traditionally associated with those who work for a living. As Robert Seguin succinctly puts it, "with the recent downsizing of middle management, the increasing technological displacements of engineers and architects, and the sessionalization/detenuring of university departments, positions and locations once regarded as concrete evidence of Marx's errors are today under an intense pressure of proletarianization" (13). To say this is not, as Seguin hastens to add, by any means to deny the differences between the members of what is still called the middle class and the members of either the traditional working class or the new service class. To assert this would be absurd: it's still far better to work in an office than to clean it, and some people who work in middle-class occupations—lawyers, brokers, executives—still do quite well in the so-called New Economy.²⁷ But even a New Economy booster like Robert Reich admits that the well-paid, nonhierarchical, creative jobs he ascribes to "symbolic analysts" coexist with the far less appealing kinds of work he categorizes under the headings "routine production services" and "in-person services."²⁸ In addition to software engineers and cinematographers, the global economy employs (far more) data-entry clerks and phone-service representatives (and, as Andrew Ross points out, the hype over the former jobs helps to inculcate an ethos of overwork within the high-tech workforce more generally).²⁹ There is, in this regard, a kind of false pastoralism in accounts of the postwar middle class as the embodied refutation of Marxism. If subsequent events have contradicted the circumstances that presumably proved Marx wrong, then perhaps we shelved

our copies of *Capital* too early. The fate of the middle class in recent years if anything seems to confirm Marx and Engels' assertion that "society as a whole is more and more splitting . . . into two great classes directly facing each other": those who own capital and those who must sell their labor at the former group's terms.³⁰ The postwar middle class did well, but the fate of the middle class since the seventies suggests that this had more to do with the postwar boom and the redistributive policies of the mid-century welfare state than with the inherent nature of the postwar economy.

Of course, it is one thing to worry about contemporary white-collar workers subject to downsizing, or the assault on the forty-hour week, or capital's perpetual flight to cheaper labor pools, and quite another to worry about postwar white-collar workers whose comfortable jobs putatively threatened their individuality. But while the well-off members of the postwar middle class seem like the antithesis of their successors in terms of income, security, and other factors, their situations share an important element if we consider the rise of the postwar middle class in structural terms. In the first half of the twentieth century "the rise of corporate and bureaucratic structures" triggered a process of "remarkable growth and metamorphosis" through which "managers and white-collar workers" replaced "independent entrepreneurs" as the prototypical members of the American middle class.³¹ Historically the basis of middle-class status in the United States had been the ownership of small property. Of course, the American middle-class ideal mutually embodied in the otherwise very different figures of the Jeffersonian freeholder and the Franklinian entrepreneur was from the start mostly limited to white men, and even for them this ideal began to break down early on.³² But it was the changes brought about by industrialization—the growth of corporations, the elaboration of their managerial strata through vertical integration, the expansion of finance capital and the professions—that really accelerated the shift from entrepreneurship to white-collar employment.³³ The PMC emerged in the final decade of the nineteenth century as the first middle-class generation not to define itself through (the increasingly limited possibility of) property ownership, instead attempting to shift the basis of social authority onto management.³⁴

The advent of the PMC, however, did not immediately or completely reconfigure the structure of the middle class as a whole. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the PMC coexisted with the small-property-owning middle class whose national political role had climaxed with Populism but which remained significant—albeit increasingly on a regional rather than a national scale—at least through the 1930s.³⁵ The PMC was, however, on the side of history, growing alongside the increasingly more complicated managerial structure of early twentieth-century monopoly capitalism as its scale received successive boosts from the rise of industrial trusts, the economic impetus of the World War I, and the merger movement of the 1920s.³⁶ During this period, the PMC relied upon the ideology of professionalism to bolster its members' agency within "large bureaucratic entities."³⁷ The thirties, and the New Deal, initiated a significant transition

for the middle class, as for capitalism more generally. On one hand, PMC ambitions reached a high point with the New Deal implementation of limited forms of centralized planning: here at last managerial oversight was deployed to save capitalism from its own obvious failures, for the good of all. At the same time, however, the New Deal represented much more of an accommodation with big business than Progressive-era policies ever had. It was “managerial,” but less in the sense of articulating an overall vision of society than of attempting to balance various conflicting interests, and marked a shift from “moralism” to “opportunism” on the part of Progressivism’s increasingly technocratic heirs.³⁸ Concurrently with this shift in attitude at the highest levels of the PMC, at least some white-collar employees in the education system, the culture industry, and the new state bureaucracies began to conceive of their work not in professional-managerial terms but as a form of routinized mental labor.³⁹ These two shifts taken together—the decline of PMC faith in the managerial ideal, and an increasingly negative understanding of mental labor within large organizations—anticipate the new middle-class consciousness that would assume its definitive shape following World War II.

The war itself provided another huge boost—the largest yet—to the processes of corporate expansion and centralization. The hundred largest American corporations’ share of manufacturing grew from 30 percent to 70 percent between 1940 and 1943 alone.⁴⁰ By the end of the war, there were over 500,000 fewer small businesses than at its start,⁴¹ and over 1,600 mergers had taken place, “nearly one-third of which involved corporations with assets of \$50 million or more taking over smaller enterprises.”⁴² By “1948, the corporate sector held almost 60 percent of national income-producing wealth.”⁴³ The governmental sector, and the corporate-government nexus, also expanded in this period, as World War II defense spending gave way to the even more feverish outlays of the cold war and the federal government pursued a Keynesian program of spending and regulation designed to promote permanent growth.⁴⁴ The white-collar workforce grew apace, and in a frequently cited statistic white-collar workers surpassed blue-collar workers as the largest segment of the nonfarm workforce in 1956.⁴⁵ By this point, moreover, even the remaining small-property owners could not avoid “constant interaction with corporate and bureaucratic America.”⁴⁶

Postwar descriptions of the middle class forged in this context largely abandon the PMC’s more positive understanding of organizations and the sense of agency—both individually and as a class—that this understanding enabled. For figures as diverse as Edward Bellamy, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Thorstein Veblen, the overall organization of society had seemed like the cure for the poor management of specific institutions.⁴⁷ For Whyte—who sees Progressivism as the enemy because it replaced the Protestant Ethic with a “Social Ethic” that “ma[de] morally legitimate the pressures of society against the individual” (6–7)—the problem is not so much specific organizations as the all-encompassing abstraction that he calls “The Organization.” As Timothy Melley argues in his study of late

twentieth-century fiction and social criticism *Empire of Conspiracy* (2000), Whyte and his contemporaries engaged in a discourse of “agency panic” that posed a reified, “all-or-nothing conception of agency” against an equally “monolithic conception of ‘society’ (or ‘system,’ or ‘organization’).”⁴⁸ Taking my cue from Lears’ and Ohmann’s arguments about the universalization of middle-class concerns, I argue that this discourse of constrained agency is best understood as a product of the transition from small-property ownership to white-collar employment as the basis of middle-class status. In brief, the postwar period constitutes a tipping point in the history of the middle class, when PMC efforts to rewrite individual and class agency in managerial terms give way to skepticism about organization as such and nostalgia for the putative autonomy of the property-owning old middle class.

This understanding of what it means to be middle class poses dispossession in abstractly individualized terms. Nonetheless, it reconfigures middle-class status around employment in ways that not only depart from the PMC’s activist self-conception but also point toward the more concrete forms of dispossession experienced by the contemporary middle class. Descriptions of the organization man’s threatened individuality, this book argues, simultaneously obscure and reveal concerns about downward class mobility. This occurs, for instance, in Whyte’s discussion of “the use of psychological tests” as “symptomatic” of the organization man’s situation:

Originally, they were introduced by the managers as a tool for weeding out unqualified workers. As time went on, and personality tests were added to aptitude tests, the managers began using them on other managers, present and prospective, and today most personality testing is directed not at the worker, but at the organization man. If he is being hoist, it is by his own philosophy. (42)

Beneath this passage’s ironic deflation of the PMC project of managing workers lies a submerged parable of the managers’ own fate: if they are now subjecting themselves to the personality tests once reserved for workers, the unacknowledged implication is that they themselves have become workers.

What the *Fortune* editor Whyte only alludes to, C. Wright Mills makes explicit in his still influential 1951 study *White Collar*.⁴⁹ For Mills white-collar work exhibits the same sort of rationalization that had been central to the Fordist transformation of the factory in the early twentieth century:

Even on the professional levels of white-collar work, not to speak of wage-work and the lower white-collar tasks, the chance to develop and use individual rationality is often destroyed by the centralization of decision and the formal rationality that bureaucracy entails. . . .

The introduction of office machinery and sales devices has been mechanizing the office and the salesroom, the two big locales of white-collar work. Since the ’twenties it has increased the division of white-collar labor, recomposed personnel, and lowered skill levels. Routine operations in minutely subdivided organizations have replaced the

bustling interest of work in well-known groups. Even on managerial and professional levels, the growth of rational bureaucracies has made work more like factory production. The managerial demiurge is constantly furthering all these trends: mechanization, more minute division of labor, the use of less skilled and less expensive workers. (226–27)

Here Mills understands the threat to agency not as some generalized specter of conformity but rather as the concrete loss of control in the workplace that, as it earlier had for factory workers, precedes and underwrites other kinds of proletarianization (one can be replaced with less expensive workers).

Thus while Mills acknowledges the variations in income, status, and workplace power within what he calls white-collar pyramids (70–76), his overarching historical narrative stresses “the centralization of small properties” (xiv) that has structurally proletarianized the middle class by placing its members “in exactly the same property-class position as the wage-workers” (71):

In the early nineteenth century, although there are no exact figures, probably four-fifths of the occupied population were self-employed enterprisers; by 1870, only about one-third, and in 1940, only about one-fifth, were still in this old middle class. Many of the remaining four-fifths of the people who now earn a living do so by working for the 2 or 3 per cent of the population who now own 40 or 50 per cent of the private property in the United States. Among these workers are the members of the new middle class, white-collar people on salary. For them, as for wage-workers, America has become a nation of employees for whom independent property is out of range. Labor markets, not control of property, determine their chances to receive income, exercise power, enjoy prestige, learn and use skills. (63)

To make this point is not to deny the real prosperity enjoyed by the postwar middle class and the upper levels of the unionized working class. Nor is it to confuse white-collar workers with the members of the traditional working class, or to obviate the (ongoing) differences between those at different levels of white-collar pyramids. But it is to impute a structural priority to the middle class’s loss of its historical control over property, which in a capitalist economy rendered it vulnerable *as a class* to future losses of income and job security.

While it is a staple of discussions of Mills to cite his alleged transcendence of Marxism, this is a fundamentally Marxist argument. In this case Mills owes an insufficiently acknowledged debt to a book he mentions only briefly in a long list of sources, Lewis Corey’s 1935 *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (Mills, *White* 357). Corey, too, had argued that economic concentration had transformed “the old middle class of small producers” into a “‘new’ middle class of salaried employees.”⁵⁰ No doubt one reason that Corey’s argument has traveled less well than Mills’s is his Depression-era claim—made with an eye to contemporary events in Germany—that the members of the dispossessed middle class should be encouraged to identify with and as workers lest they become recruits to Fascism. But if the postwar boom (thankfully) invalidated this thesis, Mills’s appropriation of

Corey suggests that it did not invalidate Corey's underlying claim that the transformation of the middle class symptomatized the increasing binarization of the U.S. class system.⁵¹ While this seems to contradict our standard understanding of the postwar period as an era of redistribution, Adolf Berle's preface to the 1968 edition of his and Gardiner Means's classic 1932 study of economic concentration, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, suggests that it need not do so. Berle points out that the commonplace understanding of redistribution in fact conflates two separate meanings of "wealth." While "individually owned wealth has enormously increased" in the postwar era, he acknowledges, "relatively little of it is 'productive' property—land or things employed by its owners in production or commerce." Instead, the largest amount is invested in "owner-occupied homes" and the next largest in "consumer durables" such as "automobiles and home equipment."⁵² On one hand, then, a relatively equal distribution of *income* during the postwar period created a large class of people, white-collar workers and otherwise, who enjoyed a middle-class standard of living. On the other hand, however, this process concealed an ongoing concentration of *capital* continuous with the current unequal distribution of wealth.

Good middle-class incomes and an active welfare state, not to mention cold war strictures against anything smacking of Marxism, rendered the concentration of capital difficult to see in the postwar period. But postwar representations of the middle class nonetheless found a substitute narrative of declension in the story of the middle class's fall from its golden age of property-owning autonomy. Lipsitz argues the concentration of property during World War II undermined "the ideal of small-business ownership [that] constituted a popular symbol of freedom in the United States,"⁵³ although this is only partly true. Following Melley's account of agency panic—which he argues conserved individualism discursively by continually describing it as threatened—we can argue that the postwar decline of property ownership as a material reality in fact led to its ascendancy as "ideal" and "symbol." Mills, for instance, invokes the classic terms of property-owning liberal individualism alongside his more Marxist narrative of structural proletarianization.⁵⁴ In the past, he writes,

since few men owned more property than they could work, differences between men were due in large part to personal strength and ingenuity. The type of man presupposed and strengthened by this society was willingly economic, possessing the "reasonable self-interest" needed to build and operate the market economy. He was, of course, more than an economic man, but the techniques and the economics of production shaped much of what he was and what he looked forward to becoming. He was an "absolute individual," linked into a system with no authoritarian center, but held together by countless, free, shrewd transactions. (9)

Eschewing his skepticism elsewhere in *White Collar* about "sentimental versions of historical types that no longer exist, if indeed they ever did" (xiii), Mills here reproduces the classic terms of American (white, male, middle-class) self-making.

In contrast with this golden age, he writes, “The decline of the free entrepreneur and the rise of the dependent employee on the American scene has paralleled the decline of the independent individual and the rise of the little man in the American mind”(xii).

Despite the obvious difficulties with such liberal nostalgia, however, it still provides a way of thinking about the pervasive anxieties of the postwar middle class in class terms rather than individual ones, and historically rather than existentially. Even in works lacking Mills’s Marxist perspective, like Whyte’s *Organization Man* and David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), this narrative of decline provides a sedimentation of class history usefully at odds with the countervailing pressure toward an existential narrative of conflict between individual and society.⁵⁵ Whyte’s invocation of the Protestant Ethic to describe a lost era of middle-class ambition and creative endeavor, for instance, functions in this manner. Less obviously, Riesman postulates an emergent shift within contemporary society from “inner-direction” (in which guidance comes from goals implanted early in life by parents and other adult authorities) to “other-direction” (in which it comes from the continuously changing signals sent by peers and the media).⁵⁶ While Riesman subtitles *The Lonely Crowd* “The Changing American Character” (my emphasis), he notes that

if we wanted to cast our social character types into social class molds, we could say that inner-direction is the typical character of the “old” middle class—the banker, the tradesman, the small entrepreneur, the technically oriented engineer, etc.—while other-direction is becoming the typical character of the “new” middle class—the bureaucrat, the salaried employee in business, etc. (20)

Riesman sees the rise of other-direction, that is, at least in part as a class phenomenon, one conditioned by the loss of the private property that served, during an earlier “era of private competitive capitalism,” as “a kind of exoskeleton” separating “the individual self” from “other people” (114).

Riesman and Whyte are typical postwar authors, then, not insofar as they understand the crisis of individualism in terms that verge on the existential, but rather insofar as they deploy such terms in ways that simultaneously mask and reveal the historical transformation of the American middle class. It is worth noting, however, that not all postwar texts need to be teased into giving up their economic engagements; as Ohmann’s essay on postwar fiction makes clear, middle-class dissatisfaction does not so much determine the production of this fiction as guide what gets canonized. The classic realist account of the dismantling of the American middle class is Ira Wolfert’s largely neglected 1943 novel *Tucker’s People*. Here I mean classic realism in the sense theorized by Georg Lukács, in his discussion of “the classic form of the historical novel,” which for him “portray[s] the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who, in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces.”⁵⁷ Such fiction, neither “romantically monumentalizing the important figures of history

[nor] dragging them down to the level of private, psychological trivia” (47), instead offers types of “the inter-relationships between the psychology of people and the economic and moral circumstances of their lives” (40). This sort of fiction, epitomized for Lukács by Walter Scott’s historical novels, arises with “the class struggles between nobility and bourgeoisie . . . whose last decisive stage was the . . . French Revolution” (27–28), and comes to an end with the bourgeois reaction to the failed but nonetheless threatening revolutions of 1848. Fredric Jameson has observed that this chronology, which lays the groundwork for Lukács’ well-known critique of modernism as inherently apolitical, leaves out “writers and whole cultures which lay outside Lukács’ personal interests and background.”⁵⁸ While Jameson is concerned to recover various versions of politically progressive modernism, we might also apply his argument, in the American context, to writing that remained outside the canons of experimental modernism. *Tucker’s People*, later filmed as the Abraham Polonsky noir *Force of Evil* (1948), starring John Garfield, tells the story of a gangster’s efforts to consolidate the numbers rackets in New York City. But the novel can also be read as an allegory of the traditional middle class’s disappearance in the face of an increasingly large-scale capitalism. *Tucker’s People*, we might say, continues to operate as Lukácsian classic realism, although coming at the opposite end of the historical trajectory initiated in Great Britain by Scott, it records not the triumphant emergence but the ignominious decline of the small bourgeoisie.

As the novel opens the small businessman Leo Minch is reluctantly entertaining a proposal from another character named Samson Candee to go into the numbers business in Harlem. Minch has just lost his garage business because his landlords have turned him in for allowing his brother Joe to store liquor trucks owned by his bootlegger boss Ben Tucker. In fact, they had merely used Leo’s indiscretion as a pretext to recover the property, whose value “Leo’s success with his business had increased.”⁵⁹ This is not the first, nor will it be the last, time that Leo loses his business to larger operators. Leo’s story, Wolfert makes clear at the end of book 1, is a historically typical one:

He had been born in the time of Rockefeller. He had spent his business life being hounded from the woolen business to butter-and-egg routes to real estate to the garage business to policy. He had run from place to place, looking for one place where he could hole up and be overlooked and at peace in a world of expanding big business. But all his running had done was advance him towards the time of Hitler, when big business and its creatures, when trusts and monopolies and their methods, having grown powerful and hungry in the hunt, were foraging even among the rabbit holes. (71)

Repeatedly driven from businesses whose very growth attracts bigger players and makes it impossible for him to compete, Leo accepts Candee’s proposition, and builds a successful policy operation in Harlem. Unbeknownst to Leo, however, Ben Tucker is planning to take over and consolidate the New York numbers business. He does this by arranging for a certain popular number to hit so that Leo

and his colleagues will have to pay out all their assets and he can buy them out, a “method,” Wolfert writes, that “was simple and had a long tradition among monopolists” (74). Leo finally surrenders his organization to Tucker in exchange for a top managerial position, in a deal that has been brokered by Leo’s brother. When Joe asks Leo if he “begin[s] to see the possibilities” in this arrangement, Leo replies—in words that might serve as the epitaph of the small-property-owning old middle class—“I see that I had a business when I came up here and now I’m working for Tucker for salary” (143).

Wolfert reinforces this point with another story of middle-class expropriation, the family history of Tucker’s lawyer, Henry Wheelock. In a chapter whose title (“An American Hero’s Son”) invokes the national heritage of liberal individualism, we learn that Wheelock’s father was a hotel manager in a small town built by the “big lumber companies” in “western timber country” (147). Like Leo Minch, Roger Wheelock lies at the end of the line for the old middle class, in a world shaped by big capital. When the lumber companies had “plundered the forests and got theirs out of it” (147) they moved on, precipitating a general economic collapse: “The sawmills nearest town started closing and the branch of the furniture company that advertised ‘From Forest To You’ moved away and the railroad cut its passenger train schedules in half” (149). The elder Wheelock, who “had known what the big lumber people were up to” and had paid off the mortgages on the hotel in the hopes that “if he owned [it] all free and clear, then he would be safe” (148), finds himself stuck with a useless business. Eventually the bank repossesses the hotel and asks Roger Wheelock “to stay on as manager” (155), thereby completing his transition from old middle-class independence to white-collar employment. Henry, who at the time is struggling to find work as a lawyer in New York City, meditates on his father’s life:

Roger knew the end, his son thought, the minute the big lumber companies started working on the forests. He saw the day and he tried to prepare for it. He got his hotel all paid off and he thought that would be the rock he would stand on. Then the rock began to sink and he had to fight to hold the rock up. It was a hopeless fight. He was a man holding up something that was holding up him. The old man must have known it would be hopeless and must have known it was hopeless, but he kept right on with it. It was heroic. It was a life to which music should be played. (153)

The experience of seeing his father ruined by men who “had no thought of people as people or as anything but tools or opponents” (147), the novel suggests, drives Henry to his position as Tucker’s amoral, cynical lawyer. *Tucker’s People* analogizes crime and business, not simply because “Tucker’s organization [is] like that of any many-sided management corporation geared to absorb new businesses” (175), but more importantly because “business—without thought of anything but money—could destroy the lives of great numbers of people. . . . The murderer was the same kind of personality in either case, whether he was a big man and

sat in a corporation's office . . . or whether he was a small man and had to supervise everything himself" (174).

Although he thus treats business as no better than gangsterism, Wolfert's politics have less to do with Marxism than with the politics of small property that, Mills notes, have generally taken the place of class politics in the United States (55). Leo, for instance, loses his first business when the expanding woollens industry attracts speculators who drive "prices . . . up and down violently without regard to value," causing "a steeply falling market" that catches Leo "with shelves loaded" (9). He uses what's left of his credit to pursue "an opening . . . in butter-and-egg routes in the suburbs" (9), but this leaves him dissatisfied because "he had been a merchant all his life, providing goods—not merely service. To sell service, somehow, seemed false" (10). Later, he becomes a successful real estate speculator himself, but the methods he must employ—"loss leaders and premiums, doing things for good will that a man who was there to make a living out of running the store itself could not have afforded to do"—only make him feel more "dissatisfied and insecure" (10). Retrenching, he buys two apartment houses with the goal of "pay[ing] off the mortgages and own[ing] them outright," as well as leasing the garage that he is "determined to run as a business, not as a mere squeeze-box for squeezing out profits" (11). Leo's victimization at the hands of speculators and his desire to run his businesses for their own sake rather than for the sake of profit echo the agrarian-producer ethos of the Populist-Progressive era.⁶⁰ One would not be surprised, in this regard, to see Frank Norris's farmer-turned-businessman Charles Cressler take the stage and assert, as he does in Norris's 1903 *The Pit*, that "the Chicago speculator . . . raises or lowers the price out of all reason, for the benefit of his pocket," "gambling" on its eventual price to the detriment of farmers because, unlike them, he "don't care in the least about the grain."⁶¹ But the novel's politics are not simply anachronistic. Leo's preference for goods over services also resonates with the post-war understanding of white-collar work as a field where members of the middle class no longer "manipulate *things*" but instead "handle *people* and *symbols*" (Mills, *White* 65; Mills's emphases), where "the 'softness' of men rather than the 'hardness' of material . . . calls on talent and opens new channels of social mobility" (Riesman, *Lonely* 127). In this respect, *Tucker's People* provides a bridge between the small-property-owning politics of Populism and its descendants on the contemporary left⁶² and right.⁶³

Wolfert's main investment in old-middle-class ideals lies, however, in his idealization of the relationship between Leo and his employees. By no means perfect—he cuts Candee out of their numbers business before it becomes successful, for instance—Leo nonetheless knows and treats each of his employees as an individual, in explicit contrast to big business's tendency to treat people as "tools" or "opponents":

Leo admired the placid way in which Mr. Middleton took his hard luck and used to give him a cigar once in a while. He listened to Juice's story sympathetically several

times and once had Edgar take the door off his car to see if that would help Juice stay in it. It didn't. He was sorry for Delilah and secretly proud to have a college graduate working for him. He found her some pupils to tutor on Saturday mornings when she did not go to school and told her that if she got enough pupils, she would not have to work for him. (92)

The novel reinforces this point formally by providing detailed back-stories for each of Leo's employees, something that we only get in the case of Tucker's big organization for his inner circle. In classic old-middle-class terms, Leo's treatment of his employees epitomizes the coincidence of decency and profitability. On one hand these employees, many of them former "domestic servants or charwomen in offices and hotels" (87), are "grateful for their jobs and happy in them" (92): "He felt they all loved him . . . and, actually, they did" (92). On the other hand, Leo's practices are "copied by other bankers because the methods were profitable" (65). Self-consciously collapsing two different definitions of "good," the novel notes that "Leo, who was a 'good' man, could make it a 'good' business" (65). Despite its seemingly evenhanded exposure of Leo's character flaws, *Tucker's People* ultimately romanticizes the small employer; indeed, its attention to these flaws only reinforces the idea that small business is inherently ethical despite the motivations of any particular businessman.⁶⁴ It is thus not a proletarian novel, since it views events not from a working-class but from an old-middle-class perspective. Its working-class characters never become collective historical agents in their own rights, but remain the objects of a history told from the perspective of people like Leo Minch and Roger Wheelock.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, Wolfert's invocation of old-middle-class ideals transcends nostalgia insofar as he understands these ideals as casualties of the historical process of middle-class expropriation. Wolfert makes this point clear in the scene where Leo negotiates with Wheelock and Tucker the terms under which he will transfer his business to Tucker. Wheelock questions, for instance, why Leo pays much more for one of the apartments he uses as a drop-off station for policy slips, and learns that the renter is "a boy who worked with [Leo] to put himself through college" and now "can't find what's fit for him to do." Leo "pay[s] half his rent" because "a college boy with a wife has to have a place that's nice to live" (130). Wheelock thinks, "There were a lot of things like that, . . . sloppy things, where expenses could be cut when the business would be managed properly" (130). When Tucker arrives for the meeting he continues this line of inquiry, insisting that "things is going to be run up there on a businesslike"—by which he means profitably standardized—"basis": no more covering collectors' shortages, a lower commission for everyone, a lower payoff for customers who hit (139). Systematizing Leo's operations in this manner, Tucker trims away Leo's ability to treat employees on an individual basis, what Wheelock thinks of as Leo's inability "to get used to paying people their wages and letting them alone" (130). This produces tragic results for both Leo and his employees: Leo's bookkeeper, Frederick Bauer, unable

to quit because Leo's brother Joe thinks it would be a bad example for Leo's other workers, becomes embroiled in a kidnapping scheme that leads to his shooting and Leo's fatal stroke. Leo's ability to shelter his employees from the exploitative logic of capitalism has been contingent, the novel insists, upon his control over his own capital. Thus it is no coincidence that, as the final stage in their negotiations, Tucker barely lets Leo retain his \$31,000 cash reserve, letting Leo know that he knows about it and making it clear that he allows him to keep it only to bind Leo more closely to him (142). Granted the return of what was previously his own capital at his new employer's sufferance, Leo—and by extension the American middle class he represents—loses the autonomy that property grants, bringing an era of history to a close.

From the perspective of postwar literary history, the realism of *Tucker's People* was a dead end. But the transformation of the middle class that Wolfert's novel takes as its explicit historical backdrop shapes all postwar fiction in one way or another. The middlebrow novels of middle-class life popular in the fifties, for instance, translate the shift from entrepreneurship to employment into generational conflicts whose successful resolution phantasmatically negates this shift's worst effects. Elizabeth Long has argued that Sloan Wilson's 1955 *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* enacts a shift "from entrepreneurial adventure to corporate-suburban compromise," in which the protagonist Tom Rath rejects his employer Ralph Hopkins's single-minded devotion to business, "in favor of a balance between work and privatized familial happiness."⁶⁶ But the contrast between Hopkins and Rath is not simply a contrast between workplace and domestic forms of satisfaction: it is also a contrast between a founder of a company and one of his employees, played out in the form of an Oedipal relationship. As Jurca's reading of the novel suggests, its true fantasy is not a retreat into the family but Rath's unexpected recovery of entrepreneurial status thanks to his grandmother's bequest of valuable Connecticut real estate (139–42). Rath repudiates Hopkins and still gets to have what he has; what Hopkins has, crucially, is not income but capital. Cameron Hawley's 1952 *Executive Suite* similarly fantasizes reversing the middle class's historical trajectory through the medium of a successfully resolved generational conflict, although Hawley, unlike Wilson, attempts to do so within the corporate context. *Executive Suite*, whose epigraph is "the king is dead . . ." (Hawley's ellipsis), begins with Avery Bullard, the owner of a furniture company, collapsing on a New York sidewalk in the midst of reluctantly searching for the executive vice-president demanded by his investors. It concludes with the succession of a young engineer named Don Walling to Bullard's position. Walling thus takes Bullard's place as King, reassuring the novel's readers that upward mobility still exists. But this is not the whole story, since the novel also suggests that Walling brings to his job an emphasis on personnel matters that marks him, in Whyte's reading, as a typical organization man (Whyte, *Organization* 83–84).⁶⁷ In the terms that we earlier saw employed by Mills and Riesman, Walling exemplifies the white-collar middle class in that he is less interested in making furniture than

in managing furniture-makers. At the same time Walling, who has come up through the firm as an actual designer of furniture, epitomizes old-middle-class values. In a climactic speech he even suggests that it was Bullard who first abandoned these values by okaying a training film emphasizing profit over workmanship and greenlighting an inferior line of furniture.⁶⁸ *Executive Suite* thus transposes the transformation of the middle class from the economic to the moral realm, insisting that as long as men like Walling exist this transformation remains reversible. Like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*—and unlike *Tucker's People*—Hawley's novel incorporates the transformation of the middle class only to offer a fantasy of its reversal.

At a further remove from Wolfert's explicit concern with the fate of the middle class, Mickey Spillane's 1947 *I, the Jury* characterizes its hero's agency as a function of his residually entrepreneurial work. In the opening pages of the novel, Spillane's detective Mike Hammer responds to the advice of a policeman friend not to "go off half-cocked" with the following speech:

From now on I'm after one thing, the killer. You're a cop, Pat. You're tied down by rules and regulations. There's someone over you. I'm alone. I can slap someone in the puss and they can't do a damn thing. No one can kick me out of my job. Maybe there's nobody to put up a huge fuss if I get gunned down, but then I still have a private cop's license with the privilege to pack a rod, and they're afraid of me.⁶⁹

This passage employs the distinction between private detection and police work as a symbol for the distinction between old and new middle classes. Spillane can claim some historical and generic justification here. Police work had become a more regularized, white-collar profession during the first half of the twentieth century, giving rise around the same time as Spillane's career took off to a new genre—the police procedural—dedicated to detailing the bureaucratized work of officers like Pat.⁷⁰ Hammer's ability to do what he wants derives from the fact that he is an entrepreneurial businessman, while Pat must "follow the book because [he's] a Captain of Homicide" (Spillane 6). Pat's individual agency, that is, is overridden by the role he must play, precisely as the organization man's is.

I, the Jury thus provides, like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Executive Suite*, a fantasy of entrepreneurial agency in a white-collar world. It is with Spillane, however, that we can begin to see the factor that distinguishes postwar fiction from its modernist predecessors, and that allows us to read such fiction as shaped by the reconfiguration of the middle class even when this event does not comprise one of explicit topics. Fundamental here is the way in which postwar fiction equates the agency of characters with the agency of authors. This move bears the traces of the transformation of the middle class insofar as postwar commentators understood white-collar work as a system for constraining the autonomy of mental laborers. Because authors themselves perform mental labor, the question of agency cannot be constrained within the horizon of content, but leaks

into the form of literary work understood as the material embodiment of the author's own mental labor.

In Spillane's case—as in that of his colleague and admirer Ayn Rand, as we will see in chapter 1—this equation functions positively, with Hammer's entrepreneurial agency echoing and reconfirming that of his creator. Sean McCann has recently argued that Spillane evolves his particular brand of populism in response to the perceived transformation of the welfare state from “the realization of mass democracy” to “a system of bureaucratic institutions and individual alienation.”⁷¹ But as my reading of *I, the Jury* suggests, the degradation of “personal agency” at issue here has to do not only with “the displacement of local community by a procedural state” (McCann 223) but also with the transition from entrepreneurship to employment. McCann's own point that Spillane understood his high sales as a victory over the literary-critical apparatus (203–4) suggests as much. Spillane, like Hammer, does what he wants without regard to the “rules and regulations” of the organization men who serve as literary gatekeepers; like Hammer, he is an entrepreneur whose justification comes from success on the market. Spillane, like Rand, could lay claim to a level of entrepreneurial success that to some degree compensated for the genre writer's typically vexed relationship with the arbiters of literary prestige.

What distinguishes the postwar period, however, is the adoption of this same stance by authors who are not excluded from critical success or the institutions of literary prestige. Saul Bellow provides a perfect case in point: early recognized as a major author, he also becomes the first fiction writer of his stature to make his living within the academy *and* a bitter, life-long critic of the university.⁷² I take up Bellow's attacks on “the literary intelligentsia”⁷³ of the university and the “culture-bureaucrats”⁷⁴ of the publishing industry at greater length in chapter 3, but here we can note that Bellow, like Spillane, turns to public success as the antidote to the constraints these institutions impose upon the author. According to his biographer James Atlas, Bellow “yearned to be—and tended to think of himself as—a ‘great-public’ writer, whose reach extended far beyond the modernists he admired for their high seriousness but disdained for the ‘difficulty’ that estranged them from a wider audience.”⁷⁵ Bellow's antiacademicism has, to be sure, become an all too common stance among university writers with far less claim to public success. What's worth noting in the present context, however, is the extent to which Bellow's desire for public success distinguishes him from previous generations of American authors, for whom the market signified not freedom from constraint but precisely the opposite. Michael Gilmore has shown, for instance, how the American Romantics understood the market as “a site of humiliation where the seller has to court and conciliate potential buyers to gain their custom,” and in response evolved protomodernist “strategies of difficulty and concealment” designed to “forestall easy consumption” of their work.⁷⁶ On one hand, American authors' early aversion to the market in comparison with the rest of the middle class anticipates the managerial turn taken by the PMC in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷⁷

But because they defined themselves at least partially in opposition to the rest of the middle class, they developed a form of professionalism designed to protect their authority as much from the public as from the institutions of corporate capitalism.⁷⁸ Subsequent generations of authors with canonical pretensions, abetted by their comparatively less direct contact with corporate capitalism, retained this residual mode of professionalism well into the period of the PMC's rise and consolidation. Thus in the Progressive Era Jack London turns to professionalism as a means of bolstering his agency in relation to both the publishing industry and the sorts of compromises associated with "public approbation" and "success with a middle-class readership."⁷⁹ And as Thomas Strychacz suggests, modernism's cultivation of "esoteric forms of discourse" can be seen as a version of the professional's "disciplinary codes" designed to enhance the authority of the artist by excluding the mass public from his or her work.⁸⁰ Although modernists' disdain for the market often concealed a canny attention to promoting and selling their work, modernist marketing was aimed at small, self-consciously elite publics rather than the public at large.⁸¹ Thus Timothy Materer notes that when Ezra Pound took over editorship of *The Little Review* he "decided that avant-garde literature could only be marketed though [*sic*] a magazine that appealed to an elite," in contrast to Harriet Monroe's effort "to market poetry that appealed to a wide, democratic audience." In response to Monroe's use of Whitman's "To have great poetry we must have great audiences" as *Poetry's* masthead, *The Little Review* under Pound's editorship declaimed "Make No Compromise with the Public Taste."⁸²

Bellow, by contrast, wants to make exactly this compromise, or more to the point, he sees satisfying the public taste as entailing no compromise at all. This is because in the postwar period the middle class has come to see organization—and particularly, the sorts of organizations in which one performs mental labor—in unremittingly negative terms. In contrast, the market of public taste comes to seem like not only a comparative refuge but indeed the very place where intellectual virtues per se can be realized. The authors of the 1930s, writing in the context of earlier concerns about the bureaucratization of mental labor, anticipate this turn. One way to understand late modernism, Michael Szalay implies, is as authors' attempts to reconfigure themselves in old-middle-class terms (as makers of things) in contrast to the New Deal regime of authorship as salaried mental labor.⁸³ But authors like Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein retain a residual modernist commitment to complexity designed "to forestall the market valuation of experts by a nonexpert public."⁸⁴ Bellow self-consciously forgoes this commitment in favor of the same romanticized regard for the market that shapes postwar accounts of middle-class life more generally.

Numerous postwar intellectuals share this regard with Bellow. Mills, for instance, proclaims that

the eighteenth-century intellectual stood on common ground with the bourgeois entrepreneur; both were fighting, each in his own way, against the remnants of feudal control,

the writer seeking to free himself from the highly placed patron, the businessman breaking the bonds of the chartered enterprise. Both were fighting for a new kind of freedom, the writer for an anonymous public, the businessman for an anonymous and unbounded market. (143)

For Mills, the heroic age of the intellectual coincided with the heroic age of the entrepreneur because both are at their best when satisfying public tastes on the market. A similar nostalgia for the classic period of market society surfaces in the art critic Harold Rosenberg's well-known critique, in his 1959 *The Tradition of the New*, of kitsch as art that "follows established rules."⁸⁵ While this formulation might seem to demonstrate kitsch's market dependence—it "has a predictable audience, predictable effects, predictable rewards" (266)—Rosenberg's objection to kitsch is not a "question of . . . 'selling-out,' but of muscular slackness associated with finding an audience responsive to certain norms" (268). The source of these norms, for Rosenberg as for Bellow, is not the mass audience but "the new post-War employed intelligentsia" (280). Rosenberg complains that "Modern Art" has been transformed from an avant-garde movement to an institution dominated not by artists but by "the expanding caste of professional enlighteners of the masses—designers, architects, decorators, fashion people, exhibition directors" (37). Within this framework Rosenberg offers a measured but surprising—particularly in this context—endorsement of "bad art." "The first American playwrights," he claims, "could think of nothing less to compose than Shakespearean tragedies in blank verse. Had it not been for a will to bad art in order to satisfy the appetites of the street, the American theatre [*sic*] would never have come into being" (15–16). While Rosenberg remains too much of a modernist elitist to fully endorse mass tastes, he suggests that in the heyday of market society even bad art possessed a productive energy lacking in the desiccated institutional regime of kitsch.

Finally, Irving Howe's landmark 1959 essay "Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction" mourns the passing of market society if only in its role as the object of earlier intellectuals' criticism. Howe begins his essay with a retelling of *Crime and Punishment* in which Raskolnikov, contemplating the murder of the old pawnbroker, receives a telegram informing him that he has won a Guggenheim to study "color imagery in Pushkin's poetry and its relation to the myths of the ancient Muscovites."⁸⁶ We might assume that Howe, who subsequently describes the new Raskolnikov as a "sober Professor of Literature" (125), regrets the character's transformation into one of the bourgeoisie that his earlier incarnation used to rail against. But this is not the case, as the rest of the essay makes clear. Rather, the problem is that the bourgeoisie against which modernism once set itself no longer exists. What characterized the pre-World War II world in which modernism came of age, Howe argues, was "a cluster of stable assumptions as to the nature of our society" (126) that made possible the modernists' revolt. Howe identifies these assumptions, tellingly, with entrepreneurial values: this society, Howe writes, was

“hard, tangible, ruled by a calculus of gain” (127). The fact that this is not entirely true—as, for instance, the eponymous proto-organization man of Sinclair Lewis’s 1922 *Babbitt* suggests—only makes all the more clear that Howe here indulges in nostalgia for the entrepreneurial values of the market, if only as a worthy object of criticism.

Indeed, Howe’s desire for the entrepreneurial middle class as enemy rather than Bellow and Mills’s—and, to a lesser extent, Rosenberg’s—idealized lay audience makes clear what is at stake in postwar intellectuals’ shared dislike for the institutions (whether academic, museological, or critical) of intellectual life. In the postwar period, intellectual work was definitively reconfigured as something that took place within institutions: foundations, museums, government, the media, and, most importantly, the expanding system of higher education. This process blurred intellectuals’ traditionally antagonistic relationship with the middle-class mainstream in two ways: by transforming intellectuals into white-collar employees, and by transforming the rest of the middle-class into the higher-educated mental laborers that Riesman calls “demi-intellectuals” (148).⁸⁷ Whereas the modernists notoriously worked various jobs to pay the bills while they did their *real* work—as Wallace Stevens wrote to his fiancée in 1909, “I certainly do not exist from nine to six, when I am at the office”⁸⁸—the postwar generation found employment *as* artists and intellectuals. And whereas the prewar generation could comfortably distinguish themselves from the philistinism of a small-business owner like George Babbitt, their postwar successors found themselves in the position of organization men par excellence, their employment symbolizing the ultimate degradation of creative mental labor within the white-collar workplace.

Mills sums up this new conception of the intellectual in a passage from the tellingly entitled “Brains, Inc.” chapter of *White Collar*:

Busy with the ideological speed-up, the intellectual has readily taken on the responsibilities of the citizen. In many cases, having ceased to be in any sense a free intellectual, he has joined the expanding world of those who live off ideas, as administrator, idea-man, and good-will technician. In class, status, and self-image, he has become more solidly middle class, a man at a desk, married, with children, living in a respectable suburb, his career pivoting on the selling of ideas, his life a tight little routine, substituting middle-brow and mass culture for direct experience of his life and his world, and, above all, becoming a man with a job in a society where money is supreme. (156)

In this passage, Mills’s usual attention to the structural conditions of white-collar employment gives way to a far more typical assertion of the essential incompatibility of institutions and creative thought. This assertion—which, as we will see in chapter 1, links Mills with as seemingly disparate a figure as Ayn Rand—remains influential. Consider, for instance, the respectful attention accorded to its more or less uncritical reproduction in Russell Jacoby’s 1987 *The Last Intellectuals*.⁸⁹ This notion arises at the moment when the institutionalization of intellectuals’ mental labor renders it parallel to that of the rest of the middle class: designed to

maintain intellectuals' distinction, it ironically reproduces the typical white-collar middle class response to *The Organization*.

Within this framework, mental labor takes on an ambivalent role for intellectuals. On one hand, it continues to signify a residual sense of self-authorship that (as Howe's account suggests) is simultaneously posed against and parallel with that of the entrepreneurial old middle class. On the other hand, however, it now becomes the site of a new, typically white-collar sense of institutional disempowerment. Mark McGurl, who understands the modernist art novel as participating in the PMC projects of "privileging . . . *intellectual* virtue" and producing "various forms of social distinction and status elevation," suggests that this trajectory reaches an impasse in the 1950s with "the institutionalization of modernism in the university."⁹⁰ To give a concrete example of the earlier paradigm, we can understand modernism's use of dialect to renovate the routinized language of Standard English as reflecting a typically PMC faith in the ability of good organization to displace bad.⁹¹ But in the postwar period, when all organization comes to seem like a bad thing—a transition figured not so much in the institutionalization of modernism per se as in the persistent narration of this event as a bad thing—then style becomes simultaneously overvalued and associated with inevitable failure. The more idiosyncratic and activist deployment of style-as-mental-labor that McGurl associates with modernism gives way to the threat of Taylorized mental labor, even as style takes on an even greater burden of representing individuality.

This ambivalence about mental labor gives rise to the distinctive characteristics that Tony Tanner attributes to postwar fiction in his 1971 study *City of Words*. For Tanner, "The problematical and ambiguous relationship of the self to patterns of all kinds—social, psychological, linguistic—is an obsession among recent American writers."⁹² He thus identifies at the heart of postwar fiction the dramatization of threatened individuality central to accounts of the white-collar middle class. But Tanner goes beyond content, arguing that this dramatized situation finds a formal analog in the author's quest for "a *stylistic* freedom which is not simply a meaningless incoherence, . . . a stylistic form which will not trap him inside the existing forms of previous literature" (19; Tanner's emphasis). The writer's "paradox," Tanner argues, lies in the fact that

if he wants to write in any communicable form he must traffic in a language which may at every turn be limiting, directing and perhaps controlling his responses and formulations. If he feels that the given structuring of reality of the available language is imprisoning or iniquitous, he may abandon language altogether; or he may seek to use the existing language in such a way that he demonstrates to himself and other people that he does not wholly accept nor wholly conform to the structures built into the common tongue, that he has the power to resist and perhaps disturb the particular 'rubricizing' tendency of the language he has inherited. Such an author—and I think he is an unusually common phenomenon in contemporary America—will go out of his way to show that he

is using language as it has never been used before, leaving the visible marks of his idiosyncrasies on every formulation. (16)

The brilliance of this passage, we might say, lies in its dramatization of the situation that it seeks to describe. The writer's efforts to transcend the constraining effects of language as a social system ultimately fail, just as Tanner's own abstract and ahistorical staging of this conflict give way to his admission that it is particularly prevalent in postwar fiction. One explanation for this prevalence—the most convincing, to my mind—is that Tanner's formal paradox (language provides the only means for expressing the individuality it constrains) corresponds to the situation of the postwar intellectual for whom mental labor is the site of both transcendence and disempowerment. Or, in the terms with which this introduction began, it is the place where the presumed irrelevance of the economic actually becomes the economy's textual trace.

The opening paragraph of Saul Bellow's first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), exemplifies the way in which style encodes authors' relationship to the transformation of the middle class, and the economy more generally. "There was a time," Bellow's novel begins,

when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered . . . in poor taste. For this is an era of hardboiled-dom. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy . . . is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. And it does admit of a limited kind of candor, a closemouthed straightforwardness. But on the truest candor, it has an inhibitory effect. Most serious matters are closed to the hardboiled. They are unpracticed in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring.⁹³

Here hardboiled style, which Bellow implicitly links to Hemingway and his imitators, functions not as a means of resistance to literary rules and regulations but, on the contrary, as a form of systemic constraint imposed upon the "truest candor" of the authentic self. To the extent that Bellow here criticizes the regime of the hardboiled "tough boy," this passage might seem like a preemptive critique of Spillane. But in fact it plays out precisely the critique of bureaucracy that animates Mike Hammer's rejection of "rules and regulations," on the terrain not of professional institutions but of what Tanner calls "the existing forms of previous literature" (19).

Insofar as Bellow understands inherited literary forms as deindividualizing embodiments of institutional logics, the opening paragraph of *Dangling Man* provides an explicitly thematized formal equivalent to his more direct attacks on the academy and the publishing industry. At the same time, this move cannot be

reduced to the merely formal; it understands preexisting literary forms as institutional constraints upon individual creativity and autonomy and thus—however insistently disguised—as versions of the white-collar workplace. Bellow himself, as I discuss in chapter 3, will pose his third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), as a stylistic revolt against his own first two novels, which he will come to see as exemplars of a facile modernist alienation that he identifies with the university. Similarly, much postwar poetry stakes its claims to innovation against modernism as an ossified bureaucratic system. “At mid-century, accepted, even celebrated, by the Luce Corporation, the modernist revolution might well seem finished,” James E. B. Breslin writes, leading poets like Allen Ginsberg and critics like Leslie Fiedler to turn to “recuperated versions of the modernists . . . as civilized ideals against which to judge the ‘anarchic’ work of the present.”⁹⁴ It would be a mistake to understand these phenomena solely in literary-historical terms, as a revolt against modernism. *Dangling Man* poses one form of modernism (Dostoyevskyan self-exposure) against another (the minimalism Hemingway learned from Stein). And Bellow’s friend Ellison turns toward modernism (including Hemingway) as part of his own stylistic revolt against Richard Wright’s naturalism. What matters in these cases is not the specific target but the way that any inherited form can become an avatar of the “social institutions which by their bureaucratic planning and mathematical foresight usurp both freedom and rationality from the little individual men [or in this case little individual authors] caught in them” (Mills, *White* xvii).

The ultimate irony here is that because no particular style can successfully avoid this fate, the burden shifts from the lineaments of style itself to the act of opposing the previous style (any style). What looks like a commitment to form in opposition to repetitive mental labor itself becomes a repetitively assumed stance. Thus Mills argues, in his suggestive comments on style near the conclusion of his “Brains, Inc.” chapter, that the “cult of alienation” in literature (like the “fetish of objectivity” in the social sciences) (159) becomes the formal equivalent of intellectuals’ superficiality “in an age of organized irresponsibility” (160):

Simply to understand, or to lament alienation—these are the ideals of the technician who is powerless and estranged but not disinherited. These are the ideals of men who have the capacity to know the truth but not the chance, the skill, or the fortitude, as the case may be, to communicate it with political effectiveness. (160)

In some branches of postwar fiction, this becomes a self-conscious commitment to antistyle: for instance, Kerouac’s (highly polished, as we now know)⁹⁵ efforts to appear spontaneous.

While postwar authors’ engagement with stylistic innovation thus links their work to the transformation of the middle class, it does not necessarily constitute a politically desirable response to this transformation. On the contrary, the inherently individual and formal nature of such stylistic interventions necessarily forecloses the sorts of collective struggle and organization that a political response to

the transformation of mental labor would call for.⁹⁶ Moreover, postwar fiction projects an essentially middle-class experience of capitalism's negative aspects and thus reinforces the putative universality of middle-class problems. It is, in this regard, a particularly middle-class idea—conditioned by traditional doctrines of individual upward mobility and the autonomy that derives from property ownership—that the worst aspect of mental labor is the threat that it poses to one's individuality. Nonetheless, understanding postwar authors' stylistic revolts as responses—however displaced—to the expansion and ultimate proletarianization of mental labor does give the lie to our understanding of the era's novels as rejecting political and economic concerns in favor of individual and psychological ones.

In this regard, even as putatively hermetic a novel as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955 France; 1958 United States) engages the postwar transformation of the economy not in spite of, but to the extent that, it announces itself as a pure expression of individual style. We can begin to see this by considering how the standard understanding of the novel as a self-contained exercise in formal innovation leads Nabokov's biographer Brian Boyd—normally a meticulously careful reader of textual details—to a clumsy mistake. Boyd, who argues that the Nabokovian aesthetic privileges “the uniqueness of [the artist's] invented world” over the “philosophical, social, and historical generalizations so customary in literary criticism,”⁹⁷ writes of *Lolita* that “no other novel begins so memorably: ‘Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Le. Ta’ ” (228). These alliterative lines, the first paragraph of chapter 1, not only engage in the verbal play that is Nabokov's trademark, but also perform the subsumption of content by form—the transformation of “Lolita” from a girl into a series of syllables—that is the function of such play in the Nabokovian aesthetic. The only problem is that the novel does not actually begin with these lines, but with the fictional foreword that Nabokov appends to Humbert Humbert's narrative over the signature “John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.”

This foreword functions as a tutorial in precisely the reading of *Lolita* that Nabokov wants us to avoid, the sort of reading that he elsewhere associates—in terms that should by now be familiar to us—with the categorizing imperatives of the paraintellectuals who staff institutions of culture. In the commentary that accompanies his translation of Alexander Pushkin's long poem *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov complains that

there are teachers and students with square minds who are by nature meant to undergo the fascination of categories. For them, “schools” and “movements” are everything; by painting a group symbol on the bow of mediocrity, they condone their own incomprehension of true genius. (qtd. Boyd 345)

It is precisely these categorizing habits—against which Nabokov promotes “the quiddity of individual artistic achievement” (qtd. Boyd 345)—that the fictional John Ray exemplifies. Ray explains that he was given the manuscript of “Lolita”

by his friend, the lawyer of the pseudonymous narrator Humbert, on the basis of his Poling Prize–winning article “Do the Senses make [*sic*] Sense,” a treatise on “certain morbid states and perversions.”⁹⁸ Yet Ray, as befits the winner of the Poling Prize (with its suggestions of demographic rather than individual, quantitative rather than qualitative, standards), ultimately justifies the manuscript on the basis not of its pathological, but of its representative, status. Thus he tells us “that at least 12% of American adult males,” according to a colleague of his, “enjoy yearly, in one way or another, the special experience ‘H.H.’ describes with such despair” (5). Ray recognizes both the singular nature of Humbert’s actions and the aesthetic value of his account. While Humbert is “abnormal” and “not a gentleman,” Ray writes, “how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!” (5).

Within his scheme of values, however, the text’s individual properties—either as the record of a specific event or as a unique aesthetic object—take a back seat to its synecdochic relationship to a larger social whole. Thus, while “as a case history, ‘Lolita’ will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles,” and “as a work of art, it transcends its expiatory aspects,” its primary value resides in

the ethical impact [it] should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac—these are not only vivid characters in a unique story: they warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils. (5–6)

Ray, that is, understands the worth of “Lolita” to inhere in the way in which its merely “personal” and “unique” aspects dissolve into a more “general” narrative, in which Humbert, representing the 12 percent of the adult American male population who engage in pedophilia, provides an object lesson for “all of us—parents, social workers, educators—[engaged in] bringing up a better generation in a safer world” (6). If “our demented diarist [had] gone, in the fatal summer of 1947, to a competent psychopathologist,” Ray proposes, “there would have been no disaster; but then, neither would there have been this book” (5). While he acknowledges, that is, that psychological intervention would have cured Humbert at the cost of silencing his “singing violin,” he accounts this a reasonable trade-off. And if Ray were discussing real life events, it might well be. As a discussion of a work of art, however, Ray’s reading errs not only in giving the didactic precedence over the aesthetic, but—even worse—in endorsing the anti-individual logic of norms, trends, general lessons, types.

Before we get to the (undeniable) formal excellences of Humbert’s narrative, then, we must travel through the terrain of intellectual labor transformed into white-collar work. That Nabokov begins in this way suggests some anxiety on his part about whether the “quiddity of individual artistic achievement” can be understood other than in opposition to the intellectual labor performed in institutional contexts. As Alfred Kazin puts it, “The non-Nabokov world must always

be shown up as unnecessary to Nabokov's freedom."⁹⁹ The irony here is that with the inclusion of Ray's foreword parodying social scientific methods, *Lolita* ends up producing the same model of individuality as the postwar sociology of white-collar work. Whyte, for instance, insists in *The Organization Man*'s introduction that his book "is not a plea for nonconformity":

We must not let the outward forms deceive us. If individualism involves following one's destiny as one's own conscience directs, it must for most of us be a realizable destiny, and a sensible awareness of the rules of the game can be a condition of individualism as well as a constraint upon it. The man who drives a Buick Special and lives in a ranch-type house just like hundreds of other ranch-type houses can assert himself as effectively and courageously against his particular society as the bohemian against his particular society. He usually does not, it is true, but if he does, the surface uniformities can serve quite well as protective coloration. The organization people who are best able to control their environment rather than be controlled by it are well aware that they are not too easily distinguishable from the others in the outward obeisances paid to the good opinions of others. And that is one of the reasons they do control. They disarm society. (11–12)

For Whyte, as for Nabokov, individuality can only be gestured toward as the ineffable residue left over after one accounts for all the social forces shaping the individual (be it the individual person or the individual novel). Of course, it might seem mistaken to align Whyte's disregard for "outward forms" with Nabokov's anti-Freudian investment in "the pulsating surface."¹⁰⁰ Whereas Whyte rejects form, for Nabokov form is everything. Thus even Ray's foreword defines *Lolita* in formal terms, albeit the implicit and negative ones of "not sociology" and "not psychology."

Yet on some level the preference for form is, for Nabokov, indistinguishable from the rejection of form: what defines literature and distinguishes it from other forms of writing is not its particular form but its essential formlessness. "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," the essay Nabokov wrote for the novel's American debut and that has since been appended to some editions as an afterword, seemingly sets out to distinguish *Lolita* in formal terms from the pornography some had accused it of being. Pornography, Nabokov asserts, "must consist of an alternation of sexual scenes"; "passages in between must be reduced to . . . logical bridges of the simplest design"; "the sexual scenes . . . must follow a crescendo line"; and so forth (313). When it comes time to describe his own novel, however, he abandons such formal specificity in favor of simply listing specific images: "Mr. Taxovich, or that class list of Ramsdale School, or Charlotte saying 'waterproof,' or Lolita in slow motion advancing toward Humbert's gifts" (316), and so on. This suggests that the distinction between pornography and literature lies not in their different formal structures, but in the fact that pornography has a formal structure while literature does not. In contrast to pornography's devotion to "Old rigid rules" (313), art is characterized by its resistance to any coercive structure beyond the level of the individual image. Thus Nabokov can no more describe what makes a

good novel than Whyte can describe what makes an individual. “I happen to be the kind of author,” Nabokov writes, “who, when asked to explain [a book’s] origin and growth, has to rely on such ancient terms as Interreaction of Inspiration and Combination—which, I admit, sounds like a conjurer explaining one trick by performing another” (311). Nabokov in this respect practices what he preaches in decrying others’ interpretive efforts: “everybody should know that I detest symbols and allegories (which is due partly to my old feud with Freudian voodooism and partly to my loathing of generalizations devised by literary mythists and sociologists)” (314). As this capacious dismissal—which links literary critics with social scientists and clinicians like John Ray—reminds us, Nabokov’s preference for ineffability arises out of the same context as Whyte’s. Both feel that the transformation of the middle class (including intellectuals) into white-collar employees continually raises the possibility that what they think of as “their” ideas—or even “their” identities—may in fact originate in the systemic framework in which they perform their mental labor. Nabokov’s only way to protect the products of his own mental labor from this possibility is to refuse to describe them, to refuse to give them a form that might then turn out to be a product of The Organization. But this then involves these products in the catch-22 that they can only be described negatively, as *not* products of The Organization, in a way that ultimately grounds them in the very social framework that Nabokov seeks to transcend.

As Frederick Whiting argues in his brilliant reading of *Lolita*, the novel’s claims to transcend the social aesthetically thus mirror its content, which consists of Humbert Humbert’s equally unrealizable efforts to produce his individuality over against the constraining forces of the social. Humbert’s career as a pedophile theoretically flies in the face of social norms and thus constitutes a kind of perverse individualism, a claim that Humbert plays up in his descriptions of himself as a monster of sensuality. In practice, however, these very descriptions insistently return Humbert to the legal and cultural norms that constitute the pedophile as a member of a pathological category and thus not an individual at all.¹⁰¹ In this way, Humbert ends up seeming like nothing so much as a prototypical organization man. Humbert tells us, for instance, that

overtly, I had so-called normal relationships with a number of terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts; inly, I was consumed by a hell furnace of localized lust for every passing nymphet whom as a law-abiding poltroon I never dared approach. (18)

In this passage Humbert declares his separation from the “so-called normal” yet admits that in his behavior at least he cleaves to social norms. The distinction between inner desire and outward behavior, as we saw in the quote from Whyte above, is central to the understanding of the organization man as a conformist. If there was no such distinction, then the organization man could not be said to be sacrificing his individuality to the Social Ethic. Elsewhere Humbert notes (speaking of himself in the third person), that “under no circumstances would he have interfered with the innocence of a child, if there was the least risk of a row”

(19–20). In this regard Humbert might well be following the advice of an executive cited by Whyte who remarks that “the ideal . . . is to be an individualist privately and a conformist publicly” (172). Humbert’s pursuit of nymphets does, it is true, assume a more outward form when he begins sleeping with Dolores Haze. But even then his activities remain publicly conformist to the extent that he pursues them under cover of his masquerade, first as the devoted husband of Lolita’s mother, then as her widower father. In thus performing socially approved roles to cover his sexual relationship with Lolita, Humbert exemplifies the behavior of “the other-directed person [who] gives up the one-face policy of the inner-directed man for a multi-face policy that he sets in secrecy and varies with each class of encounters” (Riesman, *Lonely* 139).

Here one might reasonably object that Humbert’s status as a European émigré prevents us from reading his story in the class terms that I have claimed are central to postwar fiction’s engagement with narratives of threatened individuality. Nabokov grounds Humbert’s questionable individuality, however, in the fact that he makes his living as a critic and sometimes teacher of English and French literature.¹⁰² The author of such papers as “The Proustian theme in a letter from Keats to Benjamin Bailey” (16) and a devoted Freudian, Humbert is like his redactor John Ray a member of the “employed intelligentsia” that Nabokov and others saw as the prototypical organization men of the world of ideas. Moreover, Humbert embarks upon this career in explicit departure from his family’s history as property owners: his father, he tells us, “owned a luxurious hotel on the Riviera,” while his father’s “father and two grandfathers had sold wine, jewels and silk respectively” (9). Despite his European background, then, Humbert’s family history recapitulates the story of the American middle class’s transition from entrepreneurship to employment.

Humbert’s story differs in this detail from his creator’s, although this difference may be less significant than it at first seems to a consideration of *Lolita*’s resonance with postwar narratives of lost middle-class autonomy. Nabokov, unlike Humbert, was a descendant not of the bourgeoisie but of the aristocracy, the child of an official who was forced to take his family into exile following the Bolshevik Revolution.¹⁰³ As Boyd tells this story, it recapitulates not the narrative of new-middle-class descent but, on the contrary, the classic myth of old-middle-class ascent in the New World. “[B]orn into an old noble family and stupendous wealth,” Nabokov “at seventeen . . . inherited the most splendid of the family manors,” but lost it when his family fled Russia. Thereafter he made a tenuous living as a writer for “a fragmented and destitute émigré audience of less than a million readers,” eventually emigrating to the United States where he supported his wife and young son by teaching literature at various colleges. “In America life was easier but still modest until the success of *Lolita* turned Nabokov again, at sixty, into a wealthy man.” Quitting his last teaching job, at Cornell, he retired to Switzerland where he and his family lived “in a luxury hotel, waited on by a retinue of liveried attendants.” But this event marks not so much Nabokov’s return to aristocratic

ease as his transformation from employed intellectual to bourgeois entrepreneur, since *Lolita's* success freed him, in Spillane-esque fashion, to “carry on with his writing undisturbed.”¹⁰⁴ As we have seen, this same transformation provides the counterhistorical fantasy of middlebrow novels of middle-class life like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Executive Suite*.

During the early fifties, however, Nabokov could not see this outcome and thus perhaps identified more with figures like Humbert and Timofey Pnin—the hapless Russian teacher who is the protagonist of the academic comedy Nabokov wrote after *Lolita*—than the story of his later triumph might suggest. *Lolita* and *Pnin* (1957), we might say, translate Nabokov’s experience of his family’s expropriation into the American narrative of middle-class expropriation, even as his background attunes him particularly well to the core of loss and nostalgia that catalyzes the crisis of the organization man. Recognizing this, we can see how *Lolita*, so far from simply reproducing the postwar narrative of threatened individuality, indirectly critiques this narrative on both logical and ethical grounds. Central to this critique is the fact that Humbert relates to Dolores Haze not as a person in her own right but as a form of property over which he can retain control only by rigorously isolating her from all social contact. In doing so, he of course violates the necessarily alienable nature of middle-class property, becoming as Marx says of the miser “a capitalist gone mad.”¹⁰⁵ His sexual perversion, which he traces to his unconsummated adolescent affair with the Poe-derived Annabel Lee, is thus equivalent to his perversion of property, his refusal to allow Lolita to circulate paralleling his refusal of adult sexual partners:

“Whose cat has scratched poor you?” a full-blown fleshy handsome woman of the repulsive type to which I was particularly attractive might ask me at the ‘lodge,’ during a table d’hôte dinner followed by dancing promised to Lo. This was one of the reasons why I tried to keep as far away from people as possible, while Lo, on the other hand, would do her utmost to draw as many potential witnesses into her orbit as she could. (164)

Seeking to remain forever on “that intangible island of entranced time where Lolita plays with her likes” (17), Humbert becomes the real Dolores Haze’s jailer. In this respect his narrative parallels that of the postwar middle class, whose fascination with its lost property becomes an ethos of antisociality at odds with the very forms of exchange that, Mills notes, underwrote the old-middle-class world of “countless, free, shrewd transactions” (9). Humbert thus undermines his own project, though more importantly he mistreats Dolores. The novel’s ethical judgment against Humbert derives not from an investment in normative definitions of pedophilia but rather from the fact that, in his need to shape the world around him to his own specifications, Humbert displays “disregard for the live reality” of other people, particularly Lolita.¹⁰⁶ This becomes jarringly clear in those moments where Humbert’s narration either intentionally or naively allows Lolita’s personhood to leak through: Lolita’s “wild, intense, hopeful, hopeless whisper” pleading to talk to a family she recognizes (157); her “weeping in my arms” after sex

(169); “her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep” (176). As Whiting puts it, “the elements of Lolita’s subjectivity that [Humbert] must will himself to ignore in pursuit of [his] fantasy are not confined to her failure to desire him but extend to all aspects of her subjectivity.”¹⁰⁷

Lolita is, in this regard—and however much Nabokov himself might have disliked this characterization—a surprisingly feminist novel. In his 1976 *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* Eli Zaretsky proposes the historically oversimplified but nonetheless usefully counterintuitive notion that “proletarianization gave rise to subjectivity.”¹⁰⁸ By this he means that the proletariat, by definition lacking property, could only cultivate the subjective “‘property’” of “our inner lives and social capabilities, our dreams, our desires, our fears, our sense of ourselves as interconnected beings” (76). For Zaretsky this elaboration of subjectivity carries a revolutionary potential whose ability to register “universal feelings and experience” is degraded, in “modern art,” into something “obscurantist and remote from actual human concerns” (120–21). This account, whatever its historical value, corresponds quite well to the stereotype of Nabokov as an apolitical writer. But what distinguishes *Lolita* from other postwar books in which style simply becomes a reified marker of distinction is that Nabokov, through the unreliable narrator, Humbert, also parodies this stance and undermines its pretensions to singularity by alluding to Dolores’s viewpoint. As a result, Nabokov produces something like the second-wave feminist critique of the family that Zaretsky dialectically attributes to the postwar hypervaluation of the family as the site of personal life.

Nabokov thus participates, surprisingly, in what I will describe in chapters 3 and 4 as the production of identity politics out of the encrypted class politics of the organization-man discourse. *Lolita* retains the traces of this encryption in the way that Humbert treats Dolores not only as an object but also—in terms that are particularly loaded in any discussion of the white-collar middle class—as a member of a category. This, Humbert makes clear, is what a nymphet is: “Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (16). Humbert thus tries to do to Dolores precisely what society threatens to do to him: to transform her from an individual into a member of a species. In this way, *Lolita* returns us—more than a little unexpectedly—to the account of dehumanization that appears in *Tucker’s People*. Wolfert’s novel understands dehumanization as a historical process, contingent upon the expanding reign of “business” (that is, centralized property) that not only transforms the formerly autonomous members of the middle class into agency-less employees but also sees its “victims” more generally not “as people” but “merely [as] opposition” (174). Thus Leo Minch’s death comes about when, absorbed into Tucker’s operation and no longer able to use his status as a “‘good’ man” to make his numbers business a “‘good’

business,” he denies Bauer’s request to quit and precipitates the bungled kidnaping scheme that kills them both. From the perspective of Bauer, whose only encounter with Tucker’s top management is a few run-ins with Leo’s brother Joe, Leo is the enemy because he makes the decision that keeps Bauer imprisoned within the numbers business. From Leo’s own perspective, however, he has no control over these decisions, and it is “torture to have to do to Bauer what Joe had done to him” (310).

Lolita has absolutely no explicit concern with the history of economic concentration within which *Tucker’s People* grounds this situation, yet Nabokov’s novel reproduces this dilemma structurally in Humbert’s relationship with Lolita. Just as Leo’s lack of agency looks like tyranny to Bauer, what looks like Humbert’s crisis of agency from his own narrating perspective becomes from Lolita’s perspective his tyrannical enforcement of *her* lack of agency. In this way, *Lolita* depicts nothing less than the historical situation of the American middle class at the middle of the twentieth century. Threatened with proletarianization through the loss of its property to big capital, the middle class translates this loss into narratives of individual dispossession that enforce its cultural dominance rather than seeking a potentially more useful affiliation with those already outside the magic circle of capital. The insufficiency of this strategy has become apparent as the problems of the employed middle class have migrated from compromised individual agency to more practical forms of dispossession like overwork and tenuous job security. Within this framework, big capital exploits the ongoing resonance of traditional American middle-class values even while it proves increasingly able to dispense with an actual middle class. The contemporary United States is haunted by a specter: the specter of the middle class. To exorcise this ghost we must return to the culture of the 1950s, and unravel how the specific class interests of the middle class were translated into cultural forms predicated on their supposed ahistoricity and classlessness.