

DEEP IN THE HEART: MARK TWAIN AND WALKER PERCY  
AS AUTHORS OF AGENCY

by

LAURA LEA BOURLAND

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

The following project examines the transformative power of literature against certain problems of the modern and postmodern experience as articulated by political theory. The primary concern is what theologian David Kyuman Kim calls “melancholic freedom,” a condition wherein the intelligibility of the self has been compromised by the decreases in personal agency brought on by a modern disconnect from moral and ethical sources. As such, this work is situated within the contemporary debate on the interrelatedness of identity and agency, and thus the work of Charles Taylor will figure prominently. Much of the work of twentieth and twenty-first theorists has centered around attempts to resolve the complications that have developed in the wake of our modern era, to explain the tradeoffs and contradictions. Kim suggests the need for “projects of regenerating agency,” which satisfy the following criteria: 1) provide suggestion of a religious imagination at work; 2) support a cultivation of the self; 3) demonstrate a search for moral identity and present opportunities for spiritual exercise; and 4) exhibit an aspiration toward a vocation of the self. It is my argument that engagement with the literary arts, either as a reader or writer, fulfills these conditions and presents an alternative site for

regenerating agency. This expansion of Kim's work opens theory to wider application and joins political philosophy and literature in a common project of expanding the discourse on identity and agency. I will demonstrate how the writing and lives of Mark Twain and Walker Percy meet Kim's criteria for such a project. Twain and Percy as authors of projects of regenerating agency advance the case that art has the capacity to be instructive and illuminating as part of our moral discourses in ways that theory cannot replicate. Also, a reading of literature motivated by the concerns of political theory—in this case the discussion on identity, agency, and their points of intersection—allows us to reinvigorate the critical appreciation of these two authors.

## DEDICATION

It is with the greatest affection and gratitude that I dedicate this dissertation to my family. Their unwavering patience and encouragement guide my every aspiration and achievement. Love like theirs is the surest and brightest bridge between this world and a better one.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### “NO LINE ON THE HORIZON”<sup>1</sup>

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#### I. Introduction: Three Corners to a Triangle

On the social networking website Twitter, users post short entries (140 characters or less) which are viewed by other users who subscribe to or “follow” the account of the original poster. The entries (regrettably named “tweets”) can then be commented upon or reposted (retweeted) on other users’ pages. One small segment of information—a personal update, greetings, meeting arrangements, recommendations, directions, photos, or news items—can therefore travel through cyberspace at unprecedented speed as it is posted to one user account and reposted to their followers, who repost to their followers, and so on. Despite the space restrictions, detailed conversations take place and are shared, repeated, transformed, joined by, and exposed to countless individuals across the globe. When complications from cancer treatment ended his ability to speak, film critic Roger

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<sup>1</sup> For the main title and each chapter title, respectively: Bono, *The Edge*, Adam Clayton, and Larry Mullen, Jr., *The Joshua Tree* (1987), *No Line on the Horizon* (2010), *The Joshua Tree* (1987), *The Unforgettable Fire* (1984), *No Line on the Horizon* (2010), *War* (1983, 2008), and *Achtung Baby* (1991), Island Records.

Ebert took his opinions to the internet in the form of a much celebrated personal blog (boasting over one hundred million views in twelve months) and an extremely active Twitter account with nearly 260,000 followers. In the summer of 2010, Ebert posted the news that the complete three-volume autobiography of Mark Twain would be released to the public for the first time on November 15, one century after the author's death. To Ebert's surprise and delight, that post was retweeted more times and by more followers than any of his previous entries (Ebert 2010).

Mark Twain's pen could be venomous, and few things provoked it more than when a person professed a religion without living by it. I mention this fact here because during the same period in 2010, in another corner of the internet, an article entitled "More Teens Becoming Fake Christians" appeared online. Kenda Creasy Dean, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, co-conducted a study on the religious literacy of 3,300 adolescents in the United States; she would later describe the three months of interviews as "one of the most depressing summers of her life" (Blake 2010). The research revealed that of the large majority (three out of four) of teenagers who affiliated with Christianity, "fewer than half practice their faith, only half deem it important, and most can't talk coherently about their beliefs" (ibid). Though many Christian denominations were represented in the sample, the results were remarkably constant: despite a claim of belief, most respondents could not express the essential tenets of their faith and approached the subject apathetically.

According to Dean, the teens exhibited the signs of a “moralistic therapeutic deism,” a soft impression of principles guided only by the idea that God “simply wanted them to feel good and do good” (ibid). Those who were able to articulate the details of their faith and religion shared the same attributes: a “personal story about God,” a profound connection to a “faith community,” and “a sense of purpose and a sense of hope about their future” (Blake 2010).

Two months after Roger Ebert and thousands of his readers excitedly traded back and forth their favorite quotations of Samuel Clemens, and barely a month after Dr. Dean publicized her findings on the state of faith among the American youth, religious studies professor John Lardas Modern posted an essay on *The Immanent Frame*, a blog on “secularism, religion, and the public sphere” sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. His topic was a newly published collection of critiques and commentaries on Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007). He opened by warning readers to “recognize, from the outset, the delicious perversity of inviting comments upon comments about the comments about Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, itself a commentary, magisterial in scope, about the inability of Anglo-Europeans to end a certain cycle of commentary about themselves, their religion, and their humanity” (2010). Though he may find the impulse a bit absurd, Modern nonetheless follows his caveat with two dense essays on new critical readings of Taylor’s book, and at nearly 900 pages, *A Secular Age* offers a wide and rich canvas of material for consideration.

A new autobiography from Mark Twain. A new study on religious belief. A new book examining a very recent book about things both old and new. Though these three corners of the internet might seem to be at odd angles to one another, they are actually three corners of a triangle. When reconstituted as larger concepts, they represent literature, modernity, and political theory, and it is the goal of this dissertation to show the lines connecting them. One can build more and hold more with a completed shape than with a loose grouping of individual points.

## **II. The Project of Purpose and the Purpose of this Project**

My argument begins here: current theoretical debates in political theory have a stake in the study of literature, and the predicaments of the former intervene with the subjects and content of the latter. In more detail, I will argue that the writing of Mark Twain and Walker Percy speaks to the philosophy of Charles Taylor, particularly to what theologian David Kyuman Kim calls Taylor's "project of regenerating agency." I will advance a reading of David Kyuman Kim's *Melancholic Freedom* (2006) by identifying literature as an alternative site in which Taylor's enterprise of self-refurbishment can take place. I chose to highlight Twain and Percy because their work demonstrates how literature can be instructive in moral inquiry and self-understanding and because they show how projects of regenerating agency exist and are accessible. Using an analysis of Twain and Percy to delve further into

the questions surrounding agency and identity also blurs disciplinary boundaries in the service of a more thorough and instructive investigation.

### *Which theoretical debates?*

The work of Charles Taylor, including *A Secular Age*, circles the intertwined concepts of agency and identity and how both have been problematized by conditions related to modernity. In the briefest terms, the modern era has witnessed some of the most profound advances in human liberty and knowledge, but in our progress we opened deficits in other arenas. We lost a sense of purpose, and with it our self-understanding. This critique and its counter-critiques are not new, but neither are they settled, hence our “inability to end a certain cycle of commentary.” And if, as Taylor suggests, “familiarity hides bewilderment,” the saliency of these issues is undimmed, even in 2010 (1991, 3).

### *What intervention?*

It is my argument that literature, and more specifically, an engagement with literature, can offer responses to particular debates in ways philosophy cannot, even to the degree of providing solutions to the dilemma articulated by critical theory.

The most recent edition of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (2006) recognizes the changing definition of what political theorists may treat as serious subjects for inquiry: “There has been a much needed explosion in what has come to be considered a legitimate text worthy of study in the moves to expand the canon...”

(Saxonhouse 2006, 855). Since the “reading of texts” as a “practice of political theory” continues to be regarded as a profitable (if not indispensable) branch of the disciplinary method, enlarging the scope of valuable material beyond obsolescent standards of genre is wise. The incorporation of literature, film, and other cultural objects into the study of political theory not only unveils new landscapes of potential critique, but also increases the accessibility of a discipline that routinely finds itself defending its relevance to the day-to-day world. The creation of the Politics and Literature Section of the American Political Science Association signals that this development in political theory has matured into academic convention, and rightly so, as it invites more thinkers with new questions into the fold. Mark Twain, as a giant of American literature, would probably be pleased to find his work involved in the democratization of an academic subfield, and no doubt that delight would sour into grumbles when he found the discipline claimed for itself the highfaluting rank of philosophy. After all, this is the same man who at the beginning of his masterpiece warned us: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (Twain 1885 [Graff and Phelan 1995], 27). Students and scholars have written dissertations, earned tenure, and retired wrinkled and gray without solving whether Twain’s preface to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a genuine warning to not complicate his story or a sly wink to

show he knows what riches wait ahead. It is a fool's errand, of course, considering Huck's first lines of the novel tell us that "that Mr. Mark Twain...he told the truth, mainly" (2).

Like Taylor, Twain tempts endlessly, and therefore the following project examines the transformative power of literature as a response to certain problems of the modern and postmodern experience. Following, Walker Percy, I will claim that an "alliance" between the reader, the text, and the author presents a powerful triad by which one can appraise questions of moral agency and identity.

### *What literature?*

The editors of the *Oxford Handbook* suggest that the upcoming generations of political theorists will need to formulate an "Aristotelian capacity for judgment" for deciding what literary materials warrant entry into the new canon and what do not.

In the hefty 834 page anthology *History of American Political Thought* (2003), the editors compiled a chronological account of significant contributions specific individuals have made to the nation's philosophical heritage. The forty-six chapters cover many of the usual suspects: political philosophers, the Founding Fathers, statesmen, presidents, Supreme Court justices, civic leaders, and academics. Tucked between essays on the Anti-Federalists, Henry Clay, John Rawls, and the like are entries on Mark Twain and Walker Percy.

My argument begins with the acknowledgment that Twain's comprehension and treatment of the complexities of American life and personal ethics are as instructive today as they were during his lifetime, and probably more so. His unique voice as an author and observer do not echo today as relics of Reconstruction and the Progressive Era, but as predictors of the crises and predicaments that haunt theorists and artists of this century. Twain sought solutions in his art, just as Percy did, just as a reader should when reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain, Percy wrote, presents the ideal example of how engaging these alliances with art can return profound relief (or in Percy's word, *rotation*) from contemporary theoretical and existential difficulties:

The best part of Huckleberry Finn begins when Huck escapes from his old man's shack and ends when he leaves the river for good at Phelps farm. ... A man who sets out adrift down the Mississippi has thrice over insured the integrity of his possibility without the least surrender of access to his actualization—there is always that which lies around the bend. ... he is on the Mississippi, which, during the entire journey, flows *between* states ... No one ever had the ambition of floating down the Hudson on a raft. (Percy 1956, 90)

Huck personifies the escape and self-realization possible when one leaves the ordinary and embarks on a journey. It is traveling from one type of being into another, moving from the stultifying to the stimulating: "...[it] is a remarkable coup, the snatching of freedom from under the very nose of the *en soi*. A Cairo businessman sits reading his paper, immured in everydayness, while not two

hundred yards away Huck slips by in the darkness” (Percy 1956, 90). One of Percy’s creations, the “man on the train” or alienated commuter, an individual made faceless and numb by wealth, health, and the science articles in *Reader’s Digest*, can (and should) read Huck’s tale, “rotate” himself onto the raft, and exit his own alienation in the best case, and at the very least recognize it. When the book is closed, the commute will shed the impenetrableness of routine and take on the aspect of the river. As Percy’s first true protagonist, Binx Bolling, states: “ To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something—not to be onto something is to be in despair” (*The Moviegoer* 1960, 11).

Given the sources of Percy’s take on alienation in mid-century—namely material abundance, disappointment in the explanatory limits of science, and ubiquitous technology, it follows that our unease has only increased as we have achieved greater gains in possessions and scientific knowledge. Richard Meyer, editor-in-chief of digital media for National Public Radio, takes this point even further in his book *Why We Hate Us: American Discontent in the New Millennium* (2008), which diagnoses the United States with an acute case of national self-loathing brought on by a superficial, vacuous culture and rampant “phoniness.” It seems that Wordsworth’s lament that “the world is too much with us” is weightier than ever before—the range of decisions and ethical frameworks that once defined our lives have transformed entirely. As Meyer argues, “Now, it means choosing your

breast size. It might mean choosing the way your nose looks. Almost every discrete element of our lives now can be looked at as a consumer choice. ... We accepted, naively, a bill of goods about how one forges an identity and happiness in life” (Meyer 2010). We are overcome with choices on every facet of life at the expense of cultivating critical distance and habits of moral and spiritual health.

The anxiety of Percy, the discontent of popular critics like Meyer—these are sentiments common to examinations of contemporary life and have been extensively examined by theory. However, major strands in social and political theory trace the roots of these conditions to causes beyond the chaos and clutter of modern life: the anxiety and discontent are endemic in the very ways we have realized our social and political structures and the conventions which give substance to the American interpretation of liberalism. Much of the work of twentieth and twenty-first century theorists has centered around attempts to resolve the complications that have developed in the wake of our modern era, to explain the tradeoffs and contradictions. As Alexander Nehamas explains:

... Modernity is essentially characterized by a belief in an overcoming of tradition as the result of radical progress in scientific, technological, economic, social, and perhaps even moral practices. But this commonplace does not stand alone. On the contrary, it is tempting to contrast this social, progressive, optimistic understanding of Modernity with another, much less positive though equally commonplace attitude toward it, perfectly encapsulated in the aesthetics and general philosophy of Modernism. In Modernism we find both the love of innovation and the rejection of the authority of tradition, but also, and at the same time, a sense that premodern civilization involved a

wholeness and unity that have now been irreparably fragmented.  
...Such an aesthetic and philosophical predicament—the sense that  
secure foundations are still required by can no longer be found—is not  
at all opposed to the social and political optimism of Modernity.  
(Nehamas 1996, 223-224)

We see unprecedented material comfort and crushing poverty, greater  
communicative abilities simultaneous with diminishing social communities, and the  
most vexing and nebulous of all: our personal and collective freedom, unrivaled in  
history, plagued by persistent unhappiness, isolation, and unease. Kim puts it this  
way: “Human freedom—which is to say, freedom of movement, speech, and  
thought—emerges through the application of critical thinking and reasoning that  
continues to render distinctions from the past, authority, and tradition. Modernity  
finds its pitch and strength in the clasping hands of discontent and freedom” (Kim  
2007, 3).

The discontent Kim describes follows not just the rendering of these  
distinctions, but the *renting* of our previous ways of understanding ourselves and  
the world away from our daily lives: “...one can label many of the great critiques of  
modernity as depictions of the discontents or melancholy of modernity by  
identifying ‘the costs’ of modern life, that is, what one feels obliged to *give up* or  
relinquish in exchange for the ‘advances’ of modernity” (66). Freedom is a result of  
our examining what came before, ethically and historically, but the spaces left in the  
critique’s wake may be hard to discern, uncomfortable, or empty. Kim calls this

problem “agency as melancholic freedom” (4). He argues that a sense of loss accompanies our freedom, and our agency (our autonomy and ability to act and move) is blunted and soured by the absence of the things we gave up on our way to greater liberty: the elements of “the past, authority, and tradition” that once provided meaning to our lives. Kim believes that in contemporary theory, the work of Charles Taylor represents serious correctives to the problem of loss and melancholic freedom because of his extensive discussions in support of reclaiming agency. In fact, he describes Taylor’s writing as a “project of regenerating agency” that makes “distinctive calls for human flourishing, self-cultivation, and self-transformation” (5-6). According to Kim, the core feature of project of regenerating agency is “the religious imagination,” which he describes as

[...] a faculty that buoys moral, political, psychic, and spiritual motivations to realize the value of one’s moral identity. The religious imagination is the faculty that envisions and enables a willingness to risk conceiving of life chances and possibilities for the self under conditions in which these chances and possibilities are neither fully evident nor apparent. (7)

It is my argument that, with the preceding outline from Kim providing the parameters, Twain and Percy were also involved with projects of regenerating agency, and their work engages the same dilemma articulated by Kim and Taylor. Projects of regenerating agency are transformative. They allow for progress past the melancholy of loss and toward a regained attachment to meaning. In addition to

demonstrating the ways in which Twain and Percy produced work profoundly useful in responding to questions of identity and ethics, I will show the differences in their conclusions. I will show that Twain ultimately finds frustration and despair at the end of his search for meaning, while Percy finds reasons for hope. The irony here is that Twain provided valuable lessons for the following generations of writers and readers, and thus his failures are our gains (which begs the question if they are then failures at all). When compared in this way, Percy exceeds Twain in the conclusions he reached for himself and his characters. However, Twain's work lives on as an archive of the struggles and triumphs tangled up in the search for identity, morality, and truth. By leaving that legacy for others (like Percy), Twain's contribution continues to loom large. Furthermore, I ultimately hope to establish some of the "identifying criteria" Saxonhouse says we need in bringing "non-political" writers into the full focus of our field (Oxford Handbook, 857).

### **III. Outline of Chapters**

My first task and the subject of the next chapter involves describing in greater detail the need for a project of regenerating agency. I examine the contemporary discourses on agency and identity and how they have been complicated by the forces of modernity. I then delve further into the particulars of Kim's project and his reading of Taylor by introducing the key concepts of the religious imagination and

self-cultivation. Finally, in Chapter Three, I present the case for literature as a site of regenerating agency through a discussion of several prominent political philosophers.

Chapters Four and Five examine the contributions of Mark Twain and Walker Percy to the conversations on agency and identity and how their writing confirms the position that the engagement of literature has a profound capacity to move individuals away from disorientation and abstraction toward a reconnection to a more robust and meaningful subjectivity.

In Chapter Six I extend the potentiality of literature's restorative character by turning to a less conventional genre than those represented by Twain and Percy. Using Benjamin's concept of "playthings in the margin of literature," I describe the development of digital literature, specifically that which is generated from a reinterpretation of an original work. As the production of texts moves into digital forms, the importance of derivative non-canonical literature presents a fertile plot for critical interrogation. The linguistic and social communities trading in this industry have carved out a substantial piece of real estate in the electronic world, and yet are still largely unexplored by the academic mainstream.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “WHERE THE STREETS HAVE NO NAME”: THE MORAL AGENT IN A MODERN LANDSCAPE

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#### I. Introduction

The notion of identity refers us to certain evaluations which are essential because they are the indispensable horizon or foundation out of which we reflect and evaluate as persons. To lose this horizon, or not to have found it, is indeed a terrifying experience of disaggregation and loss. This is why we can speak of an ‘identity-crisis’ when we have lost our grip on who we are. A self decides and acts out of certain fundamental evaluations.

— Charles Taylor,  
*Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*

In the preceding passage, Charles Taylor defines both the concept of an individual identity, or a realized notion of “self,” and the chief characteristic of the human self: the capacity for agency. The capacity for agency is then indivisible with the idea of selfhood: “In other terms, to be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers” (Taylor 1985, 3). So to be a self, one must have agency, but what is meant by agency? According to Taylor, agency is living against a

“background” of personal assessments which assign unqualified importance to certain things such as morals and actions; we formulate those assessments by *reflecting* on questions of moral import and *evaluating* potential answers. To operate as an agent or to use one’s agency, therefore, is to live a life based on those reflections and evaluations. Without such a framework, we lose our capacity to “determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done” (Taylor 1989, 27). Taylor also distinguishes between “weak” and “strong” evaluation and the weak and strong evaluator. It is strong evaluation, of course, that is the goal for the modern individual described above, as indicated by the integral relationship between distinctions of value, agency, and self-knowledge. Choosing priorities, actions, and decisions for the strong evaluator occurs at a “deep” level of scrutiny and reflection: “The strong evaluator envisages his alternatives through a richer language [than the weak evaluator]. The desirable is not only defined for him by what he desires, or what he desires plus a calculation of consequences; it is also defined by a qualitative characterization of desires as higher or lower, noble and base, and so on” (1985, 23).

The implications of lost, or even unstable, agency are enormous: our ability to prioritize along ethical principles and take types of moral action is diminished. But a directionless compass is only the beginning. Without agency as a component of our selfhood, perhaps our very inclination toward submitting to personally-assessed moral demands is at risk, and confusion becomes the antecedent to apathy. In other

words, the problem of “I do not know where I stand” potentially transforms into the alarming position of “I do not know where I stand, and I do not care that I do not know.” The road to this troubling spot follows the development of moral and political philosophy since the Enlightenment, with the ascendancy of naturalism (the belief that anything can be understood through the application of scientific practices) and deontological ethics (those focused on duty over notions of “the good”) paving the way for the loss of agency. Taylor describes how these currents shaped late modern theory in that they squeezed out other foundations of moral inquiry:

A satisfactory moral theory is generally thought to be one that defines some criterion or procedure which allows us to derive all and only the things we are obliged to do. So the major contenders in these stakes are utilitarianism, and different derivations of Kant’s theory, which are action-focused and offer answers exactly of this kind. What should I do? Well, work out what would produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Or work out what I could choose when I have treated other people’s prescriptions as if they were my own. Or think what norm would be agreed by all the people affected, if they could deliberate together in ideal conditions of unconstrained communication. We can see how moral theory so conceived doesn’t have much place for qualitative distinctions. (1989, 79)

In other words, while not entirely dismissing generations of prior moral philosophy (including Kant, Bentham, and Rawls as implied above), Taylor argues that the dominant framework of such theory is compromised by serious omissions. In this understanding, “Morality is narrowly concerned with what we ought to *do*, and not also with what is valuable in itself, or what we should admire or love” (84). Though

Taylor's portrayal of modern morality and its misplacement of priorities is persuasive in its passion, the problem immediately arises of how to determine what is admirable and worth loving, and even more disturbingly, how to apply that determination in a way that satisfies a widespread notion of the good. The presumption in Taylor's conception here is that values-in-themselves must have a universal quality that both declares their importance and legitimizes their enactment, especially at the institutional level.<sup>2</sup> This well-covered dilemma in Taylor's theory sometimes resurfaces in the work of his adherents, such as Kim's visualization of melancholic freedom described below, but I do not want to jump too far ahead.

Though the interlocked concepts of identity and agency and their consequences have long troubled philosophers and political theorists, a similar vocabulary is now infiltrating avenues of popular criticism. Even a superficial inspection into various media reveals commentators remarking on a society they see

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor's preferred framework for morality, those which comprise our "horizon" of social and personal ties, is taken up by Kymlicka, who argues that Taylor's first mistake is a misreading of the liberal emphasis on individual freedom: "According to Taylor, liberals teach us that the freedom to form and revise our projects is inherently valuable, something to be pursued *for its own sake*, an instruction that Taylor rightly rejects as empty. Instead, he says, there has to be some project that is worth pursuing, some task that is worth fulfilling. [...] Liberals aren't saying that we should have the freedom to select our projects for its own sake, because freedom is the most valuable thing in the world. [...] Our projects are the most important things in our lives, but since our lives have to be led from the inside, in accordance with our beliefs about value, we should have the freedom to form, revise, and act on our plans of life. Freedom of choice, then, isn't pursued for its own sake, but as a precondition for pursuing those projects and practices that *are* valued for their own sake." Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 48.

as morally disoriented and composed of hollow personalities. For many social critics, the experience of Western culture, particularly in the American context, has become a situation where “looking good and feeling good has replaced being good and doing good” (McAllister 2010). Though this sentiment is not a perfect parallel to Taylor’s “narrowly” conceived morality, it is an oft-repeated critique of contemporary society. Consider the perspective offered by National Public Radio’s Richard Meyer:

We hapless moderns have discovered that the much-hyped self can’t just create itself and get happy. Human beings are not amoebas. It is not at all clear to us anymore what an invented or discovered self is to be forged *from*. Our communities have been neutered, and our traditional, inherited moral, religious, and aesthetic sensibilities have been discredited. [...] We’re good at organizing self-centered lives, with faux chateaus, wealth, nostalgic kitchens, and sensitive therapy talk. We create what have come to be called ‘lifestyles.’ A lifestyle is thinner than a life. We hate not having something more. (2008, 67)

Meyer’s *Why We Hate Us: American Discontent in the New Millennium* directly references Taylor and his theory of the self—it is a journalist’s rant against the consequences of shallow identity and depreciated agency that Taylor outlined decades before. For Taylor, agency gives our identity meaning, and therefore a diminished agency (for counting it as completely lost may be going too far) is mirrored in a personal identity that is diluted, confused, or obscure. We cannot know who we are as individuals unless we know how we might respond to situations which challenge our values.

Tirades against the state of society and persons living within are well familiar and necessary. Moreover they demand a response—answers at least, and solutions at best. According to David Kyuman Kim, Taylor not only names the problem, but also provides a corrective in his work by the creation of what Kim calls a project of regenerating agency. This corrective will be of central focus to this dissertation, as it is my argument that Kim’s concept (heavily based in and inspired by Taylor) is theoretically mobile: projects of regenerating agency can be located in sources beyond political and moral philosophy. Without stripping Kim’s formula of its genealogy or particulars, I will show how literature is also a potentially powerful starting-point for the reconnection and renewal of agency and identity. The purpose of this chapter then is to articulate further the theoretical terrain of agency and identity and the factors which have contributed to their contemporary complexity.

**First**, I examine the terms which provide the groundwork for Kim’s project: *melancholic freedom* and *the religious imagination*. These ideas expound on Taylor’s theory of agency and how he has provided an antidote of sorts to the predicament or “identity-crisis” of our modernity. They also provide the conceptual scaffolding for the importation of my argument that literature has a comparable (if not superior) role to theory in regenerating agency and reviving meaningful self-identity.

**Second**, I place the work of Kim and Taylor (and, by extension, the subject of this project) against the larger discourses defining modernity. The context of

modernity is integral to understanding how and why the intersections between agency and individual identity have occupied such a sizeable and varied share of theoretical discussion in the past half-century. Critiques of modernity demonstrate why projects such as Taylor's are necessary, and I describe in greater detail how Kim's use of Taylor gestures toward a rehabilitated capacity and desire to reflect and evaluate.

**Third**, I explain how literature, or more specifically, an engagement with literature, matches the requirements attached to a project of regenerating agency. I briefly revisit the dispute on whether literature can be morally instructive (and whether it should be) and discuss how a reading of literature propelled by the debates in political theory enriches the former and demystifies the latter. Creating, receiving, or interacting with the literary arts can facilitate the kind of self-awareness, moral reflection, and conditions for evaluation needed for the recovery of agency.

## II. Kim's Melancholic Freedom

Like Taylor, Kim understands agency to be a fundamental element to fully realized individual humanness. Also like Taylor, Kim believes agency to be indissoluble from personal identity and its various compositional strands, such as the moral, social, or political elements of our selfhood. However, Kim slightly shifts his attention to the language of melancholy as expressive of the condition of persons living in the Western world of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries. This is a theme Taylor will pick up later in *The Secular Age* (2007). The inclusion of melancholy—and more explicitly “a condition in which the self is unable to mourn” for something it has lost—is crucial because melancholy has become a defining aspect of our pursuit and enactment of freedom (Kim 2007, 5). To repeat Kim: “Humanity ‘discovered’ its freedom in modernity, but it also lost much in the bargain. Human freedom—which is to say, freedom of movement, speech, and thought—emerges through the application of critical thinking and reasoning that continues to render distinctions from the past, authority, and tradition” (3). While we have thrown off the blinders and tack that once prevented us from exercising the freedom described above, we have also severed or weakened the web of categorical values that tied our decisions and actions to a meaningful identity. What is left is an ironic equation where freedom is gained in exchange for personal loss: loss of certainty, loss of moral parameters, loss of a sense of belonging, and a loss of self.

“To be an agent in our times,” Kim argues, “is to live a life of melancholic freedom” (4). However, it is worth noting that the imprecise characterization of these losses as nebulous and existential could potentially allow them to be successfully annexed and filled by prior-held distinctions of value that are problematic at best, and discredited at worst. For instance, notions of racial supremacy, nationalism, and class superiority often boast an unqualified importance and virtuous foundation, but are these the kinds of moral tethers that should be recovered? Could melancholic freedom be appropriated to describe the discontent of formerly imperialistic, privileged white men who are no longer in power? If so, is the term a suitable descriptor for the whole of Western society when so many have yet to realize the freedom promised by modernity and liberalism? In the following chapters, I describe how both Mark Twain and Walker Percy addressed very similar concerns in their writing. For now, however, let us turn a closer eye on Kim’s key language and the context from which it was devised. With those points established, the details making up a project of regenerating agency can be presented in a setting of theoretical clarity.

### *The Religious Imagination: Vocation and the Sublime*

If the modern individual operates in a condition of melancholic freedom—enjoying the liberties of the age while suffering the losses of once-familiar signposts (such as directives and mores derived from communal and religious sources)—how

does he recover himself in the junction where freedom joins with an emphasis on categories of value? Where agency is the mechanism by which identity sustains itself and in turn gives agency meaning? How, in other words, can a self return to a position of action and thought against Taylor's background of evaluation?

According to Kim, the starting point for such a journey is in the religious imagination: "...at the core of contemporary quests for agency lie dimensions of the religious and spiritual life, the heart of which is to transcend circumstances and conditions of constraint and limitation of varying kinds" (4). This atmosphere of "constraint and limitation," to stay with the journey metaphor, is the increasingly featureless road of modern life: we live in the presence of countless twists and forks, their destinations and pathways often contradictory and perplexing, but we have no mile-markers. In freeing ourselves to go further, we erased most of the map. But how will a metaphysical orientation put us back on track? As Meyer complained earlier, "It is not at all clear to us anymore what an invented or discovered self is to be forged *from*," and without knowing who we are, how will we know where we are going, or better still, where we *should* be going? At this point Kim ascribes to the religious imagination a momentous significance:

...the religious imagination engenders new modes of cultural, social, psychological, and political possibilities [...it is] a faculty that buoys moral, political, psychic, and spiritual motivations to realize the values of one's moral identity [...] the faculty that envisions and enables a willingness to risk conceiving of life chances and possibilities for the self under conditions in which these chances and possibilities are neither fully evident nor apparent (7).

By using the language of a metaphysical quality, one that is presently individualized and personal, Kim assigns the first step on the road away from melancholic freedom to the befuddled modern self. We must make the first move in our own recovery. To do so, we need to understand recovery as more than increased liberties in a social or political context, more than greater choice in consumption or movement, and more than a contented lifestyle. Our need is too dire, our identities too threadbare to require anything less than a vocation of the self, a calling to be and to do something of a higher order: "Vocation is the tie that binds identity and agency, which is to say vocation speaks to a care of the self that has experienced disempowering forces and life conditions, as well as a lost sense of purpose and meaning" (8).<sup>3</sup>

By its very definition a vocation carries a heavy commitment on the part of the individual to fulfill it. For Kant, the "original vocation of human nature" was to

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<sup>3</sup> On the meaning of vocation, Oscar Wilde's laconic observation regarding Christ is illuminating: "...who knew better than he that it is vocation not volition that determines us, and that one cannot gather grapes of thorns or figs from thistles?" *De Profundis*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 59.

“proceed along the path of enlightenment,” and by this he meant for persons living in a civil society to deliberate without restraint and to think for themselves while simultaneously submitting to the laws laid down by a (hopefully) just and benevolent government (Kant [1784] 2006, 20). To act in such a way that would prohibit such free-thinking (if one generation committed a following generation to an oath against literacy, for instance) would spoil the integrity of all citizens (Owen 1994, 9). We also have Weber’s famous treatment of vocation, one that, like Kant’s emphasis on a principled citizenry, requires honesty at the center of one’s actions—honesty in “passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion” ([1918] 1990, 115). In more detail, this dedication “consists of a passionate devotion to one’s ultimate values, a recognition of the demands of the day in one’s vocation, and the sense of distance required to mediate between one’s ultimate values and these demands” (Owen 1994, 129). One can see why Weber described both science and politics as vocations: the truth claims of science compel scientists to practice their occupation with the utmost seriousness, just as the incredible stakes and temptations surrounding a life in politics necessitates a politician be an individual of particular character. And while Weber provides us with a rich explanation for the meaning of vocation, he also contributes significantly to the discourse surrounding modernity’s weaknesses. On one hand he extols the scientist’s fidelity to reason and method, and on the other he exposes the failure of science to validate its own worth: “Science ...

presupposes that what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is 'worth being known'. In this obviously are contained all our problems. For this presupposition cannot be contained by scientific means" (Weber [1918] 2004, 18). It seems that even the passionate solemnity one expresses in service to a true vocation cannot overcome the obstacles of trying to diagram the universe (science) or govern imperfect people perfectly (politics).

Weber's discussions on science and politics, and in particular his descriptions of their vocational character and the limitations of their power as tools for societal progress, will resurface again in the literature of Mark Twain and Walker Percy. The three share concerns about investing too much faith in mechanisms or institutions that are inevitably complicated or corrupted by human foibles. After all, Mark Twain's words were never far separated from the political issues of his day, and he knew very well that he was a gadfly with a powerful pen. And while he considered himself to be a part of public discourse, a "statesman without salary," as he once put it, he also considered himself ill-suited to holding office (Budd 1962, xxi). Similarly, Walker Percy began his professional career as a medical doctor, but he soon found the science of the human body inadequate to confront the elusive existential maladies that clung to him and others as the most obdurate kind of virus. Both men viewed writing as their own best means—their ultimate vocation—to examine what politicians and scientists could not justify or explain regarding human behavior.

Because both Mark Twain and Walker Percy wrote commercially and for a public audience, and because both also considered their vocation to include active dialogue with other writers and non-writers alike, I propose that writing as a vocation to also include reading. As mentioned earlier, it is an *engagement* with literature that represents the best circumstance for regenerating agency, and engagement implies both creating and receiving text. Moreover, it is not adequate to refer only to their writing, either to the activity or the professional product. A more appropriate account is offered by considering their *writing lives*, and by that I mean the many aspects of their ordinary days, their personalities, beliefs, struggles, behaviors, and uncertainties either directly or indirectly expressed in their fiction and non-fiction. In other words, putting pen to paper was incredibly important, even vital to these men—a vocation in the truest sense.

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Because the search for identity and agency is given the priority of a vocation, nothing less than the religious imagination is required as a means to embark. A religious imagination is not necessarily an adherence to or seeking out of any specific theistic tradition, rather it is simply a readiness to investigate and encounter the sublime. Kant provides a famous definition of the sublime by comparing it to one's confrontation with beauty: "The sublime *moves*, the beautiful *charms*" (Kant [1764] 2004, 47). He characterizes a sublime feeling as a fragile emotion capable of

inspiring joy, nobility, dread, or sadness. Moreover, one must be open to receive such an experience, “because it presupposes a sensitivity of the soul, so to speak, which makes the soul fitted for virtuous impulses” (46). Kant’s concept of the sublime joins aesthetics and the human (or, in his myopic view, the white European human) ability to recognize and receive moments of wonder and transmute those emotions to wisdom.<sup>4</sup> George Kateb offers a slightly more accessible, comprehensive definition of the sublime as that which “... refers to aspects of artworks, nature, and human social phenomena as the unbounded or boundless; the indefinite, indeterminate, or infinite; the transgressive; the overwhelming or overpowering; excess or extravagance; the massive, the massively ruinous; the oceanic; the abyssal; the overweening or overreaching; the awe-inspiring, wondrous, astonishing, or unexpectedly mysterious; and the uncanny” (2000, 17). However, the idea might be best represented as it unfolds in real time, as it were, from the recollections in Rousseau’s autobiographical *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*:

As evening approached, I came down from the heights of the island, and I liked then to go and sit on the shingle in some secluded spot by the edge of the lake; there the noise of the waves and the movement of the water, taking hold of my senses and driving all other agitation from my soul, would plunge it into a delicious reveries in which night often

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<sup>4</sup> Definitions of the sublime of course precede Kant (Burke being a prominent example), and the idea has been reformulated since by thinkers such as Hegel, Adorno, and Lyotard. For a recent account on the ambiguity of the sublime as a philosophical concept, see Jerome Carroll, “The Limits of the Sublime, the Sublime of Limits: Hermeneutics as a Critique of the Postmodern Sublime,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 171-181.

stole upon me unawares. The ebb and flow of the water, its continuous yet undulating noise, kept lapping against my ears and my eyes, taking the place of all the inward movements which my reverie had calmed within me, and it was enough to make me pleasurable aware of my existence, without troubling myself with thought. From time to time some brief and insubstantial reflection arose concerning the instability of the things of this world, whose image I saw in the surface of the water, but soon these fragile impressions gave way before the unchanging and ceaseless movement which lulled me and without any active effort on my part occupied me so completely that even when time and the habitual signal called me home I could hardly bring myself to go. (Rousseau [1782] 2004, 87)

In this piece, Rousseau records many of the elements customarily associated with the sublime: introspection, a communion with the natural world, and a moment of transcendence where his surroundings and receptive temperament were “taking hold of my senses and driving all other agitation from my soul” (87). Interestingly, after his life of writing on both the perils and necessities one finds in a social life, Rousseau describes this state as the one true location of happiness, a place where one can be “self-sufficient like God” (89). Essential to the Rousseauian sublime, therefore, is the condition of physical solitude, underscoring the individualized nature of such encounters.

Even if caution prevents the explicit application of Kim to Rousseau, it nevertheless appears that the religious imagination is just around the corner from Rousseau’s thought. This confluence of ideas is unsurprising, as Rousseau anticipated much of what theorists are still puzzling over today, especially regarding critiques of modernity. As David Gauthier writes, “Rousseau is perhaps the first to

diagnose a malaise at the core of the sense of self in civil society, and in this way, however much he may misunderstand some of our circumstances, he may claim to be the first to understand *us*" (2006, 25).

Returning to the previous point, so far it has been demonstrated that through a dedicated vocation of the self, the religious imagination can connect us to the sublime. Yet we have still not completed the circuit and answered the problems of lost identity and impaired agency. Kim explains how we move from mystification and gloominess back to a place of self-knowledge and, hopefully, a more solid foundation of action and decision-making: "Agency requires adjudicating among different goods not simply on the basis of rational criteria, but through a complex set of conjectures that involve the imagination, which is to say, the ability to see what kind of life follows from adopting one moral vision rather than another" (Kim 2007, 32). In other words, the religious imagination allows us to visualize Taylor's critical plateau where existence is "defined by distinctions of worth," and by so visualizing, we may make evaluations to reclaim our agency *and* our sense of who we are. The sublime is merely a shorthand way of describing the gateway to that arena, to the ontological headspace that will "reawaken us to our orientation and connection to moral sources" (Kim 2007, 18). As we will see, for Taylor, it is no less than an epiphany that is required, but such is the challenge presented by our melancholic freedom.

### *Aspiration as Method*

Kim conceptualizes Taylor's work on modernity, agency, secularism, and the self as an interrogation into how modernity changed our ethical and spiritual horizons, and what actions and theoretical orientations are viable as routes toward overcoming our conditions of uncertainty, purposelessness, and disenchantment. In other words, Taylor's work reaches toward identifying the path to agency and the heuristic tools needed to redraw the map of the self. There is, however, an important point to make regarding Kim's exegesis of Taylor and his own project: though his examination of Taylor is scrupulous, Kim explains that his use of Taylor (and in particular, *Sources of the Self*) is less an unpacking of explicit methods and theories aimed at curing the modern malaise, though such analysis is crucial. Instead, Kim emphasizes that Taylor's work represents the best *tone* in which to address questions of identity and agency. Tone in this case could be synonymous with attitude, orientation, or even a methodology in the most general sense. While the content of Taylor's philosophy retains its cogency, it is his larger approach that has inspired Kim:

[...]the religious and spiritual significance of Taylor's [...] projects of regenerating agency is not to be found in the specific ends and aims [...] but rather in the *qualities of aspiration and striving* identif[ied] with melancholic freedom. These qualities signify a desire for transcendence, though not necessarily in the metaphysical sense of Taylor's moral sources [...] Instead, this desire is more fully located in the immanent experience of yearning to move beyond the conditions of

life as they currently affect us. This yearning and aspiration is tied to the work of the religious imagination. (144)

While Taylor's arguments and subjects are not diminished, it is his approach, the state of mind evidenced in the work, the *reasoning* behind the pursuit of it, that Kim is taking as the primary strength in Taylor's project of regenerating agency and as illustrative of melancholic freedom. This distinction is key for two reasons. First, it returns us to a question worth revisiting when any writer is under the scope: why was this work written? What questions are relevant to this text and its purpose? For answers we zoom out and away from the particulars and judge the combined works on identity, the self, and agency as a whole. We find that Taylor's orientation to his theory is as one who is looking to "instill the aspiration to become a more genuine self." His religious imagination—the source of "creative yet critical reflection of our states of being"—is what unlocks the details of his arguments (145).

The second reason Kim's separation of Taylor's aspiration from his content is important is because the contrast underlines my assertion for the translatability of the melancholic freedom framework and its attendant elements to genres outside political philosophy. To engage literature is to find a potential site for regenerating agency. But rather than simply exporting one theoretical structure for use beyond its original context, my project also supports the joining of fields. Approaching literature as a location for regenerating agency supplies a bridge between literature and political theory; with the two disciplines overlapping, both are illuminated.

Again, the consideration of Taylor's work on one level and his objectives on another is not to avoid or dismiss the former as immaterial to replicating a project of regenerating agency in another venue. On the contrary, identifying the philosophical inspirations behind a text such as *Sources of the Self* brings into greater relief the precise routes taken to satisfy the motivating question, in this case, how to live a meaningful and ethical life in a world where modernity has cost us as much as it has delivered. Kim's reading of Taylor, his conceptualization of Taylor's project as borne out of melancholic freedom and in pursuit of regained agency, creates for readers a resource that is twofold: it is a way to comprehend Taylor's work as a product of the predicament of modernity, and it is a paradigm of an effective approach for the recovery of hope and fully realized humanness.

With the over-arching theme of Kim's treatment of Taylor thus described, it is now time to consider the details. Despite Kim's statement that the "specific ends and aims" of Taylor's writings are not at the heart of their "religious and spiritual significance," these are the points which give substance to Taylor's "striving" for a transcendent answer to the challenges of modern life. First, however, in order to understand Kim's emphasis on this desire and how it characterizes a project as one of regenerating agency, we must now look to how such a project is defined.

### III. Theorizing a Way Forward

Those masterful images because complete  
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

— W.B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1939)

The language of Yeats' poem evokes images of detritus and filth (however beautifully described), and his words present a mental world that parallels that of the modern self as expressed in the preceding pages. It is a space within the self that is simultaneously cluttered and empty: overcrowded with the distractions and superficialities of daily life though lacking in any system of prioritization or valuation. However, one could read Yeats' verse as a sketch of the self *in the presence of* the kinds of elemental distinctions sought for by theorists looking to salvage some of the gains of moral inquiry lost in the transition to the modernity of the past three or so centuries. Taken this way, the language of rubbish, untidiness, and things dismissed or forgotten is allegorical for what remains after rigorous, critical decision-making over what is worthy (in terms of life-pursuits or choices) and what is not. In other words, metaphysical house-cleaning can be a very messy business indeed. Nevertheless, Yeats sees the chaotic, potentially hazardous, bottom-level task of making sense of our internal "mounds of refuse" as a sanctifying process,

one that will end in the “masterful images” of a “pure mind.” However, a connection must exist between the deep disorder of our most trying ethical struggles and our emergence into clarity and principled purpose. Yeats names that connection from one form of life to another a ladder, but we might interpret that ladder as agency. Recalling Taylor’s conception of agency and its importance as a necessary component of full humanness, as well as Kim’s emphasis on the need for a vocation of the self, the ladder-as-agency metaphor is appropriate. It represents an active “engagement of the will” in the search for “high-order values that constitute meaningful and morally articulate forms of life” (57-58). We climb the upper rungs to more rarified, more *strongly evaluated* levels of action and thought. Like a proper modern, Yeats is also grieving for a perceived loss, and in this case it is his ability to create profound art, a facility he enacted as the intertwining of his aesthetic and moral sensibilities. The final lines of the poem constitute a vital (though melancholy) option for relieving his bereavement: “Now that my ladder’s gone / I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.” In order to remaster the fraying ends of selfhood back into a life centered on integrity, the individual must participate in significant self-examination. He or she must start “in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” where uncertainties rule, questions wait to be answered, and moral truisms are obscured by either indifference or bewilderment. One must engage in a project of regenerating agency.

A project of regenerating agency is the curative outgrowth of Kim's idea of "the late modern/postmodern condition of agency as melancholic freedom" (55). In other words, such a project is necessary because of the losses associated with our modernity; one might call such losses the missing signposts that once helped guide our way through ethical confusion and the obscurities of our own identities. However, given the vastness and variety of the intellectual, social, and political movements associated with a term as omnipresent as modernity, some specificity is in order to better understand the predicament under study by Kim and his predecessors. Such terminology is further complicated by the smaller, specialized areas which are categorized as "modernist" or a product of "modernism." For instance, the literary movement of modernism (of which Yeats was an eminent participant) is heavily associated with the generations which came of age around World War I. The same distinction can be made between "postmodernism" and "postmodernity."<sup>5</sup>

The foundations of what is historically known as the modern era took shape in the seventeenth century with the ascendancy of the nation-state and the concept of the sovereign individual. The philosophical and political thought of modernity is given identifiable form by the Enlightenment. Its defining precepts, the "emphasis

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<sup>5</sup> For an extended discussion on the differentiation, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996).

of experience and reason, mistrust in religion and traditional authority, and a gradual emergence of the ideals of liberal, secular, democratic societies,” are the taproots of contemporary theoretical debates (Blackburn 2008, 115). Modernity is often synonymous with the Enlightenment and its legacy, and is therefore a blanket term encapsulating both the achievements and failures of the last four and a half centuries. But is this then the modernity confronted in projects of regenerating agency? Not exactly, since even the most strident critics of modernity would face a daunting task were they to attempt a reconsideration of the entire era. Nor can we then offhandedly accept a connotation which makes modernity and its combined movements the corrupting force behind all Western society’s ills—to do so overwhelms the incredible advances realized during this period. We can, however, isolate particular threads identifiable with modernity and follow their development into the dilemmas which occupy contemporary political theory, and more explicitly, the concerns of thinkers such as Taylor.

### *Modern Times*

Social and political theorists have suggested that one of the gravest losses suffered by Westerners living now and in the last century is the intelligible location of moral judgments. What makes this condition exceptional to our experience is its pervasiveness. Questions of objective truth, the interplay of reason and emotions, and the best foundations for agency have always fueled the ruminations of

philosophical and pious minds, but today those concerns appear on any given street corner or newscast. The articulations vary in depth and precision, but an underlying mood of unease and confusion over moral priorities binds them together. These concerns join the more famous diagnoses from past and present theorists.

Tocqueville observed the “cloud habitually hung” over the heads of the most prosperous American citizens, a persistent anxiety that their material accumulations were either insufficient or not acquired by the shortest route, and the pleasure of such things was therefore hollow and transient (1835, 536). Weber wrote of the “disenchantment” characterizing mankind’s comprehension of himself, the world, and his relationship to social structures (Wolin 2004, 379). Herbert Marcusé and his colleagues in the Freudian Left attacked the overwhelming forces of technological capitalism as oppressive, depersonalizing, and perhaps worst of all, utterly embedded in acceptable, everyday cultural practices.<sup>6</sup> Taylor described the

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<sup>6</sup> Marcuse’s indictments cover every level of society: “Can one really distinguish between the mass media as instruments of information and entertainment, and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination? Between the automobile as nuisance and convenience? Between the horrors and the comforts of functional architecture? Between the work for national defense and corporate gain? Between the private pleasure and the commercial and political utility involved in increasing the birthrate? We are again confronted with one of the most vexing aspects of advanced industrial civilization: the rational character of its irrationality. ... The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced” (1964, 8 – 9). For a discussion on the contrasts between Marcuse and Adorno (both members of the Frankfurt School along with Horkheimer and Benjamin) relative to critiques on modernity, see Espen Hammer, “Marcuse’s Critical Theory of Modernity,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 9 (2008): 1071-1093.

“malaises,” of modernity, the same symptoms Kim identifies as constitutive of melancholic freedom. To Taylor’s reckoning: “The first is fear about what we might call a loss of meaning, the fading of moral horizons. The second concerns the eclipse of ends, in face of rampant instrumental reason. And the third is about a loss of freedom” (Taylor 1991, 10). The loss of freedom Taylor refers to in this case follows Tocqueville’s warnings against “soft” despotism, an erosion of democratic practices brought on by individuals abdicating their civic rights and duties in favor of personal pursuits and comforts. The “demotivating” forces of a pervasive and impersonal state eventually leave citizens with little or no influence (Tocqueville 1835, 9-10). Percy would also portray modernity as a kind of malaise, the foremost feature of which is man’s alienation from his community and himself. Of course, Mark Twain, always reliable to cut through to the core of an issue, condensed these judgments (and others) in his account of humanity.

Above is merely a small sample of the critiques of modernity, and they cover perspectives from multiple generations, from the United States to continental Europe and back. We see similar broad themes such as disaffection, moral confusion or abdication, and anxiety repeat and emerge from a assortment of causes, from the economic to the social. Contributory factors include secularization, the compartmentalization and separation of public and private life, a disintegration of interpersonal ties, and even material abundance. The constant among these critiques

is the lack of peace associated with individual self-identity, and as Taylor suggests, such discontent, a “terrifying experience of disaggregation and loss,” is evidence of a disconnect between moral sources and self-comprehension—a disconnect which has left the person without that which gives his or her beliefs, choices, and actions significance. Critics of modernity might be skeptical over the prospect of finding a person of the United States or Western Europe who is strongly assured of their values, unambiguous on the sources of those values, and expressive as to how those values and their sources contribute to the substance of their identity. To reiterate, identity and agency are deeply intertwined. The condition referred to here does not, of course, apply to every person nor to every person to the same degree. Nor do examinations of modernity and the major threads of criticism against it fail to address individuals and communities having fervently expressed value distinctions, particularly those of fundamentalist religious groups. The thrust behind Taylor’s diagnosis is that it appears to be more the norm for the majority than not.

The diminishing of agency and subsequent breakdown of identity can be traced back to Taylor’s construction of identity: “The notion of identity refers us to certain evaluations which are essential because they are the indispensable horizon or foundation out of which we reflect and evaluate as persons” (1985, 35). The background of judgments is a prerequisite to an unimpaired and properly understood self-identity. The human being, however, is not a computer in need of

programming or an installed list of operating parameters. What we require, what facilitates our capacity for agency and the thickening of our identities is the ability and desire to *reflect* and *evaluate*. These two faculties have suffered the most compromise and degeneration under the changes wrought by modernity. A person who cannot actively reflect on moral claims—both their own and those presented to them—and evaluate those claims for the purposes of ranking some as superior to others, falls into the malaise described by Taylor. This state is what Kim calls melancholic freedom: living in the presence of the liberties ushered in with modernity while simultaneously experiencing a shortfall in the convictions once produced by reflection and evaluation.

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To better understand the cast of modernity particular to this project and its effect on Twain and Percy, it is necessary to trace the foundations of modernity's manifestation in the United States. Studying modernity requires looking into the past and examining layer after layer of societal transformation. In this case, the questions become a) what developments led to the decreasing power and frequency of reflection and evaluation as means of discovering personal moral horizons; and b) how such forces also enfeebled existing value claims, beliefs, and conventions, resulting in diminished or constrained agency and correspondingly deficient and

abstract self-identities. The starting point for approaching these inquiries in the American context is Locke.

Following the Hobbesian dictate that humans are first subject to their physical instincts and passions, Locke saw the contractually derived civil state as a construct which could govern mankind in the absence of a “rational ethic” shared by all (Wolin 2004, 302). Ethical judgments did not reach far beyond the satisfaction of one’s appetites or the efficacy in which one achieved their desires, just as reason was less a device for realizing objectivity than it was an instrumental approach toward personal acquisition. However, moral horizons could still be found in religion:

Despite the inroads of secularism and skepticism the Western political tradition had for several centuries taken for granted the viability of what may be called a ‘common Christian conscience.’ Both in theory and in practice the tradition had assumed the continuing presence of a common outlook and moral response among the members of society. In addition, that men shared a common element of conscience meant that they could ‘know’ and understand each other and communicate by accepted moral signs. (302)

Locke rejected this idea of a collective moral attitude despite its origin in a theology to which he subscribed. He described the conscience as “nothing else but our own opinion or judgment of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions,” and this subjectivity left the conscience a poor source for the determination of public goods.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> From John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.C. Fraser, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 1:2:8, as quoted in *Politics and Vision* by Sheldon Wolin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 302. In addition to the final list of collected references, I am including throughout the dissertation bibliographic notes for canonical texts in

For Locke, communal conscience (represented primarily by the church body) was more or less a myth, and individual conscience little more than a reflection of fluctuating personal assessments. However, these assessments were still informed by religion, even though Locke nevertheless found no evidence of a single, coherent voice representative of the collective.

Furthermore, the notion of a private conscience formed chiefly as a mode of resistance against social mores out of line with individual convictions: one could claim fidelity to their internally-held principles as a justification for holding beliefs outside community standards (303). The reference here is to the case of a majority versus a minority. For example, a Calvinist announced his trust in predestination and defended his unpopular belief as based in personal, unassailable knowledge of God's favor for a chosen few (this knowledge, of course, typically formed within the structures of religion). Yet as the absolutism tied to certain church doctrine relaxed, the idea of a private conscience as a shield against majority opinion lost futility. As Wolin suggests, "...conscience and its attributes could be detached from the inner life and used to protect what a growingly secular society most treasured; namely, wealth, status, or more briefly, 'interests'" (ibid). What was once conceived as the conscience—an individual's personal system of ethical beliefs—transformed as tolerance between groups increased: the greater coalescence among sets of norms,

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political theory. These notes should clarify the use of major writers (like Locke) who authored more than one significant text.

the less discord between various factions. Imagine Protestant sects once deeply divided over select scriptural interpretations gradually harmonizing as adherence to tradition-specific canon eased, or as the gravity attached to congregational distinctions diminished. In other words, there was less need for an individual to *rely* on his or her conscience in the articulation and defense of moral claims. Consider again our Calvinist from above, an outsider in a town of Methodists, challenging their dismissal of his assured status and boldly declaring “You may choose the sermon, but you cannot alter my conscience.” If they are less dismissive and he less assured, there is less need for him to assert his individuality. The scenario is facetious, of course, but the point remains: religious differences smoothed out and former denominational opponents turned toward new priorities, namely the acquisition of resources and property, and in this pursuit persons of every faith proved remarkably single-minded.

The common Christian conscience represented by the church was dismantled, and a private conscience transformed into a private interest driven by economic pursuit—and that self-interest was not only the chief motivator in human affairs, but also individualized to an extreme point. A person’s self-interest could only be known to himself with no exceptions or room for interpretation, and therefore “interest” was impossible to transfer from one to another and could never be introduced to an individual by an outside force. These features were the same terms

Locke used to previously describe his concept of the conscience, and thus his writing illuminates a shift in self-understanding during the seventeenth-century (304). Here we see the themes of modernity taking hold: a move from consensus to individuality, toleration as evidence of both strengthening mutual respect between groups and a decline in intimacy between the self and traditional moral sources. Mankind would now be comprehended solely by the observable actions committed on behalf of his personal interest rather than through communally-held ideas (membership in a congregation) or internally-constructed beliefs (expressions of conscience, religious or otherwise). We might characterize this movement as the long transition from piety to privacy. This change, so far as one is willing to accept it, would have ramifications for the “interior life of the individual”:

The epitaph for conscience was stated by Bentham in his usual bald way when he said it was a ‘thing of fictitious existence.’ And Bentham also made it abundantly clear that men no longer had any real incentive to that self-knowledge which leads to examination of the inner life. ... At the same time, since every act of will and of the intellect was reducible to interest, there remained nothing to examine internally: man’s soul had been factored out. (305 – 306)

Before this change, *reflection* was a fact of one’s life—reflections composed of questions, challenges, and parameters created by religion and the community. The downgrading of reflection from an essential key to self-understanding to an afterthought (if that) would later complicate the access to and intelligibility of distinctions of value. At the same time, touchstones such as the church were also

undergoing conversions that would diminish their influence. As Quentin Skinner suggests, "By the time we come to Rousseau, the process by which our moral values became disengaged from external standards is more or less complete" (1994, 39).

This is a theme repeated in much of Twain's work: his writing contains many instances of both individuals and entire communities operating under false pretenses. They present a devotion to public service (politicians) or solemn piety (everyone else) when their actions are actually determined entirely by the most worldly and concerted self-interest. In fact, Twain found that often the only external standard which held any sway was reputation, a defect of "civilized" society also condemned by Rousseau.

If we follow Locke through this transformation, we eventually arrive at his theory of property. The combining of a person's labor with property creates a unique acquisitive identity, including specific rights, for the individual involved (306). The legitimization of private property (and the subsequent attacks on that legitimacy) is not, however, the key point in this discussion. Instead, what is significant here is the metamorphosis of that "interior life" and the changes modernity brought to the methods, priorities, and importance of self-knowledge and what Taylor would call strong evaluation. As Skinner remarks above, *disengagement* was a distinguishing element of the Enlightenment, and Taylor identifies it as an orientation to the world that is still with us:

To take everyday instances, when we see something surprising, or something which disconcerts us, or which we can't quite see, we normally react by setting ourselves to look more closely; we alter our stance, perhaps rub our eyes, concentrate, and the like. Rather than disengaging, we throw ourselves more fully into the experience, as it were. There is a kind of search which involves being "all there", being more attentively 'in' our experience. A more important context is the one in which we try to get clearer on what we feel about some person or event. This involves reflexivity and self-awareness, but precisely not of the disengaging kind. (1989, 163)

Taylor hopes to show that a disconnect from such "reflexivity and self-awareness," despite its ascendancy in Locke's age and persistence today, not only has serious consequences for how we develop moral agency, but should also be scrutinized as evidence of a misplaced confidence in the dominant philosophical inheritance, the instrumental reason of the Enlightenment. There are alternatives: "Disengagement and what we might call engaged exploration are two quite different things. They carry us in contrary directions and are extremely difficult to combine. The point of this contrast is to see that the option for an epistemology which privileges disengagement and control isn't self-evidently right. It requires certain assumptions" (164). And those assumptions—such as the potentially limitless explanatory power of physical science—led to certain ways of living and thinking. With the universe understood as a set of inductive principles and nothing more, the need for "attuning the soul's gaze" to gain knowledge fell away. Thinking about the self and how to act was reconfigured as a *process* of reason, a step-by-step dissection

of how the world works and how individuals operate within it in empirical terms. Locke argued vehemently for this process to be the purview of the autonomous self: each person's interrogative must be the property of his own mind and reason, wholly independent of influence or coercion from social custom, tradition, human authority, and, most crucially, doctrines which assume human behavior either is or should be rooted in any universally inherent concepts (168). For instance, according to Locke, we must resist the temptation to uncritically follow any idea of justice, either our own or one presented to us, that is assumed to be irrefutable. He passionately charges individuals to think, analyze, and decide on matters for themselves, and in doing so envisions a radical new freedom. Such freedom and each person's responsibility to enact it is the consequence of first rejecting, at least temporarily, all previous epistemologies and truth claims.<sup>8</sup> However, other consequences also emerged: "This anti-teleological objectifying view of the mind doesn't only rule out theories of knowledge which suppose an innate attunement to

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<sup>8</sup> To highlight this point, it is instructive to revisit Taylor directly: "What probably made Locke the great teacher of the Enlightenment was his combination of these two factors: that he offered a plausible account of the new science as valid knowledge, intertwined with a theory of rational control of the self; and that he brought the two together under the ideal of rational self-responsibility. Many things have been declared authoritatively true, both in science and in practice, which have no real title to the name. The rational, self-responsible subject can break with them, suspend his adhesion to them, and by submitting them to the test of their validity, remake or replace them. Holding the package together is an ideal of freedom or independence, backed by a conception of disengagement and procedural reason. This has given Locke's outlook its tremendous influence, not only in the eighteenth century, but right through to today. Even those who reject many of Locke's doctrines feel the power of his model. We can see it in one way in some contemporary discussions about identity, as I have mentioned" (1989, 174-175).

the truth; it also directed against moral theories which see us tending by nature towards the good—in the first place, of course, the major traditions which came down from the ancients, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic” (169). Locke, like so many of his modern colleagues, based his moral theory on the principle that only pleasure and pain (of the body or mind) signify good and evil, and human motivation to respond to moral situations depends entirely on our responses to whatever pleasure or pain is gained from our action. As a result, if the absence of a particular good (shelter for the homeless, for instance) fails to upset us (the upset being painful and that pain registering as an evil), then we have no incentive or inspiration to act (169). Unsurprisingly, the predication of morality on such stimuli is highly problematic, but let us avoid that briar patch for now. What the preceding does show is how man gained much in his transition to the modern era, including Lockean protections for freedom of thought, but also how such progress forever altered the mental and intellectual landscapes of moral introspection. For Taylor, disengagement is a legacy worth overturning:

Thus if we follow the theme of self-control through the vicissitudes of our Western tradition, we find a very profound transmutation, all the way from the hegemony of reason as a vision of cosmic order to the notion of a punctual disengaged subject exercising instrumental control. And this, I would argue, helps to explain why we think of ourselves as ‘selves’ today. [...] This is an operation which can only be carried out in the first-person perspective. It doesn’t tell us, like Stoicism, to be aware of what is worthwhile for humans as such or, like Plato, to focus on the properties of reason and desire and their relation to what we know about the happy

life. It calls on me to be aware of *my* activity of thinking or *my* process of habituation, so as to disengage from them and objectify them. Indeed, the whole (strange and ultimately questionable) picture of myself as objectified nature which this modern turn has made familiar to us only became available through that special kind of reflexive stance I am calling disengagement (1989, 174-175).

Taylor later refines the notion of the disengaged individual as the “buffered” self (2007, 38). The buffered self is a product of a post-metaphysical, thoroughly modern society wherein forces that once moved us—spiritual awe and fear, the realm of the mysterious—are safely placed behind a boundary of objectification and liable to unbelief or dismissal. In other words, the world of the buffered self is a disenchanted world, as opposed to the earlier enchanted world of the “porous” self (*ibid.*). The engine behind our self-buffering is what Taylor calls “the ethic of rational self-control,” which is an outgrowth of the self-regulation and mastery championed by Locke. We manage (or attempt to manage) our thoughts and positions, our being-in-the-world with an almost ruthless efficiency. We have moved from a position and existence where things (demons, spirits, God) “get to us” to one where they do not, and thus we do not yearn for transcendence or the assurance of a moral epistemology derived from an elevated, pre-human source. “In a mechanistic universe,” Taylor argues, “and in a field of functionally understood passions [again, this is Locke], there is no more ontological room for such an aura [that is, feelings of longing]” (136). So while Locke deepened the idea of the self *as* a self, a contained and naturalistic individual, the

underlying anti-teleological basis removed much of our humanity in the process. One reason Rousseau is so often in conflict with his own thought is due to this inherited positionality from Locke: Rousseau embraced the pureness of individual autonomy, but he could not divest himself of the desire for illumination.

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With a thinker like Locke now included in the conversation, it is important to pause and offer an important clarification. Despite the many overlapping identifiers, modernity should not be considered purely synonymous with liberalism, nor should liberalism be made the easy culprit in accounting for the attrition of personal agency described by Kim and Taylor. Though the exchanges between the champions and critics of liberalism have yielded decades of rich discourse, my project exists outside that debate. The quantity and depth of the literature from both liberals and communitarians (and everything in between) has created a large enough common space between the two camps that one can use elements of both without swearing devotion to either. Furthermore, the most tangible characteristics of American liberalism, such as a jurisprudence founded upon individual rights or constitutional protections for expression, will not conflict with any of the arguments offered in this project. Also, the theoretical concept of “the good” is hardly exclusive to one group since “...the love of which is deeply embedded in the moral and social

imaginaries of secular philosophies such as liberalism and utilitarianism” (Kim 2007, 78). More importantly, given the individualized nature of a project of regenerating agency, the philosophical tenets and political constructs proposed by liberalism offer the best environment in which such a project could take place. A retreat to the traditional battle lines in the communitarian / liberalism debate, therefore, would conceal more than reveal. Consider the following criticism:

The theoretical discourse of liberalism tends either to falsely describe autonomy or to undermine it. The result is a radically foreshortened individualism, one subject to deontological or teleological constraints, an individualism cut off from its most profound cultural resonances. In this way, liberal theory blocks our ability to appreciate the new mode of being-in-the-world made possible by liberal democratic culture. (Villa and Sarat 1996, 4–5)

As the preceding suggests, one must be wary of the theoretical blind-spots not only in defending one dogma against another, but also within one’s own position. When viewed at the appropriate critical distance, theorists from opposing traditions might find they are in fact occupying the same plot of real estate and have similar plans for its use.

The liberal impulse toward individual freedom is reproduced in Kim’s discourse of recovering personal agency. Take, for instance, George Kateb’s concept of democratic individuality. Though Kateb is the liberal’s liberal, his thought contains substantial parallels to Kim’s aspiration for a vocation of the self:

“...democratic individuality is something more than the culmination of liberalism or

the distinctive American contribution to liberalism. [It] stands for a genuinely modern form of selfhood, a self capable not merely of choosing itself, or transcending role and convention, but also of periodically transcending its own drive to self-creation and redefinition” (5). The difference between Kateb’s democratic individual and Kim’s disoriented self is that the former approaches his potential for change and improvement with a postmodern giddiness, clear-eyed but lively. The latter, on the other hand, either will not or cannot stride so boldly into the future without considering what worthy elements of human knowledge or experience are in danger of being left behind. However, both Kateb and Kim draw heavily on Emerson for their arguments: Kateb clearly reveres the Emersonian urge toward non-conformity, and Kim casts Emerson’s perfectionism as indicative of the religious imagination (Kim 2007, 136). Ironically, Kim also cites Emerson’s enthusiastic resistance to “discontent” as a way of approaching modernity and postmodernity “not so much as epochs, but as a set of attitudes or dispositions” (135). Such a view of modernity is liberating, for it recasts the concept as a frame of mind (which can be altered) rather than ineluctable orientations left behind by history, such as disengagement.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Disengagement is but one of the conditions which problematize our capacity for moral agency, and, by extension, our notion of identity. An alternative thread of theory critiques the complications presented by the politics of difference, that is, how identity as a matter of the individualized self squares with the requirements of and power exerted by a single state committed to its integrity as an abstract collective. Under this heading, Wendy Brown examines

Still, as I describe the particular concerns raised by Kim and Taylor and how those concerns are reflected in the work of Mark Twain and Walker Percy, it is helpful to allow some further demarcation in the concept of modernity, with the understanding that the term will always bear the legacy of the Enlightenment and the social, political, and economic changes of sixteenth century Europe onward. For current purposes, therefore, modernity will generally refer to the Western world following the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, or roughly two hundred years back. It is from this approximate inception point that Taylor argues we can detect the “large-scale transformation in common assumptions and sensibility” where a “new moral culture radiates outward and downward from the upper middle classes of England, America, and (for some facets) France” (1989, 305). Within this temporal

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identity in its politicized context: the dilemma of the individual and her self-expression in a democratic construct created to secure commonality in opportunity and rights. To particularize oneself through difference—difference which is often attended by the pain of exclusion or oppression—carries the risk of disconnecting the self from its uniqueness: to objectify difference in service of politics, either to minimize or highlight it, removes the substance of identity to a place inaccessible to change. In her words, “In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion, augments or ‘alters the direction of the suffering’ entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it. But in so doing, it installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity. In locating a site of blame for its powerlessness over its past, as a past of injury, a past as a hurt will, and locating a ‘reason’ for the ‘unendurable pain’ of social powerlessness in the present, it converts this reasoning into an ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it, discursively codifies it. Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics and can hold out no future-for itself or others-that triumphs over this pain.” See “Wounded Attachments,” *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (August 1993): 390-410.

framework, Twain and Percy are ideally situated, as their lifetimes spanned the bulk of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively.

### *The Uncertain Agent*

Now that the concept of modernity has been refined both as a term and an era, it is necessary to examine further the elements of modernity that have led to the condition of agency described as melancholic freedom. The symptoms of melancholic freedom have been established: a disconnect from moral sources, a confused, abstracted, or incomplete selfhood (or, in the language of liberal discourse, a “thin” rather than “thick” sense of self), superficiality and materialism substituting a search for the good, and a general feeling of meaninglessness and homelessness. From what circumstances of modernity have these losses originated? Of course, this is not a new question, and therefore the usual suspects are not hard to identify. And while theoretical clarity is reason enough to note them, their significance to the project at hand is their relevance to Kim’s formulation of a project of regenerating agency and how they manifest in the writings of Mark Twain and Walker Percy.

The causes underlying the predicament of identity and agency are the familiar critiques communitarians charge against contemporary liberalism. Broadly drawn, these critiques include secularism, pluralism, and naturalism. Though as mentioned earlier, it is not my aim to carve out specific territory within the traditional confines of that debate. Also, it has already been stated that central to a

project of regenerating agency is a belief in a kind of power belonging to the individual; this is not necessarily the radical individualism of Kateb, but an experiment contained in personal terms nonetheless. Kim downplays this element of recovering agency by not according it the proper credit as a feature of modern political and social liberalism, and this curiosity will become more evident as the details of his project are outlined below. Moreover, despite my efforts to avoid capture within the liberal/communitarian quarrel, Taylor is considered the prototypical communitarian. Some conceptual overlap is therefore to be expected.

The influences of secularism, pluralism, and naturalism (and the many undercurrents of social, political, and philosophical change that may be ascribed to them) on the modern condition have been extensively, perhaps exhaustively, covered. Instead of retracing already well-trod ground, let us briefly consider the ways in which secularism especially has led to the constraints on human agency. Naturalism, very loosely defined as “a sympathy with the view that ultimately nothing resists explanation by the methods characteristic of the natural sciences,” is heavily intertwined with secularism, and therefore can be treated in the same discussion (Blackburn 2008, 245).

The whole of modernity, both its advances and faults, might be contained within the concept of secularization, but the causes and effects of secularization

cover a large spectrum.<sup>10</sup> The expansiveness and ubiquity of the idea often render its application in a variety of scenarios a thorny task, though that fact has not stopped theorists from trying. On trying to exact an instructive definition, Hans Blumenberg notes

This attempt to extract a more precise meaning from a term hitherto mostly used with an innocent confidence that it must mean something has caused a number of its users to step forward and protest that that was not what they meant by it. My question in return is not so much what in fact they did mean by it as what would have to have been meant by the term 'secularization' to make it capable of the productivity it has been thought to have in the comprehension of historical relations (1985, 63).

His point is well taken, and I offer that, at the very least, subsequent usage of the idea will not bear such "innocent confidence." Nevertheless, it is integral to the vocabulary of modernity.

Often secularization is traced to one of two broad lines of reckoning (and sometimes both): the intersection of Christianity and modernity and the ascendancy of scientific reason (which is the heart of naturalism, another nebulous and problematic term). In his cynical critique of modern society and philosophy, German theorist Karl Löwith interpreted secularization as the process by which non-

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<sup>10</sup> Prohibited from indulging in the philosopher's chronological vagueness, historians have struggled with the idea of secularization as a product of modernity because of the difficulty in identifying when such a process began, especially in comparison to some murky "golden age" which preceded it. See Jonathan Sheehan, "When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age," *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 217-242.

Christian and non-Jewish social and philosophical movements adopted the historical concerns of the two formerly dominant religious traditions, and thus what looked very modern was in fact a new salesman in old clothes. In other words, the idea of the modern age as a horizonless landscape of unending progress was a myth; the very thinkers that pushed modernity forward tied it to the same end-time scenarios as Christian theology: "... Marx's idea of communism (and other similar revolutionary visions) are 'really' secularized versions of the biblical paradise or the coming of the Messiah" (Wallace 1985, xv, xvi). The promise of modern progress, based in a wrongfully-appropriated eschatology, is unfounded. Worse still, the Western world is caught between the explanatory power of reason and the omniscient presence bound up in faith. As a result, our outlook "is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking" and the modern age is therefore invalid (Löwith 1957, 188). However, Löwith's theory has not survived the scrutiny of younger critics unscathed. Blumenberg argues that the culmination of modern progress has not been imagined as a "transcendent intervention" akin to the end-time prophecies of Christian belief. The correct interpretation of modernity includes the development of progress as a possibility across disciplines and social strata (Wallace 1981, xvii). Habermas shows that the idea of modernity having a "completion" date has been overtaken by the creation of "modernization" as a concept, a time and region-free set of social and political structures, including the

“secularization of values and norms” (1996, 2). Nevertheless, Löwith is not alone in naming Christianity as the origination point of secularization. Similar theories follow Weber’s account of how Calvinism taught believers to live isolated from God. Devoting themselves to earthly works as evidence of their piety, they endured “unprecedented inner loneliness,” until, generations later, the piety faded and the earthly works remained (Weber [1905] 2003, 104). In this interpretation, secularization is a consequence of Christian ideology: “God’s transcendence has led to his withdrawal from the world and thus to the autonomy of the world” (Larmore 1996, 42).

Other interpretations of the secularization thesis do not locate its source in religious doctrine itself, but rather as a consequence of one episteme gradually replacing another in the inevitable forward movement of time. One might recall Robert Frost’s poem that begins “Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice” ([1920] 2002, 237). Secularization is then the path paved by modernity and will lead to a different horizon than that pursued by our ancestors: “History is still supposed to end, thought not through the Second Coming of Christ; it is now supposed to tend toward more ‘worldly’ goals like the perfectly just society, the Spirit’s reaching the state of Absolute Knowledge, or the total elimination of human suffering” (Nehamas 1996, 225). However, as the decades have passed, confidence in these worldly goals has weakened, and we are faced with a situation in which

“standards of value are eliminated one after the other; [and] the very idea of progress is undermined from within” (ibid). William Butler Yeats expressed this Janus-like nature of civilization’s development through linear time as two vortices: they exist in the same spatial and historical moment and turn simultaneously, though one is inverted. The rings concentrated at the vortex’s center represent the period of moral and existential clarity or the beginning of an epoch; the further from the core and wider the rings become, the greater uncertainty and anxiety as belief systems disintegrate or lose legitimacy and relevance. Progress, understood here as simply movement through time, is approaching the heart of a new vortex while the old one spins into fragments.<sup>11</sup> Yeats’ poem is helpful in understanding how

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<sup>11</sup> Yeats weaved this theory into much of his work, but its most famous illustration is in the aptly named poem “The Second Coming”:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast,  
its hour come round at last  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

(1919)

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

secularization can be understood as both a multifaceted historical happening *and* as a metaphor for the experience of being separated from the moral foundations which kindle agency. “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / the falcon cannot hear the falconer” symbolizes this estrangement. In this way, secularism is not only a consequence of modernity, but also, as Kim suggests, a symptom (61).

Though there are multiple accounts of secularization, the changes it has wrought, specifically for the individual, follow a central theme for theorists across the generations. Nietzsche, Weber, Habermas, and Taylor have described secularism as a force that either created or revealed a hole in the human sciences, and that hole fills us with longing. For Nietzsche, the unshakeable refusal to pour belief from a discredited religion into that gap despite a desperate yearning to do so was the most critical feature of Western society’s distorted value structure (Nehamas 2006, 225). Weber, Habermas, and Taylor do not follow their predecessor’s intransigence, but they nevertheless identify with the sense of loss. Instead, their projects generally investigate the practices which secularism has supplied in place of a belief in divine and absolute knowledge. For instance, the primacy of deontological ethics as the guide for social and institutional behavior presents one condition to unpack: “Questions of the good—especially that which inspires and motivates the self and

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provides a sense of worth and meaning—are considered secondary to obligations and duty, which is to say, that there has been diminishing attention given to the significance of moral motives for engendering agency, especially in contemporary moral and political philosophy” (Kim 2007, 59). The smaller share of consideration afforded these motives (which are, in Taylor’s terms, strong evaluations) is contributory to the melancholic nature of our modern lives: with such motives devalued, obscured, or dismissed, an individual has lost connection to elements that have been intimately related to self-identity. Imagine a digital scan of the brain: a range of colors indicate different thought processes across the lobes, only certain areas once illuminated are now dark. In the wake of such losses, however, one might find recourse in a project of regenerating agency.

## CHAPTER THREE

### "A SORT OF HOMECOMING": PROJECTS OF REGENERATING AGENCY

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#### I. Introduction: A Cultivation of the Self

In *The History of Sexuality Volume III: The Care of the Self*, Foucault examines the social and philosophical practices of the ancient Greeks in relation to their concern with a "cultivation of the self." On their emphasis on periods of meditation, he writes,

They enable one to commune with oneself, to recollect one's bygone days, to place the whole of one's past life before one's eyes, to get to know oneself, through reading, through the precepts and examples that will provide inspiration, and, by contemplating a life reduced to its essentials, to rediscover the basic principles of rational conduct. ...This time is not empty; it is filled with exercises, practical tasks, various activities. (1986, 50-51)

One can sense the reverberations of Greek tradition in Kim's formulation for what he calls projects of regenerating agency, and he finds such a project as the heart of Charles Taylor's work. According to Kim, "These are projects which reflect the late modern/postmodern condition of agency as melancholic freedom. That is, the quest

for agency under conditions in which political ideologies are unstable, vague, and/or lackluster, in which moral ideals and norms are constrained by things like pluralism” (2007, 55). Now that such constraints have been considered, we turn to a more detailed anatomy of a project of regenerating agency.

### *Reflections on How to Flourish*

If we follow the Greeks and Foucault, then we would describe Kim’s project as a variation on an active cultivation of the self. Kim, however, adds to cultivation the component of the religious imagination, the faculty reflected in “passionate commitments, aspirations for life chances and possibilities, and attempts to envision impact in the world and for the self” (131). Self-cultivation and the religious imagination interconnect to create a project of regenerating agency. In self-cultivation, there are similarly two complementary pursuits or aspirations which, when sought, represent purposeful attendance to matters of agency and identity. First, one must seek *moral identity*, and to do so one must engage in “continuous critical reflection on the conditions for the possibility of human flourishing” (128). Note that reflection is immediately referenced as an imperative of self-cultivation and therefore of regenerating agency. Second, one must be open to and participate in the idea of *spiritual exercises*, or “disciplines—broadly defined as political, moral/ethical, and spiritual/religious practices” (129). Let us consider the details of each charge, beginning with the former.

Kim's theory contains certain assumptions, and in this case it is the binding of a moral identity to a belief in "the possibility of human flourishing." He has notably avoided other words often used to express a confidence in human prosperity, and, by extension, progress. What of the concept of human perfectibility that was born alongside modernity and the Enlightenment? While we may presume a distinction between man's desire to flourish and his desire to achieve perfection, the two goals share the common core ideal of man's ability to improve himself and his society. Is this flourishing then a newly polished version of the belief in amelioration once tied to the foundations of liberalism? The vision of an ongoing and inevitable improvement in humanity's stake—originally an axiom of liberalism—has dimmed in the last century, the age of weapons of mass destruction. As we see with Kim, the boundaries of aspiration within the predominant currents of political theory have shifted, or, more specifically, they have condensed. Expectations rooted in the eventual triumph of democratization, market-based economies, and advancements in scientific reason have been downsized and refocused on the individual's capacity for development. Belief in the possibility of human flourishing, or at least an openness to such a possibility, implies that a sense of hope is a necessary antecedent to change. As individuals consider the potential for personal betterment, the larger community adopts an attitude of anticipation and even a readiness for action. And yet, it seems perfectibility has been taken off the table. Or has it? Of two influential

theories of perfectibility, both offered by Rousseau, only one fulfills the requirement presented by a project of regenerating agency: a conviction that, after all this time, humans can improve.

My focus here is on Rousseau for two reasons: first, because of his sympathies with the Romantic tradition's critique of human beings as mechanistic creatures whose highest possible faculty is self-interested rationality; and second, because Kim instead considers Emerson, and thus I hope to add to his analysis.<sup>12</sup>

Rousseau's perfectionism is an idea which speaks to a certain kind of optimism of which there are two possible interpretations. The first follows that human perfectibility is the development of a capacity for personal self-determination and, subsequently, moral evolution. Perfectibility manifests in human awareness, particularly the "full extent of the possibilities of self-legislation" (Scott 1994, 498n).

This knowledge expands as an individual moves from a place of exclusive and

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<sup>12</sup> Emerson's perfectionism comes from a belief in independence derived from a seamless ontological and phenomenological unity. He also venerated individuals who acquire wisdom outside the mores of conformity, a theme later taken up by Nietzsche. See "The American Scholar," (1837) and "The Over-Soul," (1841) in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000). In a more recent treatment of perfectionism, John Rawls defines it as one of two concepts: first as a "teleological theory directing society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture," and second as "one standard of intuitionist theory" which seeks to justify social, political, or cultural structures that otherwise challenge notions of liberty and fairness (1999, 285-286). For a comparative analysis of the Emersonian and Rawlsian ideas of perfectionism, see Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Cavell also covers variants of perfectionism from Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, but his consideration of Rousseau in this context is slight.

innocent self-regard (*amour de soi*) to a self-understanding based in the interaction with others (*amour propre*). The height of perfection is the realization of moral freedom, which is when a person chooses to align himself with a body politic and in so doing accesses the interests of a collective will as his own. This society, of course, is Rousseau's model based on his social contract, not the mess of a civilization he observed around him in eighteenth century Europe. However, his belief that an individual can reach this pinnacle is tempered—most citizens cannot comprehend the potential in his political and social construction (where a philosopher would, naturally), and thus they must be “forced to be free” (Rousseau [1762] 1968, 63). Rousseau's doubt that perfectibility of this kind will ever be realized across the whole of society reveals his underlying pessimism regarding human nature, and thus despite the suggestions in *The Social Contract*, it is no stretch to assume he had no real expectation that such a state would ever be realized.<sup>13</sup> A person's perfectibility “enables him to transcend the limitations of his individual self, to identify with others, and to act on a basis that he shares with them. In doing so, he becomes the master of his desires” (Gauthier 2006, 58). This understanding of perfectibility is threaded through Rousseau's theory of man's departure from his natural state to his inclusion in a corrupting social culture and his final participation

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<sup>13</sup> As Scott remarks, “The citizen enjoys something more like the opinion that he is fully free; the moral freedom of most citizens is in reality a ‘simula-crum’ [or simulation] of true moral freedom, for theirs is a virtue and freedom not of their own making” (1994, 489n).

in an ideal civic state. Its utility as infrastructure for Kim's view of human flourishing is limited by Rousseau's own ambiguity toward the feasibility of the general will as a substitute for pure individual autonomy.<sup>14</sup>

A second interpretation of Rousseauian perfectibility both expands and restricts the meaning of the term. To read perfectibility simply as *adaptability* takes the idea beyond a cognitive recognition of self-governance and the implications of realizing one's autonomy; instead, it may be understood as any social or individual development that distinguishes humans from animals (Salkever 1978, 36). Rather than lead directly into the problematic nature of committing to a civil society (as the first interpretation does), perfectibility as adaptability presents questions that strike an even deeper core of human nature. As Rousseau proposes, "... there is another very specific quality which distinguishes them [man and animal] and about which there can be no argument: the faculty of self-perfection, a faculty which, with the aid of circumstances, successively develops all the others, and resides among us as much in the species as in the individual" ([1754] 1987, 45).<sup>15</sup> He later identifies this

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<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the complexity of Rousseau's take on personal interaction with a social order persisted after he finished the details of *The Social Contract*. In fact, his tendency toward contradiction increased as he reflected on his own experience within and without a community. In his last work, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, he vacillates between longing for companionship and dramatic assurances that man's happiness and totality of experience is a product of being "self-sufficient like God" (89). See particularly the *First*, *Fifth*, and *Ninth Walks*, trans. by Peter France (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Part I, in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. by Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).

trait as not only that which separates us from animals, but also as the origination point for human unhappiness: “The other animals possess only such powers as are required for self-preservation; man alone has more. Is it not very strange that this superfluity should make him miserable?” ([1762] 2008, 66).<sup>16</sup> Such a sentiment parallels well with many of the complaints against modernity. For instance, our adaptability manifests in our ability to manufacture material needs and create relational situations among one another that are unattainable or founded upon corrupt notions of the self, that is, relationships and identities built around reputation and the regard of others. Rousseau’s point is that more is not better, it is just more. He rejects the convention that what we think of as progress, be it technological, aesthetic, or societal (and whatever that may mean), necessarily advances moral development as well:

And so human beings find themselves on a treadmill; each step they take toward restoring the balance between their powers and their desires leads them to new desires and passions that dislocate the balance. Once human beings sense themselves as unfree, in the grip of desires that they cannot satisfy, then their attempts to free themselves, even if successful in terms of their original concerns, put them in the grip of yet further desires. If we think of human history as beginning with the first imbalance between power and needs that deprived human beings of their original liberty, we must ask if the further course of human history reveals some point at which the balance is restored, and with it liberty, or reveals instead a progressively increasing imbalance that drives human beings further and further from the prospect of freedom. (Gauthier 2006, 8-9)

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<sup>16</sup> *Emile, or On Education*, Book II (Charleston: BiblioLife, LLC, 2008).

Perfectibility as adaptability deserves a larger share of Kim’s formulation of melancholic freedom, but not as an attribute that could enable individuals to carve out better methods of moral reflection and action—methods adapted to the times in which we live. On the contrary, the concept highlights the ways in which we have let ourselves become confused over what goods are worth pursuing, intoxicated as we are by the false liberties of progress and failure to remember Wordsworth’s warning that in “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers” (1851). Stranded in the “imbalance,” our capacity as moral agents weakens—we have misapplied our energies to staying on the treadmill.

### *Spiritual Exercises and Moral Identity*

The second ingredient of Kim’s cultivation of the self is the spiritual exercise which is, to repeat, “disciplines—broadly defined as political, moral/ethical, and spiritual/religious practices” (129). While he is vague on what precisely constitutes a spiritual exercise, my interpretation is that they are enacted when an individual anticipates an opportunity to earnestly engage questions of political, moral, or spiritual significance and, after identifying such an occasion, reflects seriously on what course to take and how and why such a decision is made. For instance, if I am aware of a Habitat for Humanity project in my area, I can choose to offer my services directly, take note of the endeavor and offer financial support, or simply go about

my business and let the details of the undertaking disappear into the crowded basement archives of my mind where things are eventually forgotten. Often these choices are made with superficial (what Taylor would call “weak”) evaluation—even the decision to show up and pick up a hammer. This scenario becomes a spiritual exercise when we pause to consider how we arrived at our action and why. It is not enough to say “I am here because it is good to help people” or “I did not participate because I cannot devote the time.” The exercise is in asking oneself “Why is it ‘good’ to assist those in need of homes?” or “Where does volunteerism rank in my priorities and why?” The possible queries extend into multiple arenas of life:

“Why do I object to the neglect of animals?”

“How did I come to the opinion that the death penalty is unjust? Is it an opinion or is it my belief? On what set of principles is that belief based?”

“What criteria do I use when purchasing food, clothing, or large manufactured goods? What should I be using? What would make me rank cost over sustainability or vice versa?”

“I find certain speech to be inappropriate, even offensive. What sensitivities are being insulted and what do they represent?”

Though political scientists might find the description of such interrogations as *spiritual* exercises slightly disconcerting for the metaphysical implication, the reality is that what Kim is referencing—disciplines and practices involving reflection and evaluation—shares theoretical space with a healthy bulk of the discipline’s behavioral and quantitative research. Consider the scholarship on political opinion,

particularly the study of partisan attachments and voter choice. Do people form their opinions and partisan attachments based on pre-existing political dispositions, their current stores of information, through the influence of elite discourse, or something else? Decades of work have been devoted to determine how individuals come to choose their political affiliation, and the hypotheses range from a psychological socialization in the family (the Michigan model) to more rational issue-based assessments.<sup>17</sup> More recent studies suggest that individuals perform calculated self-sorting based on the desire to belong to one peer group over another (the social identity model).<sup>18</sup> One constant in research on vote choice and partisan affiliation is

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<sup>17</sup> The Michigan model (named after the writers of *The American Voter* (1960) and their affiliation with the University of Michigan) is comprised of a combination of long term and short term forces influencing individual decisions, with party identification being the primary voting cue. The factors are organized into a “funnel of causality” which travels back across space and time from the voting act. Party identification is described as a psychological attachment formed early in life, even before actual political participation takes place, almost like an inherited trait. As such, it is measured not by rational processes (such as policy stances) but by a perceived personal connection to a party. Voters filter out information inconsistent with the platform, and deference to party identification in this way supports the notion that people are not heavily ideological or well-informed (Campbell, et al., 1960, and Converse 1964, 1). More solid support for policy-based, rational voting comes from Krosnick (1990) and his categorization of the citizenry into issue publics. His analysis reconnects the voter (and voting outcome) with public policy in a way that contradicts the Michigan model’s assumption that voters pay little attention to the issues (59). Fiorina found that those without the foundation of strong party identification (young voters, Independents) will demonstrate the closest association between issues and the actual vote (2002, 93-94). With partisanship increasing and party identification retaining robust explanatory power of the vote, it is unsurprising that Fiorina’s model elaborates our understanding of the incumbency effect.

<sup>18</sup> Green, et al., generally accept the theory of *The American Voter* that the way in which people arrive at party membership and their subsequent vote choices is largely irrational and based on attachments which form before or beyond political knowledge. Partisan identification is instead likened to religious affiliation, and as such it is relatively stable over time. What Green, et al., introduce to the debate is the idea that party choice is a result of the stereotypes

the low level of detailed knowledge individuals exhibit on political and public policy matters. The lack of information and awareness corresponds with a lack of serious reflection, without which a sincere moral evaluation is unlikely to take place. Political scientists are usually the first to dismiss the claim that voter's engage in thoughtful ethical judgment when electing candidates, and unfortunately they often have the data to back them up.

These cold political realities underscore a broader point regarding meaningful agency. That decisions (such as the vote) are more often than not made in a climate of limited facts and superficial understanding is an observable sign of our diminished capacity to make choices based on thorough reflection and careful evaluation. Societal factors, such as an overloaded media cycle and socio-economic inequalities which limit citizen resources and input, perpetuate that environment. The result is a body politic composed of individuals who, having already entered the public arena without a clear idea of where they stand, lose the will to confront and make sense of the same social complexities which require deliberation and the exercise of democratic rights. Unfortunately, government elites are often all too eager to exploit the public's confusion and disinterest in service of a power-grab or personal agenda.

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and images a voter has regarding each party, and he or she will select the party based on those images and how closely they fit with his or her own mores and self-perception (2002, 6).

More importantly (for this project at least), if we could gain a long aerial view of this scenario with the culpable social and historical forces labeled as such below us, we would recognize those same trappings of modernity introduced by Locke and later critiqued by Tocqueville. He identified in early American civil society the habits of public engagement (or non-engagement) that in the twentieth century formed into the space between government and private life. Civil society has been an obsession of political theory for decades, particularly in critiques which contrast ancient standards and practices of democracy with modern ones. Modern democracies often receive lower marks when measured against the ancients, with the health of civil society serving as one of the criteria.<sup>19</sup> According to Habermas, "... for about a century the social foundations of this sphere have been caught up in a process of decomposition. Tendencies pointing to the collapse of the public sphere are unmistakable, for while its scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant" (1991, 4). If the cause of this decomposition is rooted in modernity, then the relationship between liberal progress and democratic ideals might not be as symbiotic or stable as once thought.

A discussion on civil society could overtake the issue at hand—spiritual exercise as a component of self-cultivation—so it is time for pause and review.

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<sup>19</sup> Habermas notes that ancient civil society or the "model of the Hellenic public sphere" is strongly embedded in Western political thought "[n]ot the social formation at its base but the ideological template itself" (ibid).

From Kim's definition, spiritual exercises encompass any disciplines and practices (moral, religious, or political) that highlight the constraints on agency which encumber a fully realized identity (129). Political participation, as an example, is limited by factors both internal (lack of knowledge and will) and external (resources in time and education and unclear or congested information streams). A spiritual exercise in this case could mean anything from showing up on election day to routinely following current events. These practices remind us of what we cannot do without some type of access to moral articulation—we cannot choose the right candidate without knowing whose policies align with our own. They also rouse us to break those constraints—reading the newspaper exposes us to ideas and situations which contradict, challenge, and inspire. By taking on these two practices, we are engaging in acts that will assist in and compel the search for a moral identity, one that will no longer be numbed by neutrality, ambiguity, and melancholy. By committing to them as a way of life, we embark on self-cultivation as a vocation.

*Charles Taylor: Epiphany and Freedom*

What I have described so far is Kim's outline for a project of regenerating agency: a cultivation of the self practiced with and enabled by the religious imagination. However, Kim delves one layer deeper in his identification of elements unique to the project of Charles Taylor. He characterizes it as "an invocation of the aesthetic and poetic as epiphanic, a revelation of held moral orientations, ideal,

values, and ends. A relationship, if you will, between the sublime and agency” (56). In other words, Taylor’s work contributes to the belief that transcendence, or making fresh contact with “higher order values” and morals, is not only possible, but necessary to the reconstitution of meaningful agency. To touch this plateau involves a deliberate movement and direction by the individual—we are practicing a very personal and willful freedom in choosing to seek for and acknowledge a set of values.

In referencing the concept of the sublime epiphany, Taylor is tapping into a tradition of Romanticism which challenges the reductionist claims of the Enlightenment and invests instead in the significance of authenticity, imagination, creativity, and self-expression. Art, therefore, is an ideal conduit for access to the sublime. Epiphanies, after all, would be inaccessible to creatures who live and function entirely according to a series of biological principles. They are revelatory moments wherein contact with the sublime “spurs the imagination of the not-yet-realized self to engage in the activity of articulating what these [moral] sources and potential identities are and elaborating on how they can become manifest in one’s consciousness and in the life one wishes to lead” (130). The sublime epiphany infuses a project of regenerating agency with a transformative and vocational quality. It moves the idea of authenticity away from the type of “Neo-Nietzschean narcissistic self-determination” that privileges personal fulfillment as a moral

relativism (129). Instead, agency is understood as judgment. We must still operate in a condition of freedom, but our agency is animated not by what we are free from in the negative sense, but by the idea that we should “aspire and strive for something, some notion of the good” (85). Put simply, Taylor’s idea of agency is strong evaluation, and strong evaluation is achieved through reflection, self-questioning, and the exploration of horizons of meaning (130). Like philosophy, art stimulates reflection, and it is my argument, therefore, that literature and one’s engagement with literature be understood as a project similar to Taylor’s.

### III. Literature as a Site of Regenerating Agency

If our moral lives are 'stories' in which mystery and risk play a central and valuable role, then it may well seem that the 'intelligent report' of those lives requires the abilities and techniques of the teller of stories.

– Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*

The preceding discussion has recounted the theoretical discourse on identity and agency, with particular emphasis on Charles Taylor's work on the conditions of modernity that constrain them and how the symptoms of that constraint manifest in contemporary society. David Kyuman Kim draws on Taylor's arguments (especially those from *Sources of the Self*) to construct a representative portrait of the current predicament of the modern individual agent, a figure who lives in a circumstance of melancholic freedom. We are largely free in movement, expression, and thought as heirs to the emancipatory products of the Enlightenment, yet we find ourselves lacking tethers to the philosophical and moral resources that inform our decisions, guide our actions, and give our identity meaning. Kim configures Taylor's work as a blueprint for a project of regenerating agency, which is the combination of a cultivation of the self (constituted by a search for moral identity and practice of spiritual exercise) with a religious imagination (a faculty that promotes identity and agency to reconnect through hope and imbues self-cultivation with a vocational aspect). The finer elements of a project of regenerating agency have been outlined above; at this point, I will develop my argument that an engagement with literature

presents another potential site for a project of regenerating agency. To further this point, I will demonstrate how the writing and writing lives of Mark Twain and Walker Percy fulfill Kim's criteria for such a project. Twain and Percy as authors of projects of regenerating agency advance the case that art has the capacity to be instructive and illuminating as part of our moral discourses in ways that theory cannot replicate. However, a reading of literature motivated by the concerns of political theory—in this case the debates on identity, agency, and their points of intersection—allows us to reinvigorate the critical appreciation of these two authors.

### *An Old Project Is New Again*

With the elements of Kim's model of a project of regenerating agency elaborated, I will now draw from his structure several foundational points which can be used to identify similar projects. First, a question of conceptual clarity: is a project of regenerating agency an act, an approach or orientation, or something else? Given the varied and interrelated nature of the features involved—the religious imagination, self-cultivation, the search for moral identity, and spiritual exercises—the most accurate way to characterize these projects is as a combination of acts and approaches. We should also include motivating forces (recall Taylor's overall aspiration for more genuine selfhood), types of behavior (exposing oneself to opportunities for spiritual exercise), and general ways of thinking (remaining open to transcendence). In short, a project of regenerating agency is a clockwork of many

parts which touch upon every aspect of living. It is, after all, to be demonstrative of a vocation of the self. However, if we reduce the framework to its purest fundamentals, what remains is Taylor's original concern: the importance of evaluation and reflection. With that reminder at the forefront, we can sketch a profile of requirements for a project of regenerating agency. The candidate project should satisfy the following criteria: 1) provide suggestion of a religious imagination at work; 2) support a cultivation of the self; 3) demonstrate a search for moral identity and present opportunities for spiritual exercise; and 4) exhibit an aspiration toward a vocation of the self. It is my argument that engagement with the literary arts, either as a reader or writer, fulfills these conditions and presents an alternative site for regenerating agency, and in turn opens Kim's theory to wider application and joins political philosophy and literature in a common project of expanding the discourse on identity and agency.

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Before I outline the points which justify the inclusion of literature into Kim's theoretical paradigm, I must clarify what I mean by literature. In the simplest terms, I am referring to works of fiction such as the novel, short story, and drama.

Occupying a unique space is poetry, and though my project does not focus on poetry specifically, its significance to any union of literature and philosophy has been well established. Furthermore, I am including several types of non-fiction as deserving

equal contemplation. The essay, journal, biography, and travelogue have long been considered alongside fictional works as similarly indicative of an author's communicative abilities, creativity, and insight (or his or her deficiencies in the same). What, then, of the "differences" in narrative voice between fiction and non-fiction?

The establishment of divisive analytical borders around these genres in order to funnel a reading into one critical camp or another would distract from my larger goal of highlighting a specific philosophical function that is enacted when audience and book meet. To dismiss (or at least downgrade) the issues of authorial intent, reliability, textual structure and the like would be strictly opposed by the schools of Formalism and New Criticism, but for myself (and perhaps others mentioned herein) such concerns are minimal, if not counterproductive. Such critiques import certain political implications into the reading of literature that may obscure as much as they reveal. Because so many of these schools exist, because they often contradict one another, and because their legitimacy and status ebb and flow, this project does not subscribe to one literary school over another. In fact, some of the most influential critiques are either dismissive or damaging to the premise of literature having a legitimate role in moral inquiry. For instance, both structuralism and post-structuralism oppose the idea that fictional characters should be regarded as human beings (Palmer 1992, 2). The argument goes that characters are, in reality, an entity

composed of the author, the author's deception, a complex mass of nonfigurative traits, a Dorian Grey-style amalgamation of reader prejudices, or all or none of the above. Characters are not to be read as human beings with names, actions, feelings, or agendas, nor are we to respond or attempt to relate to them as such. I could present my soft rejection of institutionalized literary theory as emblematic of a postmodern impulse to refuse solid categories and embrace new species of inquiry which combine a variety of methods and assumptions. That is at least a fraction of the explanation. Frankly, however, I am more persuaded by the skeptical view that contemporary criticism is "absurd and destructive" and with its "narrowing range of specialist interests and in its professional jargon, has yielded to the temptation to cut itself off from the human problems that matter deeply to the intelligent layman" (Palmer 1992, vii). Ultimately, I am sympathetic to Gadamer's perspective:

But then, with respect to art: how much knowledge can one really cope with? One still has to be able to make the work one's own. So there are no rules other than one: only as much knowledge is useful as one is capable of forgetting; that's the measure. As Plato said at the very end of the *Phaedrus*: give me as much gold as a reasonable man can carry. One should not let oneself be deformed by knowledge. That's a crazy way to proceed. But that's what literary criticism does. (1992 70)

At the least, I will offer the following concession: "One battle that cultural theory [including literary theory] has probably won is the contention is that there is no neutral or innocent reading of a work of art" (Eagleton 1996, 208). However, both Gadamer and Eagleton's comments present another issue: what is a work of art?

Attempts to answer this question span the centuries, and I will leave that debate to those with greater expertise and a stronger command of aesthetics. It is enough to say that, in relation to this project, the concept of art is rather broad.

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The foremost task in determining whether literature is a viable site of regenerating agency is assessing if it holds or presents properties which aid in evaluation and reflection. The study of aesthetics, at least according to certain academic schools, is well past its prime, much like the age of grand, totalizing philosophical schemes and complete systems of undisputed morality (Malpas 2006, 232). The counter to this judgment, however, is the notion that aesthetics is still a valid approach—it is the nature of art that became problematic in the modern era. As one of the founding thinkers in aesthetic philosophy, Hegel argued that art lost its ability to move us, and therefore a new type of inquiry was required to restore to the experience of art some semblance of meaning. It is almost as if Hegel “identified” a theoretical quandary so he could conveniently offer his own remedy, that is, dismiss art as outmoded so he could substitute it with philosophy. Nevertheless, it is feasible that the same forces which altered the individual agent also affected our reception of art: “...with the move into modernity and the increasing complexity of social organization, scientific sophistication and religious understanding, sensible presentation is no longer up to the task of adequately

grasping and communicating a society's most vital ideals" (237). Hegel's aesthetics contend that a more complex and perplexing civilization needs a more complex and perplexing method of accessing what art, including literature, has to offer (if anything).

The essence of his case has a logical and parsimonious appeal, but those qualities quickly disappear upon closer scrutiny of his particulars. Moreover, after several generations, an equally logical and parsimonious position still stands, which is that "...human deliberation is constantly an adventure of the personality, undertaken against terrific odds and among frightening mysteries, and that this is, in fact, the source of much of its beauty and richness, that texts written in a traditional philosophical style have the most insuperable difficulty conveying it to us" (Nussbaum 1990, 142). Even when their subject is the same, philosophy and art instigate different shades of interrogation and comprehension. Aristotle could not communicate quite like Sophocles, so it is unsurprising that theorists from Hegel on would face similar challenges in contextualizing and translating human matters into something explicit and usable. Nussbaum's point also exposes a defect in certain kinds of philosophical writing: too often the "beauty and richness" of life and the wonder surrounding questions of existence are lost in attempts to understand the world and reality through systematic theoretical analysis. But does such mystery complicate literature as a suitable environment for moral inquiry? Consider this complaint:

Plato's Socrates insists that literature has no power to 'teach the truth adequately to others', nor to 'educate men and made them better' (Plato, *Republic*, line 599d). Literature is inimical to justice because it is an 'illusion,' 'an imitation of a phantasm ... far removed from the truth (Plato, *Republic*, line 598b). Instead of evoking, even to the degree that perceptual objects do, the one true world of the Forms, the images of art and literature capture only the distorting illusion of the artist's own way of seeing or style, by which the unity of reality seems to be fractured into a multiplicity of perspectives and worlds. It thus undermines the central philosophical idea of the universality, the univocity, of truth. Moreover, literature is dangerously open to interpretation. It cannot choose its interlocutor. (Rawlings 2006, 129)

This line of reasoning, which suggests that literature merely "provides nonconceptual access to ideas of justice and universality" to people who are "incapable of the systematic thinking of philosophy" smacks of a kind of disciplinary territorialism that is unproductive and elitist (130). Rawlings allows that Aristotle softens the suspect class of those who are "incapable" to those who are simply "unmoved," but she nevertheless supports the underlying objection to literature. She attacks it as a danger to conventional theoretical investigation: "...rather than merely supplementing the concepts and project of moral philosophy, [literature] actually calls it into question. Rather than merely inducing feelings that are effective in turning the mind toward philosophy's ideas of the moral good and justice, literature produces significant conceptual effects that challenge those very ideas" (131). Apparently, this is a very bad thing. What Rawlings is missing is the failure of philosophy to conclusively articulate ideas of the moral good and justice, at least in any way that has had lasting purchase. (Confusingly, her subsequent

arguments take up the *value* of detective fiction, Sherlock Holmes and the like; why one genre is given this honor while every other literary art is dismissed is unclear.) Furthermore, the crux of Socratic philosophy is self-examination, the primary device of which is dialogical exchange. Literature has the capacity to open dialogues between the text, author, and reader that can lead directly to reflection, especially when the literary narrative contains ideas and ways of life different from those of the reader. It is the same “alliance” and cycle of “rotation and reflection” referred to by Walker Percy in the opening chapter.

That literature contributes to a greater understanding of the world is not a new proposition, nor is it necessarily bold to assert that fiction can illuminate with considerable power the sometimes dark corners of our social orders, and even perhaps contribute to a greater understanding of ourselves as individuals. While an overall increase in knowledge is certainly a worthy end for both the writer and his audience, a temptation exists to leave the work at that juncture, to either accept or reject the instruction or insight of a particular fiction and leave the book—and its ideas, characters, and stories (not to mention the author)—on the shelf. How useful is the novel then (and by extension of course, the novelist) in the increase not only in knowledge, but in the enactment of agency? Nussbaum makes a passionate argument for the novel as a critical element in the development of social discourses:

I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own (1995, xvii).

This defense can in part be attributed to Adam Smith and his belief that moral judgment is the result of one person taking into himself the emotions and intentions of another and deciding if those same feelings would be so personally held, he or she first wiping the slate of their own circumstances clean to the degree that they may effectively “share” with the observed (Darwall 1999, 151). Smith’s “judicious spectator” is in some ways a theoretical predecessor of Rawls’ veil of ignorance: the impartiality forced upon those existing behind the veil reaches only so far as each one knows that his or her social standing might be affected by the choices made beforehand (though it is important to note that for Rawls, the strength of sympathy in invoking justice is thin at best, and must be entirely supplemented by the two principles). Impartiality, as Smith points out, does not preclude emotion, but justice can best be served when the spectator is “filtering” information about an observed scene to minimize bias (Nussbaum 1995, 73). The novel presents both the reader and author with rare opportunities for these kinds of observations, moments when we might step outside our own experience to learn about the experiences of another. Twain provided rich material in his rendering of Jim, and no doubt he was careful to portray him in a particular way. Beyond the question, therefore, of what does Jim tell us about the African American experience before the Civil War, lies the matter of

what the writing of Jim tells us about Twain's understanding of race relations. Percy layers the undertaking even further in the character of Forney Aiken, a white Northerner who tours the South "disguised" as a black man—much to the befuddlement and irritation of the protagonist.

To my mind, literature need not justify its purpose or existence as a tool for moral inquiry or rejuvenation, but nor should it be understood as trading in a different currency than philosophy. The two should complement one another and combine the strengths of art and reason to whatever depth of intricacy is useful to a given project. Consider, for instance, the power literature has in fusing back into one space the many aspects of life that have been so thoroughly compartmentalized as a result of modernity? Taking part in literary narratives, either by reading or writing them, reconnects the public and private: the author reaches into the world of the reader who in turn steps into the realm of the text. The Romantics appreciated this shared space, which one reason Taylor accesses a Romantic sensibility in his critiques of atomism and authenticity. As Nancy Yousef notes, "Some of the most substantive responses to, and transformations of, problems raised in eighteenth century philosophical writing took *literary* form in the nineteenth century" (2004, 11).

While I am advocating the use of literature in as a platform for regenerating agency, particularly because of the ability of reading and writing to inspire reflection and evaluation, I am not suggesting, necessarily, that literature provide the standards of moral content, only that it can facilitate the intellectual and emotional environment that accesses and poses questions of morality and judgment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### “I STILL HAVEN’T FOUND WHAT I’M LOOKING FOR”: MARK TWAIN AND THE PESSIMIST RESPONSE

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"You tell me whar a man gits his corn pone, en I'll tell you what his 'pinions is."  
—Mark Twain, “Corn-Pone Opinions”

#### I. Introduction

In the quotation above, Mark Twain is recounting a proverb from the “sermon” of Jerry, a local slave he befriended during his boyhood in Hannibal, Missouri. He goes on to Jerry’s words and their lasting effect on him:

I can never forget it. It was deeply impressed upon me. By my mother. Not upon my memory, but elsewhere. She had slipped in upon me while I was absorbed and not watching. The black philosopher's idea was that a man is not independent, and cannot afford views which might interfere with his bread and butter. If he would prosper, he must train with the majority; in matters of large moment, like politics and religion, he must think and feel with the bulk of his neighbors, or suffer damage in his social standing and in his business prosperities. He must restrict himself to corn-pone opinions -- at least on the surface. He must get his opinions from other people; he must reason out none for himself; he must have no first-hand views.

I think Jerry was right, in the main, but I think he did not go far enough.  
(Twain [1901] 1997, 92-93)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Corn-Pone Opinions” was first published posthumously in the *Europe and Elsewhere* volume of the New and Uniform Library Edition (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923). The date listed above is from a note on the original manuscript and represents the year of

The questionable origin of his fellow man's beliefs was a common theme in Mark Twain's writing, though he always included himself in those observations as well, lest he exhibit hypocrisy, the most heinous, most indefensible sin in his personal set of commandments. He was also both intrigued and dismayed by the frequency with which people "switched" identities—every individual had at least two faces, perhaps more, and to present one and cast off another and back again was a matter of routine nonchalance. A fascination with such a practice is ironic coming from a man known as both Mark Twain and Samuel Clemens. Nonetheless, "Corn-Pone Opinions" has Twain speaking on the same problem referenced by Taylor at the beginning of the previous chapter: the failure or inability of individuals to evaluate and reflect. While Twain does not attach a sense of melancholy to his observations (in fact, he notes how happy people are to dispense with critical thinking), he is directly addressing the dilemma that will preoccupy future theorists. He begins with the seemingly innocuous reality of how clothing styles (in this case, the hoop-skirt) constantly fall in and out of fashion: "Public opinion resented it before, public opinion accepts it now, and is happy in it. Why? Was the resentment reasoned out? Was the acceptance reasoned out? No. The instinct that moves to conformity did the work. It is our nature to conform; it is a

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composition. The entirety of Twain's loose manuscripts, letters, short pieces, and other unpublished works are housed at the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley. Paul Baender provides detailed textual and bibliographic information on many of these works in his notes to *What Is Man?: and other philosophical writings*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).

force which not many can successfully resist. What is its seat? The inborn requirement of Self-Approval. We all have to bow to that; there are no exceptions" (93-94). He goes on to comment on more serious matters, and in a conclusion that would make Rousseau proud, interprets our mutable, fickle beliefs as the inevitable outcome of being far too invested in how others perceive us:

But as a rule our self-approval has its source in but one place and not elsewhere -- the approval of other people. A person of vast consequences can introduce any kind of novelty in dress and the general world will presently adopt it -- moved to do it, in the first place, by the natural instinct to passively yield to that vague something recognized as authority, and in the second place by the human instinct to train with the multitude and have its approval. [...] Our table manners and company manners and street manners change from time to time, but the changes are not reasoned out; we merely notice and conform. We are creatures of outside influences; as a rule we do not think, we only imitate. We cannot invent standards that will stick; what we mistake for standards are only fashions, and perishable. We may continue to admire them, but we drop the use of them. (94)

Twain makes the desire for self-approval the motivating goal of our behaviors and actions, and that approval is merely the pleasure one experiences when untroubled by external scrutiny or judgment. Ethical reasoning is therefore a superficial and instrumental exercise in choosing the path of least resistance. Twain is describing Taylor's disengaged subject who lives in the "neutralized world of the psyche," and for whom "there is only de facto desire; there is no longer a place for a higher good, the object of strong evaluation, within nature itself. 'Whatsoever is the object of any man's appetite or desire, that is it which he for his part calleth good' as Hobbes put it. An

ethic can be constructed taking simply this de facto desire as its basis: the high good just as the maximization of de facto goals” (Taylor 1989, 249). But again, it is not only strong evaluation which has crumbled, but also its antecedent, the act of reflection. Reflection fails across-the-board: we would no sooner investigate our public and private affiliations than we would sincerely question the latest trend in footwear:

Morals, religions, politics, get their following from surrounding influences and atmospheres, almost entirely; not from study, not from thinking. [...] and not in a searching personal examination of the matter. [...] Mohammedans are Mohammedans because they are born and reared among that sect, not because they have thought it out and can furnish sound reasons for being Mohammedans; we know why Catholics are Catholics; why Presbyterians are Presbyterians; why Baptists are Baptists; why Mormons are Mormons; why thieves are thieves; why monarchists are monarchists; why Republicans are Republicans and Democrats, Democrats. We know it is a matter of association and sympathy, not reasoning and examination; that hardly a man in the world has an opinion upon morals, politics, or religion which he got otherwise than through his associations and sympathies. Broadly speaking, there are none but corn-pone opinions. (Twain 1910, 95-96)

When Twain finally declares “We all do no end of feeling, and we mistake it for thinking,” his words leap forward and land with an uncomfortable thud in 2010. Contemporary audiences recognize the condition as “truthiness,” satirist Stephen Colbert’s term for “the quality of being considered to be true because of what the believer wishes or feels, regardless of the facts.”<sup>21</sup> Colbert’s arena is the dizzying and

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<sup>21</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, April 2010), URL: [http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m\\_en\\_us1443362](http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1443362) (accessed June 3, 2010). The comparison may seem frivolous, but it operates within a larger context. A nonscientific poll conducted last year in the online edition of *Time* posed the question “Now that Walter Cronkite

often preposterous world of nonstop information, bundles of heavily partisan items condensed into tiny packages and shoved into the atmosphere. Here fact-finding is indeed daunting, so it might be unsurprising that today's audience turns to truthiness to survive the onslaught. Twain, on the other hand, is grieving a different set of facts: those uncovered when we turn the investigative lens on ourselves, the facts of our identities and our beliefs. His articulation of the way we make decisions "not from study, not from thinking. [...] and not in a searching personal examination" unequivocally places him in the midst of debates in contemporary political theory. He is entirely worthy of consideration in the same manner and by the same methods in which Kim approaches Taylor: as an author of a project of regenerating agency.

In the following pages, I offer additional examples and analysis of Twain's appropriateness for expanding the definition of a project of regenerating agency and, by extension, his merit as a topic for political theory. The discussion follows two broad tracts which support this claim. First, I review a portion of the existing literature on Twain relative to the critical attention he has received as a writer of political and philosophical depth. Second, I offer textual evidence to substantiate Twain's creation of a project of regenerating agency. Twain's project is twofold: on one level we can

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has passed on, who is America's most trusted newscaster?" Of the nearly 10,000 responses, 44% chose Stephen Colbert's broadcast partner and comedic foil, Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*. Given their sizeable audience and popular appeal, the two could reasonably claim a share in Twain's legacy of publicly exposing some of the most prickly faults, blind-spots, and inconsistencies in national culture.

identify his versions of self-cultivation and the religious imagination and how he pursued them; on another level, we can recognize how such projects manifested in his art, and how they exist today as compelling entry-points for individuals seeking locations and methods to stimulate the faculties of meaningful reflection and evaluation. However, Twain was and is a notoriously thorny topic of study, a man whose character and writing display alternating fits of delight and indignation, with stretches of the warmest nostalgia undermined by spells of depression and doubt. He was plagued by a multitude of personal losses and disruptive financial upsets, and one is left with the impression that Twain often viewed happiness suspiciously—to trust it might expose one to catastrophe. Moreover, the literature below makes clear, Twain's social and political beliefs, as well as their underlying moral and philosophical foundations, often contradicted one another and shifted over time. He is thus infamously hard to confine to any one partisan or ideologically derived framework. There is, however, a more pressing matter, which is if the disconsolate valleys of Twain's eccentric individuality affect his promise as an author of regenerating agency. Given the priority Kim places on *hope* as the nucleus of such a project, they might. An excavation of past literature is the first step toward a determination.

## II. Reading Mark Twain

To attempt even a broad thesis which encompasses both Twain and his writing in their entirety is to invite a swift and valid criticism: unless a great majority of his fiction, nonfiction, and biographical material is incorporated, the assessments drawn will be incomplete, perhaps fatally so. He wrote incessantly, so much so that scholars are still sifting through stacks of papers, notes, correspondence, and isolated scribbles to piece together as full a portrait as possible. Until every scrap, anecdote, and unidentified photograph is catalogued and made public the academic portrait will remain unfinished, but even after that point I imagine the story of Mark Twain will persist and grow.<sup>22</sup> In the meantime, researchers have to proceed judiciously in deciding how far to cast their nets, and inevitably some texts garner more attention than others. For my study of Twain, I make almost no distinction between his fiction and nonfiction in terms of what to

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<sup>22</sup> The editors and staff of Mark Twain Papers and Project Online at the Bancroft Library (University of California at Berkeley) have made incredible progress toward the most complete and accessible Twain ever through a systematic digitization of everything known to be in his hand. The collection includes “some 50 notebooks kept by Clemens between 1855 and his death in 1910; approximately *11,000 letters* [my emphasis] by him or his immediate family, and more than 17,000 letters to them; about 600 literary manuscripts left unpublished (and often unfinished) in his lifetime; manuscripts ranging from mere fragments to complete drafts (including chapters Clemens later deleted) for almost all of the books he published and for perhaps a tenth of his published short works (sketches, essays, editorials, speeches, poems); working notes, typescripts, and proofs for various titles; first editions and other lifetime editions, including American, English, Australian, Canadian, and German or Continental printings of his various books; about 150 books from his library, usually with marginalia; uncounted business documents, clippings, scrapbooks, interviews, bills, checks, photographs, and a handful of objects originally owned by him” (<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/MTP/about.html>, accessed July 23, 2010).

highlight or exclude; as mentioned above, those categories have little bearing on how a given work speaks to the concerns of political theory. Also, the following review of literature should curtail any criticism that small portions of text have been cherry-picked without regard for the larger whole. What follows is a survey that will illuminate major themes and recurrent questions in the history of Twain scholarship. Those themes and questions will show that traditional Twain scholarship (mostly the domain of university English departments) and contemporary political theory already share an enormous amount of common ground and mutual interests, including matters of self-knowledge and understanding, moral action and decision-making, and how individuals process the contradictions of modernity.

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Given the variety and depth of the writings of Mark Twain, it is surprising that he has not been treated more extensively by mainstream political theory. Consider Twain's contemporary, Charles Dickens, a writer as celebrated and heavily associated with his country as Twain is with the United States. Dickens has been examined by Richard Rorty, Martha Nussbaum, and scholars in the fields of ethics, religion, and law.<sup>23</sup> A considerable amount of scholarship from literary studies

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<sup>23</sup> See Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 66; Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, (Boston: Beacon

examines Twain's historical context, the methods and genres of his writing, and the ways in which he revealed his opinions on the social and political issues of his day. Notable titles include *Mark Twain in Eruption* by Bernard de Voto (1940), *Mark Twain and the Gilded Age* by Bryant M. French (1965), *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* by Justin Kaplan (1966), and *Mark Twain: God's Fool* by Hamlin Hill (1973). Dozens more might also be mentioned. These works draw heavily on the intertwining of the author's literary endeavors with his personal life, and as such their scope tends toward a wide array of themes and interests. Texts more explicitly concerned with political matters include Philip Foner's *Mark Twain, Social Critic* (1958) and Louis J. Budd's *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher* (1962), a field standard. These resources in particular are vital starting points for engaging Twain in the specific language of political theory. Both deal with the intersections between the author's public political associations and the sympathies or prejudices present in his fiction.

Twain scholars gradually began to close the gap between biography, literary criticism, and political theory with studies such as *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress* by Henry Nash Smith (1964), *Mark Twain and the Limits of Power* by James L. Johnson (1982) and *Mark Twain's Ethical Realism* by Joe B. Fulton (1997). Each of the foregoing approaches Twain from a more theoretical framework: human progress and

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Press, 1995); Allen Boyer, "The Antiquarian and the Utilitarian: Charles Dickens vs. James Fitzjames Stephen," *Tennessee Law Review* 56 (1989): 595-628.

industrialization, the Emersonian Self, and literary genre as an ethical tool, respectively.

Though the questions relevant to contemporary political philosophy have incrementally found their way into Twain criticism, political theory as a discipline has not given serious attention to the depth and complexity of his work. At least one exception is *The Idea of Fraternity in America* by Wilson Carey McWilliams (1973), which will be discussed below. Otherwise, Twain has often been relegated to the role of a helpful footnote, the subject of a colorful quotation or reverent nod to give texture to the social and political landscape of nineteenth century America. For instance, Joshua Dienstag's *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, and Spirit* (2006), an examination of pessimistic schools of philosophy, relies heavily on Rousseau, Nietzsche, Freud, and Schopenhauer, among others, but only for the continental history of pessimism. To gain a complete understanding of American intellectual development, Dienstag states, one needs to seriously consider Twain. To position Twain as complementary to the foregoing thinkers casts him not just as an observer and recorder of American thought, but as a participant in its maturity, a contributor to the questions and debates that mold our social and political ideas. Dienstag has not yet written this history, and thus we must assume our portrait of Twain and our scholarship in American political theory remain incomplete. I hope to provide some of the arguments that will flesh out this lacunae.

The missing strands of this history are forced into greater relief by at least two currents: first, the literary contemporaries of Twain, who in their praise and criticism identified him principally as the ideal inquisitor for a unique, fluctuating nation of Americans; and second, the abundant work in the late twentieth century on the value of literature as a viable form of philosophic writing (such as those titles discussed in the previous chapter). Nevertheless, the breadth of literature on Mark Twain is enormous, and therefore the selections below represent the work which best gestures toward a reading of Twain framed by the interests of political theory. In the service of clarity, the following section will be organized into the three parts:

1. An overview of the landmarks in Twain literary and biographical scholarship;
2. A discussion of Foner, Budd, and the works which bring Twain criticism closer to the modes of political theory; and
3. An examination of more recent scholarship.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The analysis could easily begin with Albert Bigelow Paine's biography of Twain or the reminiscences of his friend William Dean Howells, but these texts will be considered for separate purposes when the peaks and valleys of Twain's personal life are examined. Also falling under the rubric of biographical interest would be Van Wyck Brooks' controversial *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1920) which attempts a psychoanalysis of the author as a victim of thwarted artistic development. The Brooks theory, though influential, if, for no other reason, it was the first of its kind, was dismissed by the equally influential *Mark Twain's America* by deVoto (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935). Followers of deVoto, often vicious in their rejection of the "pseudo-Freudian method" of Brooks, dismissed his arguments that Twain was softened, his creative intellect diluted by his marriage, by Howells, and by the memory of his religious mother. Their first line of defense was to point to Twain's vigorous and sometimes inflammatory social criticism—no writer so shackled by late nineteenth century

### *Early Scholarship: Biography and Artistry*

In 1937, Twain's first biographer and close friend Albert Bigelow Paine died, and the personal documents selected by Twain to make up the official archive, the Mark Twain Papers, passed to the editorship of Bernard DeVoto at Harvard University. DeVoto became the literary executor to the Clemens estate and published three volumes of previously unseen material: *Mark Twain in Eruption* (1940), *The Portable Mark Twain* (1946), and *Mark Twain at Work* (1952). His work was the first to consolidate and organize the volumes of loose paper and materials left by Twain, and his publications remain important resources, particularly for fleshing out areas of the author's life already established by his own writing and Paine's biography (The Mark Twain Papers and Project 2010).<sup>25</sup> *Mark Twain in Eruption* was the first major public release of Twain's memoirs after Paine, and it is often recalled for Twain's cutting personal remarks on many of his contemporaries, from Theodore Roosevelt to the wives of business associates. The book allows Twain to present

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sentimentality or decorous New England society, they rebutted, would make such audacious attacks against imperialism, injustice, and hypocrisy, and certainly not illicit chuckles while doing so. Freud has made several appearances in Twain scholarship, though the drawing of parallels between the two usually gives scholars pause. The most sound comparison is James M. Cox's *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, c2002). A more recent example is Abraham Kupersmith's *Twain and Freud on the Human Race* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, c2009) which attempts to show that Twain's beliefs on human nature were not only systematic and innovative, but also predicted the theories of Freud.

<sup>25</sup> The undated introductory material from the online version of The Mark Twain Papers and Project, <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/MTP/about.html>, accessed multiple times between January 26, and July 23, 2010. Hereinafter noted as MTPP.

himself for the most part, and the figure on display is unmistakably a man and writer in the last years of his life with many tragedies and bitter lessons festering inside him. According to DeVoto, Twain claimed he wanted his biographical materials to “do what Rousseau failed to do in his *Confessions*: he aimed to be the first man in all history ‘to tell the whole truth about himself,’” though the declaration could hardly overcome Twain’s penchant for telling tales (Pochmann 1941, 175). Considered one of the foremost Twain scholars, DeVoto also prepared the first public-ready manuscript for *Letters from the Earth* in 1939, but the volume remained unpublished until 1962 at Clara Clemens’ behest (MTPP 2010).

Regarding Twain’s aesthetic sensibilities, G.C. Bellamy’s *Mark Twain as a Literary Artist* (1950) presents the writer as a deliberate and self-aware craftsman of themes and tone, a viewpoint contradicting once popular images of Twain as a man whose gifts flowed from him with little premeditation or authorial rigor. This characterization synchronizes with Kim’s directive that regenerative projects emerge from an individual’s conscious desire and intent to open (or reopen) channels of personal reflection and evaluation. However, her reading stops short of investing in Twain a belief in human flourishing, a necessary component for a project of regenerating agency. Bellamy suggests that Twain’s creative impulse operated from four “bases” of his mind: the moralist, determinist, pessimist, and patheticist (56, 61, 64). Echoing Brooks’ argument of artistic failure in Twain’s inability to reconcile

contradicting pressures (such as industrialization and traditional agrarian values, as we will see developed later by Smith), Bellamy finds Twain's reformist yearning to instruct and lift up his readers undermined by his belief that mankind is ruined from birth. His natural sympathy or "patheticism" led not to hope, but to resignation, and was always terminated by a bitter acknowledgement that man's cruelty exceeded his compassion (64). Therefore, according to Bellamy, reading Twain for moral illumination leads to a dead end: "From Mark Twain's work the reader gets a vast amount of self-knowledge, particularly that touching the darker side of human nature. But from much of that work he gets very little that increase his self-respect" (118). For Bellamy, these negations fuel fascinating, if not always successful, works of art, as her definition of success requires aesthetics to ultimately serve an ethical purpose.

Bellamy's work describes Twain as an architect struggling with particular motifs, and though she emphasizes the self-aware approach he took in the thematic construction of his novels, she does not devote much attention to their literary form (Blair 1951, 523). This exercise was later taken up by Henry Nash Smith. Like DeVoto, Smith served as the editor of the Mark Twain Papers (1953-1964), and completed his predecessor's work by convincing Clara Clemens to release DeVoto's manuscript of *Letters from the Earth* (MTPP 2010). In addition to his executorial duties, Smith made major original contributions to Twain scholarship, beginning

with *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* in 1962. Here Smith committed painstaking analysis to excavate Twain's literary methods—how his uses of language, genre, narrative, and structure both shaped the artistic content of his work and responded to (or resisted) his ethical and social concerns. Twain sought to bring what Smith calls his “vernacular values” to the forefront of his work despite the stifling, even corrupting nature of his environment. Though never made explicit, these values might be freedom from social convention and the idea that a good life is one lived with an honest account of oneself (Smith 1962, viii), an account extracted from critical reflection. Borrowing the phraseology of George Santayana on the “cult of the genteel,” Smith explains how Twain's perspectives in and outside of conformist, Gilded Age traditions motivated his writing, and notably his adoption of colloquial language (2).<sup>26</sup> Twain deploys his literary technique first with *The Innocents Abroad*: his use of exaggeration and highly creative visuals in the recreation of European and Middle Eastern landmarks recall the flourish of his journalist roots. However, perhaps more interesting (and complicated) is the “narrative persona” which shifts throughout the travel log (22). Though the facts of Twain's actual expedition are verifiable, his account of the trip is represented through a variety of voices, some of which make a parody of nineteenth-century

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<sup>26</sup> For an extended discussion on *The Gilded Age* (1873) and its importance in illuminating Twain's literary and political contradictions, see Bryant Morey French, *Mark Twain and the Gilded Age: The Book that Named an Era* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1965).

travel literature, others which narrate the voyage with a naiveté Twain himself did not possess. His seemingly uninformed voice mirrors and ridicules the reactions of his shipmates. Smith contends that this was not necessarily a precise calculation on Twain's part, but rather a function of his instinct:

Mark Twain's imaginative insight showed itself at this stage in his career (and often later) to be more reliable than his command of the technique of extended narrative. The 'I' who appears in the book under so many guises and is seen from so many different perspectives, like the subject of a cubist portrait, possesses an identity after all. He represents the meaning Mark Twain, with his gift for recognizing mythical elements in his own experience, was able to extract from the confusions of the *Quaker City* excursion. (50)

As Smith demonstrates, this "I" is a fledgling version of the individual that will eventually emerge fully-formed in the person of Huckleberry Finn. Huck's first-person account allowed Twain to step back as the creator and relieve himself of any lingering tensions the "cult of the genteel" might have imposed on his young protagonist. The values of Huck's vernacular took center stage and steered the artistic vision and moral narrative of the novel, that is, of course, until the conclusion.

Smith's treatment of the infamous final scenes sees Tom Sawyer's reclaiming of the action as Twain's failure to push his vernacular to its ethical end: he realized Huck and Jim would never be free, and thus the ugly farce of the final chapters shoves the narrative back toward its comic beginnings (134). However, Twain made another attempt to reconcile his bleak views on human nature with hope and

progress, though the results turned even more tragic. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Smith sites that Twain "was subjecting the vernacular perspective developed so variously in his earlier work to a test that destroyed it. He tried not merely to transform the vernacular value system into a political ideology, but to make it the conceptual framework for a novel embodying his philosophy of history and using this philosophy to interpret nineteenth-century civilization" (138). Again Twain's protagonist, even removed from his own place and time, is unable to answer the degradation that accompanies man's movement through history. And in Hank Morgan's story, the disappointment is even more acute, the distance from Huck's climax of a free conscience so far, that Twain could no longer sustain his search for progress. His narrative personas finally retreat to the "immunity of a detached observer," the omnipotent Satan of *The Mysterious Stranger* who is able to label mankind for what he is without also implicating himself (170). Satan judges man as inconsequential and doomed, and Twain's writing career ended with that verdict.

The foregoing is only a very small amount of Twain scholarship through mid-century, but it is characteristic of the overall themes of interest to scholars during that time. Of the works that followed, a few are worth mentioning for their contribution to the critical canon and their continuing influence on current scholarship.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For a bibliographical recounting of the literature up through the 1980's, see E. Hudson

Biographers have been wrestling with Twain since before his death, most finding the official biography from Albert Bigelow Paine to be somewhat lacking, especially since the validity of several of the episodes recounted therein are even acknowledged by the author as suspect. Such is the mercurial nature of the man himself. The legacies left by Brooks and DeVoto also cast long shadows, though their work has not stopped countless others from giving their interpretations of Twain's life and work. While these texts may not speak directly to the questions in political theory mentioned earlier, namely the problem of alienation and diminished agency in the last century of American society, they are worth mentioning for the sake of completeness. First is Justin Kaplan's *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (1966), a dense, detailed, and colorful work. He emphasizes many of the personal relationships that Twain both enjoyed and reviled, as the writer was rarely shy in broadcasting either his praise or dislike for colleagues and strangers. Kaplan also puts money at the very forefront of Twain's career motivations and devotes considerable energy to Twain's disastrous forays into publishing. While most scholars agree on some measure of profit incentive is evident in Twain's activities, Kaplan holds that Twain wrote primarily for money despite his many invectives against capitalist greed in his writing (Krause 1967, 443). Twain's obsession with

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Long and J.R. LeMaster, *The New Mark Twain Handbook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985). A more recent capture of Twain scholarship can be found in Shelley Fisher Fishkin, ed., *A Historical Guide to Mark Twain* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

money, however, was but one symptom of his almost chronic debt, the unenviable circumstances of which Twain blamed at least partially on his own megalomania (Kaplan, 348).

Hamlin Hill's *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (1973) adds to a long tradition in Twain scholarship: "correcting" the errors and omissions of Paine's 1912 official biography. Hill's work was originally unique because of his access to a large amount of unpublished material, most notably the journals of Twain's secretary, Isobel Lyon. Hill was also the first biographer to dedicate significant attention to the personal struggles of Twain's later years. Previous scholars had analyzed the literary output of Twain's post-1900 career (with Henry Nash Smith's *The Development of a Writer* a dominant standout), but Hill follows the precedent set by Brooks and DeVoto in the examination of Twain as a deeply psychologically troubled personality. Hill also argues a point proposed by the author himself: that his professional life, his literary life, and his home life were inexorably interconnected and one could not be successfully separated from the other two (Hill, xix).

Another milestone in Twain studies arrived a year after Hill's often unflattering portrait in *God's Fool. Mark Twain and the South* (1974) by Arthur G. Pettit marks the first comprehensive attempt to tie Twain's complex identity as a "Southerner" to his writing and self-understanding. Attaching the label to a figure as emblematic and expansive as Twain is a precarious venture, a problem Pettit

addresses early in his manuscript: “If Southerners were obsessed with Time and Place, Defeat and Deprivation, Race and Guilt, it is not surprising that spokesmen for the South have struggled for the better part of two centuries trying to explain their special situation. ...And so again with Mark Twain—errant son of the South, disloyal and disinherited, but still heir to the Burden and the Tragedy, and himself enigmatic and cursed” (5). Even describing someone as a “Southern writer” and ascribing to him or her the many attendant attributes is—following Twain’s uneasy relationship with the term—highly problematic, as Walker Percy will later show. Nevertheless, with *Mark Twain and the South*, Pettit introduces in one volume a branch of inquiry now vital to the whole of Twain scholarship.

### *Social and Political Studies of Twain*

Foner’s *Mark Twain, Social Critic* (1958) approaches the canon by categorizing major socio-political topics relevant to the author’s era and examines Twain’s treatment of such in his writing. The study benefits greatly by the inclusion of a vast amount of then unpublished material from the Mark Twain Papers housed at the Bancroft Library at the University of California (where the collection still resides). Letters to and for Twain, autobiographical sketches, notes, personal manuscripts, essays of criticism, and more provide a deep well of resources to dredge in the service of unpacking the ideas behind the work. Foner traces critical reception of Twain and shows that the majority of established critics in both journalistic and

literary circles found the work to be effective in rousing laughter, evocative in description, and skillfully constructed, but nevertheless unworthy to be counted among the texts of serious men of letters. As Foner explains: "To the upholders of the genteel tradition, the keepers of the cherished flame of Eastern culture, a humorist was a jester and a buffoon, *not* of the same breed of men as the gentle Whittier, the scholarly Longfellow, the urbane Lowell, the cultured Emerson, the polished Holmes...The jokes were good, it was conceded, but not even good jokes should be confused with good literature. (Foner 1958, 41).

Compounding Twain's poor standing when juxtaposed with his contemporaries (and his infamous lampooning of them in the Whittier Birthday Speech) were the facts of his popularity, his methods of distribution (his work was often by subscription in mainstream periodicals rather than in stand-alone books), and his comic lectures, all of which left a bad taste in the mouths of the established intelligentsia (42). Two exceptions were *Californian* editor Charles Henry Webb and writer Bret Harte, associates of Twain who were the first to publicly describe their colleague as a satirist, a keen critic of society whose humorous renderings of everything from tourists to the Confederacy contained cutting observations between the one-liners (39). Twain's most illustrious praise came from William Dean Howells, the respected editor of *Atlantic Monthly*. Howells was quick to recognize and passionate to defend the notion that Twain represented much more than literary

burlesque (39). Howells and a very short list of other supporters maintained that Twain was probably superior, but certainly the critical and intellectual equal to the luminaries of his day, and his genius resided in both his humorous work and such “serious” pieces as *The Gilded Age* (43). They were understandably frustrated when critics finally began to speak a similar language upon the publication of *The Prince and the Pauper* in 1881; Twain, the latecomers wrote, displayed a “new” maturity and depth of purpose, an ambition of mind beyond the scope and abilities of a simple humorist. For Howells and those like-minded, the genius had always been evident. In 1882, Howells wrote an extensive tribute to his friend in *Century* magazine: “I shall not insist here upon Mark Twain as a moralist; though I warn the reader that if he leaves out of account an indignant sense of right and wrong, a scorn of all affectation and pretense, an ardent hate of meanness and injustice, he will come indefinitely short of knowing Mark Twain” (46). Gradually the tide of majority opinion moved toward Twain’s favor, and by his death he had been ardently lauded as a writer of immense courage, keen insight, and very real philosophical depth. At the apex of this praise was *Harper’s* Archibald Henderson who claimed Twain as “...a factor of high ethical influence on our civilization; and the philosopher and humanitarian look out from the twinkling eyes of the humorist...there is yet to come that greater prosperity of the future which will, I dare say, class Mark Twain as America’s greatest sociologist of letters” (53). Henderson’s remarks were prophetic:

soon after Twain's passing his stature expanded from the top echelons of literary criticism into neighboring academic realms. Twain the novelist was now Twain the historian, the cultural anthropologist, and the foremost chronicler of American life beyond the well-read and well-published upper classes of the Eastern seaboard. Popular acknowledgement in both the parlors and barber shops of the nation celebrated Twain as the first American author to give voice to the entire country, to expand our literary and national identity from one shore to the other. Also, given that his fame as a uniquely American creature was unmatched overseas, it would be difficult to undersell the space he grew to occupy in the social imaginary of both continents (54).

Beyond the useful summation of the critical response contemporary to Twain, Foner's study attempts a general examination of major topical matters relating to social and political life. These issues include race, religion, labor unions, imperialism, and an insightful discussion on the "brotherhood of man" (a topic that would resurface again under the scrutiny of political theory). Twain's views on the most basic forms and imperatives of neighborly fellowship and compassion are greatly enhanced by Foner's access to a treasure trove of unpublished notebooks. His use of the source material reveals some interesting contradictions in Twain's political thought, even if the motives or circumstances behind the changes in opinion are undocumented or unknowable. On women's suffrage, for instance, Twain

cleverly played to the fears of the male-dominated audiences of miners in the gold-hungry West (a demographic he regarded with both pity and disdain) and publicly spoke against the expansion of voting rights to women. Twain claimed that women's arguments for inclusion in the democratic franchise were unsustainable and faulty. Yet by the turn of the century, his opinion had utterly transformed in support of female suffrage, a perspective which appears far more in line with his beliefs on the importance of a healthy, fully-participatory civil society (88). The caveat here, of course, is just how far the twenty-first century observer can travel in judging the ebb and flow of passions and convictions of a man over his lifetime. Twain's opposing conjectures on women's suffrage span decades, and scholars only have so much evidence to dissect to find points of personal political conversion. Foner seems less bothered by this fact, or rather, perhaps, he unconsciously relies on it as part of his high estimation of the author. Since such contradictions demonstrate as long metamorphoses rather than sharp about-face revelations, Foner is content to describe them more as fascinating minutiae and less as indicators of patterns in social and political orientations. On the other hand, Louis J. Budd's *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher* (1962, 2001) presents a slightly less effusive view of its subject while covering much of the same material.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher* was first published in 1962, not long after Foner's work, but it was republished in 2001 with a new introduction by the author. In addition to the content, the long span between editions make Budd's work an important entry for gauging trends in

If Foner spends a fair amount of energy presenting Twain as a “serious” writer, and one who was very much regarded as such during his lifetime, Budd calls for a pause in the recasting of Twain as a vocal social reformer. He instead insists we anchor our appreciation of the man to his gifts of satire and wit. Twain himself famously underlines this point in *The Mysterious Stranger*: “Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little, weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast.” (Twain 1916, 236). Despite this caveat, however, Budd’s analysis, like Foner’s, is penetrating in its detail, though his conclusions temper the former’s proclivity toward excusing Twain’s more incriminating moments. These moments, Budd argues, must be accounted for in Twain’s life and writing just as his most consistent and well-documented opinions, such as intolerance of violent cruelty and political corruption. He suffered such offenses so acutely as to leave him deeply skeptical regarding the core values innate to humanity. His incredibly unkind words for Native Americans, for instance, hardly coincide with these overarching themes, but that is precisely the reason such words must be balanced alongside his most virulent indictments against ruthless cattle-barons or rapacious, bloodthirsty imperialists (Budd 1962, 45). However, Budd’s project goes beyond a mere tallying of Twain’s virtues and biases: his unifying thread is the correct placement of Twain

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twentieth century Twain scholarship.

within the author's own social and political context—with the implication present that taking Twain in his proper place in time is the only accurate way to evaluate his thinking against our advantage of looking back into history.

Unlike Foner's topical approach, Budd examines Twain chronologically, and he finds the writer adherent to social norms not popularly associated with his traditional stereotype. In fact, Twain is often described as a reactive personality, one more prone to doubt and confusion than the iconic everyman author for America's age of expansion. As Budd explains,

During his long life, society changed with at least average speed and his ideas made responsive shifts, some of them just as crucial as the plunges into pessimism that spoiled the serenity of his sunset years. Even in those years, though he never revised his map of society fast enough, his hunger for the truth could drive him to fresh insights that were brilliant rather than glowering. (xx)

Twain's awareness of the world around him (if not of the twentieth century structuralist's systems that shaped it) is underlined by an important, though often minimalized fact of his life: his early and influential years as a journalist. Before he wrote novels, Twain wrote headlines, and his talents were aimed directly (and often lethally) at the current events in politics and public affairs. Even in these early writings, Twain shows himself resistant to easy categorization under any one platform or ideology. Nevertheless, he could be by turns vigorously partisan, proudly inflammatory, and doggedly independent in matters of social and economic controversy. His youthful prejudices against certain groups (Irish immigrants,

Chinese laborers, and Jewish businessmen as the stand-outs) would be rethought as age took its mediating effect, but it was more than the simple passing of time that changed him. Such bigotries were eventually overwhelmed by stronger, more broadly and deeply-held feelings which only increased over the decades: a generous sensitivity toward the vulnerable and oppressed and vicious contempt for pretension and hypocrisy (19). Budd ties these beliefs to his support of the overarching notion that Twain was, in his own words, a “statesman without salary” (1962, xxi). From the public scolding or praise of local officials in his newspaper days to the famed lectures and punditry of his last decade, Twain rarely, if ever, withheld an opinion on civic matters when he felt his words needed to be spoken, even if they were not to be heard or heeded. Often his loquaciousness circled around the nature of American citizenship; irrespective of any acknowledgement of his enormous audience and influence, he freely offered observations on behalf of and criticisms against the entire nation. Such comments became especially pointed during his many trips abroad. After one early excursion to the Holy Land, Twain sized up his traveling companions for the *Herald* in New York: “Many and many a simply community in the Eastern hemisphere will remember for years the incursion of the strange horde in the year of our Lord 1867, that called themselves Americans, and seemed to imagine in some unaccountable way that they had the right to be proud of it” (28). His rather cool assessment of his countrymen speaks to the

solemnity with which he so often viewed matters of state—including reputations and relations among international parties. American tourists were too often wide-eyed and superficial, gleefully consuming the greatest hits of foreign culture with little to no critical distance by which to evaluate their host countries or themselves, assuming they had any interest in such matters at all (which, to Twain’s eye, they did not) (28).

It may have been Twain’s ubiquity, both in person and in print, that opened the floor for him to speak as, for, and against the whole of the United States, a task to which his natural disposition was well suited. However, to situate him more precisely in the landscape of native soil is more complicated. After all, Twain considered himself enough of a Southerner to join the Confederacy in 1861 as part of small band of agemates from farms around his birthplace in Hannibal, Missouri. However, his first biographer noted that this decision was less a commitment to secessionist zealotry and more an interest in joining his friends in a choice to “follow Lee,” who had famously promised himself to Virginia before the Union (Paine 1912, “The Soldier”). Twain spent his entire military career (all two weeks of it) strenuously steering clear of any hint of combat. He and his friends merely wandered around in the woods. It is interesting, then, that when speaking in Tennessee at a memorial for Abraham Lincoln in 1901, he assumed the posture and

language of a battle-hardened veteran—another moment of contradiction (or irony) for historians to ponder (Rubin 1972, 81).

Though Budd's work highlights many of the inconsistencies in Twain's social and political thought—or at least that thought as represented in his public speech and writing—he emphasizes two points. First, Twain's popular persona, both in his own time and far into the twentieth century, as a simple democrat, a teller of fantastic or rustic tales to preserve the rural masses and entertain the elite, is entirely too shallow. Ample evidence exists that paints Twain with healthy republican strokes. Budd writes, "Seldom in his long life did he doubt that almost everybody makes as much money in the end as he deserves, that property rights are the foundations of the happiest society, and that amount of property a man has largely determine the extent of his right to help guide society..." (210). Budd's second point is Twain's own understanding of his writing and his public life. Despite his cynicism or frustration, his "newspaper and magazine clowning," or the thorny, ambiguous politics of his later work, Twain considered knowledge of and involvement in the public affairs of the day to be indispensable to citizenship. Though some opinions changed, throughout his life he held to a staunch belief that he was to be politically conversant and expressive (209). Writing was his primary outlet for such expression, and it would be difficult to deny that Twain considered it a vocation in the most vital sense. Furthermore, writing was the central spiritual exercise in his

self-cultivation: it allowed him to deliberate over the public good, human potential (or lack thereof), and fostered the creation of his moral identity.

Henry Nash Smith's slim but well-regarded *Mark Twain's Fable of Progress* (1964) probes the questions that troubled Twain as the American century which emerged fresh from revolution transformed into the Gilded Age. Smith recalls Brooks' theme that Twain's creative development suffered and eventually withered permanently below its initial potential, particularly during the last twenty years of his life. However, where Brooks' inaugurated the era of posthumous Twain scholarship with a quasi-Freudian evaluation of psychological encumbrances, Smith finds that Twain's dénouement begins as his intellectual (and, one might argue, philosophical) paradigms mature. As capitalism and technology became inextricably bound to human progress, the complexities became more than Twain could reconcile while maintaining some sense of optimism. Smith calls this Twain's "negative conversion," or "a loss of faith in human progress and human perfectibility which all but paralyzed his powers of imagination and condemned him to the relative sterility of his last twenty years" (3). This paralysis found a fictional representation in Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* where the author launched a failed reconciliation of the many complex pressures and contradictions which were now defining the industrial age. The new economy of the post-war period forced open as many deep schisms in everyday society as the

conflict had, and Twain felt an imperative to respond to them (7). He wrote *Connecticut Yankee* at a time when the public dialogue on the wealth explosions and lost communities endemic to the shift to industrialism was at its most contentious. For Smith, this novel alone speaks to Twain's importance: he had acute awareness in the socio-economic changes that had been initiated by war and set out to address them soberly, deliberately, and yet in the guise of a vibrant burlesque (20). The same year Twain published *Connecticut Yankee*, the urbane Howells made a similar attempt to answer the societal transformation in his serial *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, and the two works share commonalities in the portrayal of nineteenth-century capitalism as a powerful, ambiguous force, one that could enable men to improve themselves through innovation and hard work while also eroding the humanitarian values standing in opposition to gross economic inequities and rampant greed (35). Their protagonists illustrated that sweeping changes in the ways of getting and spending fundamentally transformed everyone from the top down, from the crass *nouveau riche* of the new ruling class to the individual wage-earner who left the farm for the factory. According to Smith, Twain's Hank Morgan presented the question on "whether the American Adam, who began as representative of a preindustrial order, could make the transition to urban industrialism and enter upon a new phase of his existence by becoming a capitalist hero" (69).

The road to that idealized state was much bumpier than Twain might have first anticipated, as throughout the novel the impressive blessings brought to Camelot by the Yankee (technology and capitalism being at the forefront) either lose their luster or produce effects more sinister than increased freedom and expanded choice. Twain, after all, lived in a time when the contradictions of modernity reached resonated at high pitch. Both Twain and Hank professed belief in a robust republican polity fueled by capitalist enterprise, but in leaving the corrupt feudal system of the Middle Ages, the people of Camelot find the new economy of industry and speculation to be just as ruthless. As Hank's plans veer into farce and begin to crumble, Smith asserts that Twain's own loyalty to his original vision—that of a modern man introducing a new and better civilization to an ignorant and superstitious past—dissipates as well. Moreover, Smith argues that Twain's ability to confront American progress through fiction was doomed from the outset since his contemporary landscape could not be accurately recreated for Hank's experiences (99, 100). Like many of his contemporary critics, Smith characterizes Twain's "failure" with *Connecticut Yankee* as an artistic one:

"Like every artist, he was by instinct an idealist in philosophy: things became real for him in proportion as he could give them imaginative substance. Whether consciously or not, in writing *A Connecticut Yankee* he was attempting to justify his belief in the superiority of the American economic and political system by creating a favorable image of it in fiction. ... It was a heroic undertaking... If he could have brought it off, he would have written a novel on the scale of *War and Peace* or *The Charterhouse of Parma*. ...Nevertheless, he did fail, and the

circumstances throw light on the difficulties that stood in the way of any American writer who tried to take stock of what was happening to his country in the decades after the Civil War" (100).

My argument challenges this kind of evaluation of the novel: Smith allows that only a "great artist" like Twain could attempt such a book, but I contend that the value lies not just in the finished text, but in the undertaking itself as an effort to make sense of questions that plagued Twain.

The Yankee is both a worker and employer, and thus labor strife is conspicuously absent from the novel, as is any viable system of currency to prop up Camelot's transfigured economy: "...the Boss simply does business with himself" (102). Placed against the backdrop of these artistic inconsistencies and the social confusion of nineteenth century America, *Connecticut Yankee* demonstrates Twain's need to understand the new frameworks by which society would operate, and his conclusions, just as Hank's, were far from satisfactory. They were, to Smith's estimation, rather causes for despondency: "When he [Twain] found it impossible to show how the values represented by his vernacular protagonist could survive in an industrial society, he lost his faith in the value system of that society" (107). While Smith's analysis stops short of the psychic probing of Brooks' treatment in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, he nevertheless reiterates the notion that Twain suffered a kind of philosophical and artistic collapse, and at the very least the abruptness of *Connecticut Yankee's* ending and Hank's deathbed anguish suggest his creator

suffered an episode of intense frustration and disillusionment.<sup>29</sup> It is a more acute replay of Twain's oft-described "failure" at the conclusion of the novel's predecessor, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), though in both cases Twain's literary defeats have left personal and philosophical archives of great value to political theory, as both stories represent the necessity of reflection and evaluation.

The preceding has taken a sample from two general categories of Twain scholarship: first, the canonical biographical work through the mid-twentieth century, and second, the initial forays into discussions devoted to Twain's social and political beliefs. At this point it is instructive to pause and consider a fascinating element of Twainian studies, one borne out of the density of the subject and the abundant amount of material. To uncover one picture of Twain, one as "truthful" as the evidence of a given study suggests, is a valuable and rewarding enterprise. However, as a figure of scrutiny Twain is shifty and difficult, open to many interpretations and beholden to none. Consider John Lyndenberg's comparison of Budd and Smith:

One would scarcely realize that Mr. Budd and Mr. Smith were writing about the same man. The explanation is, of course, that Mr. Budd mines an entirely different vein of Twainiana. Painstakingly digging

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<sup>29</sup> *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is also singled out briefly in Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (London, New York: Verso, 1990). In this treatment on the permeation of racial inequity as a fundamental organizing principle in American society, Saxton also shows that Twain could not make Hank the man with the answers he sought. Like Smith, Saxton describes Twain's revelation that it is not industrialization or the rejection thereof that leads men to ruin, but rather deficiencies that are a natural fact of our humanity (Saxton, 354).

out and classifying Twain's readily expressed views on particular social problems, he shows us a relatively simple man: a self-styled 'moralist' and 'teacher,' a believer in most of the precepts of Manchester liberalism, an opponent of graft and corruption and professional politicians, an old-stock American with most of the commonplace prejudices against various minority groups—and at the same time, a warm human being whose sympathies for the underdog conflicted with some of his naturally acquired dislikes... [W]hat strikes me most illuminating ... is the way in which the treatment of different materials leads to almost diametrically opposed pictures of the man. When we collect and arrange Twain's pronouncements on social problems we find little more than the normal confusions of a sensitive social observer in a rapidly changing society. When we look closely at Twain's fiction we discern the deep-seated conflicts which at first engendered works of great imaginative power but finally paralyzed his creative energies. (Lyndenberg 1963, 102)

As Lyndenberg points out, one's reading and impression of Twain can (and as he implies, will) vary according to what is read—his fiction or his nonfiction? His travelogues or his editorials? His speeches, personal letters, or all of the above? This partitioning of his work was a common methodology in the first half of twentieth century Twain scholarship. While the work generated still stands, I think the separation of one Twain from another is not as useful tactic as once thought (though given the amount of Twain to study, the technique's efficacy continues unchallenged). After all, neither Budd nor Smith are awarded with the "right" interpretation even though their conclusions appear mutually exclusive. If neither are wrong, then both must be correct, and therefore the most accurate portrait of Twain lies in work that minimizes the distinctions between one type of writing over another. The man himself saw his life and his work as fundamentally intertwined:

“To me, the most important feature of my life is its literary feature” (Twain 1917, 130). As shall be demonstrated below, examining what Twain recorded, what he created, and what he said as separate accounts has lost ground as the dominant methodology. Contemporary scholars are now more likely to approach and receive Twain on a variety of levels simultaneously, and while the results can be perplexing, they have also proven revealing.

### *Later Scholarship*

As mentioned above, at the midway point through the last century of Twain scholarship, at least one theme has become apparent: the attempt to explain or reconcile the dualities in Twain’s life and writing. The critic of modern economy and ardent capitalist, the celebrity writer and interloper into “high” culture, the tamed Samuel Clemens and the boisterous Mark Twain—resolving the contradictions in these seemingly incongruous personalities has inspired volumes of conjecture. Also consistent in the literature are explanations of Twain’s supposed denouement after the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the how and why his creative energies eventually led to the disturbing conclusions of *The Mysterious Stranger*. Both threads are explored in James M. Cox’s *Mark Twain and The Fate of Humor* (1966, 2002), a prominent example of approaching Twain’s work and his life (including his beliefs) as two inseparable, even interchangeable, parts of the same whole. The writing reflects the man and vice versa.

Employing Freudian language on the nature of Twain's "split-personality," Cox identifies Olivia Clemens as the superego to Samuel Clemens' id manifest as Mark Twain. This reading borrows from Brooks' controversial treatise on Twain three decades previous, and like Brooks' *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, Cox's understanding of Twain's literary abilities rests heavily on the author's close relationship with his wife. Olivia acted as Twain's "editor and censor," and her loss of influence at death proved to be as important to his creative output as her mediating presence was during their marriage (75). Cox veers away from Henry Nash Smith's characterization of Twain as a deeply troubled personality in the last stage of his career and instead maintains he was first and foremost devoted to the art of humor. When Twain wrote his brother Orion in 1865 stating he had discovered his calling to "excite the laughter of God's creatures," Cox found evidence of "the unmistakable intention shining through the assumed stateliness, the ponderous gravity, the elaborate mechanical analogy, and the pervasive self-deprecation. [...]" This conversion, mirroring Samuel Clemens' conversion from would-be preacher to low humorist, was both the act and fate to which he would give his life" (33). Twain's pursuit of humor, therefore, was more than a method of self-expression: it was his vocation, the deliberate dedication to pleasure that extended as far as his artistic wits and socially astute sensibilities would allow. His ambition was rooted in humor, and that ambition was thwarted when the objects of his play were

overwhelmed by his disappointment in the world. In the end, even his brilliant comedic devices could not answer the hypocrisy and brutality he found in mankind. Cox's analysis probes the many identities Twain utilized in his comic writing, as well as his awareness that his work would invite the reader to engage the texts in new ways. For all his complicated guises and alternating voices, Twain believed in that "alliance" between the author, reader, and language: "as long as the narrator is honest, there is no real distinction between the narrator and reader," even if that narrator is the "Mark Twain" extension of Samuel Clemens (41). To recall the earlier example, Twain's "honest" depiction of American tourists (honest in that he demonstrated incredible fidelity to the style of urbane travel writing as much as he did to Southern vernacular) permits the reader to enter the story for himself, to exit (or rotate into) the confines of his own identity and experience something potentially transformative.

Cox makes a sharp distinction between the entertaining humor of Twain's pre-*Huckleberry* career and the disquieting tone of his late work: the mischief and amusements give way to the uncomfortable invention of satire. In Twain's most explicit description of humor, the character of Satan from *The Mysterious Stranger* relates a famous passage: "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand. You are always fussing and fighting with your other weapons. Do you ever use this one?"

No; you leave it lying rusting. As a race, do you ever use it at all? No, you lack the sense and the courage" (Twain 1916, 236). Cox shows the departure is a serious one:

For although laughter here defined is associated with a sense of humor, it is not humorous, but satiric laughter. What Satan discloses is not a sense of humor at all, but a sense of satire—not a joke on the self converting past humiliations or shame into totally pleasurable form which brings an audience to a helpless laughter of affection and self-approval, but a joke on the "other" which establishes a distinction between the audience who is judged and the narrative who exposes. (286)

Cox argues that this is not accurately Twain's definition of humor, but rather "the epitaph disclosing how he had buried it" (286). Moreover, Satan and his interactions with his audience (both on and off the page) represent Twain's final confrontation with the questions that had plagued him since Hank Morgan's failure to improve the ancients in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Mankind, he had decided by this point, was fatally flawed beyond the reach of a forgiving God and forever enslaved by his Moral Sense—his ability to distinguish right from wrong (which, to Twain's mind, meant only his capacity to see right and wrong so he could willfully chose the latter). Cox details the opposing elements of Twain's vision, determinism and identity—it is a determinism emerging out of man's foolish acts (choosing to ignore the virtuous fork in the Moral Sense) crossed with his identity as a creature of pride and selfishness (280). God is notably absent. Satan, in illustrating this truth with magical gestures and the unflinching language of damnation, becomes Twain's "embodiment of creative imagination" and the pinnacle of his calling to excite

laughter in God's creatures (276). The result, however, is far from funny, and the emancipation hoped for in being able to laugh at oneself is revealed as empty, a decoy that crumbles under the reality of our condition. This inversion endangers Twain's personal project of regenerating agency because it is a failure of his religious imagination, and that failure could be challenging for readers to overcome.

As demonstrated above, most critiques of Twain have traditionally emerged from the expected academic disciplines, with English and the attendant schools of literary criticism at the forefront. That tradition, while still strong, has gradually given over a portion of its territory to other fields. As interdisciplinary studies gained institutional ground, blurring the boundaries between history, literature, and political theory, scholars began reaching across and into new intellectual spheres for material. Twain, with his enormous reputation and body of work, was and is an ideal candidate to bridge the distances between disciplines. Indeed, Twain scholarship could be classified as a pioneering genre in interdisciplinary work. Take, for instance, the work of Henry Nash Smith. Though his major books focus on Twain's creative output, they can be read as portraits of how the American imagination matured during the late nineteenth century, and as early examples of what we now call American Studies (Lyndenberg 1963, 102). However, it was not until 1973 with Wilson Carey McWilliams' *The Idea of Fraternity in America* that Twain was included in a work of mainstream political theory.

While Twain figures prominently in McWilliams' discussion, he is but one point along a series of examples underlining the author's thesis. McWilliams argues that a Rousseauian concept of fraternity has been obscured, forgotten, and worst of all, dismissed by both the major architects of American political and social thought and by the general populace. In fact, identifying authentic moments of fraternity in our national history from a post-Puritan colonial landscape to mid-twentieth century is a difficult and discouraging task. According to McWilliams: "...[T]he ancients were right in seeing fraternity as a means to the ends of freedom and equality; and correspondingly, that the modern theorists who reversed this relationship were guilty of a serious error" (1973, 7). Rightly predicting that his emphasis on a term as theoretically loaded as fraternity would inspire argument, McWilliams offers a precise description for his usage of the word. His conception of fraternity

1) is a bond based on intense interpersonal affection, and 2) like all such bonds, is limited in the number of persons and in the social space to which it is extended; that it 3) also involves shared values or goals considered more important than 'mere life,' and 4) is closely related to the development of an 'ego identity,' since it 5) includes a recognition of shortcomings and failure in the attainment of ultimate values, but 6) provides the emotional encouragement and sense of worth ('assurance of identity') which make it possible to endure such tensions without betraying one's own values, and finally, 7) implies a necessary tension with loyalty to society at large. (8)

Such a detailed outline anticipates the reading of fraternity as simply a brotherhood of men or revolutionaries. However, in giving fraternity such a specific list of qualifiers, McWilliams has also opened up the term for application across the entire

span of American history from the Puritans to the present. His work can be seen as a companion of sorts to Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), which documented the almost irresistible dominance of Lockean liberalism as the fundamental principle behind mass political behavior, institutional design, and social organization in the United States.<sup>30</sup> Hartz argues that the hold of liberalism on America is thorough and tight; the pervasiveness of liberal thought and values is so total that those same thoughts and values are virtually a given, subtle in their omnipresence (and in this observation Hartz closely follows de Tocqueville). McWilliams' contribution to that theme is to illuminate what that liberalism is lacking, that is, since the American Founding, "liberty and equality were put before fraternity in the Revolutionary triad," and fraternity never achieved parity as a social and political aspiration (Berthoff 1974, 115). The wholesale adoption of Enlightenment values precluded fraternity from gaining a foothold and ironically set the stage for the grossest offenses to freedom and equality in the country's history.

Into this interpretation of American thought McWilliams places Twain as a champion of fraternity, a consummate teacher whose carefully crafted humorous arts bore lessons on the importance of social communion. Notably, McWilliams' conception of Twain is at least partially built on the ruins of previous readings. If

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<sup>30</sup> The characteristic tenets of this liberalism, according to McWilliams, include "individualism, property rights, secularism in the state ... toleration in religion," and a state "as a contract between discrete individuals for the purpose of utility" (156).

English faculty were curious over what a political theorist would do with their giant, then they were shocked to find accusations that they had, in fact, misread and misinterpreted Twain most of the time. Then again, no one ever said the interweaving of disciplines over a common subject would be bloodless.

McWilliams finds many interpretations of Twain to be overly reflective of the general literary atmosphere in which they were written: "Twain never conformed to the image of the alienated artist (as prevalent today as in the 1950s when Van Wyck Brooks wrote *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*), isolated and unappreciated in his time" (430). Though McWilliams' point that Twain was not the lonely, frustrated Freudian neurotic of Wyck Brooks' study is well taken, he has made one of several factual errors. As mentioned earlier, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* was published in 1920, not thirty years later. McWilliams also argues that Twain "rejected the liberal's faith in history and technology..." and that "...his doctrine was in many ways a vaulting back to the older tradition" (431). What this "older tradition" is not entirely clear, and one wonders how he could reject history yet support the return of its customs. Also, the idea that Twain rejected technology outright is inaccurate; one need to only read his enthusiastic essays and letters on new inventions of the day.

In any case, McWilliams does acknowledge that Twain's craft, method of delivery, and intended audience show him to be far more interested in reaching the masses than in building an ivory tower for his own self-contemplation: "The

'democratic' character of his art was largely the result of the fact that Twain never lost his political concern. If he ceased to believe in America's political myth, he replaced belief with a sense of responsibility for the myth: political obligation was the logical consequence of alienation" (430). Separated from his fellow citizens by his gifts, Twain used the same to reconnect. Predicting some of the later work on Twain, McWilliams portrays him as a figure acutely aware of his ability to instruct his readers, and his pedagogy took the form of his writing style and content:

"Humor and horror are the tools of the teacher; both, in Twain's writing, are used to inculcate a view of man and society, to open up the possibility of fraternity" (433).

So, then, what is the importance of fraternity to Twain? Why does such a virtue need to be taught?

Following previous interpretations, McWilliams identifies Twain as largely deterministic in his thought; both human nature and our given environments shape our decisions and morality. Humans are always greedy, self-centered, and emotional, and our daily circumstances have a greater influence on our actions than ethical frameworks. If such frameworks exist, man is wonderfully skilled at ignoring them—but again, even that tendency toward negligence is embedded in our nature. Mankind, therefore, has little in the way of free will. However, one choice he does have dominion over is in his selection of friends (439). Our companions supply a crucial buffer between our most destructive emotions and

confronting the whole of a unintelligible and often cruel society: “The possibility of growth beyond society’s constraints in ways compatible with the moral and political burden of freedom depended on the discovery of friends and brothers. Ever in need of support and reassurance, man demands communion, and the need is greater for the one who confronts his own guilt and error” (439). Fraternity binds individuals to one another, makes achievements and sacrifices shared experiences, and offers an alternative to a selfish individualism which emerged from the Enlightenment. It urges men to “govern life by values higher than survival” (441). It softens the damage done by egotism, which is inherent in man but harmful to humanity.

According to McWilliams, one of Twain’s most disturbing encounters with a social order lacking in fraternity occurred when he visited the gold mines of the West. Believing he would find camaraderie and fellowship, he instead found the opposite: “...he found gold fields populated by isolated men. The desperate loneliness of these uprooted men could not overcome the fact that the miner was engaged in a search for gold in which his fellows were competitors. There was a forced congeniality, an ephemeral community, but Twain saw through these to the rivalry and suspicion that lay beneath” (442). If these men, the “living dead” as Twain called them, represented one of the worst cases of fraternity’s absence, then the friendship between Huckleberry Finn and Jim embodied the best of what fraternity is and what it could produce between people. The point at hand is

McWilliams' treatment of Twain as worthy subject of political theory, and to that end his work was and is significant.

### *New Theoretical Approaches*

McWilliams offers the first instance of Twain appearing substantively in political theory, and since *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, Twain scholarship has expanded beyond the scope of traditional literary critiques into interdisciplinary inquiries filled with new questions, new methods, and new insights.

A good representative of these new approaches is Joe B. Fulton's *Mark Twain's Ethical Realism* (1997). Paying due respect to Aristotle, the first writer to interweave questions of ethics and aesthetics, Fulton discusses the complex relationships between ethical imperative and artistic form in Twain's use of realist language and in his near constant striving to produce authentic voices for his characters. Realist and naturalist literature present the results of an open inquiry into daily human action on the part of the author, the measure of the work's success unsurprisingly resting in the accuracy of the text in reflecting, at the very least, the empirical truth of the author's subject. This drive for realism, however, is more than simply a stylistic choice. As Fulton notes, the impulse manifests in the work of Mark Twain so "...that Twain's desire for artistic authenticity is itself an ethically oriented behavior...that there is a connection between a 'truth in detail' with a 'conscious moral purpose.'"(6) Prior work on ethical literary criticism only probed so far as the outright or implicit

determination that a piece of writing is morally lacking, but issues of genre and form as devices of an ethical consciousness were not considered. In Twain, however, the elements of character, context, language, and action are tools by which he pursues a moral purpose: to use aesthetic realism as a method of engendering empathy between the reader and the characters, and, hopefully, witness that empathy transported into real life behavior. Fulton offers impressive evidence from throughout Twain's career that the author took this kind of literary construction seriously for the sake of its final outcome, and thus the often attacked approach of ethical criticism is validated. His reading of Twain follows previous work which examines the writer through a Bakhtinian sensibility; however, where earlier studies merely highlight Twain's use of polyphony—the creation of multiple, full-formed voices creating a pluralist atmosphere—Fulton extends the analysis to include Bakhtin's idea of answerability. The individuals making up the polyphony, the plurality, must interact with one another, and accept "...every person's obligation to answer for his or her own acts, both toward another person and toward the world. For Bakhtin, the simple fact that one exists and is uniquely situated entails an obligation to interact with others, to 'answer' them" (14). Twain's understanding of the Other—indeed our own confrontation with and understanding of the Other, of any person outside oneself, is not just as a part of identity constructs, but also as a necessary component in ethically responsible social interaction.

## II. Twain's Project of Regenerating Agency

Mark Twain's essay "What Is Man?" (1909) is a long dialogue between two characters known only as "Old Man" and "Young Man." Their conversation begins after the old man has declared that man is "merely a machine, and nothing more," a claim rejected by the young man, who requests that his companion give evidence and reasons to support this bold statement. The popular assumption is that the old man speaks for Mark Twain himself, and the younger exists simply to sharpen his elder's opinions by presenting common objections (Macnaughton 1979, 230). With a casual and untroubled aplomb, the old man argues that man's chief pursuit, his "sole purpose," is the "securing of his own approval," which is a shorthand way of describing man's love of comfort, convenience, and vanity over and above all other moral or spiritual aspirations (Twain 1917, 13). In fact, man's "spiritual comfort" is nothing more than the result of mercenarily maneuvering. He adjusts to external circumstances to secure the path of least resistance within his conscience. Should a man go to war? Whether he "should" or not is irrelevant, states the old man: he *will* go to war if his family and neighbors judge it necessary for his reputation. Not going to war (and risking their disapproval) would vex his internal peace. Philanthropists give in order to pamper their conscience with the gratitude and adoration of their benefactors and the public. Self-sacrifice without a selfish motive is a myth (19). As the old man insists, "Duties are not performed for duty's *sake*, but

because their *neglect* would make a man *uncomfortable*. A man performs but one duty, the duty of contenting his spirit, the duty of making himself agreeable to himself" (20). According to the old man's pronouncement, man is more or less an empty vessel—his single impulse is to satisfy the conscience, and the conscience seeks ease over all else. He has no content of his own, no morals, no conviction, no original thoughts—only moods and *temperament*, the feelings that ebb and flow according to his success at keeping himself and his conscience comfortable. Furthermore, his mechanistic quality (if it can be called a quality) is transferred to the larger state of collective human affairs, the operation of government, since the state takes on the same characteristics of the self-centered units that compose it. The old man delivers his final verdict to the young man with a lethal assurance:

As instances, you have all of history [...]—a thousand wild and tame religions, every kind of government that can be thought of, from tiger to house-cat, each nation knowing it has the only true religion and the only sane government, each despising all the others, each an ass and not suspecting it; each proud of its fancied supremacy, each perfectly sure it is the pet of God, each with undoubting confidence summoning Him to take command in time of war, each surprised when He goes over to the enemy, but by habit able to excuse it and resume compliments—in a word, the whole human race content, always content, persistently content, indestructibly content, happy, thankful, proud, *no matter what its religion is, nor whether its master be tiger or house-cat*. Am I stating facts? You know I am. Is the human race cheerful? You know it is. Considering what it can stand, and be happy, you do me too much honor when you think that *I* can take the cheerfulness out of it. Nothing can do that. Everything has been tried. Without success. I beg you not to be troubled (109).

The old man's final words are left unanswered, and both the reader and the young man are left to ponder the enormity of this searing indictment of man's vacuous yet "indestructibly content" nature. Twain is not referring to a stalwart optimism, nor to an enduring hope to extend a bridge over mankind's troubles and circumstance to some internal peace. Rather this contentment is a willful abdication of responsibility, a molding of the conscience to fit those decisions and lifestyles which end in the greatest self-satisfaction. Twain is describing the dependable relief of complacency.

The old man's sentiment, though delivered with a lethal certainty, is not new, nor is it the first kind of observation made about the people of America, Twain's primary audience and literary target. These condemnations echo Tocqueville's writings on the infamous tyranny of the majority, and more specifically, the social and national character created by the soft, omnipresent restraints of such tyranny. His amazement evident, Tocqueville dryly noted the lack of autonomy demonstrated by Americans, how citizens did not bear any of the "virile candor and manly independence of thought" which characterized the Founding generation's claims for nationhood and self-governance (Tocqueville 1835, 258). Deficient of individuals to call their neighbors to account for their social, moral, or political decisions, and to be so called themselves, Americans existed as a largely indivisible mind, a combined body of reputations free of serious conflict both within and without. This

circumstance made for the kind of mental comfort described by Twain's old man: "American moralists and philosophers are not obliged to wrap their views in veils of allegory, but before hazarding an unpleasant truth they say: 'We know that we are addressing a people so far above human weaknesses that they will always be masters of themselves'" (Tocqueville 1835, 259). Indeed, the preceding line carries the same cutting wit that Twain would level at his countrymen, but where Tocqueville ends his assault with an institutional critique, Twain marches deeper into human character to expose those elements which fed his predecessor's disappointment.

Twain's late-life writings (of which "What Is Man?" is a prominent entry) speak at length of man's composition—or lack of composition, depending on how one might view it. Mankind is described with an almost airtight determinism: we are endowed with various temperaments (by God most likely, but even the details of that relationship are suspect), and we are unable to act outside the dictates of those temperaments. Our temperaments control our internal workings, our conscience so-called, and the external circumstances of life rule everything else. Twain makes it clear that we have no more say over such external forces than we do in choosing our temperament.<sup>31</sup> What we are left with is a shell called Man, molded by chance and

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<sup>31</sup> He uses the same framework to describe politics at large: "A nation is only an individual multiplied. It makes plans and Circumstances comes and upsets them—or enlarges them" (1909, 138).

driven by preferences that bloom within us without attachment to any guiding principle past the arbitrary character we have been assigned by God or nature or nothing at all. Twain traces our condition through time back to our first ancestors:

The later command, to let the fruit alone, was certain to be disobeyed. Not by Adam himself, but by his *temperament* – which he did not create and had no authority over. For the *temperament* is the man; the thing tricked out with clothes and named man is merely its Shadow, nothing more. [...] I cannot help feeling disappointed in Adam and Eve. That is, in their temperaments. Not in *them*, poor helpless young creatures – afflicted with temperaments made out of butter; which butter was commanded to get into contact with fire and *be melted* (Twain 1909, 139).

While Twain's grim determinism bears some complicated of internal contradictions (which will be explored later), it is important to note that his arrival at such a framework emerges only in the last years of his writing after a lifetime of literary, and some would say philosophical, struggle. Ultimately he is identifying the individual's loss of agency, and by 1909 his language was so pessimistic, his tone so resigned, that the idea Twain *ever* saw agency as a human faculty is hard to accept. Of course the story is more complex than an uninterrupted descent into nihilism, and the nuances involved deserve our attention.

How did Twain eventually come to this view? How he gradually (and often painfully) move away from a belief in an individual's capacity to think and act independently of external and internal preferences *and* within the constraints of an ethical framework which made demands often contrary to those preferences, or

“temperaments.” The transition is accentuated by the literary figures already discussed: the equally stalwart and stubborn Huckleberry Finn, the ambitious Hank Morgan of *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, the fallen angel Satan from *The Mysterious Stranger*, and Mark Twain himself as both artist and interlocutor, observer and participant. Though a gifted architect of fictional worlds and characters, Twain made little distinction between his profession and his everyday existence away from the desk; for him they were one in the same: “To me, the most important feature of my life is its literary feature” (Twain 1909, 130). To try and isolate the man from his work, to tease one from the other in the pursuit of a purer form of literary critique would be ill-advised, not to mention less interesting.

The philosophical inconsistencies and often oppositional forces behind Twain’s politics advertise that his self-identity and beliefs were never conclusively resolved. This is not to suggest that Twain was flippant or easily moved from one ethical position to another, but rather that his identity could mirror various social and political circumstances. During the height of his fame, for instance, his diversions, no matter how humorous, were often too cogent to be denied by the Democratic or Republican ideologues. Twain never shrank from injecting his own opinions into evenings where his presence was intended to serve principally as a relief from partisan obstinacy. Of course, Twain could hardly be identified as sectarian in his political activities. Rather, he devoted himself to a personal and political dogma of his own invention: an intricate

weaving of new and old traditions in republican pessimism, liberal individualism, and regional practice. His political beliefs, however esoteric in revealing any definitive orientations, surfaced most reliably over the subject of who should hold political office versus who should not, with the oft recalled caveat that Twain himself belonged in the latter category. During one such declamation against the corrupt Tammany Hall politician Richard Croker, Twain announced, "I impeach him in the name of all the people of America, whose national character his has dishonored" (Paine 1935). In summoning the collective spirit of the American people in an indictment against the suspect candidate, Twain momentarily asserted himself as their representative, a "statesman without salary" who, despite his refusal to be formally deputized, personified the conscience and contradictions of the nation that bore him (Budd 1962, xxi). Yet to identify Twain merely as a prototypical American does not alone illuminate the man or the country.

Twain's America spanned three-quarters of a century. During his lifetime the Whig Party was born and died, industrialism swept the north-eastern countryside, and the devotees of Manifest Destiny fought through the territories hoping to populate the Californian coast with Winthrop's shining cities, make heaps of cash, or both. Twain himself could comfortably boast the insight of a world traveler, a steamboat pilot, a Confederate soldier, a Western prospector, and, of course, a Connecticut Yankee. Unsurprisingly, the moment a reader settles into thinking of Twain in the context of a

particular time and place, within a few pages the writer has emerged somewhere else entirely, and his ubiquity is by turns delightful and confounding. Moreover, though ample evidence exists to cast Twain as an enthusiastic (if unlucky) liberal capitalist, a descendent of his Hartzian forbears in his commitment to that “national character” of Locke’s acquisitive America, he is also a product of a deeply-rooted republican impulse. For instance, Twain originally planned for *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* to be a simple “comic burlesque” contrasting the blunt Hank Morgan with the overly mannered knights of England’s medieval court. Before the manuscript was completed, however, he had created “a protagonist who represented the American common man functioning within an exemplary industrial and political order which he himself created” (Smith, 1964, 69). *Connecticut’s Yankee* is individualistic and self-interested, agrarian and anti-aristocracy, but also politically well-informed and invested in the public good.

Simply considering what part of the country might rightfully claim Twain as its literary figurehead presents the many sides of his political, social, and artistic personality: “[he was] a naïve observer of the West, an experienced and wise writer on the Mississippi, or an old pundit experiencing India with an anti-imperialist eye” (Hellwig 2008, 18). Furthermore, Twain never allowed himself to stand outside his own indictments. He counted himself as guilty as the harshest overseer or the most oblivious slave owner:

I have found that there is no ingredient of the race which I do not possess in either a small or large way. When it is small, as compared with the same ingredient in somebody else, there is still enough of it for all the purposes of examination (Paine 1935).

This simple realization, a mixture of rational introspection and honest Protestant guilt, would inform (and complicate) every perspective adopted by Twain on social and political issues. Ever the parodist of Eastern manners and wealth, Twain found lifelong friends amidst the intellectual and material abundance of New England (Morgan 1965, 18). The same rustic frontiersmen awarded the punch lines in *Roughing It* were scorned in Twain's newspaper columns calling for the territory's rabble to sober up and get an education. These dichotomies to shifting sands of self-understanding. Twain is sometimes dancing, sometimes faltering over his own position. One might say that he finally sinks under the weight of those contradictions in the conclusion of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

### *Giving and Losing Hope*

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

“All right, then, I'll go to hell” — and tore it up.

— Huckleberry Finn

The moment recounted above—when Huckleberry Finn decides to destroy his note to Miss Watson which disclosed Jim's location—is undoubtedly one of the great watermarks in American literature. It is also one of the most closely scrutinized turns of

plot and character in any work of Mark Twain. The decision initiates the book's final act, and the pages that follow have become some of the most controversial in all American literary scholarship.

The exhilaration of Huck's revelatory moment fades as the final chapters of the novel unfold. Much has been written on Tom Sawyer's late appearance in the book and the narrative's shift to his buffoonery at the cost of Huck's moral predicament, and on the anticlimactic emancipation of Jim through the widow's last will and testament. Responding to defenses of the ending from T.S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling, critic Leo Marx famously accused the final pages of creating a farce, that "the most serious motive in the novel, Jim's yearning for freedom, is made the object of nonsense" (1953). I offer the more teleological interpretation: the end took shape exactly as it was supposed to—that the "failure" of the novel to complete Huck's ethical maturity is more valuable as a comment on the writer and his resistance against his own inability, in this case, to realize a thoroughly articulate his moral stance. Neither Huck nor his creator should be indicted as an ethical failure for the novel's famously anticlimactic conclusion. What we have is not just the unsatisfying resolution to Huck and Jim's journey, but the documented history of a great mind unable to reconcile the injustices of his age. As such, it is a striking illustration of reflection and evaluation at their most intense. In one story we are witness to both the highest peak of Mark Twain's religious

imagination and the beginning of the denouement that will characterize his later work and terminate in a loss of hope for mankind's future.

Mark Twain is interesting because his life and work are characterized chiefly by contradiction. It is one thing to list the contradictions framing his personal and public life—the rough frontier reporter retired to a Connecticut mansion, a writer and wit who was both larger than life and life-sized, a humorist plagued by tragedy and professional failure—but his work reveals tension beyond personality and celebrity. At the core of Mark Twain's writings are contradictions that force into sharp relief the distance between the individual and his society: distances that may be mutually understood, collapsed, enforced, or entirely one-sided. It is easy, and therefore tempting, to describe Twain and his work as uniquely American, but even that descriptor contains an inherent contradiction. Uniqueness, after all, implies a quality of singularity, an object that exists as one of a kind, and a national character of America is surely composed of multiple, often competing strands of identity, politics, ethics, and conceptions of justice. These strands are the entanglements of American life found in Twain's writing, and just as his characters struggle to make sense of their position and obligations, so too did the author himself.

In *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, and Spirit* (2006), Joshua Dienstag rescues the doctrine of pessimism as a valid framework for ethical positioning by revisiting its history in the work of political theory's familiar giants, such as Rousseau and

Nietzsche. He admits that his treatment is limited to the European tradition, and that a full reassessment of American pessimism is much needed. Such a treatment, he claims, would necessarily involve Twain (Dienstag 2006 45n, 269n). According to Dienstag, the familiar “philosophies of the self” of contemporary fixation are not new to the modern era, but rather that we have never been without such pursuits, and pessimism has often been the framework under which these inquiries have taken shape (xi). That is, our self-perceptions, from the individual to the whole of the species, or, as Twain not-so-fondly termed it, “the damned human race,” directly impact our choices and behavior as political animals (Blair 1962, 245). Dienstag’s project is a defense of pessimism, and a mighty one at that, since he articulates the differences between pessimism (which for him is fundamentally a confrontation and acceptance of linear time-consciousness) and the “pseudotraditions” of nihilism, cynicism, and skepticism; to divorce pessimism from the doomed conclusions of other doctrines restores to the individual a certain kind of freedom in his or her cognitive perceptions of the world and the self (xiii). Put another way, pessimism lifts the suppressive veil that we have let fall over our eyes in the form of optimism—a veil that has tempered the ways in which we relate to one another. Human social and political activity has been harmed by a denial of pessimism, and the philosophy of the self has suffered without the realities pessimism forces us to accept.

Dienstag wisely casts pessimism as an approach, a “form of life,” rather than a normatively weighty doctrine, and this definition loosens the potentially paralyzing emotional hold pessimistic viewpoints customarily project. His writing, which names Twain as an architect of contemporary pessimism, contains a crucial prescriptive: that the spirit of pessimism should emancipate us from the denial of our condition and allow us to act with a full knowledge of our flaws and confinements, to grasp “...the liberation of every moment from every other...in other words, it makes freedom possible *now* rather than in an indefinitely postponed future” (247). Put another way, Dienstag asserts that pessimism should liberate one’s moral and political decision-making processes for greater purposes and steer them away from the luster of one’s legacy or the constraining belief in storing up good deeds for a preternatural award. His reduction of religious faith to a “constraining belief in storing up good deeds for a preternatural award” is a terse dismissal and over-simplification of the ways in which individuals might locate the origination of morality on a horizon beyond their own lives or perceptions. However, the underlying point—that to think and behave ethically does not require attachment to a divine presence—was an idea familiar to Twain. Before Dienstag awards Twain the title of chief American pessimist, he should consider how much the writer *struggled* with himself. Take, as an example, this 1868 letter to his beloved wife Olivia (appearing here as it does in the original transcription):

Yes, Livy, I do like to have you give me synopses of Mr Beecher's sermons— & you need not suppose that I read them over once & then lay them aside for good, for I do not. I read & them over & over again & try to profit by them. I got the printed sermon also, & have read that several times. , also. Everything convicts me—so does this sermon. 'A Christian is a fruit-bearer—a moral man is a vine that does not bear fruit.' That is me, exactly. I do not swear, I do not steal, I do not murder, I do not drink. My 'whole life is not.' I am 'not all over.' 'Piety is the right performance of a common duty, as well as the experience of a special moral emotion.' I now perform all my duties as well as I can, but see what I lack!—I lack the chief ingredient of piety—for I lack (almost always) the 'special moral emotion'—that inner sense which tells me that what I do I am doing for love of the Savior. I can be a Christian—I shall be a Christian—but when I feel as I feel to-day, it seems a far journey away. I would be discouraged, but for the reflection that one learns a foreign language only by patient study, not by a single lesson; we cannot cross the Continent at a stride, we cannot bridge the sea with a shingle. Therefore, why should I spurn the Savior for a lifetime & then hope to gain pardon save through long toil & striving & supplication? I will not be discouraged.

Granted, this letter appears before the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and thus before Twain and his writing enter ever bleaker and more troubling territory. The sentiment behind his words, however, shows that pessimism was not his default position in view the life ahead, nor was it his only ethical approach. Pessimism, as Dienstag frames it, is essentially an acceptance of physical death, a one-dimensional understanding of life as contained in the empirical of here and now. The only direction is forward, the only destination is a point where biological processes cease. The pessimist uses the acknowledgment of the end of existence and consciousness as the foundation for making moral decisions. It is a total reversal of

the idea that “You do not have a soul. You are a soul, you have a body.”<sup>32</sup> As such, pessimism leaves no room for the religious imagination, which leaves the cultivation of the self impoverished and oriented toward instrumental reason rather than notions of the good.

Huck certainly chooses the immediacy of Jim’s freedom over the future of his own soul, and in doing so rejects that future altogether—but has he rejected his belief in it? That is, has he chosen to abandon the belief system that would restrict his moral choice? If so, Dienstag’s pessimism is fully formed and we are left with the question of whether Huck truly believed in the threat of Hell or not, an ambiguity which would have probably suited Twain well enough. However, if the belief in damnation was not abdicated but rather *chosen*, and chosen as a consequence of a moral judgment, then Huck’s sacrifice retains the dire magnitude of his self-condemnation. This latter interpretation seems to me a stronger evaluation than the former, but such is the enduring mystery of Twain’s story.

Additionally, it is important, if not crucial, to note that a true philosophical freedom (which is what Dienstag is ostensibly aiming for) would allow an individual to stand by those attachments or beliefs and be guided by them as a decision based in reflection and evaluation. Pessimism, Dienstag argues, enables liberal autonomy. But what is liberal autonomy without meaningful agency? Moreover, how do we

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<sup>32</sup> Though this quotation is typically attributed to C.S. Lewis, possibly from a radio broadcast during World War II, the definitive source is unknown.

construct a basis for personal ethics without first being free to self-examine? It took a soul-rending moment of introspection for Huck to make his stand, and it is a worthy thing to speculate where Twain's thoughts hovered before he set the novel's final act into motion. Both the writer and the writings, therefore, deserve attention as projects of regenerating agency.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### "ANGELS TOO TIED TO THE GROUND": WALKER PERCY AND THE VOICE OF DISSENT

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*"Could you say something about the vocation of writing in general?"*

No.

*Nothing?*

All I can think to say about it is that it is a very obscure activity in which there is usually a considerable element of malice. Like frogging.

*Frogging?*

Yes. Frogging is raising a charley horse on somebody's arm by a skillful blow with a knuckle in exactly the right spot."

— Walker Percy, "Questions They Never Asked Me" (1977)

#### **I. Introduction**

Like Mark Twain, Walker Percy has often been overlooked by scholarship on the value of literature as an arena from which to excavate scenarios relevant to political theory. This omission is unfortunate, especially since a great portion of Percy's non-fiction explicitly focuses on questions familiar to theory: the relationship between man and language, the problems and possibilities opened by science, and the politics of faith, race, and memory. Percy, more than any of his contemporaries, sought to restore the "strangeness" to the human practice of naming

things and that his philosophical interests are admirable even if they are not always carried to satisfactory conclusions. His nonfiction owes as much to Kant, Descartes, Husserl, and Gadamer as his fiction does to Kierkegaard, Camus, and Sartre (Bigger 1980, 46).

Percy's writings display remarkable diversity, from essays on semiotics and existentialism to editorials on race relations and religion. His fiction tends toward the personal, the inner conflicts of individuals caught in moments of emotional and intellectual panic. Responses to the crises vary from depression and suicide to boredom, violence, invention, and humor. Moreover, the ideas of reflection and evaluation are never far from his musings or his characters' predicaments; if one theme could be distilled from Percy's writing, it would be that human life is a frustrating and mysterious search. However, though the subject of the quest may vary from person to person, it is nevertheless a journey worth making. Within this one precept, the core elements of a project of regenerating agency materialize—self-cultivation requires, before all else, a willingness to pursue it; it does not simply happen to a person. We receive a glimpse of Percy's own search in his account of how he came to write *The Moviegoer*, his first novel:

Here is a young man, a disciple and devotee of science [...]who settles on medicine as his vocation [...] Then, early on, his career is cut short by a serious, disabling, but nonfatal illness. What to do? In the end he returns to the South and changes professions, decides to become a writer—in the South at least, still an honorable profession. [...] The long and the short of it: he writes two novels, one a bad imitation of

Thomas Mann, the other a worse imitation of Thomas Wolfe—which is very bad indeed. [...] And so it came to pass that he wrote a short novel in which he created a character, an amiable but slightly bemused young man of a certain upper-class Southern background, and set him down in Gentilly, a middle-class district of New Orleans, in order to see what would happen to him. (Percy 1991, 192-193)

Percy's use of the third-person in an autobiographical piece confuses the narrative: if he is not speaking, who is? Is he offering a perspective viewed externally from himself? Is he detached and omniscient? The tactic may seem disorienting at first, but the impulse behind his method soon becomes clear: Percy is reinforcing the power of sharing and receiving an experience through writing. He has made himself the story, much like Twain did in his use of multiple personas, and goes on to show us how the prelude of uncertainty and longing leading up to his novel is emblematic of the birth of the novel itself:

What happens to him is that in the very anxiety of his despair, cool as it is—indeed, as the very consequence of his despair—it occurs to him that a *search* is possible, a search altogether different from the scientific explorations mounted by scientists or by the most perceptive of psychoanalysts. So the novel, almost by accident, became a narrative of the search, the quest. And so the novel, again almost by accident—or was it accident?—landed squarely in the oldest tradition of Western letters: the pilgrim's search outside himself, rather than the guru's search within. (193)

Percy's first reference to "the novel" is still situated in his arriving at that first book, a re-imagining of his own experience as the story of Binx Bolling, the protagonist of *The Moviegoer*. The novel of the last line is both *The Moviegoer* and the novel *itself* as a literary form. Again, the coalescence of the two "novels" erases any boundaries

between art and artist and places both in a context where past and present fuse along one plateau: the now and forever experience of the search. But one metaphysical totality is not the end. Percy describes a final crucial revelation:

All this happened to the novelist and his character without the slightest consciousness of a debt to St. Augustine or Dante. Indeed, the character creates within himself and within the confines of a single weekend in New Orleans a microcosm of the spiritual history of the West, from the Roman patrician reading his Greek philosophers to the thirteenth-century pilgrim who leaves home and takes to the road. (193)

Here we see a subtle doubling of narratives, as now the passage includes a novelist *and* the character he has created. The world of the character advances to the fore and replicates Percy's experience, which is also the experience of generations previous. This event is what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons," and it is a core principle of understanding the engagement of literary texts to be more than one-way dialogues ([1975] 2004, 305). They are, as both Percy and myself suggested, alliances between writer, text, and reader.

### *Percy and Twain*

Despite Twain's continued relevance to today's audience, he is still very much a figure of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and a discussion on identity and agency might be limited if confined to a particular historical context, no matter how compelling that context might be. Furthermore, it is not enough to throw literary angst at the feet of some shadowy monster known as "modernity," especially when the writers in question lived in different centuries. More specific

categorization shows that Twain's writing is often concerned with industrialization, memories of childhood irreconcilable with maturity, the racial legacy of the Civil War, and the ascendancy of the United States as a world power through condemnable means. Percy's subjects include the privileging of science as the ultimate knowledge, the irresistible pull of family, the racial turmoil of the Civil Rights Era, and the oppressive gloom and threat of the Cold War. Twain targeted cruelty and hypocrisy; Percy focused on boredom, depression, and the contradictions of being miserable in the presence of great wealth. While it is satisfying to list their concerns in a two-column tally, one can quickly see that, one column laid over the other, they actually contain strikingly similar pursuits.

Percy is an heir to Twain's contribution to American literature (following the proverb that all American writers, and especially all Southern writers, stand in the long shadow of Twain). His writing grapples with many of the same anxieties that plagued Twain and his work, though his language is often more explicitly theoretical. Rather than dodge or deny the philosophical implications of his work as Twain famously did, Percy stated that he was on the search for answers to the Big Questions. Writing for most of the latter half of the twentieth century, Percy addressed head-on the difficulties of identity and agency that Twain revealed primarily through allegorical writing rife with cynicism and apprehension. Furthermore, the answers Percy found—if we can be so bold as to call them

answers—represent a different tract from the one followed by his predecessor. Simply put, Twain's path led him to a place largely devoid of hope; Percy, on the other hand, concluded hope to be the only adequate response to the elements of modernity that complicate identity, obscure ethics, and make agency a tenuous concept.

## II. A Life Examined

At least two things are apparent in comparing the academic and biographical literature on Mark Twain and Walker Percy. First, the former is unsurprisingly the subject of a much larger amount of research and analysis. Upticks in the amount of Percy scholarship before his death in 1990 generally follow his publications, of which there were few compared to the prodigious Twain. He is the author of only six novels: *The Moviegoer* (1961), *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987).<sup>33</sup> His non-fiction is collected into three volumes, *The Message in the Bottle* (1975), *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983), and *Signposts in a Strange Land* (1991). While the number of books of biographical import and textual analysis have been steady (though not voluminous) since the late 1970s, recent years have seen a noteworthy increase in the amount of

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<sup>33</sup> *The Second Coming* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* are sequels to *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*, respectively.

doctoral dissertations and journal articles focusing on Percy and his work. Peaks in scholarly activity follow the reprinting of his National Book Award winning *The Moviegoer* and release of *The Second Coming* in 1980, and the release of *Signposts in a Strange Land* a year after his death. However, another surge in attention occurred in the early 2000s, both in academic periodicals and dissertations, without any accompanying previously unpublished items from the author. These texts, along with a healthy group of articles and books appearing in 2009, indicate that interest in Percy has not only remained undiminished since his death, but in fact is growing, along with his reputation and importance not just as a fine Southern writer, but as one of the most significant American writers of the last century.

Second, where Twain is often presented as a figure emblematic of a certain moment and spirit of American nationhood (particularly when viewed from a non-U.S. perspective), Percy is inevitably and irresistibly associated with the South and the abundant tropes of “the Southern writer.”<sup>34</sup> Twain successfully shifted his locales

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<sup>34</sup> Percy describes the label of Southern writer as a “curious handicap in the marketplace,” a “disability” loaded with certain reader presumptions about what he or she will find in a Southern novel: musings on sense of place, tradition, the Civil War, race, and so forth. His observations on the genre and his place within it are wonderfully self-aware. See “How to be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic” and “Questions They Never Asked Me” in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991). Critical studies on the genre, so called, are numerous and varied. A suitable starting point is *The Writer in the South: Studies in Literary Community* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972) by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., long considered one of the premiere critics and historians of Southern literature. His work also includes the editorship of *The History of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

(both real and fictional), his literary tone, and his social and political sympathies enough so that no one region of the country could ever truly claim him as the native son. Percy, however, never escaped the South, neither the Old nor the New, and he had a keen understanding of the influence that culture on his life and writings even as he tried to attain critical distance from it.

Given the tendency in both Twain scholarship and popular perception to view the man as a larger-than-life character, a singular white-suited figure on the stage of American literary and social history, it is interesting that Percy, as an object of inquiry, is more often than not located within the context of his family. A famous family in their native South, the Percys are often described in relation to their impressive literary legacy of several generations, their aristocratic bearing, and, not least, their seemingly hereditary struggle with depression. One fascinating and instantly recognizable attribute of the family is the apparently constant recycling of names from one generation to the next. Though the custom is common in many Southern families, the Percys exhibit an almost pathological repetition of names in every possible combination. In addition to leaving historians with a dizzying puzzle

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Press, 1985). For more recent commentary on Southern literature, see Jerry Leath Mills, "The Dead Mule Rides Again," *Southern Cultures* 6, no.4 (Winter 2000): 11-34, which is an addendum to "Equine Gothic: The Dead Mule as Generic Signifier in Southern Literature of the Twentieth Century," in *The Southern Literary Journal*, 29 (Fall 1996): 2-17. Mills builds his analysis around the half-serious cliché that every Southern novel mentions or must mention a dead mule somewhere in the text.

of relatives to sort through, it is as if prior generations of the family wanted to imprint (or haunt, depending on the interpretation) their successors with daily reminders of their forebears. Though our novelist spoke little of his legendary family, his inheritance of the name touched every fact of his life: “If Walker Percy bore burdens that were heavy, they were by no means uniquely so. One could even say that some of them—including his birth to a wealthy, widely respected, and highly accomplished southern family—were indistinguishable from privileges” (1992, 11). Indeed, the Percy family history is a worthy (if not crucial) starting point for any examination of its most famous son. The leading biographies of the Percys are *The Literary Percys* (1994) and *The House of Percy* (1996), both by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, author of the classic *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982). The two most prominent works on Walker Percy are *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (1992) by Jay Tolson and Patrick Samway’s *Walker Percy: A Life* (1997).

The founder of the Percy clan in the New World, Charles Percy of Ireland, fought in the Seven Years’ War before abandoning his two children and their mother (whose legal relationship to the father is unclear) and fleeing to the infant America during the 1770’s. After another romantic liaison (the details of which are lost, save for the woman’s death shortly after taking up with Charles), Percy married a teenage heiress, Susannah Collins, in 1780 (Wyatt-Brown, 1994, 8). Ten years later, Robert

Percy, one of the children from Britain, found his father at his plantation near the Mississippi River, though by this time it is assumed that Charles had started to exhibit the manic depressive episodes that would plague him for several years.<sup>35</sup> He finally drowned himself, leaving Susannah to care for the homestead, a task she performed admirably. Robert settled nearby, and both families suffered the unease of wondering which branch represented the “true” Percy clan, and which might be viewed as imposters (9). Coincidentally, every Percy with a talent for letters issued from Susannah Collins’ side.

As noted in virtually all Percy family histories, depression, often extreme, even psychotic in nature, followed the family like a close shadow. Charles’ oldest daughter Sarah endured long, debilitating episodes as an adult, much to the distress and embarrassment of her husband, Nathaniel Ware. Major Ware moved Sarah and their children (Catherine and Ellen) to Philadelphia so that she could receive treatment, but his own disposition prevented the household from enjoying much levity:

Formidable and gloomy, Ware almost mesmerized his daughters, and they were bound to make him the object of much of their fiction and poetry. He even looked the part of a Byronic intellectual. Conceited about his appearance—pale complexion, small mouth, tightly pressed, and nose that a Roman proconsul would have worn with pride---he was

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<sup>35</sup> Charles and Susannah had seven children, though only three lived to adulthood. The only surviving son, Thomas George Percy (1786-1841), half-brother to Robert, formed an intimate friendship with another young man from a troubled family, John Walker of Georgia, and Walker Percy’s namesake (Wyatt-Brown, 1996, 70).

always dressed in the most expensive broadcloth and silk waistcoat. ... Making use of their father's image in their imaginative work, the daughters often wrote of figures who achieved high place in national affairs but eventually found the pursuit of power an empty and thankless enterprise. (10-11)

A devotee to agnostic philosophy, romantic literature, and science, Nathaniel Ware had a strained relationship with his children, as all three struggled with the disequilibrium of having Sarah confined to a hospital, insensible and ill yet still living (11). Nevertheless, Major Ware encouraged his daughters' artistic proclivities, and in 1843 Catherine and Ellen released a book of poetry, *The Wife of Leon* (15). Though the majority of the content is considered of minor significance, isolated portions of verse "...had a 'mysterious' character that involved depression, decay, and death..." and contained meditations on the persistence of memory—themes that would resurface in the work of Walker Percy. Ellen, who married a cousin of Robert E. Lee, succumbed to yellow fever in 1849 at the age of thirty, followed by Major Ware in 1853, leaving Catherine (now Warfield) in a deep state of loneliness and grief (23). After a protracted period of mourning, Catherine harnessed her melancholy to produce a two-volume novel, *The Household of Bouverie or The Elixir of Gold*, a best-selling, critically praised gothic romance filled with heady themes of violence, mystery, and tortured characters—just the kind of novel in fashion in the parlors and sitting rooms of wealthy Victorian women (24).

The family practice of writing continued with Catherine's niece, Sarah Ellis Dorsey, who penned a highly-regarded Civil War history in addition to several novels. If the Percy line had not already produced two famous women, Dorsey would have put the family on the map: in 1873 she moved to a plantation on the Gulf of Mexico, a peaceful property close to the water, and named it Beauvoir. After the death of her husband in 1875, she invited her close friend, the penniless and exiled Jefferson Davis, to live in the mansion. She aided him closely in the writing of *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* and eventually bequeathed to him all her belongings, including the Beauvoir estate, despite the severe annoyance of the larger Percy family (Percy 2009). Her devotion to the veterans of the war and her stoic, proud disposition inspired some to call her the "mother of the Lost Cause," which Brown describes as "that curious postwar movement that mixed legend, mourning, and anger ... that would continue to dominate Southern memory for the next fifty years" (1996, 135).

The last prominent female writer was Ellen's daughter, Sarah Catherine "Kate" Ferguson, and her sad story ended the tradition of Percy women embarking on literary careers. However, even her demise illuminates both the predicament of feminine ambition in antebellum America and the esoteric customs of a troubled family and their long-vanished society:

[Kate's] story demonstrates why a late-nineteenth-century woman with undoubted talent failed so catastrophically. The explanation is twofold: Kate Ferguson was a victim of family tragedy and a captive of a traditional literary moment. ... [I]n terms of literary genres open to women writers, no clear guidelines had surfaced. She did not have the education, sophistication, self-confidence, or freedom from marital responsibilities to place herself in a class with Kate Chopin, her contemporary. Finally, and no less important because it leads toward a fresh consideration of Walker Percy ... one can see how a family's selective amnesia wiped out the whole story of Kate and her foremothers ... Instead the Percy clan, especially Will Percy, Walker's cousin and guardian, made a heroic tale out of the disgrace of Kate's husband to rescue the family's tarnished honor. (Brown 1994, 38).

Her only novel was 1888's *Cliquot*, about a cross-dressing female jockey who disguises herself to follow the ownership of her beloved horse. Characterized as an early "bodice-ripper," the risqué story boasted figures of loose morals and underhanded deeds, and heroes who "expressed their love in ways that an earlier generation would have found much too suggestive" (39). Despite her reputation as a woman overly friendly with male company, Kate married General Samuel Wragg Ferguson and the two lived as prominent citizens in the community of Greenville, Mississippi. Kate's behavior made her an object of both fascination and scorn, but she remained steadfast in her commitment to the Percy tradition of literature and writing—a tradition, she felt, to which she was destined to make a substantial contribution. However, irregularities in the financial accounts of the local levee board exposed its accountant, General Ferguson, as a possible thief and extortionist. The following scandal obliterated the couple's public life, and General Ferguson fled

to Ecuador. The abandoned Kate never wrote another word and died a virtual widow, her presence in the community having dwindled to that of a living ghost (49).

Keeping to the literary members of the family, the next entry is undoubtedly the most famous behind Walker Percy: William Alexander Percy (1885–1942), Walker's cousin, and author of the landmark autobiography *Lanterns on the Levee: Reflections of a Planter's Son* (1941). Uncle Will, as Percy called him, was a mentor to and legal guardian of the younger writer, and his influence was immense. At this point it is worth noting the impact (and prevalence) of suicide in the Percy history, as two deaths in particular led directly to the importance of William Alexander Percy in his cousin's life.

As mentioned above, Charles Percy, founder of the family in the United States, became the first Percy to take his own life, and in a way his suicide initiated the unfortunate practice that would follow his heirs into the twentieth century. Charles' grandson (and William Alexander Percy's great uncle), LeRoy Pope Percy, committed suicide in 1882. He was followed by his nephew, John Walker Percy (1864-1917).

John Percy was a well-regarded Birmingham attorney at the turn of the century, a quiet, dignified man many assumed would enter politics. Instead, he traveled to Mississippi and campaigned on behalf of his brother, LeRoy, for the U.S.

Senate against James Vardaman, a thuggish politician and declared racist. The ugly libel perpetrated against Percy by Vardaman and his co-conspirator, white supremacist and future governor Theodore Bilbo, deeply offended both brothers, so much so that John publicly challenged Vardaman to settle the matter by fisticuffs (Tolson 1992, 31). Upon returning to Birmingham, John entered the state legislature for the sole purpose of passing two specific pieces of self-sponsored legislation. The first instituted fair pay for city alderman, thus significantly reducing the selling of political favors for office. The second established regular salaries for police officers. Before Percy's bill, the police were only paid according to arrests made, and thus arresting blacks and poor whites carried a profit motive that often rendered the guilt or innocence of the detainee irrelevant (31). Percy's much-needed legislative interventions, though successful, drained him to the point of illness, and like his forerunners he fell into depression. He lamented the seeming futility of keeping to an old ethical code that stood little chance against the power-seeking ruthlessness of the Vardamans and Bilbos of the world. In early February of 1917, he shot himself in the chest with a twelve-gauge (32). John Walker Percy was Walker Percy's grandfather.

His son, LeRoy Pratt Percy, also became a successful Birmingham attorney and also suffered from severe bouts of melancholy and dissatisfaction. Twelve years

after his grandfather took his own life, Walker's father shot himself in the attic of the family's home (45).

It is no surprise that LeRoy Pratt Percy's suicide haunted his son for the rest of his life, and the event would return, to Percy's own admission, in his fiction. The specter of suicide is indeed a recurring theme in all of his novels and essays.

Unfortunately, his losses did not end with his father. In 1932, Percy's mother Mattie Sue, a well-liked and attractive lady, took her young son Phin for a drive in the family Buick, but the boy was disturbed by his mother's unusually aloof behavior. Taking an atypical route, she drove to the Deer Creek bridge outside of Greenville, Mississippi. Though the details will never be fully known, somehow the car veered past the guard rails and dropped into the water below. Though just a child at the time, Phin recounted that his mother made no effort to escape, and in fact held his hand tightly as the car slowly sank. He screamed and pulled, trying to free them both, when finally she released him and he scrambled out of the back window. In a cruel bit of chance, Phin's two brothers, Walker and Roy, turned onto the same road just as her body was loaded into the ambulance (98-99). Uncle Will intercepted the two boys and took them and the traumatized Phin back home. Walker Percy would later state that he believed his mother's death to be a suicide, one more early death in the long Percy line (142).

An orphan at sixteen, Walker and his brothers were immediately adopted by Uncle Will, and the relationship between the young Percy and his cousin would be one of the most important in his life. Indeed, a strong case can be made that to complete a full reading of Walker Percy's work, one must start with Uncle Will's powerful memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*, so rich as it is in not only Percy family history, but also in the grand and decayed history of the mythical South. This is not to say that the book is a romanticized version of the region, another volume of moonlight and magnolias—such a characterization overlooks the complexities and internal contradictions of its author. Will Percy was a devoted son and family member, though never a father himself. Though he came of age at a time when traditional courtly manners still ruled over matters of romance and marriage, Will was a homosexual. His service in World War I did not obliterate the old notions “[h]onor, glory, chivalry, the big abstractions, the noble causes” as it did for so many other young men (71). On the contrary, it strengthened them: “For him the war had the ironic effect of confirming his deepest beliefs. Will was spared disenchantment because he entered the war believing that defeat and disillusionment were man's fate. This was partly his own personal credo and partly the legacy of southern history” (72). He was by profession a lawyer and a planter, but he also demonstrated remarkable artistry as a poet and essayist. Despite material affluence and deep intellectual curiosity, he never permanently relocated outside Mississippi

or Louisiana. Extensive travel, however, made him worldly in a community of neighbors who rarely saw the county line, let alone the Parthenon. And, perhaps most importantly to his young charge, he had lost his Christian faith as a young man (68). The many unresolved forces in William Alexander Percy's life opened similar chasms in Walker Percy. But where so many other Percys had succumbed to these stressors, Will survived them, and his survival undoubtedly demonstrated to Walker that it could be done: "Will, quite simply, was the first and most important part of Walker's education. The novelist would, in fact, never cease pondering Uncle Will's lessons—not simply his values but the example of his valiantly lived life" (73).

When applied to William Alexander Percy and Walker Percy, the ideas of a vocation of the self and the religious imagination seem less like branches of a theoretical concept and more like matters of life and death. Hope linked their moral agency to their identity—for Uncle Will it was a hope in never reaching the horizon of transcendent moments. He was gifted with the kind of sensitivity that makes reflection and self-examination almost inescapable, and in belonging neither to the old guard of Reconstruction nor to the battered souls of the Depression generation, he had a unique way of looking at the world. Like Walker, he allowed for and expected moments of grace in encounters with art and during self-reflection.

### III. Percy the Writer

In the fall 1956 issue of *Partisan Review*, Walker Percy published "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes," and was thereafter praised by his friend Shelby Foote for writing a piece which vindicated the profession of writing. "What encouraged me the most about it," Foote wrote, "was your seeing an answer in art (openly expressed) as well as in Jesus (only implied, but hardly that)" (Tolson 1997, 112). The question studied by Percy and Foote was the matter of what to do with what Percy called the alienated self. Percy introduced the idea with the man on the train: "There is a great deal of difference between an alienated commuter riding a train and this same commuter reading a book about an alienated commuter riding a train. ...The nonreading commuter exists in true alienation, which is unspeakable; the reading commuter rejoices in the speakability of his alienation and in the new triple alliance of himself, the alienated character, and the author" (Percy 1956, 83).<sup>36</sup> He goes on to define alienation as a feature of modern life: our technology-infused, consumer-driven forty-hour a week existence is one of isolation, abstraction, homelessness, and anxiety. Percy gave little attention to distinctions between modernity and postmodernity, though it might be argued that the absurd and ironic responses of cultural postmodernity to the here and now are ways in which the

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<sup>36</sup> Many of Percy's articles, including "The Man on the Train," appear in the collected volume *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975).

alienated commuter copes with his alienation without necessarily escaping it. The skepticism of philosophical postmodernity might find a temporary home in Percy's thought, but it is ultimately uprooted by his search for and belief in objective truth (Blackburn 2008, 283).

For Percy, above all modern conditions, one is the most pervasive and intolerable: an inelegant ennui bordering on despair. This is a boredom that manifests in paralysis and apathy, not to mention a complacency that allows self-examination and the morality once tethered to our daily functioning to float adrift. In Percy's fiction, the blank space created in our lives by the boredom and anxiety of alienation can even lead to amnesia: we literally forget ourselves. Such a fate is not a foregone end to contemporary life, however, as Percy illustrates with his commuter on the train. By reading a work of *fiction*, the commuter may reverse alienation by entering a narrative and identifying with a character, and the fortunate result is not just in repeating or "living" the experience the text is describing, but in leaving the mute exile of the everyday and entering into a space of self-awareness.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Percy makes it clear that non-fiction meant to counsel or instruct the confused modern individual is not equipped to take the reader on a similar journey: non-fiction simply reinforces the alienation by attempting to categorize it, by "abstract[ing] immanent goals from existence" for the reader to follow through like a checklist. In fact, the devotee to the self-help genre, he argues, is a "candidate for suicide" (Percy 1956, 85).

### *Williston Bibb Barrett*

*The Last Gentleman* is the story of Will Barrett, a young man living in New York City as a humidification engineer in the basement of Macy's. The "young engineer" as Percy refers to him, happens upon a vacationing family, the Vaughts, who hail from the hometown of Will's father. Mr. and Mrs. Vaught are the New South: gregarious, wealthy, exceedingly cheerful, entirely agreeable and decent people who also happen to be superficial and philistine. Recognizing him as someone "from back home," they draft Will into acting as a traveling companion for their cancer-stricken son Jamie. Skulking in the background is the older Vaught brother, Sutter. A suspended physician and misanthrope, Sutter is immediately fascinated by this strangely quiet and polite young man his family has adopted. Will is equally intrigued: Sutter is cynical, cerebral, and approaches the world (and his own life) expecting to be dissatisfied. Sutter's brooding is familiar to Will, though "it put him in mind of he knew not what" (152).

Throughout the majority of *The Last Gentleman*, the protagonist Will suffers a sense of alienation so profound that he undergoes periods of amnesia, and when he is not "wandering in his mind," as the old Southern phrase goes, he is so scattered and confused that he has no framework for constructing a meaningful, coherent self-identity—one that would allow him at the very least to take some kind of action in his life. He is pulled in many contradictory directions of culture and character, but he is seized by none. He is sensitive to history, tradition, his youth, his family, his

environment, the vagaries of thought and experiment, the mysteries of science, and yet he has not the faintest apprehension of how to feel about himself. As Judith Butler would say, he is unable to give an account of himself. Will's affliction is hardly new, for it is essentially the question of "Who am I?" threaded through half-committed pursuits of sensuality and long nights of fruitless abstraction. He wanders Southern battlefields unable to explain their pull on him; he dallies with the daughter of the wealthy family with the anxious propriety of a chivalric code he does not remember learning.

What makes Will interesting is his journey to discover the *need* to answer this question—realizing not who he "is," but rather that he has never asked. The curious pressure in his chest, the fog in his brain, are not lack of answers, but actually symptoms of having never posed the question. "To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be on to something," another Percy character claims, "Not to be on to something is to be in despair."<sup>38</sup> Self-awareness, then, even in the form of a *search* for identity, is necessary for liberation from the stultifying effects of abstraction. Without some kind of awareness, we have no capacity for action or prioritizing. The ramifications of this fugue state are easy to predict: Will represents the inert wanderer tossed about by forces he has no facility to process. He loses hours gazing in wonder at the tiny emblem of crossed swords on a map of the Vicksburg memorial, certain it holds

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<sup>38</sup> Binx Bolling, who is in many ways Will's ontological first-draft from *The Moviegoer* (1961, 13). Binx's story is told in the first-person, and that device alone gives him a level of self-knowledge that eludes Will.

some mysterious meaning for him, but when fellow students march by in a protest for civil rights, he is clueless and ineffectual. When he is charged by an absent family to ensure their dying son is baptized, Will is frantic: "The poor addled engineer took the steps four at a time, racing to do he knew not what [...] Here he stood, therefore, stooped over the machinery of Jamie's veins, hoist not only by the vast awkwardness of dying but now by religion too" (303).

Will is burdened by the task of keeping Jamie's death as "easy" as possible while struggling with his own constant "looniness." In the last hours of Jamie's life at the conclusion of *The Last Gentleman*, Will finds himself in a position where all previous bets concerning his idleness are off; confronted with the harsh indignities of death, the empty theorizations and suicidal notions of Sutter, and the pressures of understanding and facilitating a religious rite for his friend, Will is forced to act without the veil of abstractionist thought. His "looniness," previously cushioned and confounded his travels. Now it has left him stranded without an intelligible identity or background from which to act. He stands in the crosshairs of a common theme: a loss of self-understanding and agency under the conditions of melancholic freedom.

According to Percy, a central problem faced by twentieth century man is his inability to locate his subjectivity and understand its composition (why, for instance, does someone feel a connection to a Civil War memorial?). The resulting

disorientation leads to a distracted, superficial existence where agency is essentially mute. The source of this predicament is a new division in epistemological pursuit: “As a thinker, Percy found himself placed in a world in which ways of knowing—scientific versus poetic, empirical versus intuitive—had come to be seen as separate if not entirely antithetical” (Desmond 2004, 86). The resulting incongruity in “ways of knowing,” perpetuated by a defective new form of popular science, “scientism,” blocks modern man from comprehending himself and his world, both internally and externally. His agency is therefore encumbered, as evidence by Will’s tendency to stand agape when suddenly confronted by decisions that require him to have quick access his opinions. His horizon of value distinctions is murky and abstract.

Throughout *The Last Gentleman*, Will is distracted from a “normal” life by what he contacts (people, places, objects) and what he has a metaphysical connection to (the Old South, his father). His preoccupations adversely affect his health, causing periods of confusion and amnesia, and isolate him from interaction with others. His problem is, on one face, a problem of symbols and perception. He cannot detach himself from the allegorical weight of a Holsum truck passing routinely under a dying boy’s window any more than he can escape the heritage haunting him beneath a Civil War memorial. Because he cannot remove himself from this pensiveness, he becomes divorced from the active world around him. As Allen Pridgen observes: “This condition is a function of his habit of abstraction, his

tendency to mistake thinking about reality for reality itself" (2000, 40). As Jamie deteriorates, he retreats into himself and the "safest, sunniest, most inviolate circle" of *Treasure Island*, leaving Will to struggle with the overall smallness of his friend's impending death. He makes his first connection with the realm beyond his own observationalist one in realizing that Jamie's death will occur without the tiniest notice by the world at large. With the initial step out of the way, Will is free to reject the elder Sutter Vaught's notions on suicide and his hopeless battle with transcendence versus fornication versus science. Will is fascinated by Sutter's grappling with and eventual dismissal of the presence of Christ and religion, but he is dismayed by the doctor's self-destructiveness. Full of confusion and disdain, Will burns Sutter's casebook in an act of latent anger. His reality, though still troubled and uneven, begins to take root in the actions immediately preceding Jamie's death. Scientism and its flawed capacity for the attachment of meaning to its subjects has been abandoned, as has Sutter's "cynical unbelief" regarding value systems and life itself. Instead, Will's *scientific* observations, which, unbalanced have contributed to his dislocation, are slowly being checked by more creative thoughts: "He responds aesthetically and emotionally to the 'mathematical' leaves, finding a grace and beauty in their movements that he names poetically and metaphorically a 'dance.' Percy believes that these signs of art name with the same precision as science and can potentially reveal as much about human experience" (2000, 82). Will is

gradually tapping into a consciousness which had previously eluded him; his capability to think both artistically *and* scientifically allows him a mental anchor from which he develops a more direct understanding of the world around him.

Percy's solution is a reintegration of proper scientific thought and artistic expression by examination of semantics, to rejoin two quests already intellectually common in their search for the truth with an emphasis on language and symbolism (91). His construct is a product of religious imagination and it is in service to deeper self-comprehension. Here, religion, although dismissed by Percy as the ultimate remedy for the dichotomy between science and art, becomes a semiotic tool for connecting man to his symbols, his past, and his search for the truth. The truths revealed at the conclusion of *The Last Gentleman*, religion's place at one's deathbed, the failures of scientism, and Will Barrett's sudden link with reality, illustrate Percy's belief in the need for a connective tissue to be utilized in the resolutions between art and science in the modern predicament. Will's charge is to decide whether that tissue can be found in Christianity, fulfillment of domestic expectation, or in his own conscience—the important thing is that by the end of the novel, he has finally begun the search. Percy's writing of *The Last Gentleman* is a project of regenerating agency which contains the story of someone coming to realize their need for one.

#### IV. The Gentleman Respectfully Disagrees

In the summer of 1970, Walker Percy was called into a federal court house in Covington, Louisiana, to serve as an “expert witness,” or “an observer of the culture,” as he put it, in a case involving the removal of the Confederate flag from the local high school. He supported the immediate removal of the flag and subsequently found himself receiving death threats from the area members of the Ku Klux Klan, warnings which he largely shrugged off (Tolson 1997, 142). This episode was not Percy’s first foray into public debate: in the summer of 1956 Percy’s controversial piece “Stoicism in the South” attacked white Southerners for their increasingly indifferent (and consequently shameful) attitudes toward the integration movement. This piece (among others) led Peter Augustine Lawler to assert that Percy was “the most able and penetrating representative of the final moment of a dissident tradition in American thought” (2003, 303). Lawler is referring to a very small number of thinkers who emerged from the Southern agrarian tradition—a heritage of aristocracy and slaveholding—and brought into the twentieth century a clear-eyed contrition, a strong belief in racial equality and civil rights, and a suspicion of the approaching world of disposable technology and rampant consumerism.<sup>39</sup>

Only a month before “Stoicism in the South,” another Percy article appeared in a decidedly more esoteric forum: “Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism” in

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<sup>39</sup> Translated into Southern, these things would be known as either “common” or “just foolishness.”

*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (and reprinted later as a part of *The Message in the Bottle*, 1975). Despite the difference in language and tone, in these two articles Percy confronts the same problem: reflection and self-understanding. For the Southern stoic, self-regard was built around the practice and reproduction of manners, manners which created a framework for how the self was to be seen by others, the plantation master as viewed by his subordinates. Momentarily sidestepping many of the ethical and moral questions surrounding the treatment of fellow human beings by this sober gentry, Percy highlights how, at least for the white Southerner, tradition (or the “old alliance” as he boldly describes it) allowed for a brief and solitary crystallization of the self:

Whatever its abuses, whatever its final sentimental decay, there was such a thing as noblesse oblige on the one side and an extraordinary native courtesy and dignity on the other, by which occurred, under almost impossible conditions, a flowering of human individuality such as this hemisphere has rarely seen (343).

A temptation exists to deny this figure his self-awareness, that the deep mystery of Robert E. Lee’s portrait, his famous condition of being forever “unknowable” extends—and indeed is primarily characterized by—a vacuous space in place of existential realization. However, for Percy the Southern stoic is not hollow, merely reflective, and never more so than when his social conditions begin to change:

Its [the Southern Stoa] most characteristic mood was a poetic pessimism which took a grim satisfaction in the dissolution of its values—because social decay confirmed one in his original choice of the wintry kingdom of the self. He is never more himself than when in a twilight of victory over evil, of Mordred over Arthur. And of course he is in good company in his assessment of the modern world (343).

Percy's allusion to Arthur not only references the chivalric appropriations of the old South, but also implies that the strange world that was the South was corrupt from its very inception, just as Camelot was poisoned from the deceit of Uther and Mordred's incestuous conception. Both calamities unfolding in the wake of mistaken identities. (Tocqueville had made the same observation in his time, noting that the character of the South fixed the region with an inescapable expiration date [Tocqueville 1835, 347].) However, where Arthur's final and only permissible peace comes from his complete removal from the society which he previously defined, the Southern stoic "stands forever grumbling on the porch," frozen between his unwillingness to relinquish his distance from the rest of the world and the moral imperatives of his claimed Christianity. As Percy dryly notes, "For the Stoic there is no real hope. His finest hour is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him" (344). But while the individuality, the self-knowledge of the white Southerner represented a rare confluence of attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives all pointing toward and actualizing the figure on the porch, the truth of the relationship between himself and society reveals a myopic and unsatisfactory conclusion: "For it was not the individual, after all, who was intrinsically precious in the Stoic view—rather it was one's own attitude toward him..." (344). The other, therefore, the slave, the laborer, the neighbor, had value only in his capacity as one who gazes at the master to see the master staring back at him. The perception was that such consideration, however

detached, was magnanimous and edifying to both parties. In “Stoicism in the South,” Percy rejects this identity construction by characterizing it as not only solipsistic, but as contrary to the professed beliefs of the Christian faith.

In a testament to Percy’s intellectual depth, he makes a similar argument for the inherent value of the individual human in “Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism” using (and partially rejecting) Sartrean philosophy:

The Sartrean elevation of nothingness as the prime reality of the human existent, the awarding of priority to existence over essence, is perhaps a confusion of the psychological and the ontological orders, a mistaking of human being for the predicament of consciousness. When Matthieu [...] discovers his freedom in his nothingness—“Within me there is nothing. I am free,” he is after all only hypostasizing the unformulability of self. The tell-tale sign is his elation, his sense of having at last discovered his identity. He is something after all—Nothing! [...] is he not committing the same impersonation which Sartre so severely condemns in others? If the structure of consciousness is intentional, to be of its essence directed toward the other, a being-towards, then the ontologizing of this self-unformulability as Nought is as perverse as any other impersonation—really a kind of inferior totemism. (530).

Percy’s answer for both the empiricists and existentialists is an approach to the study of man with an open-mindedness for science *and* metaphysics, “a broad and untrammelled empiricism, a sensitivity and a neutrality before structures which will neither rule out nor preconceive causal connections for reason of doctrinal requirement” (530). This method allows one to reason: “I exist, I was created, I therefore have a Creator.”

Based on what has been presented in the foregoing pages, we can conclude that Mark Twain and Walker Percy differ somewhat in the ways their writing and moral

outlooks represent the constraints and losses incurred by modernity. Mark Twain's judgment could be resolute and vicious, or it could hesitate, even reverse itself depending on his age or the conditions surrounding him. As we saw in his letter to Olivia, he often felt pulled in different directions over the correct location of his moral sources—were ethics properly derived from a “love of the Savior” or from Twain's own intuition and the mores of his day? One argument goes that we need look no further than Olivia herself as Twain's one and only guiding principle; this interpretation, while not universal by any means, does have some persuasive evidence, most notably the profound effect her death had on him and his writing. Without her to censor his more careless moments and counsel his troubled ones, Twain let his religious imagination sour into a creative impulse driven by grief and acrimony rather than hope. After all, the final verdict in *The Mysterious Stranger* leaves little room for anything beyond silence. The young Theodor listens to Satan's final words:

'It is true, that which I have revealed to you; there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream—a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought—a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!'

He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized, that all he had said was true. ([1916] Blair 1962, 388).

Citing the above passage comes perilously close to the oft-made criticism that Twain is quoted more than he is actually read, but it is hard to deny the power in these last words, especially considering the body of work that preceded it. This span of

subjectivity is what makes Twain so fascinating. At the very least, we can assume that Twain's belief in the Moral Sense—the unique human attribute that enables us to indulge in cruelty and degradation—outweighed every other potential explanation for mankind he had pondered in his long life. The last epiphany, it seems, led to a void rather than transcendence.

On the other end of belief is Walker Percy. Where Twain wrestled with the societal effects of modernity, Percy preoccupation centered on more existential matters. During his last months when he was dying of prostate cancer, Percy wrote to his best friend Shelby Foote of facing the end of his life:

The worst thing is the traveling and hospitals. Flying around the U.S. is awful and hospitals are no place for anyone, let alone a sick man.

I'll tell you what I've discovered. Dying, if that's what it comes to, is not big thing since I'm ready for it, and prepared for it by my Catholic faith which I believe. What is a pain is not even the pain but the nuisance. It is a tremendous bother (and expense) to everyone. Worst of all is the indignity. Who wants to go to pot before strangers, be an object of head-shaking for friends, a lot of trouble to kin? I know the answer to this of course: false pride—who are you to be too proud to go the way of all flesh—or as you would write on the chart to Bellevue: '—the patient went rapidly downhill and made his exitus.'

Seriously, and now that I think of it, in this age of unbelief I am astounded at how few people facing certain indignity in chronic illness make an end to it. Few if any. I am not permitted to. (Tolson 1997, 303)

And while existential angst can tend toward a kind of navel-gazing that Twain abhorred (reflection to the point of stupor), it would be unfair to suggest that Percy's

concerns did not conjure their share of melancholy, anger, and distress. Homeless, useless, forlorn—what Satan shared with Theodor, Percy understood firsthand.

However, Percy maintained a faith that either cleared every path of moral and spiritual turmoil or promised to shepherd believers past the obstacles.

## CHAPTER SIX

### “EVEN BETTER THAN THE REAL THING”: STRONGER HORIZONS, EXPANDED BANDWIDTH

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This above all: to thine own self be true,  
and it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not be then false to any man.

— Polonius, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene III, lines 78-80

#### I. Introduction

In *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), Lionel Trilling notes the “unique and touching charm” of Polonius’s final bit of advice for his son (3). The proverb’s poignancy can be overshadowed by the typical reader impression of Polonius as a meddlesome and tedious old man, and thus the words are often taken as a warning for Laertes to make his own self-interests paramount and to broadcast them so others will know his priorities take precedence over theirs. This reading, according to Trilling, misses the “lucid moral lyricism” of Polonius’s point, which is to be sincere with oneself (*ibid.*). Sincerity in this sense is nothing more than knowing what is true about how one feels and what one believes, with the added suggestion that inner sincerity assures integrity in social relationships. Shakespeare’s adage is one more testament to the importance of reflection and evaluation. To be true to

oneself is to confront questions of moral, spiritual, and political significance and seek answers in a deliberate and thoughtful way—anything less than this critical stance leaves us unfinished, uncertain, or, recalling Meyer from Chapter 1, in a state of “phoniness.” We might also succumb to Taylor’s notion of the relativistic and corrupt “authenticity” of contemporary self-fulfillment. For this project, we could re-imagine Polonius’s lines to read “To thine own self be true, tis the surest guarantor of agency.” As the previous chapters have illustrated, many conditions characteristic of recent modernity have complicated the execution of this wisdom. Yet Trilling offers a ray of hope: “Now and then it is possible to observe the moral life in the process of revising itself, perhaps by reducing the emphasis it formerly placed upon one or another of its elements, perhaps by inventing and adding to itself a new element, some mode of conduct or of feeling which hitherto it had not regarded as essential to virtue” (1). We have already seen a moment like this in Huck Finn’s “go to hell” moment: he revises his moral life in a moment of conversion, a “shift from finding himself in one moral world and then another,” which actualizes and reaffirms his agency (Kim 2006, 64). We know from his monologue on the raft leading up to that instant that he is engaging in strong evaluation. He wrestles with the guilt of departing one system of belief, one which, at the very least was comfortable and familiar, to submit to an alternative that represented his ethics, priorities, and value distinctions with the highest degree of

veracity. In Huck's exertion we can detect Twain's as well: both are expressing their "psychic struggle" with the moral substance of their agency and how and what its ultimate manifestation will reveal about their identities. Perhaps Huck has the advantage of "lightin' out for the territory" at the end of his journey, but Twain would continue in his struggle for years to come. And as noted earlier, his project of regenerating agency, while rich as a case study for readers, suffers many cracks and setbacks in his later years. Without hope, our projects have no fuel.

We also see instances of "moral life revising itself" in Percy, and like Twain, Percy's writing exhibits a confrontation with the dilemma of reconnecting agency and identity through the articulation of moral foundations. Let us again revisit *The Last Gentleman*. In one of its most telling passages, Will Barrett observes the Vaught family servant, David, cheerfully performing his work, and the seeming ease in which David holds himself frustrates Will to distraction:

Damnation, David couldn't even polish silver. There was always silver cream left in the grooves. Still, the engineer liked to watch him at work. The morning sunlight fell among the silver like fish in the shallows. The metal was creamy and satiny. The open jar of silver cream, the clotted rag, the gritty astringent smell of it, put him in mind of something but he couldn't say what. But damn this awful vulnerability of theirs, he ranted, eyes fixed on the glittering silver. It's going to ruin us all, this helplessness. Why, David acted as if everybody was going to treat him well! If I were a Negro, I'd be tougher than that. I'd be steadfast and tough as a Jew and I'd beat them. I'd never rest until I beat them and I could. I should have been born a Negro, for then my upsidedownness would be right side up and I'd beat them and life would be simple (156).

In this moment, Will Barrett, Percy's addled engineer, exhibits a clarity of mind that eludes him for the majority of the novel, and in many ways this passage speaks to the whole of Percy's work: the reconciliation of the individual with himself, his beliefs, and his society, and the burdens of the past in the construction of a new kind of politics to reflect those changes. We see Will's longing for clarity and self-understanding and the friction he encounters when reflecting. Only at the very end of Will's story in *The Second Coming*, does his crisis abate, but it does when he realizes and acknowledges the root of his identity is in a believer's faith. The project of regenerating agency has reached the zenith of his and Percy's aspiration, and the reader is invited to take part in the experience.

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The previous chapters introduced and described the contemporary theoretical discourses relating how agency and identity have been shaped by the forces of modernity. A major strand in current political theory involves accounting for lost or diminished agency, the confusion and unintelligibility of modern individual identity, and how such conditions developed in social and political constructs built upon the principle of personal freedom and characterized by material abundance. Using David Kyuman Kim's design of a project of regenerating agency, I demonstrated how engagement with literature can provide the circumstances needed for an individual to participate in evaluation and reflection. By entering into a project of

regenerating agency, one is able to interrogate and confront questions of ethical, spiritual, or political significance, reconcile existing limitations on agency with a desire to transcend such limitations, connect or reconnect with moral sources, and conceive of a complete vocation of the self which will defend against the perplexing and deleterious undercurrents of modern life.

Up to this point I have been referring to literature in the most conventional sense, and so for my concluding remarks I would like to travel beyond the conventional, both to illuminate an understudied universe of discourse and to demonstrate the portability of projects of regenerating agency.

Distilled to the barest elements, the function of literature as a site of regenerating agency involves two foundational processes from which every other practice will emerge. It is a deceptively simple equation: the author writes a text and the reader reads it. But what if the possibility of literature as a practice of creating and receiving could be taken one step further? The author writes, the reader reads, and then the reader *writes back*.

As outlined in Chapter Three, Kim's concept of self-cultivation involves the active pursuit of a moral identity (gained primarily through critical reflection of the self and ethical sources) and the amorphous yet vital prescription of spiritual exercise. The dual-purposes of spiritual exercise begin with reminding us of what social, institutional, political, or personal devices might constrain our enactment of

free will in the pursuit of meaningful agency. Secondly, spiritual exercises encourage us to transcend those limitations and tether back together the social, institutional, political, or personal actions with supporting moralities. Recalling the earlier example, rather than shirk off the vote because of lack of political sophistication, lack of resources, or lack of position, a spiritual exercise as self-cultivation requires us to make the trip, learn the issues, and cast the vote. In doing so we can learn to re-infuse our agency with the evaluations gained from reflecting on the exercise. The same model applies to engaging a text—texts, after all, may present questions as directly as “Candidate A or B?” Conversely, they may force us to employ even deeper scrutiny, admit greater ignorance, and call upon the resources of our moral intellect. I am thinking here of the Socratic dialogues, or better still, the parables of Jesus. Furthermore, these may be the same inquiries the writer faced when creating the text...they may not be. Either way some kind of reflection moved the project forward. What I offer now is an expansion of this exercise, one that retains the context of recasting or buoying subjectivity, but does so through a new layer of intertextuality.

The process and product to which I am referring is the class of writing based on specific pre-existing cultural narratives. In short, fanfiction. Fanfiction (or fanfiction as academics persist in calling it) is a literary work created by a fan; the dominant source material for fan-produced texts comes from popular culture,

including such a variety of cultural products as film, novels, drama, television, gaming, sports, and music. The vanished boundaries between media and genre illustrate the intertextual properties of fanfiction right away, but they also leave behind red flags for conservative critics and writers who are protective of their territory and expertise. The words of Walter Benjamin should mollify the traditionalists:

We have to rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres [...] if we are to identify the forms of expression that channel the literary energies of the present. There were not always novels in the past, and there will not always have to be; there have not always been tragedies or great epics. Not always were the forms of commentary, translation, indeed even so-called plagiarism, playthings in the margins of literature [...]. All this is to accustom you to the thought that we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been accustomed to think may lose their force. ([1934] 2003, 258)

The amount of fanfiction being currently produced is usually staggering to those unfamiliar with its existence. The internet is now the principal repository for fanfiction, and thus the archival abilities afforded to fans has revealed some impressive numbers. *Fanfiction.net*, one of the largest collections online, once hosted over 950,000 unique works by more than 220,000 writers or fanficcors—the site stopped counting in 2007 (Parrish 2007, 36). Fans from across the globe may contribute to the archive, as evidenced by submissions in 31 languages, including Latin (*FF.net*, 2010). Though some cultural properties (the *Star Wars* films, for example) boast massive appeal and thus generate massive amounts of fanfiction, it would be incorrect to assume that all

fanfiction is derived from mainstream popular film, book series, and television shows. Between *Fanfiction.net* and *Archive of Our Own*, another non-specific site, there are fanworks on Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Henri Stendhal, William Faulkner, Dostoyevsky, George Orwell, James Joyce, Henry James, Joseph Heller, Charles Dickens, Norse mythology, legends of African Diasporas, and, of course, Mark Twain (give Percy fans time).

With the vast amount of production in fanfiction, it would be hard to deny that the genre, for lack of a better term, represents a robust stream of “literary energies,” such as Benjamin references, even if professional writers and critics consider it a “plaything on the margin of literature.” Scholarly consideration of fanfiction has only developed in the last two decades, and then only sporadically, but it is increasing steadily. However, the bulk of work to this point has followed anthropological and sociological issues surrounding fanfiction and the larger fandom community. Defining themes of the academic literature thus far include topics such as the gender composition of fanfic communities, the linguistic customs and mutations created in fandom, and, not least of course, the ethical and legal aspects of producing and publicizing work replicating images, names, and storylines derived from items typically protected by copyright.

Only very recently have a few scholars approached fanfiction not just as “evidence of a fan’s behavior,” but as content deserving of attention in the same

manner as any other professionally published work (Coppa 2006, 41). A preliminary history of sorts has emerged, though, like any subject caught in under a critical lens, definitional parameters are the subject of debate. The birth of fanfiction (and related fan-produced works) has fallen into three interpretations:

- 1) That the first fan cultures arose in the late 1960s out of science-fiction media texts like *Star Trek* and fantasy novels like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Darkover* series, both of which incited fans to create their own versions and revisions of the original stories for personal consumption or for publication in fanzines;
- 2) That creative fan cultures originated from printed works, rather than media texts, taking the form of letter responses, early fanzines, or literary societies. This argument has more subcategories than the first, locating the origin of visible fan cultures with the first science fiction fanzines in the 1930s; in literary societies based on and continuing Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories or Austen's works; or looks further back to the 1800s, when fan responses to serialized texts could impact the story's development in subsequent installments; and
- 3) Offering the broadest definition, that fan cultures and their texts are almost timeless, in that fanfiction can be said to encompass any use, retelling, and/or reinterpretation of mythology and other tales that originated in oral culture. (Handley 2010, 4-5)

An accompanying canon of critical literature is also forming, beginning with Henry Jenkin's *Textual Poachers* (1994), which launched the first round of controversies regarding the proper understanding and conceptualization of fandom and fanfiction. The relevant theoretical tentacles, however, stretch back even further, to

Adorno and Horkheimer's invective against mass-produced popular culture in *Dialectic and Enlightenment* (1944). As Handley notes, "Adorno and Horkheimer see popular culture texts not only as homogenized pabulum, but also as unidirectional—without room for 'rejoinder,' the 'culture industry' permits only passive acceptance from its audience (20). The subsequent critique of fans as passive recipients does not, however, stand up to scrutiny.

Rather than address the arguments for or against the idea that fanfiction should be studied for content as well as the social structures that surround it, I would like to make the case that not only are fans not passive, but they are engaged in alliances of reflection and evaluation much in the way Percy described with his alienated commuter. As such, fanfiction can serve as a potential project of regenerating agency in a manner parallel to canonical works.

Fanfiction communities operate under self-regulating practices which encourage dialogue and debate. For instance, fandom convention prescribes that each work made available in a public space be assigned a rating, much like the Motion Picture Association of America labels films. Fans or fanworks which push the boundaries of these ratings, misuse or dismiss them, or challenge their function and language, engage one another in questions such as appropriate age for viewing certain content and the manner of enforcing rules with no official governing body. Fanfiction.net and some of the larger archives do police content and ban those in

violation of the terms of service, but not without stirring up healthy amounts of discussion. Additionally, fandom puts a particular emphasis on “beta” reading and reader feedback. Beta readers proofread fanfic and offer critiques before a work is posted, and the expectation of commentary from fellow fans after posting is implicit. There are several levels of discourse running throughout the entire lifespan of a work of fanfiction: from initial author to reader, reader transformed to author, and author presenting re-interpretations, additions, or re-imaginings of familiar material to other readers. There is a transformation from dialogism to intertextuality: “... a text is constructed out of already existent discourse. Authors do not create their texts from their own original minds, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts, so that, as Kristeva writes, a text is ‘a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text,’ in which ‘several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another’” (Allen 2000, 37).

It is one thing to establish fanfiction as a platform for multiple concurrent conversations, but what of the other elements of projects of regenerating agency? How does fanfiction operate in terms of bolstering the foundations for meaningful action and revitalizing identity? First, fanfiction does require a creative impulse, despite the opposition’s claim that fanworks are regurgitative and predictable. This creativity is encouraged by the conventions and construct of the fanfic community—fanfic is not usually written in isolation. It is to be shared, discussed, praised, or

deconstructed. One could argue there is a thread of the religious imagination at work; after all, a fan writes fanfic hoping it will be read and their participation in a community of peers will bear fruit. Fanfiction can also inspire rigorous self-critiques—meta-fandoms which foster dialogues on the moral implications of anything from a trends to political ramifications of how this or that is represented. In short, fanfiction, by calling for and providing opportunities of reflection of evaluation, has its own part to play in regenerating agency.

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