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**Bruce Robbins: Upward Mobility and the Common Good**

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## INTRODUCTION

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### 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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."<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> "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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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).<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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?<sup>21</sup> 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















