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Bruce Robbins: Upward Mobility and the Common Good

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INTRODUCTION

The Fairy Godmother

“ADVANCEMENT, OF COURSE”

Early in Thomas Harris’s novel *Silence of the Lambs* (1988), Dr. Hannibal Lecter, psychiatrist, serial killer, and cannibal, makes a proposal to Clarice Starling, FBI trainee, through the bars of his cell.

“I’ll give you what you love most, Clarice Starling.”

“What’s that, Dr. Lecter?”

“Advancement, of course.”¹

As usual, Lecter is right. *Silence of the Lambs* could be described in various ways—as a Gothic horror story, a detective thriller, or an oblique argument for vegetarianism. But if what matters is what Starling wants most (which is also what she gets), then the novel should be classified as a story of advancement, a modern-day Cinderella fable.

The fairy godmother of this Cinderella story is of course Lecter himself. Approached for advice in solving a fresh series of murders, he describes Starling to her face as “white trash,” then goes on to reward her for glimpses into her inner life by supplying riddlelike clues. Deciphering the clues, she will track down the killer, rescue the prospective victim, and finish her training in a blaze of professional glory. However diabolical his character may be, Lecter’s narrative function is thus indisputably benevolent: he bestows on the virtuous but disadvantaged protagonist the magical help that makes possible her advancement.

In the pages that follow, I will be working from the premise that a broad range of narratives, fictional and nonfictional, can be described more or less as Lecter describes Starling’s. Whatever else these stories appear to be about, they are also about advancement. This book assembles an archive (perhaps less consistent than a genre, though I will use that term as well) composed of stories that can be shown to display a common problematic of upward mobility. Having chosen to discuss very few texts out of an almost infinite field of possibilities, I offer my choices up in the hope that, analyzed in my somewhat obsessive terms, they will also resonate interestingly in the much wider circle of texts around them. This pushy procedure will seem worth carrying out only if it can be established at the outset that these stories are doing cultural work of an unpredictable and significant

sort—doing something other, that is, than peddling simple wish-fulfillment fantasies or the shopworn ideology of individual self-reliance we have come to associate with them. This is what I want to suggest by proposing *Silence of the Lambs* as a characteristic upward mobility story of our time and Hannibal Lecter as its unlikely fairy godmother.

What could be more characteristic of our time than a Cinderella story without a Prince Charming? Starling seems to seek only what she finds: the satisfaction of solving the case, getting the respect that goes with a job well done. What she loves most is professional success, sweetened only by the admiration of her colleagues and superiors. Even as late as 1991, when Jonathan Demme's enormously successful film version appeared, viewers expressed surprise and elation that the Jodie Foster character seemed so uninterested in finding a suitable mate. As Elizabeth Young observed, "It is not that she is waiting for the right man to come along; rather, she seems utterly indifferent to any suggestion of romance as the film proposes it, in heterosexual terms."² Was it possible that a Hollywood blockbuster was really offering up a beautiful female star and yet eliminating from her ambitions any romantic interest, leaving only the striving to succeed? No, it wasn't. But the moment did seem to mark a turning point in the erotic economy of spectatorship. The audience was not asked to forsake entirely its usual vicarious pleasures. Instead, it was invited to take those pleasures in a displaced and diluted form: as a series of hints, threats, and promises surrounding two older men, Lecter and Crawford, Starling's boss at the FBI. Each is established in a position of superiority over her, with effects both vexatious and flirtatious. With each, Starling has intense and somewhat ambiguous if only intermittent and finally inconclusive relations. These not-quite-relations seem to replace the dynamics of romantic coupling that, from novels like Richardson's *Pamela* to films like Mike Nichols's *Working Girl*, had merged the protagonist's advancement in her erotic bonding with a social superior and the promise of a new, socially elevated family to come. Rather than being wooed and wedded by her prince, one might say—taking the italicized term in a slightly more neutral sense than is customary—that Starling is *patronized* by her mentors. The activity of patronizing does not result in reproduction. Still, however disagreeable it may sound, it does not rule out some degree of seduction.

The historical shift from marriageable masters to unmarriedable mentors, a shift that could only happen once paid employment for women outside the home had become the rule rather than the exception, marks a shift toward greater gender equality. A prince, once wedded, would remain a superior. A patron or mentor, however intent he may be on preserving his putative superiority, is structurally obliged to allow the possibility of final freedom and equality. If for no other reason, this is true

because, having helped raise the protagonist up, he will then disengage from the protagonist's life and very likely disappear from the plot. This means that, though the mentor may engage less of the protagonist's desire, and thus less of the accompanying desire of the reader, what desire there is is rerouted in a more democratic direction.

Appearances to the contrary, then, the mentor is a figure of (relative) democratization. This paradox accounts for why, though he is no prince, Hannibal Lecter is charming. His charm does not stand solely for the sexiness of power, a psychological fact that can never be safely neglected. Nor does it merely register a residual charisma that cannot be banished from the dominant bureaucratic rationality, though the Weberian vocabulary seems pertinent. His charm emerges at the exact point of power's *susceptibility*, its mysterious but narratively necessary willingness to break its own rules so as to open up, however slightly, to aspiration from below. Without it, there could be no story. Since Starling needs the scientific expertise that Lecter possesses, the extracurricular murders that accompany his rule breaking show another, more sinister face of the world of experts she is so eager to enter. But Lecter does not block the entrance or in any way discourage her efforts. No matter how murderous he is, on the level of narrative function he remains first and foremost the fairy godmother, the one who enables and approves Starling's accomplishment, even if that accomplishment trains and accredits her to come in search of criminals like himself. This is the source of his charm. And his charm pulls the story away from what might otherwise seem its proper destination.

I am not suggesting that Starling's rise is all pull and no push, dependent on Lecter's intervention alone and owing nothing to her own demonstrations of merit. That merit is much in evidence. But the true logic of her rise only appears when her merit suddenly coincides with Lecter's susceptibility to it. One has to ask, therefore, what Starling offers that Lecter wants or needs.

An initial hypothesis might be that power is acquired, in *Silence of the Lambs*, by mastery over sex—in other words, that Starling acts out something like the Protestant work ethic, indefinitely sacrificing present sexual gratification in a quest for the higher if delayed good of social advancement. This hypothesis is supported by the manner in which Starling acquires her benefactor's support: Lecter decides to offer his assistance, having initially refused, only after she is sexually assaulted or insulted by his sperm-throwing fellow inmate Miggs. As we shall see, this is a crucial type of scene for the genre as a whole. That is, it responds to the same causal logic as the benefactor. If the benefactor's support is the cause of the protagonist's rise, then one needs to know how and why the support itself was obtained. What was the cause of the cause?

Evidence for this hypothesis is also to be found in the narrative's deep structure. Starling's upward mobility is accompanied by the symbolic elimination of those two contrasting characters whose ambitions *are expressed sexually*, that is, the film's two genuine villains, Buffalo Bill and Dr. Chilton. Chilton, the head of the asylum where Lecter is incarcerated, tries to take advantage of his position by grossly and gracelessly coming on to Starling. Professionally speaking, he is also Crawford's ambitious and unscrupulous antagonist.³ This sexualized ambition, or ambitious sexuality, seems largely responsible for the fact that, as the credits scroll, audiences find themselves unexpectedly cheering the prospect that Hannibal the Cannibal is about to "have" the bureaucrat for dinner—a serious measure of the film's achievement, and a hint, though finally a misleading one, about its politics.

But what about the sublimated or not-so-sublimated sexuality in the relationship between protagonist and mentor? Critics have disagreed about the presence or absence of an erotic subtext between Starling and Lecter. For Elizabeth Young, "Lecter sexualizes all discussions with Clarice in the guise of exposing her emotional interior. . . . Clarice, while clearly attracted to Lecter's eroticized advances, just as clearly resists them" (Young, 9,12). Adrienne Donald, on the other hand, sees Lecter as an ideal mentor for Starling because of "his sexual indifference to her as a woman" (358). This erotic uncertainty again seems characteristic of upward mobility in our time. It reflects a narrative in which the goal of advancement has broken free from customary heterosexual bondings that refer explicitly or implicitly to marriage and the reproduction of the patriarchal family and for better or worse has come to reside increasingly in looser, half-formed relationships, neither biologically reproductive nor necessarily heterosexual, that seem to fit social units other than the family. Like the reproduction of the family, the reproduction of institutions, disciplines, teams, professions, and even corporations involves the eliciting and channeling of erotic energy, if not in the direct and literal way demanded by procreation. This is one reason why the fairy godmother can also be perceived as a "fairy" in the somewhat (but not entirely) modern sense of the word. Indifferent to the usual destinations of heterosexual desire, Starling aims the narrative of upward mobility at something less familial than collegial. Borrowing from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, we might think of this collegial alternative as "a vision of 'family' elastic enough to do justice to the depth and sometimes durability of nonmarital and/or nonprocreative bonds, same-sex bonds, nondyadic bonds, adult sibling bonds, nonbiological bonds, bonds not defined by genitality"(71).⁴ "Fairy godmother" is one of the items on the list of roles that Sedgwick associates with "queer tutelage": "patron, friend, literal uncle, godfather, adoptive father, sugar daddy" (59). As a patron, Lecter is also something of a queer

tutor. His indeterminate sexuality, which hints at an erotics of male-female mentorship while also drawing Starling into an atmosphere of campy homosexual performance, urges her toward a nonmarital, nonprocreative endpoint which seems to have more in common with a workplace or some other nondomestic grouping.

The central moment in the film, I would argue, is the one that reveals this rechanneling of desire away from reproduction and into the workplace. This is the “silence of the lambs” story alluded to in the title, a story that emerges in Starling’s final therapy-like session with Lecter. As Judith Halberstam writes, “The secret of her past that threatened all along to be some nasty story of incest or rape is precisely not sexual. Clarice Starling is the girl who wanted to save the lambs from the slaughter, who could only carry one at a time and who finally could not support the weight” (44). Making much the same point, Elizabeth Young credits Starling with a “refusal to give Dr. Lecter what he wants: the narration of a childhood experience explicitly involving sexuality (that is, the primal scene)” (12). The film’s titular secret is thus not a sexual but a professional secret: a secret about why Starling wants to practice her profession.⁵ In other words, it is something that need not have been a secret at all. Instead of the shameful memory of sexual abuse or Oedipal hatred that one might have expected from the narrative’s lurid atmospherics, we are given a story that Starling might tell voluntarily and even with pride. For it merely explains why she wants to do the work of rescuing the helpless for which she is in training. Indeed, it is a sort of myth of professional legitimation. By going through the University of Virginia and the FBI Academy, this myth tells us, Starling is not just climbing the social ladder. She is trying to alleviate the suffering of women like herself. Her efforts fuse the two motives together.

There is no reason to credit this revelation, as Young does, to Starling’s “refusal to give Dr. Lecter what he wants.” It makes more sense to give at least some of the credit to Lecter himself.⁶ Faced with this evidence of what Starling really loves, he neglects to be ironic. He does not suggest that her advancement in the FBI will be an unhappy ending, a consummation unworthy of her efforts. He is speechless. The film’s close-up of his expression when he elicits this avowal suggests that Lecter is deeply and strangely satisfied by discovering a nonerotic key to Starling’s character. It is the suggestion, in both film and novel, that he embraces this asexual, ethically generous interpretation of Starling’s deepest motives, and indeed derives from it something equivalent to erotic pleasure, that most clearly marks him, in spite of his bad habits with everyone else, as a good mentor to Starling.⁷

In short, the common ground on which Starling’s merit and Lecter’s susceptibility to that merit coincide, thus enabling and affirming her rise,

is her sense of vocation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a professional therapist (though no longer licensed to practice) approves the commitment of another would-be professional, her commitment to tend to those who are in need. What Lecter reassures Starling of by his interpretation of her story is that the “cool professionalism” she seeks is not, as Adrienne Donald thinks, “a vain flight from her white trash origins” (352), but rather a reconnection of sorts with those origins, an identification that is also a rescue, a rescue that is also an identification. “The corpse laid out on the table,” Judith Halberstam writes, “. . . is a double for Starling, the image of what she might have become had she not left home, as Lecter points out, and aspired to greater things” (42). According to Lecter, the corpse would also be proof that her aspiration to greater things is not an abandonment of those left behind or below, a proof that she advances, forward or upward, precisely so as to do something for them, and precisely because they are versions of herself, because she is what she must take care of. This professional creation myth demonstrates to anyone who might doubt it—and we have every reason to believe that readers and spectators will indeed be skeptical on this point—that her individual advancement will be in the interest of society as a whole.

References to the interest of society as a whole, like references to the common good, are most often made these days in a more or less cynical mode, as if we assumed that such claims could only be ideological, hence self-aggrandizing and self-incriminating. I’m not convinced that a post-Gramscian or post-Althusserian understanding of ideology should permit this assumption.⁸ If there is no privileged (that is, theological) position completely outside ideology, attempting to reconcile versions of self-interest with versions of the general welfare becomes something all social players are obliged to do. Making and defending claims like this is simply what we mean by political discourse. In this case, politics would have to be understood as involving the tricky, unending task of discriminating less desirable from more desirable claims—in large part a matter of timing and context.

The local context in which Lecter approves Starling’s claim, and thus some of the force behind his approval, can be gauged by a scene in which what we observe is a failure in this reconciliation between self-interest and the common good. As Young notes, when Starling finally enters Buffalo Bill’s cellar and finds the young woman he has kidnapped, Catherine Martin, the moment can be compared to “the terrified encounter between *Jane Eyre* and Bertha Rochester” (17). “As she enters the room, Clarice calls out, ‘FBI, you’re safe,’ a line so obviously incongruous—given the precariousness of her own situation at this moment—as to provoke laughter, while Catherine, hearing her leave, yells, ‘You fucking bitch!’ ” (17). I would like to draw a little circle around this fleeting moment and its

allusion to the upward mobility problematic of *Jane Eyre*, to which I will return below. The basement encounter with Buffalo Bill's intended victim, a kind of madwoman in the basement, can be seen as a beautifully miniaturized allegory of professional discourse in the moment of its failure to legitimize itself. It is an allegory, one might say, of the Reagan/Thatcher years, years that saw a frenzy of delegitimation aimed at "official" or credentialed, professional or state efforts to "rescue" private citizens. The grassroots structure of feeling that grew into a sense of its power in those years has of course continued, under different administrations, giving us among other things the Oklahoma City bombing and so-called welfare reform.⁹ As a result, we are still living with the powerful populist antifeminism, antiprofessionalism, and antistatistism that are neatly joined in the misguided animosity of "you fucking bitch!"

A justifiably desperate Catherine Martin pronounces those words because she takes Starling's apparent indifference to her as aggressive. This is an error, but in a larger sense, she has a point. Performing the rescue as her professional training dictates, Starling can also be seen as attacking the resistant, antistatist subject as such, the one who doubts the suitability or competence of official rescuers—especially when they are women, or presumed beneficiaries of federal legislation. The antistatist subject is ready in an instant to tear off the facade of impersonal officialdom and reveal a reality that is always finally personal. *You* can't be a proper representative of the authorities, the logic would go. You're just a woman like me. But if this is the logic, then Starling too is right. For by her impersonally aggressive rescue she is breaking down a resistance that not only stands in the way of professional advancement for herself, but also stands in the way of any progressive politics, any demand that the social welfare state fulfill and extend its long unkept and now ever more retracted promises—in short, any collective social advancement in the United States under our present unpropitious conditions.¹⁰ What the scene offers is another way of measuring the political achievement of *Silence of the Lambs*: its force as relatively successful propaganda, against a background of free-market antistatistism, in favor of welfare-state institutions and at the same time in favor of the enlarged market for professional service and expertise that the welfare state has always implied—in favor, in other words, of the welfare state as a social space in which an individual can rise while doing good for others.

I am claiming that the paradoxical key to Clarice Starling's upward mobility story is the welfare state, here understood very loosely as including all the state's caring and rescue functions, even when these functions are carried out by the FBI.¹¹ Here and throughout this book I will be asking the reader to see the welfare state as a personal matter. It would be absurd if Starling's gender and sexuality were *not* implicated in the

story of her advancement, for nothing could be more representative of the larger social changes in which that advancement participates. “At a moment in time when the federal government assumed greater authority over the distribution of resources,” Alice Kessler-Harris shows in her study of economic citizenship in and after the New Deal, “gender constituted a crucial measure of fairness” (6).¹² Only the mutual dependence of these two shifting concepts—of fairness on gender, and of gender on fairness—can explain how deep into personal identity these changes go. To make sense of the policy shift “from staunch opposition to federal government intervention in the lives of most men (but not women) to eager experiments with government mediation of all sorts,” one has to see “how profoundly the expectations of ordinary people altered” (64). This alteration would have had to be profound—certainly profound enough to work its way into novels. It would have had to affect both the going sense of who, what, and where the mediators of power are and where, so to speak, one’s own story is located. What could be more personal?

In following Starling’s hunt for the killer and the self-searching conversations with Lecter that make the hunt successful, I’m suggesting, what audiences experience is a reworking of desire, an apprenticeship in the ambiguities and affective transformations that advancement within a bureaucratic frame has come to require. I am not suggesting that adjusting individual ambitions to the obliqueness of an emergent welfare state means learning to live without inequality. In many and perhaps most cases (though not in *Silence of the Lambs*, as it happens), the credentialed carer or rescuer thereby preserves and legitimates a social advantage over the one who is rescued—an allegory of the distance between welfare-state capitalism and any socialism that would deserve the name. I would argue that this new set of lessons about responsibility, social interdependence, and desire brings a net ethical gain even though, as is obvious enough, some of these lessons were equally necessary to capitalism’s emerging corporate form and to the civil/bureaucratic institutions emerging to constrain and contain it, or to save it from its own self-destructive drive to achieve short-term profit at all cost. It should not be shocking, given the fragility of welfare-state institutions in the era of globalization and privatization, that we are still in the process of learning, forgetting, resisting, and relearning these lessons.

This book will try to expand this counterintuitive linkage of fiction and the welfare state so as to cover a number of otherwise diverse upward mobility stories of the past two centuries. It will suggest that *Silence of the Lambs* is a recent addition to a long and largely hidden tradition of narratives that fill in the missing emotional landscape of life among welfare-state institutions, and that the apparent bleakness of this institutional

landscape represents the imperfect historical form that we should expect even the most genuine progress toward social equality to take. Unsatisfying as it may be, this is the collective progress, I will argue, against which individual narratives of progress must be plotted.

Let me spell out a few further assumptions that underlie this argument. I understand the welfare state as a set of imperfect institutions, produced in part by management from above and in part by pressure from below, which also enters into the unfinished project of “social citizenship,” a phrase that Étienne Balibar has recently sought to revive.¹³ I see no need to disguise the fact that, alongside the sheer scholarly delight of discovering so unlikely a historical context for so pervasive a set of literary texts, I took some of the motivation for this argument from disgust at the partial dismantling and further endangering of the welfare state, as alluded to above, as well as from incipient attempts to extend social citizenship on an international scale, an effort to which Balibar is a useful guide. I will be assuming that upward mobility under capitalism is not restricted to the single option of playing and winning at the game of profit-and-loss and affirming the eternal fitness of the rules capitalism has laid down. History knows no such thing as a “free” capitalist market. Actual capitalist markets have always required immense infrastructural investment and the continuing support of various institutions, some of them classified as “welfare” institutions, like Lecter’s asylum, and others not, like Starling’s FBI. Yet in the broadest sense all of these institutions, even one as blatantly tarnished as the FBI, can be said to belong to the welfare state. All of them, while supporting capitalism, also interfere with it.¹⁴ The reality of the interference can be measured by the wrathful corporate will to dismantle and defund that such interference incites. In this context of dismantling and defunding, the persistence of the Foucaultian school in interpreting the welfare state as an apparatus of domination based on hypocritically benevolent surveillance seems to me open to new and sharp questioning.

Since the hypocrisy is often real, the benevolence is always limited, and the opportunities for misunderstanding are endless, let me repeat: I am aware that the welfare state is not the sort of ideal that deserves to dictate all of one’s political commitments and aspirations. This is a point that is well marked within *Silence of the Lambs* itself. The film ends in the Caribbean, where Hannibal Lecter, after congratulating Starling on her success by telephone, is in hungry pursuit of the asylum director, the film’s unpalatable and therefore eminently edible bureaucrat. The Caribbean or Third World or global south, one might say, is where one finds oneself when one gets off the phone with the FBI, where there is neither FBI nor welfare state. There the contradictions of the welfare state can be exported, and the inevitable collision of values between Starling and Lecter can be

evaded or at least postponed. It is the place where Lecter and Starling would not need to be separated by bars, where Lecter would only eat those who richly deserve to be eaten, where “bad” professionals would be eliminated and only the “good” ones would remain. All of which is of course once again to use neoimperialism’s familiar double standard so as to make a space elsewhere for what cannot happen at home.

I will have more to say at the end of this book about the line drawn by the international division of labor between countries that can and cannot afford some semblance of a welfare state. It is arguable that this line traces some of the most urgent and delicate political tasks of the coming decades, including the challenge of negotiating critically with a new American nationalism. The best arguments for nationalism are those that appeal to the solidarity embodied, at its best, in the welfare state. This book was written in part because I am so concerned that the political project of the welfare state, as a set of real historical accomplishments as well as still energetic impulses begging to be extended further, seems to have been prematurely given up for dead by everyone *but* the new nationalists. I have sought to respond, after my fashion, to Fredric Jameson’s somewhat reluctant imperative in his “Five Theses on Actually Existing Marxism”: “the Left is . . . today placed in the position of having to defend big government and the welfare state, something its elaborate and sophisticated traditions of the critique of social democracy make it embarrassing to do” (4).¹⁵

This task is especially pressing for American intellectuals, and especially embarrassing, for two additional reasons. First, because we ourselves depend so heavily on the legitimacy and the financial support of the welfare state. And second, because the welfare state is a cross-class project, the historical result of popular demands for protection combined with the rising influence of technocratic expertise. Thus it is the closest thing we have had to an ideological synthesis, a defensible common program in which the glaringly different interests of the poor and needy, on the one hand, and elite experts, on the other, can even appear to be resolved. I look forward to the day when a better one will have replaced it.

“I DON’T WANT TO BE PATRONISED”

Focused as it is on a professional career woman, *The Silence of the Lambs* is very much a text of its times. It hardly seems coincidental, given its attention to the potentially abusive power and the sexual ambiguity of older, institutionally powerful men, that the film version came out in the same year as the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, with their sensational testing of society’s recent and still fragile will to resist sexual ha-

rassment. For me, as for Rosemary Bray, whose memoir *Unafraid of the Dark* is discussed in a later chapter, it was a scandal that public opinion permitted Thomas to set his story of self-reliance against the dependence of his “welfare queen” sister, and this scandal provided another topical motive to rethink the ubiquitous opposition between upward mobility and the welfare state.¹⁶ And yet how topical is a figure like Hannibal Lecter? No one who has ever encountered the female Gothic, from Ann Radcliffe to *Rebecca*, will imagine that Lecter’s show-stealing, attractive-repulsive prominence is entirely unprecedented. Though stories closely resembling *The Silence of the Lambs* remain rare, though we do not often see the husband/master entirely replaced by the mentor, though this shift from master to mentor is both incomplete and likely to remain so, figures like Hannibal Lecter are not a recent literary phenomenon. Nor is their entanglement in narratives of advancement. Consider, for example, Lecter’s resemblance to the older male criminals who oversee the protagonist’s rise in such masterpieces of the realist bildungsroman as Balzac’s *Père Goriot* and Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. In the first, there is the gay and charismatic master criminal Vautrin. Like Lecter, Vautrin is a man of almost superhuman knowledge and ability. Like Lecter, he offers his services to the ambitious (male) protagonist for reasons that seem obscure but hint strongly of sexual attraction. This is an attraction for which the novel, like *The Silence of the Lambs*, will find no outlet. Yet it is Vautrin who explains to Rastignac his eventual ascent in the Parisian world and in a sense presides over it even after he has been arrested and banished from the plot. In *Great Expectations*, there is another patron who is also a criminal. The moral center of the plot is generally agreed to be the passionate bond between Pip and Magwitch, the secret source of the funds that make Pip a gentleman. Once again, a taint of criminality hangs over the hero’s upward mobility. Why should these patrons be criminals? Why is it that in both cases the hero’s emotional entanglement with these criminal patrons upstages their somewhat pro forma passions for trophy women? If we cannot call it love, what *can* we call the bond between them?

A bond that is not quite hot enough for love is also characteristic of another set of patrons, again represented in both *Père Goriot* and *Great Expectations*. Balzac’s Mme de Beauséant inexplicably invites Rastignac into her exclusive and much-coveted circle, providing him with a stock of social capital he can trade for further advancement and thus accomplishing much of what Vautrin had planned for him. They do not sleep together, but thanks to her he will have the choice of a mistress who resembles her. Dickens’s Miss Havisham merely pretends to be Pip’s patron, concealing from him the criminality of his true patron. In both cases, the Older Woman is a kind of front for the Male Criminal. But she also

helps account for the power the two categories of patron share. Like the homosocial bond between older and younger man, the bond between younger man and older woman stands apart from the cycle of biological reproduction that has traditionally channeled and legitimated desire.¹⁷ Her age and position make her unmarriageable. Unavailable for the production of offspring, she cannot be the object of a desire that aims at constituting a new family unit, which is to say a unit that would put her at a disadvantage. The ambition that passes through her will look criminal, for it cannot be an ambition that aims at reproducing society as it is. The desire for her and the desire for her patronage, two desires that frequently meld into one, define the protagonist's upward mobility as a paradoxical project, one that leads both into and away from the status quo.

These two desires are more likely to be indistinguishable in the novels of Balzac and Stendhal. Miss Havisham, who in a French novel would have been a bit younger and Pip's lover, in England must spin off a younger and more acceptable appendage as a receptacle for romantic desire. (Woody Allen's *Bullets over Broadway*, which rewrites *Great Expectations* as well as *Sunset Boulevard*, foregrounds both categories of patron, the gangster-who-supplies-what-the-protagonist-lacks and the diva-of-a-certain-age, and comes closer to the French model in its treatment of the latter.) But Estella's much-emphasized coldness is a sure sign that, structurally speaking, her identity remains that of her adoptive mother, the woman traumatized by unconsummated marriage who turns therefore against marriage itself and the society of which it is paradigmatic. To reject the option of joining with the hero to found a family is not to rule out love. But it means that love will look different, and will prefigure a different sort of society. The coldness of the unmarriageable female—what René Girard calls, apropos of the love between older woman and younger man in Rousseau and Stendhal, “cerebral love”—is a figure for ambition that is not merely illegitimate in the eyes of the social order. It is a figure for ambition in pursuit of a different legitimacy.¹⁸

As I have suggested, the ambition of the lowly can be imagined as legitimate only if power is imagined to be something other than a united and impenetrable front, a sovereignty that is both inviolable and homogeneous. The outlandish and sensational bursts of imagination that go into shaping the figure of the patron seem intended to solve this problem, to present power as contradictory and thus permeable. The patron must, by definition, possess the power to raise the protagonist up. By definition, possessors of power are defenders of the social order from which they benefit. But by raising the protagonist up, the social order would seem to be violating itself. Why would it ever do such a thing? Older Women and Male Criminals are imaginary solutions to the paradox. They are ways of imagining a hierarchical social order as simultaneously

resistant to democratic transgression and deviously willing to permit or even invite it. Logically speaking, they are at the very center of the upward mobility story, for they and only they attempt to explain how it is possible for upward mobility to happen, or to go unpunished.¹⁹ Factoring in again the social interdependence on which all supposedly independent effort depends, they make the upward mobility story more believable and more interesting.

It is the intersection of my formal interest in the mentor/mediator, as a sort of catalyst inciting or supervising the passage from origin to destination without entering into the end product, and my historical interest in the gradual emergence of the welfare state, as a context that makes some sense of these figures and their narrative effect, that narrows the otherwise unmanageable field of texts that must be consulted. There are of course upward mobility stories, in the broadest sense of the word, as early and as far abroad as one cares to look. In his quest for the origins of the English novel, Michael McKeon offers an upward mobility narrative from 1701 (from a dialogue by Charles Davenant), then trumps it with another (Thomas Deloney's *Jack of Newbery*) from 1597.²⁰ Even the unstable balance between indulging and chastising the desire for mobility (for McKeon, "progressive" and "conservative" readings) goes back at least that far. The overcoming of obstacles and the satisfaction of desires for greater prosperity, security, and so on are most likely cultural invariants to be found wherever there is storytelling. Why not include in the same category freed slaves in classical antiquity, folktale variants of the Cinderella motif, younger sons under primogeniture, and a wealthy nineteenth-century German-Jewish parvenu like Rahel Varnhagen as described by Hannah Arendt?²¹ A rigorously comparative study that would have something to say about all of the world's literary traditions would of course have to specify with precision the social context in each case, including the nature of the social obstacles overcome (class, caste, slavery, or whatever) and the forces and vulnerabilities that allow for their overcoming. This is beyond my own capacities. I also have some suspicion as to whether, at that planetary level of historical and geographical abstraction, a coherent object called upward mobility can even be said to exist.

The present book concerns itself mainly with the United Kingdom and the United States, and to a lesser degree France, in the period since 1800, and even within those limits (in some respects no doubt too loose) it is obliged to be impressionistic. The year 1800 marks not an absolute origin but a relative point of departure, much as it does for Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*. The Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, dramatic stages in the respective development of capitalism and democracy, generated objects of culture in which anticapitalist responses are often difficult to tell apart from antidemocratic responses, and impulses

to achieve more democratic representation may easily be confused with impulses to liberate the market. These cultural confusions extend to the development of the state. Like culture, the state arguably assumes its modern form in the years following 1800. In his history of the eighteenth-century English novel, John Richetti argues that the state in the modern sense could not exist in the eighteenth century because “society” in the current (that is, nineteenth-century) sense did not exist. Instead, there was “a constellation of distinct spheres of influence, a loosely federated collection of interests and smaller social units” (5–6).²² The same would have to be said about the state. Richetti cites Anthony Giddens to the effect that “Britain in the eighteenth century is not yet a modern nation-state but rather what Giddens calls a ‘class-divided’ society in which large spheres ‘retain their independent character in spite of the rise of the state apparatus’” (6). After 1800, the rise of the state apparatus accelerates (again like culture) because that apparatus is asked both to serve capitalism and to manage its contradictions, among them its contradictory effect on democracy. Again, this is not a process that calls out for unconditional approval. David Lloyd and Paul Thomas make an eloquent case that the theory and practice of culture since the early-nineteenth century should largely be understood as a “supplement” to the state, concerned with breaking down popular desire for autonomy and resistance to representative government.²³ Unlike Lloyd and Thomas, I do not read the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 primarily as contributions to “the considerable work of disciplining and pedagogy, such that the emergence of the citizen may seem inseparable from the efficacy of another kind of reform and another mode of pedagogy, that of the reformatory” (58). Resisting the metaphorical slide that begins by identifying the state with the school and ends by identifying it with the prison, I hold that prisons are part of the story (indeed, quite a large part, to judge from narratives of upward mobility), but they are not its definitive point. But I too see culture as working along with and on behalf of state formation. I will try to show much the same linkage to the state in a number of nineteenth-century works of fiction.

If apologies are not in order for taking on too little material, perhaps I should apologize for taking on too much. The phrase “welfare state” does not seem to have been used before the 1930s. Those few books that have made the risky link between the welfare state and literature, like Sean McCann’s *Gumshoe America* and Michael Szalay’s *New Deal Modernism*, both published in 2000, have solidified their case—to me, both brilliant and utterly convincing—by restricting it to a decade or so.²⁴ Yet there is also something to be said for a moderately more expansive historical scale. As Daniel T. Rodgers shows in *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (1998), the great break with *laissez-faire*

policy began in Germany in the 1870s, then crossed the Rhein, the Channel, and the Atlantic in a fascinating pattern of back-and-forth exchange. The national trajectories are distinct. Yet Rodgers's experiment in transnational history works: a common object emerges into view across a geographical space that has been stretched and a *durée* (seventy or eighty years) that is longer than is usually claimed for Progressivism. Without pretending to the same richness of historical detail, I too am interested in stretching the dimensions of the welfare state. If the nineteenth century largely believed, as Norman Barry notes, that the market itself could not possibly be a *cause* of so-called social problems (29), and thus differed dramatically with the twentieth-century opinion that produced the New Deal and the Beveridge Plan, it is also true that under close inspection the earlier period reveals the slow, diffuse cultural preparation that eventually made it possible to break with this dogma. Hence the two centuries can fit gracefully enough into the same temporal frame. Instead of a sequence of relatively discrete developmental stages, then, as would be appropriate to a fine-grained treatment of social policy, this work of cultural criticism offers a sort of moral X ray, capturing a hidden skeletal configuration that helps explain long-term symptoms. Though my subtitle lays claim to history, that term is meant to be seriously qualified by its modest preposition. Perhaps a more accurate word would be *anatomy*.²⁵

If the modern state did not exist before 1800, neither did the modern patron. It is only the rise of individualism that gives people a vocabulary in which patronizing registers as a violation. And it is only when enough people register that sense of violation that the patron's ambivalence-producing interference in the upward mobility story becomes possible. Consider the history of the word *patronizing*. "To patronize" originally meant simply to act as a patron toward, to protect, support, favor, encourage. There was no suggestion of any affront to the dignity of the one patronized. The more familiar adjectival form *patronizing* gets a new lease on life only at the point, around 1800, when the word acquires its present pejorative meaning: displaying an air or manner of superiority and condescension. The OED gives an example from Disraeli: "Spruce . . . had a weakness for the aristocracy, who . . . patronised him with condescending dexterity." And a still more paradigmatic one from Dickens: "I don't want to be patronised." The word acquires this pejorative meaning when the rise of democracy opens up possibilities for upward mobility and, with them, an uncertainty as to whether the distance between superior and inferior is indeed being disregarded or erased. Something similar happens to the near synonym *condescension*. Originally understood, without prejudice, as a voluntary abnegation of a superior's privileges, an affable disregard of differences of rank or position (OED), *condescension* has come to mean making a display of one's affability

that, whether intentionally or not, reminds the recipient of one's superiority by and while appearing to forget it. It too could seem neutral only while the distance between superior and inferior remained absolute and unbridgeable. Both terms have come to refer to an undesired and annoying *appearance* of democracy only since democratic leveling entered the realm of realistic possibility.

On the other hand, the modern relationship with the patron is not all annoyance. Nor is it adequately characterized as self-abasing love. Arendt quotes Rahel Varnhagen's parvenu husband, who tries to "honor myself in my superiors, so as to track down their good qualities in order to love them" (237). "Making a strenuous effort to love," Arendt comments drily, "where there is no alternative but obedience, is more productive of good results than simple and undisguised servility" (237). One would prefer not to obey at all. But if one has to obey, then better to disguise the servility (even to oneself) as love. Better, that is, to transform it into love. This is the logic of a social world (the Prussian nobility around 1814) whose hierarchy is still relatively stable. In England, France, and the United States, though each was on a somewhat different timetable, having come through different revolutions, the alignments of power were shifting more rapidly, the transitivity of roles was at least a theoretical possibility, and the sort of emotional bond one finds between protagonist and patron—love is not the right word, but there may not be one—is correspondingly unstable, unpredictable, creative. That bond begins in a mixture of annoyance (that one must obey at all) and seduction (by a role one may not merely benefit from, but perhaps come in one's turn to occupy), and it goes on from there.

In elaborating on this correspondence between power and emotion, I do not claim to detect a consistent and full-scale allegory linking the novel's love stories to political theory. The sorts of literary effects I am talking about are too partial and fragmentary. Focusing on characters, functions, and relationships that occupy the somewhat neglected middle ground of these texts, texts more frequently and more readily grasped in terms of protagonists and final destinations, I am content to solicit respectful attention for what might be described as fiction's figurative dimension, its ability to transcend its own social horizon and to do so not in the interest of an ahistorical utopia, but as a further imaginative development of desires and energies that are already at work within that horizon.

One final qualification. In making the case that there exists something like a genre of upward mobility stories, I will be insisting that a certain number of texts that are not usually seen in terms of class (like *The Silence of the Lambs*) make better or richer or more urgent sense if class is factored back in. This insistence is all the more necessary when these texts give a prominent place to gender, as in *The Silence of the Lambs*, and if

the difficulties of gender are accompanied by racial, ethnic, or postcolonial issues, as in the writing of Jamaica Kincaid. But my point here is not to argue that class trumps all other considerations.²⁶ It is by no means clear that the concept of class should have such interpretive authority, even over upward mobility stories. It is the *weakness* of the concept of class, its historical inability to structure from within the daily experience of the people to whom it is supposed to apply most urgently, that in large part leads me to this project. Stuart Hall's description of race as the mode in which class is lived is also true, if less universally, for upward mobility stories. These stories provide a narrative vocabulary, theoretically tainted and imperfect but extremely widespread, in which class has been and continues to be experienced. If there is authority in experience—even an authority shared with professional interpreters—then the discourse of class has as much to learn from these persistent commonsense narratives as it has to teach them. One thing it has to learn from them, at least as they are interpreted here, is its own dependence on the state, which cannot be seen as constituted *by* class identities and interests without also being seen as *constituting* class identities and interests.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CHAPTERS

In Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, as in Balzac's *Père Goriot* and elsewhere, the social superior who "recognizes" the protagonist and becomes his benefactor is an Older Woman. With help from Margaret Cohen's *Sentimental Education of the Novel*, chapter 1, "Erotic Patronage," asks why the sentimental language of female self-sacrifice is not only admitted into the domain of male realism, where upward mobility takes flight, but is assigned to the commanding position of the mentor. Taking off from Rousseau's account in the *Confessions* of his youthful relations with his patron and lover Mme de Warens, I connect the Older Woman as transitional love object in a male upward mobility story, on the one hand, and the early theory of democratic citizenship, on the other. If the disinterestedness of the Older Woman is the site of an unacceptable renunciation of interest and agency on the part of women, for Rousseau it is also, and simultaneously, a model of the ideal and necessary alienation and rediscovery of the self in the general will. Despite its apparent fidelity to a residual aristocratic model of patronage, therefore, the upward mobility story can be seen as integral to the development of a "thick" discourse of democratic citizenship. Julien Sorel's boredom, which Erich Auerbach diagnosed as "aristocratic loftiness," becomes more interesting when assimilated to Cohen's tradition of sacrificial disinterestedness. And it is the hold of this politicized sentimentality over male nineteenth-century fiction

that explains why, like the Pythons' childhood poverty game, the game of female self-sacrifice continues to work, dictating the course of upward mobility within a social world supposedly given over to brutal self-interest. Borrowing Fredric Jameson's analysis of donor-acquisition scenes as a key to what happens between protagonists and their mentor/benefactors, this chapter traces an unlikely commitment to democratic theory through works of nineteenth-century French fiction by Constant, Stendhal, Balzac, and Flaubert, with side glances at Dickens and Dreiser. It ends with Nuala O'Faolain's reflections on erotic patronage, careers, and age for women.

Chapter 2, "How to Be a Benefactor without Any Money," juxtaposes the theme of mentorship in two nineteenth-century classics of the genre, one British and one American. Dickens's *Great Expectations* is the very epitome of moral seriousness; Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* is its apparent antithesis. A reading of *Ragged Dick* attempts to display the centrality of the patron or benefactor figure even at the unrepentant heart of the ideology of self-reliance. Borrowing from Michael Moon's brilliant essay connecting Alger's benefactor figures to his pedophilia, I argue that these benign benefactors, who seem to contrast starkly with the sinister Hannibal Lecter, in fact share with him both a suspicion of unspeakable self-interest and a bond with their protégés that undercuts, socializes, and enriches the supposed rags-to-riches story for which Alger is notorious. The continuity between Alger's work with homeless children in New York City and the "no fault" or "therapeutic" ethic of the modern welfare state is explored in a brief commentary on the film *Good Will Hunting*. The chapter's third section extends the upward mobility story's emphatic entanglement with the issue of homelessness into a reading of *Great Expectations*. Homelessness, which marks the breakdown of the family, calls into being the agencies of the (just emergent) Victorian state bureaucracy. The effort to rescue the homeless, I argue, underlies and explains the genuine upward mobility that persists beyond the moral chastisement and failure of Pip's self-centered "great expectations": the more muted success of his not-quite-disinterested actions as a benefactor-without-any-money, a bizarre figure of administrative expertise who stands prophetically for the welfare state that would aim at not-quite-disinterested care for Magwitch and those like him.

Chapter 3, "It's Not Your Fault," takes its title from the film *Good Will Hunting*, which like *The Silence of the Lambs* organizes its upward mobility story around a mentor/benefactor who is also a therapist. The therapeutic or "no fault" ethic, which outraged critics of the welfare state like Christopher Lasch for its neglect of individual moral responsibility, becomes the thread tying together three classic American upward mobility stories running the length of the twentieth century: Theodore Dreiser's

The Financier (1912), Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), and E. L. Doctorow's *Billy Bathgate* (1989). In each, I argue, the refusal of individual responsibility is real and central, but it is not the moral disaster that antistatists like Lasch saw in it. On the one hand, this refusal makes the moral space required for upward mobility, which is incompatible with the strict moral accounting that is its ideological face. On the other hand, however, it obliges the upwardly mobile protagonist to bend to a new sort of responsibility, this time public and collective. The "no fault" motto is so potent, I suggest, because it stands in for the rechanneling of responsibility in the direction of emergent public collectivities like the trade union, the profession, and the municipality, which is in the course of becoming an increasingly self-conscious moral agent. In their different ways, these institutions embody a principle of loyalty set against the chaotic, self-destructive working of self-interest that we see in self-reliant criminal protagonists like Dreiser's Cowperwood, Schulberg's Sammy Glick, and Doctorow's Dutch Schultz. The therapist, like the social worker and the municipal inspector, is thus a representative of what the previous chapter had called the benefactor without any money. Yet here as elsewhere the therapist must share the spotlight with the gangster, an alternative figure (again descended from Vautrin and Magwitch) for this ethical turn, which is of course as characteristic of corporate capitalism as it is of the welfare state.

Chapter 4, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Rentier," centers on a subgenre of British upward mobility stories from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that deal with figures of the writer, artist, or intellectual. In readings of George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) and *Born in Exile* (1892), George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), H. G. Wells's *Kipps* (1905), and George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1914), I argue that the writer's rejection of social climbing implies an unconscious alignment with the old aristocracy, which of course did not have to climb. But this alignment also *enables* social climbing, as we see in the period's brilliant and enduringly popular array of Lecter-like sinister-but-seductive mentors, from Du Maurier's Svengali to Leroux's Phantom of the Opera. Why the repeated mixture of extreme power with extreme marginality or disability? In an attempt to explain this paradox, I pursue the idea that this alignment with old landed money overlaps significantly with the new, still fragile ethic of the welfare state. The rentier, or person living off rent on property, is a visible ancestor of the "no fault" sense of entitlement, disconnected from individual effort, achievement, or responsibility. And if, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, it was independent incomes that funded the artistic Bohemias where figures like Svengali and the Phantom flourish, then it becomes interesting not only that so many upward mobility stories are set in Bohemia, but that upward mobility should be so

identified with the activities of writing and art. The answer to how one can rise in the world without identifying with the dominant new-money ethic of commercial self-interest is an identification that is at once residual and emergent, a sense of entitlement that, like the Fabian paternalism that jump-started the welfare state, owes something both to the rentier and to the state bureaucrat. The life of the writer or artist serves the genre of upward mobility because it is itself a metaphorical compromise between individual social climbing and commitment to some version of the common good.

Chapter 5, “The Health Visitor,” treats a series of British and American upward mobility stories of the mid-twentieth century that share two common features. First, they are all taught frequently to undergraduates, and thus indicate something of importance about the overlap between upward mobility and the self-appointed role of higher education in providing and commenting upon it. Second, they all include and indeed revolve around a traumatic visit to the child-protagonist’s family by an authorized representative of the state. (Or the public authorities—it’s in this chapter that I declare and explain my support for Daniel Rodgers’s position in *Atlantic Crossings* that in spite of real differences in the weighing of private and public, welfare-state discourse works to unite Europe and the United States.)²⁷ This traumatic invasion of private space, which seems to lend itself to a justifiably paranoid view of the activist state, in fact becomes constitutive, I argue, of the upward mobility that follows from it, an upward mobility that can be justified only by means of a justification of the welfare state. The texts discussed include Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*, Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing,” Alan Sillitoe’s “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner,” and—as a noncurricular coda—Steven Soderbergh’s film *Erin Brockovich*.

Chapter 6, “On the Persistence of Anger in the Institutions of Caring,” begins by examining a number of British novels that participate with more or less enthusiasm in the extreme distrust of state intervention characteristic of the last two decades of the twentieth century. After glances at two “social” novels by Pat Barker and an “academic” novel by Malcolm Bradbury, I discuss at length Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), which features a futuristic version of the “health visitor.” Ishiguro’s novel sums up the meaning of caring for another by repeating and interrogating a line of some importance to my argument: “it’s not your fault.” Does this refusal of individual responsibility point a hostile finger at where the welfare state goes wrong? Has this motto become a hindrance to upward mobility, evidence of its decline? Does it abandon all commitment to a properly political anger, anger against injustice? Or is caring, the constitutive action of the welfare state, itself a vehicle for anger? The anger of

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, a representative as well as an analyst of the institutions of social welfare, offers a segue to a section on the autobiographical writings of three sociologists (the other two are Richard Sennett and Paul Willis). All three can be seen as telling, if only in fragments, the story of their own rise from the working class. Both in their lives and in their work as sociologists, all three are profoundly concerned with the question of whether this rise must be thought of as a betrayal of those left behind and the necessary anger that flows from the class system. In academic versions of the paradigmatic “writer” story discussed in chapter 4, these sociologists can be seen as proposing that being a sociologist, or being a sociologist of the sort they themselves have become, represents a kind of answer to the threat of betrayal, a mode of mixed but tangible loyalty to their working-class origins. Pushing on the differences between their accounts, I also underline their common turn to the state. As guarantor of the discipline of sociology as well as employer of the social workers who apply it, the state is the site where their conflicting loyalties can partially and potentially be resolved. In making this turn, I argue, the sociologists are obliged, like Ishiguro’s novel, to imagine the state and its employees as bearers of anger. The chapter ends with a brief further discussion of two works already mentioned: in *Parallel Time*, Brent Staples’s account of his upward mobility and the role of anger in it, and in *Brothers and Keepers*, John Edgar Wideman’s account of what federal funding means to the brother left behind.

The conclusion, “The Luck of Birth and the International Division of Labor,” takes Debra Dickerson’s *An American Story* as an illustration of the national boundaries that confine the book’s argument. Aside from the welfare system’s exclusion of distant foreigners, state policy in the metropolis is at best indifferent to them, and at worst seeks them out for more active sorts of injury. The form in which the state offers to play mentor/benefactor to the upwardly mobile Dickerson, for example, is the United States Air Force. If the price of Dickerson’s newly credentialed post in military intelligence is paid by those on whom the bombs fall, how strong can the case ultimately be for her upward mobility, when that mobility is seen from a global perspective? The borders of the nation would seem to set severe limits to the defense of upward mobility offered here. How severe? I pursue this question through discussions of two refugee novels, Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* and Lorraine Adams’s *Harbor*, before turning in conclusion to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as a reader of Jamaica Kincaid and as a reluctant but compelling theorist of upward mobility across the international division of labor.