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# Thrown Into America: Existentialism in the New World

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*Thrown Into America:  
Existentialism in the New World*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary


by

William Toler Marsh

Accepted for Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

  
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*In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.*

—Albert Camus, 1942

*The universe works on a math equation  
That never even ever really even ends in the end.  
Infinity spirals out creation  
We're on the tip of its tongues, and it is saying:  
Well, we ain't sure where you stand  
You ain't machines and you ain't land,  
And the plants and the animals they are linked.  
And the plants and the animals eat each other.*

—“Never Ending Math Equation,” American pop song, 1998

### **Introduction**

Near the start of *Invisible Man* (1952), Ralph Ellison's nameless protagonist, aptly cited as “Invisible,” recounts a defining trauma of his youth. Ostensibly impressed by his high school graduation speech, a representative of his Southern town's ruling class asks Invisible to give yet another oration. He is led to believe that he will speak at a ballroom fete, taking the podium at a prestigious society gathering. The young Invisible arrives at a battle royal: finding himself not alone—edifying an intelligent and respectful audience—but one of many blindfolded and naked black men, coerced into fighting before jeering, drunken bourgeoisie. “I stumbled about like a baby,” he recalls, “stepping out of range while pushing the others into the melee to take the blows blindly aimed at me. The smoke was agonizing and there were no rounds, no bells at three-minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion. The room spun round me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by tense white faces” (22-3). Time and space

dissolve into a nauseous swell of pain. Invisible is confused and forlorn, literally cast into the fray.

In 1951, Jack Kerouac produced the first version of *On the Road*. The final 1957 version finds Sal Paradise, Kerouac's alias, begging a question only to answer it. While recalling a trip with Dean and Marylou, to see Old Bull in New Orleans, Sal muses: "What is that feeling when you're driving away from people and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing?—it's the too-huge world vaulting us, and it's good-by. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies" (156). His transient horizon is an image of freedom, the void above it a mirror to the earthly infinite.

On a different afternoon in the 1950's, near the outskirts of the same city, Binx Bolling crashes his car. The contemplative star of Walker Percy's 1961 debut, *The Moviegoer*, narrates: "We are bowling along below Pass Christian when the accident happens. Just ahead of us a westbound green Ford begins a U-turn, thinks it sees nothing, creeps out and rams me square amidships. Not really hard—it makes a hollow metal bang *b-rramp!* and the MG shies like a spooked steer, jumps into the neutral ground, careens into a drain hole and stops, hissing" (124-5). While, fortunately, Binx's malaise is abated for the moment, a trip to the Gulf Coast is disrupted. His romantic schemes—involving his new secretary, a secluded cove by the sea, and certain worldly bliss—sputter into a roadside ditch.

These three moments in American fiction expose diverse and indeed antagonistic social locations: a brutalized black teenager of the Delta, an aimless Catholic hipster from Massachusetts, and a stockbroker born into the New

Orleans aristocracy. Accordingly, they depict different situations. Invisible is on stage, blindfolded and battered by the racist dominant class. Sal exalts in the erotica of travel, and in his clarity of vision. He philosophizes on the thrill of departure, and the open road's vast potential. Sal's desire is both voyeuristic and involved; America is a performance in which he's dying to get a part. Binx is somewhere in between—in a halted MG, blinded by the gauze of a suburban daydream.

There are differences between these scenes, and their respective social realms are conflicting. One commonality, however, is as vital as it is rare. It is their shared dramatic—and literal—currency: motion. Sal speeds beneath the sky, Binx careens off of the road, and Invisible sways amidst punches. Yet only one aspect of these experiences is physical. As Bertolt Brecht suggests with his notion of “the gest,” one advantage of drama is its capacity to illuminate the social via the movement of an actor's body. The author, in a similar way, can designate psychological situations to *existential* realities. Invisible, Sal, and Binx, are not only jostled through material space. Their movement has a significance that transcends movement per se. These disparate characters are all experiencing, in Heideggerian terms, the same condition of existence: *Thrownness-into-being*.

According to this concept from *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)*, every individual is born into a “whence and whither”—*thrown* into a particular time and place (Heidegger, 1962; 174). We all exist within a situation that is not fully self-determined. Katherine Withy rephrases Heidegger's concept thus: “A human life is never neutral or undetermined but always has some definite content already.

Talking about ‘thrownness’ is a way of talking about the ways in which we are already determined, and the fact that we are delivered over to these as our starting-points” (Withy, 2014; 62). One of the main struggles of life is adapting to this position: the search for personal location, and its possible meaning. The individual must *combat* this condition of passivity—Thrownness—and assert herself authentically in her own life. Furthermore, Thrownness is not a singular phenomenon. An individual is not thrown *once* at birth. For Heidegger, it is the very “characteristic of Dasein’s Being”—one of the fundamental qualities of being-in-the-world (*BT* 174). As Heidegger articulates it, we are thrown into *moods*. We wake up feeling one way or another. The task, in this case, is to confront the mood and not simply *give in*. According to Heidegger, we are all the source of our own possibilities. Thrownness, in short, is the perennial condition of living a finite existence situated in time. It is our task to respond with agency.

As one effect of this thesis, I explain how a core aspect of Heidegger’s philosophy found its way into *Invisible Man*, *The Moviegoer*, and *On the Road*. This was no coincidence. I will examine the social, cultural, philosophical phenomenon known as Existentialism—a product of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century European intellectualism—and its influence on the literary landscape of the United States. I propose that Ralph Ellison, Jack Kerouac, and Walker Percy, are central figures in American existentialism. While dealing primarily with their work and lives, I understand them as but a vibrant few, among many, representatives of the existential tradition.

This is, in part, a genealogical investigation. Rather than studying single texts, isolated from their own place and time, I will explore their specific historical conditions. The American affinity towards Søren Kierkegaard and his continental successors—such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre—should be accounted for in terms of social reality. For example, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground* was first published in English in 1918. It is regarded as the first existential novel. As literary historian George Cotkin writes, *Notes* is vital to “the existential nihilist tradition...[It] explores the possibility of a world where all props for God and science, moral and mores, have crashed to the ground. In this bleak universe walk characters whose existence is totally free but for whom that freedom elicits terror rather than elation” (*Existential America*, 2003; 166). My thesis examines how the American psyche confronts the moral voidance of post-WWII modernity; and, more decisively, it depicts how the same collective consciousness deals with *Dostoyevsky*.

The final concern of my essay is the *utility* of existentialism. American artists have long been struggling with the key problems of life. Edgar Allen Poe, for instance, depicted alienation before Norman Mailer. “No American,” writes Cotkin, “from the seventeenth century until the present, no matter how tenaciously he might cling to ideals of progress, has managed to the avoid the fact of his own mortality” (13). With the arrival of European existentialism, however, this anxious population was given a *framework* with which to diagnose and combat its metaphysical problems. A nation is much like a self, and is similarly thrown-into-being. Existentialism provides the means for America’s own self-

location—and self-creation—in the midst of its contingency. This is not to suggest that America is a unified or logical being. The self is indeed divided. Likewise, America is perplexed by contradictions: faith and nihilism, ideology and social fact, progressivism and conservatism, nostalgia and disgust. Existentialism responds to this deep fragmentation. Moreover, it equips the country on an individual level. As I will show with the accounts of Binx Bolling, *Invisible*, and Kerouac's various personas, existentialism addresses the condition of *taking part* in the national absurdity, in other words: *Thrownness-into-America*.

### **Existentialism Invades New World**

In his introduction to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, Hayden Carruth writes: "Existentialism entered the American consciousness like an elephant entering a dark room... This was in 1946 and 1947. And in no time at all Existentialism became a common term" (1964; v). In other words, postwar America sensed a sea change in thought—perceiving a cultural intrusion—yet the nature of the beast was ambiguous. Some thing, shrouded in darkness, was roaming through the ruins. However, when "the lights were turned on," Carruth continues, "everyone laughed and said that a circus must be passing through town... their leader, apparently, was this fellow Sartre." This bizarre European force (or *farce*) was demystified and ridiculed as quickly as it reached the New World. Existentialism was a fad, which held the spotlight for a brief and rather gloomy historical moment. It had a single, somewhat distasteful, spokesperson—yet Bing Crosby, in all odds, was more threatening to the status quo than the French nicotine junky.



Carruth depicts a profound misconception. Existentialism began outside of France, and long before Sartre. He was the first prominent philosopher to accept the title of “existentialist,” yet did not found the philosophy (Cotkin 4). Søren Kierkegaard—regarded as the father of this subversive tradition—had his first work, *From the Papers of One Still Living*, published by a Danish newspaper in 1838. In this harsh critique of a Hans Christian Anderson novel, Kierkegaard begins one of existentialism’s boldest tasks: the rejection of post-Enlightenment Hegelian rationalism, in favor of the subjective lens. Carruth deciphers Kierkegaard’s radical move. “Pain and ecstasy,” he writes, “doubt and intuition, private anguish and despair—these could not be explained in terms of the rational categories” (viii). Existentialism is a revolution. The tyranny of “Reason,” over the unquantifiable reality of human experience, is its *raison de guerre*. Kierkegaard’s mission was continued with the same energy and violence—yet in differing formulations—by the likes of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, and, indeed, Sartre (vii). While first provoking mainstream America in 1946, the existential revolution had been raging for more than a century. Like most wars, it had a hidden history to which the masses were not privy.

Not all Americans, however, were blind to the rise of existential thought. Many were instrumental. In 1916, thirty years before Knopf’s translation of *The Stranger*, the first scholarly analysis of Kierkegaard was published in America. David Swenson—a philosophy professor at the University of Minnesota, who had been seduced in the 1890’s by a Danish copy of *Concluding Unscientific*

*Postscript*—wrote “The Anti-Intellectualism of Kierkegaard” in *Philosophical Review* (Cotkin 43). Following this unprecedented path, Swenson was the first to translate one of Kierkegaard’s works into English, publishing *Philosophical Fragments* with Princeton University Press in 1936. Yet he was not alone in his passion. In the early 1920’s, Episcopal clergyman Walter Lowrie was similarly shocked, and galvanized, by an encounter with the melancholic Dane. Lowrie, notified of Kierkegaard by the writings of Karl Barth, began delving into the widely available German editions (Cotkin 42). He then tired of reading in translation. In the 1930’s, Lowrie began collaborating with David Swenson, feverishly producing English versions of Kierkegaard. Before the end of World War II, they had published twelve translations directly from the Danish. All in all, accounting for other translators such as Alexander Dru and Douglas Steere, nineteen volumes of Kierkegaard hit the English-reading market by 1941 (Swenson n.p). The influx of literature had an immediate impact. “By the mid-1940s,” writes George Cotkin, “everyone, from soldier to statesman, seemed to be reading and talking about Søren Kierkegaard” (54). Existentialism had breached American shores.

Coincidentally, Kierkegaard’s successor—Friedrich Nietzsche—reached the mainstream American market far earlier. In 1911, New York’s Macmillan Group published the first English translation of Nietzsche’s *Complete Works* (Classe 1001). This milestone was indebted to work done in the late 1800’s—particularly by Scottish translators Alexander Tille and Thomas Common. Their prior compilation, *Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, was published (also by

Macmillan) in 1896. Before Swenson had discovered his Danish library copy of *Postscript*, Nietzsche was available in his native tongue. Nevertheless, a more contemporary figure, Walter Kaufmann, the German-American translator and philosopher, has been invaluable to Nietzsche's influence. If today one reads such works as *On the Genealogy of Morals* or *The Gay Science*, Kaufmann has likely made his mark. Indeed, as well as being prolific, Kaufmann could be called the *hippest* Nietzsche scholar. His *Portable Nietzsche*—released in 1954 by Kerouac's own publisher, Viking Press—fits snugly in a coat pocket. This key to American hipness was not restricted to Nietzsche. As Cotkin reflects: “Hardly a college student in the 1960's could be found without a dog-eared copy of Walter Kaufmann's collection *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*” (1). Beyond its namesakes, this compilation prefaces work by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Rilke, Ortega, Kafka, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Camus. This broad approach proved accessible. Rather than solely responsible for the growing taste, Kaufmann's volume—and its success—exemplifies a more multiplicitous cultural phenomenon: by 1956, the “canon” of European existentialism was commonly consumed. It was on the street, and in the university.

American authors met it somewhere in between. Ralph Ellison, encouraged by his mentor and friend Richard Wright, embraced the postwar influx of existential thought with both excitement and familiarity. The condition of being black in America—paradoxes of freedom and oppression expressed by the blues—resonated with the avant-garde French attitude. Ellison, writes Jackson Lawrence, “believe[d] that black folks were able to overcome the despair of their

lives by producing a tragic art form...the blues as a folk product performing an emotional and psychological catharsis” (*Emergence of Genius*, 2002; 314-15).

African-American musical tradition set the stage by facilitating a necessary transcendence—rebellion against the Absurd. As Arnold Rampersad writes in his 2007 biography:

[Ellison] understood existentialism to be the core of modernity in his narrative...[and] to be uniquely authentic to the story of *Invisible and the Negro*...this Negro existentialism often flourished in the world attended by properties such as lyricism, folkloric grace, exuberance, and sensuality (*Ralph Ellison* 145).

Indeed, Ellison’s first encounter with existentialism occurred before the Second World War, by way of an older black artist and intellectual. In the fall of 1936, Langston Hughes mailed him *Man’s Fate* by André Malraux (Lawrence 169). This seminal novel, published in 1933 and translated to English the following year, depicts China’s 1927 communist revolt. Malraux’s realist depiction of human experience, and its alignment with both metaphysical and political rebellion, influenced Ellison’s eye for socio-existential conflict. (*Man’s Fate* also played a role in Ellison’s burgeoning Marxism—disillusionment with which informs *Invisible Man*.) In a similar fashion, *before* 1946, an even more influential existentialist shaped Ellison’s aesthetic and philosophical framework: Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The Russian’s cry for humanity and identity, in the midst of social and metaphysical turmoil, resonated with Ellison’s perception of America. *Notes from Underground* and *Crime and Punishment*, two staples of existential literature, were especially pertinent. They spoke to Ellison’s experience of a hectic, racially-perplexed nation. “Both societies,” Rampersad intimates, “were

‘plunging headlong into chaos’ because of the disruption of old hierarchies and the formation of new alliances. Black Americans had lived with this perception of social, psychological, and ethical chaos both during and after slavery” (121).

Ellison’s “Negro” existentialism found comfort, and reassurance, in Dostoevsky’s voice.

Ellison was thus primed for the existential sensibility once Sartre and company reached America. He had already been moving towards it with his admiration of Dostoevsky, Malraux, Kafka, and American “proto”-existentialists such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Eliot (Rampersad 190-91). The new wave of French thought enabled a consummation of this mindset. Rampersad points out that it was also a relief:

In the summer of 1945, Ralph found added inspiration in the intellectual life of postwar France—at least as he knew it through magazine articles about writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. “France is in ferment,” he informed Wright. “Their discussions of the artist’s responsibility surpass anything I’ve ever seen.”...Sartre so impressed him that he copied a long passage from an essay (190-91).

Sartre may have been the ringleader, as Carruth jokes, yet he certainly led an impressive circus. Ellison was seduced by the “fad.”

Jack Kerouac, born into a working class French-Canadian family, was even quicker than Ellison to imbibe the ideology. He was fluent in French, the language of Sartre and Camus; the often-lengthy delay of translation was not an issue. Kerouac was so familiar with Sartre that he could be honestly disparaging. Referring to Sartre’s work *Saint Genet* (1952), which presents Jean Genet as the ideal existentialist novelist, Kerouac states:

There's a great writer, Jean Genet. He kept writing and kept writing until he got to a point where he was going to come by writing about it...until he came into his bed—in the can. The French can. The French jail. Prison. And that was the end of the chapter. Every chapter is Genet coming off. Which I must admit Sartre noticed (Hayes, 2005; 63).

This observation reveals more than a familiarity with Sartre. Kerouac praises French existentialist Jean Genet and his controversial 1943 debut, *Our Lady of the Flowers*. In 1945, his new friend Allen Ginsberg gifted him a paperback of Genet's novels (Gewirtz, 2007; 52). Evidently, it had a strong affect. Seemingly in contrast to *Nausea*'s morbid tone, Kerouac pledges allegiance to the ecstatic, rebellious life-affirmation of Genet. Indeed, when imprisoned for his homosexuality, Genet simply “came into his bed—in the can.” His art was an extension of his irrepressible libido: a refusal to deny life itself. Kerouac aspired to embody this Dionysian spirit with his own life and work. On a similar note, Kerouac found inspiration in the work of Louis Ferdinand Celine, referring to him in a later interview as “a giant” (Hayes 24). His masterwork, *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*), was published in France, November 1932. It became an American bestseller published by New Directions in 1949. At that point, *Voyage* had already taken a spot in Kerouac's arena of influences.

New York City was the training ground for Kerouac's developing existential sensibility. In 1940, his first year at Columbia, he became infatuated with Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, James Joyce, and Thomas Wolfe (Gewirtz 51). He dropped out the following year, after disagreements with his football coach. This time of angst and freedom, appropriately, found a new wave of more “radical” literary heroes: Nietzsche, Celine, Genet, Dostoyevsky, Rimbaud, and

Kierkegaard (Gewirtz 52). In journals, Kerouac significantly referred to this epoch as his “Self-Ultimacy Period.” His essays of the same name, while distinctly Nietzschean in form and tone, also engage Kierkegaard. “Dialogs in Introspection,” as Gewirtz points out, exposes his confrontation with the rhetorical and intellectual difficulty of Kierkegaard’s 1847 *Either/Or* (61). Moreover, the essay refers to self-discovering, existential characters, such as Raskolnikov, Stephen Dedalus, and Goethe’s Faust. This was no mere flirtation. Kerouac cited Kierkegaard continually in his journal during the mid-1940’s. By 1959, Kerouac was familiar enough to criticize subtle details of his existential theology, in contrast to Christian and Buddhist mysticism (167). Kerouac’s appraisal of Dostoyevsky is less ambivalent. He writes on August 20, 1948: “Dostoyevsky wrote massively—‘Crime and Punishment,’ ‘The Idiot,’ ‘The Possessed,’ and ‘The Brothers Karamazov,’ inside of 12 years, 3 years on an average for each work...[he] wanted to *live*, not loaf” (Brinkley 120). In a moment of foreshadowing, he praises the Russian’s impressive output—perceiving a lust for life. Yet Kerouac is also transfixed by the fiction itself. Three days later, he reports reading *Notes from Underground* in a single night (123). He was gripped, as with Genet and Celine’s work, by its “confessional madness” (Hayes 55). Young Kerouac was enthralled by the existential stance.

In a properly Heideggerean fashion, Walker Percy began his relationship with existential thought in a sanatorium. Faced with a life-threatening case of tuberculosis, Percy became concerned with the true value of existence. His time spent at Saranac Lake, New York’s Trudeau Sanatorium—1942 to 1946—was

one of constant intellectual and metaphysical inquiry. Kierkegaard first came into view. In *Pilgrim in the Ruins* (1992), Jay Tolson writes: “The important texts of these early encounters were ‘The Present Age,’ ‘The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle,’ and parts of *Either/Or*” (237-8). This was the beginning of a profound yet challenging relationship with Kierkegaard. While these first essays were relatively short and accessible, in the early 1950’s Percy became so frustrated with *Either/Or*—while finding no encouragement from *Sickness Unto Death* or *Repetition*—that he nearly gave up Kierkegaard all together (238). The density of his writings was insurmountable. Before doing so, however, a more transparent text, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, came into view. From this point of access, Percy was able to retrace his steps, working through Kierkegaard’s catalog with confidence and inspiration.

By the time of his English placement test in 1933, as freshman at Chapel Hill, Percy had become so obsessed with *The Sound and the Fury* that he imitated Benjy’s rhetorical style. This was a huge mistake, and he was placed in “the retarded English class” (Samway 69-70). As well as exposing Percy’s literary ambition—and dark sense of humor—this moment reveals his early exposure to “existential” fiction. Faulkner, as Curruth would agree, embodies an intuitively existential posture towards subjectivity and self-determination within history. At Trudeau, as tuberculosis began attacking his body, Percy’s understanding of this mode of literature expanded. Moreover, after reading *Nausea*, he began digging into the philosophy behind it. Along with Kierkegaard, Percy read Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Camus, and Sartre’s more theoretical writings (Samway 126). In



1945 at Gaylord Sanatorium (the TB had returned), Percy became interested in his friend Shelby Foote's favorite Russian, Dostoyevsky. There, like Ellison and Kerouac, Percy read and reread *Notes from Underground*—enchanted by Dostoyevsky's "weaving of cultural criticism with his fictional characterization of man in extremis" (Tolson 183). Furthermore, fluency in German allowed him to approach Heidegger and Jaspers without the mediation of William Barrett or Walter Kaufman. Jay Tolson evaluates the particular, immediate effect of Heidegger on Percy:

Heidegger's approach to the being question through his critique of language and thinking...struck home in Percy. Finally, Heidegger's philosophical romanticism, his conviction that being was inseparable from nonbeing, from its potential for annihilation and death, corresponded both with Percy's inherited romantic views (acquired largely from [his] Uncle Will) and his own experience of a life-threatening illness (239).

A prominent figure of existentialism found fertile ground. Nevertheless, Heidegger, Dostoyevsky, and Kierkegaard, were not the only ones to have a lasting impact. Percy was moved by the entire chorus announcing a new way of thinking and, indeed, existing. As Patrick Samway relates: "'The effect was rather a shift of ground, a broadening of perspective, a change of focus,' as [Percy] considered the nature and destiny of mankind and the predicament of man in a modern technological society" (127). Thus, spurred by a near-death experience into new realms of thought, Walker Percy joined the ranks of Ralph Ellison and Jack Kerouac—as an American existentialist.

### **Absurd Silence, Despair, and the Problem of God**

One of the most poignant and challenging moments of *The Stranger* precedes Meursault's execution. After denying the chaplain for the last time, refusing to repent before death, Meursault reaches bliss. He finds, within himself, what Camus later calls an "invincible summer": an inexhaustible defense against—among many modes of winter—the cold, death-wielding hand of the State (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 169). Accordingly, he reaches equilibrium with the universe. Out of all the dust and confusion leading up to his sentencing, Meursault makes peace with the world:

I woke up with the stars in my face. Sounds of the countryside were drifting in. Smells of night, earth, and salt air were cooling my temple. The wondrous peace of that sleeping summer flowed through me like a tide... For the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world (122-23).

This aesthetic moment is also the dramatic climax of the novel. One core tension—between an individual who seeks reason, and his essentially non-rational existence—dissolves into the ecstasy of acceptance. Likewise, the formidable structures of power dictating Meursault's life are defeated. The Church, the government, and death itself, are made comical—and, paradoxically, comprehensible—by their very lack of meaning. The whereabouts of God and the wrath of the public become laughable. Meursault embraces "the gentle indifference of the world," and is thus himself embraced. Life becomes again *worth living*.

Meursault's epiphany illustrates the positive implications of Camus's central philosophical principle: absurdity. The Absurd is marked by the

“confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1955; 21). It is a condition, a relationship between oneself and the world. For Camus, all of humankind is born into to the same struggle as Meursault. We are to seek logic in the midst of profound illogic; to demand answers from the speechless; to toss letters into the void. Camus elaborates in the following way:

In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (5).

Opening oneself to this cosmic indifference can be a source of relief. Fortitude, rooted in a painful awareness of absurdity, allows the strange beauty of the world to flower. The gentle yet frustrating indifference of the world, and humankind’s resultant exile, is, among other sources, conditioned by the absence of God. Religion is at the center of the system of “illusions and lights,” divested by the modern consciousness. The Absurd would not occur if God spoke back.

Camus is not the first to make this claim. God is a fundamental concern within the field of existentialism. Kierkegaard elucidates the many forms of despair. In other words, he examines how the individual fails to connect with God and become a self via faith. While belief is at the core of his philosophy, God’s *accessibility* is problematic. As Kierkegaard laments: “in the world of time God and I cannot talk with each other, we have no language in common” (*Fear and Trembling*, 1983; 35). Nietzsche takes this one great step further. Ironically occupying the “the Madman,” he proclaims: “God is dead. God remains dead.

And we have killed him” (*GS*, 1974; 181). He is absent from the post-Enlightenment consciousness, and thus extinct *in effect*. This statement echoes throughout the work of his countless disciples. The atheism of Sartre and Camus is born from this proclamation, as is Heidegger’s insurmountable skepticism. As Walter Kaufman writes, “Existentialism without Nietzsche would be almost like Thomism without Aristotle” (*Existentialism* 22). Whether deicidal or not, all modes of existentialism confront the *problem* of God.

These interrelated issues—the death of God, despair, and the Absurd—manifest themselves in American postwar fiction. Compared to Walker Percy and Jack Kerouac, Ralph Ellison projects a rather explicit philosophy. Invisible’s own thoughts are at least clear: God, among many idols, is a fabrication. *Invisible Man* depicts a steady progression of disillusionment. A perennial shedding of false-consciousness propels the narrative. Ellison’s hero loses faith in institutional education, communism, society, and history itself. The existence of God is no exception.

Invisible’s disenchantment begins at an African-American college in the Deep South. Due to a properly Kafkaesque turn of events, Invisible is blamed for the sickening of Mr. Norton, a rich white donor from New York. Per his requests, Invisible leads Norton through the surrounding backwoods, to see how common folk live. Invisible is unfortunate enough to encounter Jim Trueblood, who is infamous for a sexual relationship with his own daughter. After hearing Trueblood’s graphic life-story, Norton demands “a stimulant” to combat oncoming fatigue (69). Invisible foolishly takes him to the Golden Day for

whiskey. At this chaotic juke joint, Norton again confronts a rowdy, seemingly amoral, and autonomous, black population, which disrupts his ideal of the grateful and subservient Southern Negro. Both Norton and Invisible are perplexed. In a moment of foreshadowing, Invisible recalls returning to campus: “Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it...I wanted to stop the car and talk with Mr. Norton...to assure him that far from being like any of the people we had seen, I *hated* them, that I believe in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul” (97). Invisible’s ideological urgency—to reassert allegiance to the doctrines of the college and its necessary white superstructure—is as much for his own benefit as for Norton’s. His identity, rooted in the religion of education, falls under scrutiny. The Absurd begins to rear its ugly head.

The administration’s reaction exacerbates Invisible’s mounting disillusionment. He is promptly expelled, exiled for defending the truth. Headmaster Dr. Bledsoe nips this naiveté in the bud. Upon hearing that Invisible drove Mr. Norton to the black sector—purely because he asked him to do so—Bledsoe exclaims: “He *ordered* you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it’s a habit with them...You’re black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?” (136). “Lie, sir?” responds Invisible (137). Dr. Bledsoe is confounded by the boy’s ignorance, and relentlessly denounces the value of “truth.”

Significantly, he simultaneously introduces a discourse of invisibility:

You’re nobody son. You don’t exist—can’t you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think—except men like me. I tell *them*...I had to be strong and purposeful to be where I am. I

had to wait and plan and lick around... Yes, I had to act the nigger! (141).

Bledsoe attaches metaphysical vapidness to the blind adherence of ideals.

Abstractions render those who serve them equally abstract. *Invisible* men root themselves in the illusion; they favor idealism over resistance to white America's dehumanizing machine. Bledsoe's words take effect. They are horrible yet hard to deny. "I no longer listened," Invisible recalls, "nor saw more than the play of light upon the metallic disks of his glasses, which now seemed to float within the disgusting sea of his words. Truth, truth, what was truth?" Ellison's hero has his first bitter taste, as it were, of the Absurd. Words dissolve into a nauseous swell, unsettling the moral equilibrium of his youth.

Invisible's burgeoning pessimism further materializes with the police shooting of Tod Clifton, a close black colleague in *The Brotherhood*. A huge crowd gathers to mourn this tragedy in the community. The hurt and angered masses expect words of encouragement—idealist pronouncements, and reverence for the slayed activist. Much like as a young man, anticipating what would be the Battle Royal, Invisible prepares himself for a great oration. Yet his worldview has changed. He has become an altogether different individual. Invisible shouts:

Let me tell it as it truly was! His name was Tod Clifton and he was full of illusions... Now he's in this box with the bolts tightened down. He's in the box and we're in there with him... Don't be fooled, for these bones shall not rise again. You and I will still be in the box... Forget him. When he was alive he was our hope, but why worry over a hope that's dead? (446-48).

He at once mocks the resurrection of Clifton, and of Christ. Death is the final answer. To *consider* the dead is folly—let alone bestow them with divine, eternal

power. If a “hope that’s dead” is not worth a thought, then it is certainly not worth a religion. Invisible denies both socialism and Christianity: utopia on Earth, and in heaven. They are, in Camus’s terms, but “illusions and lights.”

Invisible’s confrontation with the Absurd is made most vivid as he burns the contents of his briefcase. Quite symbolically, it is so he can see through the darkness. “I started with my high-school diploma,” he recalls. “The next to go was Clifton’s doll...[Then] was that slip upon which Jack had written my Brotherhood name...I knelt there, stunned, watching the flames consume them” (555). Invisible annihilates the emblems of his past selves, refuting the ideology at their cores: the optimistic schoolboy, the caricaturistic “Black Sambo,” and finally the communist. Invisible is indeed a stranger. Upon rejecting the many strands of ideology that determined his life, Invisible faces the Absurd. This experience is excruciating. “Suddenly I began to scream,” Invisible recalls, “getting up in the darkness and plunging wildly about...I lost all sense of time.” (556). The walls of reality, time and space, collapse into confusion. He soon has a fever dream. When asked by his mental spectre of Brother Jack, “HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE FREE OF ILLUSION,” Invisible simply responds: “painful and empty” (557). His pain and confusion result from enlightenment. The words of Camus are again fitting. Ellison’s hero “stands face to face with the irrational,” suffering the “unreasonable silence of the world” (21). Invisible’s world is not mute. Rather, it is composed of such a multitude of clanging and unsound voices that the sheer volume of noise is deafening. The result is a metaphysical silence—devoid of reason—which Invisible can never penetrate. Ultimately, much like Meursault,

Invisible finds solace in his confrontation with the Absurd. Within the cosmos left irrational by a God-sized void, Invisible rediscovers a mysterious yearning for life. “I must come out,” he asserts, “I must emerge. And there’s still a conflict within me.”

In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise recalls George Shearing, the English jazz pianist, playing at a New York party. His reminiscences are in the feverish, excitable style with which Kerouac often describes jazz performances. As the music accelerates, everyone—the crowd and the musicians—moves further into ecstasy. They all get high. Kerouac’s depiction of the performance’s conclusion, however, is unique. He sounds more like Friedrich Nietzsche than a white Langston Hughes.

Shearing rose from the piano...When he was gone Dean pointed to the empty piano seat. “God’s empty chair,” he said...God was gone; it was the silence of his departure...This madness would lead me nowhere. I didn’t know what was happening to me, and I suddenly realized it was only the tea that we were smoking (128).

The passage exemplifies the conflicted theology of Sal Paradise—a nihilist, a beatnik, and a Catholic. A series of confusions are at play in this brief moment. Foremost is the influence of Dean Moriarty. The novel is in part a love story between the two friends. Dean and Sal’s close emotional proximity, and its subsequent tension, is often expressed—and reinforced—by their philosophical affinities. Here, Dean’s blunt (and perhaps unreflective) statement causes a poignant, existential moment for Sal. Though these deeper contemplations are certainly his own, they can be traced back to Dean. The passage’s most obvious confusion is that “God” is in fact George Shearing. In fact, Shearing *is* the creator.



Shearing makes the sound: the energy that reverberates throughout the room and gives the apartment life. Kerouac conceives the artist as divine, an essentially atheistic assertion. As Camus writes, “to kill God is to become God oneself” (*Sisyphus* 80). If a pianist is the Giver of Life, then the Christian God is extinct. Yet this assertion also folds upon itself. As soon as Shearing left, “God was gone.” Kerouac relates a second divine death. Evidently, Sal is unable to handle this double negation—it is insanity.

This evocation of existential tumult reveals Kerouac’s reading of Nietzsche. Assuming the Nietzschean voice, in his influential summation of existential thought, *Irrational Man* (1958), William Barrett writes: “The man who has seen the death of God, significantly enough, is a madman, and he cries out his vision to the unheeding populace in the market place, asking the question: ‘Do we not now wander through an endless Nothingness?’” (165). Sal Paradise answers this question as soon as he asks it: “this madness would lead me nowhere.” Moreover, he blames his thoughts on the pot—explaining his metaphysical crisis as a chemical reaction. Much like the young Invisible, returning with Mr. Norton to a soon-to-be-foreign campus, Sal hesitates when faced with the Absurd. Glimpsing Nothingness through the New York tea-haze, Sal simply blinks.

A remarkably similar situation occurs soon after in San Francisco. Kerouac describes Dean’s interaction with Slim Gaillard, yet another jazz pianist: “Now Dean approached him, he approached his God; he thought Slim was God; he shuffled and bowed in front of him and asked him to join us” (176). Dean again endows the artist with divinity, and thus, in effect, affirms the death of the

Judeo-Christian God. Sal, however, views this moment with condescension rather than deference. “I sat there with these two madmen” he muses. “Nothing happened.” He resumes the discussion of madness and nothingness. Yet, in Nietzschean terms, Sal is no longer mad. He does not proclaim the death of God, but is instead the impatient viewer. Furthermore, the “nothing” that happened was purely negative—it was no longer vital. Somewhat ironically, this rejection of Dean’s theological playmaking echoes Nietzschean thought. To allow nothing to happen is to accept death. It is life-denying and therefore immoral. Nietzsche writes in his aphorism, “*What is Life?*”:

Life—that is: continually shedding something that wants to die.  
 Life—that is: being cruel and inexorable against everything about us that is growing old and weak—and not only about *us*. Life—that is, then: being without reverence for those who are dying (*GS* 100).

Dean and Slim are indeed dying. They are fooling with words, sitting still. Sal’s irreverence displays a submerged Nietzschean morality—defending “a ‘Dionysian’ joy of exultation that says Yes to life” (Kaufman, 1974; 21). In this light, Sal’s skepticism towards his friend’s nihilism is far from *theistic*. Sal does not condemn Dean’s actions because they mock the Christian God. Rather, he takes offense at his complacency. The problem of God, in other words, is still palpable. Sal’s confrontation with what Camus takes to be fact—namely, cosmic absurdity—remains a possibility.

Kerouac begins *On the Road*, and, indeed, the Dulouz Legend, with a young hero conscious of his own bewilderment. He is unable to decipher his high from existential insight; indeed, he thinks they are at odds. Another instance

reveals how even Sal's *rhetoric* denotes confusion. He remembers working odd jobs in Denver during the spring of 1949. Sal hoped to find old friends, yet found himself alone in a strange city. "I lugged watermelon crates over the ice floor of reefers into the blazing sun, sneezing," he complains. "In God's name and under the stars, what for? At dusk I walked. I felt like a speck on the surface of the sad red earth" (179). One can certainly view this final statement, on the exterior, as a pronouncement of the Absurd. Sal posits himself much like Camus's "absurd man"—face to face with the irrational, enveloped in the *ungentle* indifference of the world. Such a reading, however, ignores one essential aspect of Kerouac's existentialism: Beat Catholicism.

The Gospel of Christ and the condition Kerouac famously coined—"beat"—are ardently intertwined. *Beatness* is a kind of sainthood. It is joyful destitution—spiritual openness, which, in turn, requires the self to be broken. Take for example Sal's description of an untethering Dean, who has abandoned his wife and home. Dean is hated by most of his peers and, in general, falling apart. Kerouac writes, "Standing in front of everybody, ragged and broken and idiotic...his bony mad face covered with sweat and throbbing veins, saying, 'Yes, yes, yes'...He was BEAT—the root, the soul of Beatific" (195). Dean is portrayed as the Holy Fool, a reincarnation of Grisha, "the idiot" from *Childhood Boyhood, and Youth* (1852). Tolstoy remembers him, much like Dean, floundering under the judgmental gaze of others. "His voice was harsh and rough," writes Tolstoy, "all his movements hysterical and spasmodic, and his words devoid of sense or connection...a pure, saintly soul, while others averred that he was a mere peasant

and an idler” (14-5). Grisha is deprived, disparaged, and transcendent—the essence of “beat.” Tolstoy and Kerouac both articulate the intimacy between holiness and idiocy. This point of similarity is not coincidental: an equally vibrant and conflicted Christian faith underscores their work. As Isaac Gewirtz explains in *Beatific Soul*, “‘beat’ always had a positive as well as negative connotation, in the sense that only at the most desperate moments could one see honestly and speak truthfully” (11). This ascetic principle traces back to religious scriptures. Born into a French Catholic home, Kerouac’s first and perhaps greatest influence is the Bible. Indeed, Jesus speaks: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it...Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10: 15, 21). Beat philosophy teaches childishness and poverty, thus mirroring Christianity. Nonetheless, Kerouac’s Catholicism has its eccentricities. One 1958 interview with *New York Post* is particularly revealing.

Q: All is well?

A: Yeah. We’re all in Heaven, now, really.

Q: You don’t *sound* happy.

A: Oh, I’m tremendously sad. I’m in great despair.

Q: Why?

A: It’s a great burden to be alive. A heavy burden a great big heavy burden. I wish I were safe in Heaven, dead.

Q: But you *are* in Heaven, Jack. You just said we all were.

A: Yeah. If I only *knew* it. If I could only hold to what I *know*.

(Hayes 6).

A typical sermon often skirts the notion that Heaven is in fact Earth. Furthermore, Kerouac’s theory of awareness as the means to alleviate suffering—which is the very substance of life—illuminates his simultaneous interest in Buddhism. Still, he does not stray far from the teachings of Christ. “The judgment,” Jesus asserts,

“[is] that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light” (John 3: 19). Jesus emphasizes mindfulness. Like Kerouac, he calls for men (and women) to decipher truth out of ignorance—to *know* of Heaven.

In this light, Sal’s likening himself to “a speck on the surface of the sad red earth” is not as a simple pronouncement of the Absurd. The lens of Beat Catholicism seems more promising. Analyzing the Absurd’s literary manifestations, Stanley Hooper asserts: “God is no longer a Presence or a presupposition of the narrative or dramatic scene...the Myth of Sisyphus (by way of Camus) displaces the anecdote of Job as the representative anecdote ” (*Restless Adventure: Essays on Contemporary Expressions of Existentialism*, 1968; 117). The question arising from Hooper’s statement, then, is whether Sal conceptualizes himself more as *Sisyphus or Job*; whether, in Kerouac’s reckoning, God is cruel or simply nonexistent. Additionally, we must consider that, while born a Catholic, Kerouac is equally galvanized by the work of Nietzsche. Poverty and humility are crucial to his Beat spirituality, yet so is the “will to power.” Kerouac’s theological standpoint is marked by perplexity.

The story of Job, from an existential standpoint, is best presented by way of his complaints. Job exclaims: “Has not man a hard service upon earth/ and are not his days like the days of a hireling? /Like a slave who longs for the shadow.../So am I allotted months of emptiness /and nights of misery” (Job 7: 1-3). The tone is one of forsakenness. Job’s words denote the painful condition of consciousness in a hostile world. He finds himself in exile. In Camus’s words, Job “feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason,” yet his thirst is not

quenched (*MOS* 21). The direction of his fury, however, is significant. It is towards Heaven. Job views himself as the powerless slave who suffers his cruel master. He is “allotted” despair by a higher power. Furthermore, his pleas reveal hope. “Has not man a hard service,” he asks, as if there is indeed a logic to the Universe—as if God has a just answer, which, when heard, annuls the pain and redeems Job’s “emptiness and nights of misery.” His complaint, importantly, echoes through the ostensibly ironic exclamation of Sal Paradise: “In God’s name and under the stars, what for?” (179). Sal does not curse an empty cosmos. Like Job, he asks a question—expressing an enraged *faith* in God, and in reason. Nor does he experience happiness. Depicting “absurd victory,” Camus employs Oedipus’ shocking declaration: “I conclude that all is well” (*MOS* 90). Oedipus thus confounds the deicentric evaluation of suffering. “That remark is sacred,” Camus explains. “It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god...It makes fate a human matter” (90-1). Sal, however, clings to his sense of injustice. He is not willing to make fate simply human. For Camus, this persistence only reveals a naïveté, which is as hopeful as pessimistic. Within the absurdist framework, Sal has yet to realize that his cries are in vain. He continues to beseech the void.

Kerouac, however, is still young. The Dulouz Legend begins with a rambling hero, equally perplexing as perplexed. In the melancholy conclusion of *On the Road*, a baffled Sal reflects—

Tonight the stars’ll be out, and don’t you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth...and nobody, nobody knows

what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old (307).

No human knows beyond the way of the flesh. While the conditions of existence are clear to all, the mechanisms behind it remain a mystery. The Holy Ghost in the machine might as well be called Pooh Bear; God may also be a work of fiction. Sal ends his narration much like Meursault. He rejoices in unknowing and asserts that, by accepting the limits of human consciousness, one can experience the absurd beauty of the world in all its fullness. Unlike Meursault, Sal does not prepare himself for execution and wish for the spectators' hateful cries (123). Instead of expecting the masses with a sardonic grin, Sal sighs: "I think of Dean Moriarty" (123). He does not conclude *On the Road* with a death wish, but with a remembrance—and thus a search. Like the Dulouz Legend, Kerouac's theological struggle is only beginning.

Walker Percy introduces the problem of God to *The Moviegoer* much like Binx Bolling—on the very outskirts. It resides in the suburbs of the paratext. Before reaching the declaration of fictitiousness—or, closer to the heart of the novel, the title page—we must pass through a rather disquieting station. This is the warning of Kierkegaard, who writes, "The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair." Percy's excerpt from *The Sickness Unto Death* is oblique to most readers. The words are troubling, yet not completely decipherable. Metaphysically speaking, this state of unknowing is appropriate. In short, despair is the condition of not fully realizing oneself as a self. Despair is the *failure* to be a self. Indeed, by citing this oft-misunderstood term, Percy is himself playing a game of mystification. He does not expect for us

all to understand the passage immediately, or ever. This social reality is faithful to the concept he presents. According to Kierkegaard, one is furthest from being oneself when one is utterly unaware of being in despair. This is a form of *existential* ignorance. Importantly, there is only one venue through which one can avoid despair, and become a self: an authentic relationship with God. As Alastair Hannay formulates in his introduction to *The Sickness Unto Death* (1948), “The cure is for the self to ‘found itself transparently in the power which established it’” (5). The power Kierkegaard cites—in which we so seldom take root—is God. Percy begins a religious narrative before Binx himself speaks. An existential theme, humanity’s struggle to access the divine, lays the foundation for *The Moviegoer*.

If despair is an individual’s inability to “found itself” in God, Percy provides such a character. In fact, the first reference to God beyond the epigraph is to His irrelevance. Binx describes his comfortable and thoroughly legitimate existence as a stockbroker in Gentilly, a sleepy suburb of New Orleans.

My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards. Last year I purchased a flat olive-drab strongbox, very smooth and heavily built with double walls for fire protection, in which I placed my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance (7).

Given an ear to the discourse of American existentialism, Binx’s talk of a strongbox raises a red flag. Nine years prior, Ellison depicts an enlightened Invisible Man setting fire to his brief case of ideology. For Ellison, one must annihilate institutional legitimizations—such as birth certificates and college diplomas—in order to authentically *self*-identify. Percy now employs this



seemingly mundane object, a box full of paper, to signify the same level of illusion Invisible once enjoyed yet ultimately defies. To this end, however, Percy is far from nihilistic. He indicts one's feeble attachment to society and racial abstractions, yet with God—not simply the self—as the ultimate source of validation. That will become more apparent later. Returning to Binx, the man in despair, Percy draws: "It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist" (7). Binx does not only take pleasure in such articles as Invisible destroys. His satisfaction is much more profound: they authorize his existence, as a seamless institutional voice. Binx reveals intense despair. As Kierkegaard writes: "despair is exactly man's unconsciousness of being characterized as spirit" (*TSUD* 55). Binx characterizes himself not as spirit, but as *styrene*.

Nonetheless, Percy's hero is not without irony. Take for example Binx's description of the neighborhood elementary school. Amidst the synthetic comforts of Feliciana Parish, he reflects on the divine presence: "Suspended by wires above the door is a schematic sort of bird, the Holy Ghost I suppose" (10). Presumably, Binx does feel God emanating from the local school's mascot. Yet that is not totally clear. It is ambiguous whether Binx supposes that the mascot is literally the Holy Ghost. The school could, after all, be a religious institution. Or, more likely, Binx is flirting with blasphemy. The bird is some horrible creature of prey—which, like the Holy Ghost, descends upon us whether we like it or not. The only given fact, it seems, is an ironic temperament. This becomes clearer in the

following lines. “It gives me a pleasant sense of the goodness of creation,” Binx jests, “to think of the brick and the glass and the aluminum being extracted from common dirt—though no doubt it is less a religious sentiment than a financial one, since I own a few shares of Alcoa.” He points his sardonic gaze inward, lampooning his poetic and religious imagination. Binx mimics the evangelical construction manager, and makes his sarcasm apparent. There is business at stake, and, in bourgeois America, financial sentiment always trumps the religious. In short, a certain discomfort with honesty comes through the text. It appears in the form of distorted, backwards sincerity: irony.

Binx’s indirect communication illuminates the problem of God. Return to his depiction of bureaucratized “right[s] to exist.” It reveals despair. However, accounting for his ironic tone, Binx becomes wryly self-critical—sardonic and reflective—and thus conveys awareness. He acknowledges the tenuousness of his existence, the ultimate incapacity of diplomas and G.I. papers to place him vibrantly in the world. Binx confesses from a distance. Percy refuses to evangelize the reader by making categorical statements on their need for salvation. He learns from Kierkegaard. Existential dearth is best indicted through *demonstration* (Lübcke, 1990; 31).

The ultimate thirst for meaning in Binx’s narrative is signified by “the search.” Binx uses this term for his recurrent alertness to the potentiality of transcendence. “The search,” he states, “is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life” (13). He is vexed by what could lie beyond immediate experience. Certainly, Binx does not know precisely

what he desires; the potency of Binx's search seems to lie in this very uncertainty. Quite relevant here is the inner dialogue of Gabriel Marcel, a French Catholic existentialist whose work, *The Mystery of Being* (1951), had a crucial influence on young Percy (Tolson 238). "How can we start out on a search," Marcel asks, "without having somehow anticipated what we are searching for?" (7). He is hesitant to provide a clear and quotable answer. The question is not merely rhetorical, but in fact troubling. Marcel is even less ready to give particular and systematic instructions, warning, "The arrival at a practicable mode of action within certain determinable conditions, cannot be calculated in advance." A metaphysical search is a perplexing endeavor. Unlike a scientific investigation, it can never be *practical*. Nonetheless, Marcel posits a tentative purpose to which the searcher can aspire. It is an *existential* end—rooted in subjective experience of the world, rather than empirical data. The search, in Marcel's view, is "a gathering together of the processes by which I can pass from a situation which is experienced as basically discordant...to a different situation in which some kind of expectation is satisfied" (8). Both the catalyst and the result of such a quest are intuitive. There is no guiding light of reason, but an internal compass. Like Marcel, Binx cringes at the vulgar question of the definitive end. "What do you seek—God?" he smirks (13). The proclamation of a quest for God seems paradoxical. If one says outright that he searches for God, he already affirms that such a thing can be objectively discovered. For Binx, faith ends where complacent understanding begins. He elaborates on his unwillingness to reveal the goal of the search by citing a recent poll. It states that most Americans believe in God. This is

suspicious. “Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek,” he ponders, “or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?” (14). Perhaps, by virtue of his struggle, he is better off than the self-assured majority. Yet Binx does not refute his interlocutor. Rather, he questions the meaning of faith, thus *engaging* with the problem of God.

A second definition of the search furthers this thesis and explains Binx’s skepticism towards American belief: “To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair” (13). Percy inserts Kierkegaard’s notion of despair, nearly verbatim, into Binx’s refrain. The nature of despair is precisely that it is “unaware of being despair.” In Binx’s words, it is “not to be onto something.” Non-reflective belief is as muddled as stubborn atheism. Again, Percy chooses to suggest instead of preach. His signification of the “sickness unto death” (the failure to find oneself in the divine power, i.e., *despair*) is only coherent to those paying attention. Percy seeks out the searchers who are themselves onto something. Although encrypted, his indication is nonetheless remarkable. Binx’s search expresses a half-conscious movement towards the absolute, which, quite likely, takes a fully realized relation to God as its end. According to Marcel, a quest may only subside when “some kind of expectation is satisfied.” Percy, albeit discretely, posits faith as Binx’s submerged anticipation. A more immediately relevant (and certain) conclusion can also be made. *The Moviegoer* begins with a core existential issue: humanity’s desire to transcend the synthetic certificates of modernity, and the possibility—therefore the *uncertainty*—that there is something higher.

### Thrownness-into-being and the Task of Subjectivity

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To The "Philosophical Fragments"* (1846), Kierkegaard denies the possibility of an existential system. "Existence itself is a system—for God," he assures, "but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit" (*A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 1973; 201). By nature of being human, the pursuit of an objective and totalizing stance towards reality, in which we are *subjectively* positioned, is futile and comical. Only God, who is simultaneously "outside of existence and yet in existence," possess a fully comprehensive view. Human subjectivity necessarily has implications for our experience of time. Existence "separates and holds the various moments of existence discretely apart" such that we cannot weave them into a comprehensive whole. Life is an ongoing *now*. This sense of temporality is not chosen by the individual, but given in our nature. Kierkegaard thus posits one fundamental fact of humanness—subjectivity—which Heidegger develops further in his own assessment of being-in-the-world, namely, *Thrownness-into-being* (*Geworfenheit-ins-Dasein*).

Heidegger's notion of Thrownness asserts that certain conditions of one's existence are predetermined. At birth we are randomly cast into a specific time and place, and such a moment recurs throughout our entire lives. We always exist within a situation; every scenario is contingent on the past. Heidegger, here, is making a descriptive claim. Our experience of *Geworfenheit* is a necessary element of existing throughout time. One *challenge* for Dasein (i.e., the human being) is to exist authentically in the midst of such Thrownness. We *inauthentically* respond to Thrownness by submitting to the mundane facticity of

everydayness—the contingencies of our recurring situation—and thus disburdening ourselves of our freedom. We fall away from ourselves into passivity and conformity: an existence blindly aligned with “The ‘They’” (*das Man*). This is part of Heidegger’s notion of *Fallenness* (*Verfallenheit*)—which I will discuss more thoroughly in the next section, “Authenticity.” For now, I focus primarily on his descriptive claim, Thrownness, before further grappling with his warnings and prescriptions.

*Geworfenheit-ins-Dasein* resounds with Kierkegaard. Existence casts us unceasingly into every consecutive moment. One’s current situation, through this lens, is similarly contingent. The present *appears* divorced from both past and future. Moreover, in this earlier discussion of existing in time, Kierkegaard similarly involves a discourse of motion—comparing our fractured temporal phenomenology to a dance. “Leaping is the accomplishment of a being essentially earthly,” he writes, “since the leaping is only momentary” (*KA* 206). The dancer is bound by “the earth’s gravitational force,” and always returns to the ground. Yet he *acts* nonetheless, and persists through the dance of time.

Kierkegaard’s account of experience is not identical with Heidegger’s notion of Thrownness. Nevertheless, their projections of the human condition harmonize at significant points. A glimmer of Thrownness emerges with Kierkegaard. He even seems to make his own comment on the phenomenology of Heidegger’s *Fallenness*: “The existing individual who forgets that he is an existing individual will become more and more absent-minded” (203). The character inevitably experiencing or responding to Thrownness can, within

reason, be analyzed from a Kierkegaardian standpoint. Furthermore, as Doreen Tulloch emphasizes in “Sartrian Existentialism” (1952), neither Kierkegaard nor Heidegger are utterly unique within the existentialist tradition. “As for Kierkegaard, so for [Gabriel] Marcel,” she writes, “the ‘outsiders’ attitude of the scientific observer can [never] take up and make intelligible those immediate experiences which form the very stuff of the concrete fullness of life” (31). Marcel, in his own way, rejects the possibility of an existential system—i.e., the *objective* approach to Being. Tulloch writes:

The emphasis on “subjectivity” and on the significance of the mode of being a conscious self is the most fundamental and general characteristic of all existentialist philosophy...[It influences] thinkers as far apart as Marcel and Sartre, Kierkegaard and Heidegger (“Sartrian Existentialism” 32).

All existential philosophies account for de facto subjectivity. While challenged to interact with and modify our existences in an authentic way, we do not choose the subjective manner in which we *experience* the world as finite beings existing in time. We are thrown into being. Carruth, in his introduction to *Nausea*, connects these notions of temporality and emphatic subjectivity quite well. “The Existentialist knows that the self is not submerged,” he writes, “it is present, here and now, a suffering existent, and any system of thought that overrides this suffering is tyrannical” (viii). They acknowledge that—to the subject—one’s *born-into* history, socio-geographical location, and all other external preconditions of existence are experienced as random. One cannot explain why she is born into one family, and country, rather than another. There are comprehensible accounts for this occasion—e.g. two people met in 1960, had a

child, and moved to America. Nonetheless, to be the particular soul pulled out of the void is a puzzling experience. We operate amidst Thrownness.

Ellison, Kerouac, and Percy, all choose to reenact subjectivity—and demonstrate Thrownness—through fiction. Their work *confronts* Thrownness: it follows the individual cast in time and space, and registers their modes of resistance. They depict the precondition for both Fallenness and authenticity. These three authors adhere to the existential framework with which they are familiar. Georg Lukács writes in *The Theory of the Novel* (1971): “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (56). American existential fiction encounters this crucial problem of modernity. Yet, unlike a Tolstoy or Thomas Hardy, the likes of Ralph Ellison move deeper into the irrational. Ellison, Kerouac, and Percy, position themselves *within* the new and puzzling world—assuming the existential stance.

Take, for example, *Invisible Man*'s opening scene. Ellison's hero describes marijuana intoxication. “Once when I asked for a cigarette,” muses Invisible, “some joker gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening” (8). The incident is significant for a number of reasons, mainly regarding his impressions and reflections. Yet there is a more basic importance to the experience, which precedes what he felt and saw. Invisible experiences Thrownness: craving tobacco, he unknowingly lights up a joint. The “joker” is like reality itself. Just as one can be thrown into a mood, Invisible finds himself stoned. Here, Ellison



demonstrates how Thrownness is an ongoing experience, which, authentically or not, individuals are continually facing. There is a second central implication of the reefer scene. Simply, Invisible's reality was altered. Ellison illustrates subjectivity. We see the world through his protagonist's mind—a radically malleable lens. Invisible continues:

I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well (8).

His phenomenological experience is obviously altered by the drug. This sensation alone lacks profound thematic importance; it denotes bodily rather than metaphysical truth. He also *believes* what he feels, however, relating his hallucination as matter-of-fact. He does not distance himself from the chemically induced sensations. Nor does he assert a dichotomy between body and soul, insinuating some mode of selfhood that is apart from the flesh. Rather, he identifies the experience of reality with *reality itself*—what appears to be so, with what he believes to be absolutely true. Invisible's truth is rooted in subjective experience. Without irony, he states that particular lines of music “waited patiently for the other voices to speak.” To him, they really did. Invisible echoes Kierkegaard's bold assertion, “Subjectivity is the truth” (KA 218).

Radical subjectivity informs Ellison's entire novel. Invisible, unsurprisingly, is not always stoned. Yet the malleability of the real persists: it is a part of *Invisible Man's* fundamental style. One moment echoes the first scene particularly well. Near the end of the Harlem riots (responding to the police

shooting of Clifton) Invisible describes his confrontation with a mounted policeman amidst water hydrant assault.

[He] charged through the spray, the horse black and dripping, charging through and looming huge and unreal...I slipped to my knees and saw the huge pulsing bulk floating down up on and over me...the hair of the tail a fiery lash across my eyes. I stumbled about in circles, blindly swinging the brief case, the image of a fiery comet's tail burning my smarting lids...I stumbled down the street, the comet tail in my eyes (548-49).

This is clearly a more exterior experience than smoking pot. He engages in physical combat. Nonetheless, Invisible processes the sensations in a similar manner. The “comet’s tail” is like the personified melodic lines of the phonograph. He registers a subjective impression as an actuality—the burning shape of the horse’s tail is, to him, that of a comet’s. This passage also reveals the interiorized manner in which Ellison depicts time. Events move into one another with great fluidity: the horse charges, Invisible falls, the tail hits him, and he blunders down the street. Ellison creates a sense of inevitability—of sequences moving seamlessly forward, as if without resistance. Invisible’s subjectivity is also characterized by confusion. Heidegger would characterize it as *fallen*. Without any core sense of reality to ground him, he is subject to any and all external stimuli, as well as the whims of his imagination.

The tumult of subjectivity, central to *Invisible Man*, marks the stylistic manifestation of *Thrownness-into-being*. Invisible’s mode of perception—characterized by constant and often perplexing motion—signifies a greater existential reality. For, while Ellison makes Thrownness *visceral* through language, he similarly marries it to the narrative arc. His hero’s lifelong response

to a contingent “whence” and “whither,” begun at birth, defines the novel. Without any explicit mention of Heidegger, Robert Butler depicts the novel’s sense of Thrownness: “[Invisible’s] life, which is not tied down to any specific places or even an exact time, is notable for its constant change, movement, and freedom from rigidly fixed points of reference” (“Patterns of Movement,” 1980; 7). He leaves an unspecified location in the Deep South, works for a pseudonymous communist organization in New York City, and escapes, finally, to the Gotham underworld. Invisible’s Thrownness becomes manifest in constant travel, and in its most significant byproduct: anonymity. He was born invisible, *thrown* into the existential negativity of black America. His life is a reckoning with this initial Thrownness—an interiorization of elasticity and movement, a struggle to make it *good*. Invisible struggles for authenticity and responsibility, and resists the seduction of a passive *fallen* life.

Indeed, as Butler observes, Invisible is dialectically bound to—and repelled by—his own Thrownness. Ellison, he writes, “almost always associates lack of mobility with radically diminished opportunities and sometimes death” (10). Movement is a source of all vitality. To cease is to perish. However, his Thrownness is also marred by desperate and uncontrollable action, an impotent energy. His individual *response* to the neutral metaphysical state of Thrownness is often inauthentic and wavering. Thus, according to Butler, Invisible “ultimately conceives of his life as carefully mediating between two extremes: stasis and purposeless movement” (10). Butler is correct in one regard. Invisible’s narrative is certainly driven by this tension.

Careful mediation, however, seems an inappropriate characterization of his ultimate mindset. Butler implies that Invisible leaves the underground with the purpose of a compromise—namely, between stasis and futile action. Surely, Invisible desires a form of reconciliation. He seeks this end, however, not through the objectivity of mediation, but through *contradiction*. Reflecting on his confessions, Invisible writes, “The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness” (566). That is to say, the initial conception of his life has become uncertain. Invisible’s personal fable, of stasis and movement, becomes suddenly elusive. He therefore embraces contradiction: “So it is that now I denounce and defend...I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no...I approach [life] through division” (566-67). His response to Thrownness is an optimization of subjectivity. In a manner that may seem troubling to Heidegger, Invisible reaches for autonomy *through* Fallenness. He subsumes his contradictory state of being. He does not mediate—balancing extremes—but delves further into absurdity. Death and life are taken on all at once. “There’s a stench in the air,” Invisible ponders, “which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring—I hope of spring. But don’t let me trick you, there *is* a death in the smell of spring” (567). His emergence is optimistic. Yet even this sentiment, of course, is born into contradiction.

While Invisible wanders up the East Coast, and underground, Kerouac’s personas speed across the continent. In *On the Road*, moreover, the anxiety over “purposeless movement” and “stasis” is confounded. Invisible eventually

contradicts this dichotomy of motion, yet Kerouac simply bypasses it. Motion becomes the norm, as the constant hum of the road is its own stasis. The apparent aimlessness of travel becomes a necessity in itself. As Sal remarks, “the road is life” (212). Movement and stillness are inextricable; existence *is* motion. For Sal, the notion of a choice or mediation is absurd. Although a divine decider may not exist, the decision has already been made. Like Invisible, he makes the ostensibly contradictory move of embracing Thrownness as an act of freedom. Sal promotes *active passivity*, as it were. While at odds with Heidegger in this regard, Kerouac similarly contends that, willingly or not, we are all thrown into motion at birth. Every subsequent moment is also contingent. We always exist in a particular situation. He describes the nature of being.

Kerouac’s response to Thrownness is, in one regard, contingent on pleasure. As Mark Richardson points out in “Peasant Dreams: Reading On the Road” (2001), *On the Road* is often diminished to a “lurid tale.” “Those with no faith,” he writes, “see only the orgy and the drunkenness, only the kicks” (219-20). The ecstasy of Beat transience is an easy commodity. It undeniably plays a crucial role in Kerouac’s most notorious fable. Describing his arrival in Mexico City with Dean, Sal rejoices:

Great fields stretched on both sides of us; a noble wind blew across the occasional immense tree groves. . . . A brief mountain pass took us suddenly to a height from which we saw all of Mexico City stretched out in its volcanic crater below and spewing city smokes and early dusklights. Down to it we zoomed (299).

There is both delirium and catharsis in motion. Flux is a precondition of existence. His reverence for travel—his devotion to the road—is a means of

*embracing* the ways of the universe. In his Heideggerean reading of Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*, Andrew Martino writes: "Thrownness should not be read as something that is only negative or destructive...[It] also opens up vast possibilities...One's freedom resides with an *encounter* with being as such" ("The Vanishing Point" 91). Like Invisible, Sal confronts—and, consequently, is able to optimize—his given metaphysical condition. He aligns his will with that of the Absolute, for lack of a better word, and capitalizes on the freedom available within such alignment. For Sal, joy resides within the limitations of being as such. Nevertheless, the Eros of movement also requires pain: Sal's narcotic Thrownness comes with a sense of disorientation, an existential vertigo. Wild driving, after all, causes nausea. Here, Heidegger's doctrine (and spatial metaphor) of Fallenness rings true: a total acceptance of movement sickens the Self, rendering it imbalanced with regards to itself. "I like too many things," Kerouac regrets, "and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop...[with] nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion" (126-25). While Sal does not consider his constant movement purposeless—for it is in service of desire, of life itself—he, nonetheless, feels its evil tinge. He runs until he drops, and is left in a state of confusion.

Such a reaction to Thrownness can be as perplexing as ecstatic. The sense of radical autonomy that Martino articulates, discovered in the recognition of being as such, becomes problematic. In one respect, *On the Road* is the story of this dialectic between blissful fatefulness and vertiginous freedom. As a result,

there are moments of reconciliation between the two extremes—syntheses, as it were. Such a moment occurs with Dean and company, on a spree to New Orleans:

All alone in the night I had my own thoughts and held the car to the white line in the holy road. What was I doing? Where was I going? I'd soon find out... We got out of the car for air and suddenly both of us were stoned with joy to realize that in the darkness all around us was fragrant green grass the smell of fresh manure and warm waters. "We're in the South! We've left Winter!" (138-39).

Sal depicts the interplay between despairing freedom and gratification amidst Thrownness. To employ an odd yet apt analogy, Sal and Dean consume speed without concocting it. They take to the road, yet did not invent the wheel, determine the laws of physics, or root the desire for movement in their own bones. Here, if not explicitly confronting it, Sal moves *beyond* the metaphysical paradox of freedom amidst a determined reality. The visceral pleasure of existence rushes to him from all sides, from nowhere and everywhere, in a moment of surrender. Sal does indeed "soon find out" where he is going. He is *told* by the fragrant Georgia predawn: perennially onward, yet ever present. The tension between passivity and autonomy persists.

Sal Paradise reckons with his existential state, which Heidegger labels Thrownness-into-being, through nearly constant traveling. Carreth writes: "Man, beginning in the loathsome emptiness of his existence, creates his essence—his self, his being—through the choices he freely makes" (*Nausea* xiii). Life is a synthesis of preconditioning and freedom. The ways of existence are fixed (e.g. we never choose the "loathsome emptiness" we inherent, or where and to whom we are born), yet our *essence* is undetermined. In this lies radical freedom. Sal

thus recognizes the set nature of his own being in time—as inherently bound to motion—and, as a particular manifestation of freedom within Thrownness, literalizes his metaphysical quest across the continent.

Invisible moves up East while Sal goes just about everywhere. With the exception of one unsettling train ride to Chicago, this is not the story of Binx Bolling. Percy's hero mostly goes to the movies with his current secretary, and does so with great satisfaction (*The Moviegoer* 10). Sal recalls Dean Moriarty and their beatific ramblings across America; Invisible reflects on the long and bitter journey leading underground. "What I remember," Binx proposes, "is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles" (7). To be fair, he's more than willing to gamble on a remote New Orleans theatre. The summer evening ritual, in fact, is to take out a newspaper, phonebook, and city map, and serenely decide on a feature film. While very distinct from Invisible's "joker," the cinema's location is a veritable wild card. Nonetheless, Binx's mode of exploration is—literally—quite dissimilar from that of Ellison and Kerouac's figures. As Percy conveniently (though perhaps not coincidentally) writes: "The truth is I dislike cars. Whenever I drive a car, I have the feeling I have become invisible" (11). To Binx, Kerouac's mythic vehicle of selfhood is a cloak of fatal sameness. A passive acceptance of Thrownness, as Heidegger agrees, is a mode of inauthenticity, and conformity with *das Man*. Invisibility, which is of dialectical value to Ellison, emerges at the onset of *The Moviegoer* as an outright denial of the self. Binx prefers the bus, where he can easily see, and be seen, by



fellow passengers. He can even catch the eye of a strapping young Amazon. Yet, this decision of transportation reveals more about Binx's character than his voyeuristic tendencies. The jolting, ponderous progression of the bus, down Elysian Fields towards the French Quarter, signifies his unique response to Thrownness-into-being. Here is a clue: it is on the bus that Binx first describes the search.

Before going further, however, we must take a step back. Percy recommends *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as a first move in reading Kierkegaard (Samway 37). In this work, Kierkegaard depicts the conundrum of being in time: existence "separates and holds the various moments of existence discretely apart," such that we are always—and *only*—in the present (KA 201). Life is a perpetual rupturing with what has already been. Kierkegaard is more militant on this point in *Fear and Trembling*. "Illusion has essentially two forms," he writes, "that of hope, and that of recollection" (KA 358). All thoughts directed towards past and future are delusions; they are means of eluding the immediate urgency of one's despair. Conversely, the only reality, in earthly temporality, is the present. The self exists only in the moment. Indeed, one of the many failures of speculative philosophy, Kierkegaard points out, is its refusal to "grasp what it means to be so critically *situated* in existence as the existing individual" (222). We are forever *thrown into now*. Philosophy must reckon with this condition. By extension, this is the task of every individual.

Kierkegaard promotes an introspective and intellectual state of mind, which he calls "inwardness." It is a way of looking *inside* ourselves for truth. To

Kierkegaard, inwardness is valuable in that it can lead one to faith in God. “Within the individual man,” he writes, “there is a potentiality (man is potentiality spirit) which is awakened in inwardness to become a God-relationship, and then it becomes possible to see God everywhere” (*KA* 225). Inwardness is a bridge between the finite and the infinite: a consciousness located *in* time (a body), which, nonetheless, holds potential for transcendence (a soul). Whether with the intention of finding faith or not, Binx Bolling pursues this inwardness. It is his primary mode of being in the world. His reaction to Thrownness—and the rupturing of past and future—is an inward effort to take root, subjectively yet resolutely, beyond the disorder of time. He seeks stability within flux.

While enjoying his MG for romantic purposes, Binx favors the city bus. This choice is revealing on an existential level. The bus’s movements replicate his own mode of operation—unassuming yet probing, routine yet flexible, in motion yet deliberate. It suits his inwardness. As the bus moves indifferently through the city, Binx finds himself “absorbed” by the search. Kierkegaard would be pleased. Although seemingly lackadaisical, Binx’s inwardness gravitates towards the eradication of despair. It offers the potentiality for his awakening into a God-relationship. Amidst the Thrownness of a New Orleans bus—a fitting metaphor for time and its perennial refiguring of the present—Binx’s finite consciousness seeks the infinite. The search is a consequence of, and an engagement with, Thrownness-into-being.

Kierkegaard emphasizes that an existential system is impossible. Reality cannot be conceptualized as a totality, but must, by necessity of the human

situation, be understood from a partial and subjective standpoint. A “system” can never explain the irreducibly personal experience of being in time. In other words, Binx’s search cannot be performed objectively. Rather, he must place himself inside of existence, subjectively, in order to make any meaningful sense of the world. Percy’s hero learns this the hard way. Here, Binx regrets time wasted conducting a “vertical” (i.e., objective) search.

During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. I lived in my room as an Anyone living Anywhere and read fundamental books...that is, key books on key subjects...The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over (67-70).

Binx happens upon a crucial tenet of the existentialist ethos. Empiricism, his first reaction to the search, fails miserably. As he later rehearses in a conversation with Kate, his inquisitive step-cousin: “If you walk in the front door of the laboratory, you undertake the vertical search” (82). To this, Kate knowingly replies, “And the danger is of becoming no one nowhere” (83). While embarrassed by her response—for the search can seem absurd when discussed out loud—Binx remains in agreement. The vertical search further alienates him from the world by nullifying it with logic. Empiricism excludes individuals from life, and renders them anonymous. Binx thus modifies the method of his endeavor. “Now,” he explains, “I have undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search. As a consequence, what takes place in my room is less important. What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood” (70). He exchanges his microscope for a looking glass. The focal point of investigation becomes the footpaths of the world, rather than the miniature globes. Binx

abandons the dangerous mirage of totality, situating himself *inside* of existence. The “horizontal” search is that of subjectivity. To Kierkegaard, Binx is thus better equipped to confront the transient experience of existing in time, move further *inward*, and place himself in relation to the divine.

Like a proper existentialist, Binx creates his own terminology for the experience of being. The search is one example. Proximal to this major term are “certification,” “the malaise,” “rotation,” and “repetition.” These are all, in a way, pertinent to Binx’s experience of Thrownness. They reveal efforts to process the perplexity of a random socio-geographic and temporal placement—namely, as Binx Bolling of the fading New Orleans aristocracy, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century—and display a struggle with finitude and flux. The phenomenon of repetition, however, most explicitly diagnoses the perils of living in time:

A repetition is the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time. . . . There remain[s] only time itself, like a yard of smooth peanut brittle (79-80).

If, as Kierkegaard asserts, existence so devilishly “separates and holds the various moments of existence discretely apart,” then the successful repetition is nothing short of a miracle. As Binx admits, “adulteration” is the essence of the human temporal phenomenology. Only time in the *abstract* is smooth. It becomes merely a concept to be savored from a distance, without risk to the self. Repetition, in other words, is a mirage—at the very least, a misstep. It is akin to the vertical search: Binx the living individual, a *becoming* rather than a fixed entity, exiles himself from life itself. Indeed, to believe in the past, for Kierkegaard, is to court

a dangerous illusion. This artifice, central to repetition, is one of the many gateways to despair. We must confront our finitude, the singular and exclusive realness of the present, in order to fully understand selfhood. In short, despair lurks within the repetition. It is an inadequate reaction to Thrownness.

Describing the effect of a successful repetition, Binx comments: “How, then, tasted my own fourteen years since *The Oxbow Incident*? As usual it eluded me” (80). The flavor is bittersweet, pleasant with a hint of despair. *Something* is missing: the reality of time eludes him. The peanut brittle is smoothed into vacuity. Nevertheless, the repetition is not utterly fruitless. While the taste eludes him, Binx is left with a significant residue.

There was this also: a secret sense of wonder about the enduring, about all the nights, the rainy summer nights at twelve and one and two o’clock when the seats endured alone in the empty theater. The enduring is something which must be accounted for. One cannot simply shrug it off.

Time remains shrouded in mystery. It repels the empirical mind. Yet the endeavor is a successful failure. Binx is compelled to move further inward, deeper into subjectivity. He *wonders*. “Time itself,” a calculative assault on mystery, is discarded for “the enduring.” The despair of repetition leads Binx, dialectically, to a glimpse of the greatest absurdity: the infinite. Inwardness—Binx’s unique response to Thrownness—does not lead to New York, Frisco, or Mexico City, but to the unexplored and hazardous regions of the soul.

From a distance, Invisible, Sal, and Binx, lead discordant lives. Although inhabiting a proximal moment in time, they are born into paradoxical social positions and locations across the United States. Ellison’s hero faces the condition

of growing up an ambitious black man in a racist society. Sal, born into working class French-Canadian family in the Northeast, struggles for meaning—and a place of his own—in postwar America. Percy's protagonist finds himself entangled with the despair of a comfortable yet deteriorating ruling class. Yet, however disparate, they are all united by one *existential* state, which, in fact, regulates their contradictions: Thrownness-into-being, and the task of subjectivity.

### **Authenticity**

The problem of God, Thrownness-into-being, and subjectivity, all illuminate the human condition. While defending the radical individuality of existence—i.e., they do not strive for a system and reduce all realities into one *à la* Hegel—these tenets of existentialism nevertheless diagnose certain commonalities of the human experience. The existence of God can never be objectively realized; we do not control the situations into which we are born; time and reality can only be experienced through our own mercurial lens. All of these issues are marked by *passivity*, and thus court inauthenticity. They all confer metaphysical facts that we are subjected to simply by living. Existentialism, as discussed thus far, is a diagnostic philosophy. This portrait alone would be a gross misrepresentation. The ultimate task existentialism assigns is, indeed, to confront the conditions of being—yet it is also to move *beyond*. This is the task of authenticity.

No single conception of authenticity runs through existentialism, yet many strains share one basic assertion, namely, that humans must plant themselves conscientiously and vitally in their own lives. They must *actively* pursue a life

worth living. In the face of nihilism, the individual must create meaning. This is a difficult and perhaps unattainable challenge, but one which is imperative. As

Marjorie Grene writes:

We live from birth to death under the compulsion of brute fact; yet out of the mere givenness of situation it is we ourselves who shape ourselves and our world. And in this shaping we succeed or fail. To succeed is not to escape compulsion but to transcend it (“Authenticity: An Existential Virtue,” 1952; 266).

Authenticity is the assertion of the self despite the many obstacles that make true selfhood nearly impossible. It is the most positive contention of existentialism.

Although it was Heidegger who first used the term “authenticity,” the basic principle runs through his forerunners, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. For Kierkegaard, an authentic existence can only be made in one’s relation of faith to God, by virtue of the absurd. More specifically, authenticity comes in the form of a “God-relationship.” Here, the individual relates herself *to herself* such that she understands, at every moment, that she is completely reliant on God. Faith is a subjective passion, reached via *inwardness*, for the divine being by whom she is created. An inauthentic existence, by contrast, is marred by despair. This is the failure to be a self—i.e., the inability to transcend the finite and take root in the divine. Despair, Kierkegaard writes, thwarts “every human existence which is not conscious of itself as spirit, or conscious of itself before God as spirit, [and] every human existence which is not thus grounded transparently in God” (*KA* 349). Kierkegaard thus posits two oppositional, and dialectically related, modes of existence. One can live authentically through a God-relationship, or suffer the inauthenticity of despair.

Within the Nietzschean framework, the most (in)famous manifestation of what Heidegger later calls authenticity is the *Übermensch*. “In Nietzsche’s eyes,” Jacob Golomb states, “the *optimal* and the *highest* humanly possible personal authenticity is personified by the figure of the *Übermensch*, which is the ‘highest of all possible faiths’ or existentially viable attitudes” (“Can One Really Become a ‘Free Spirit Par Excellence’ or an *Übermensch*?” 2006; 26). The existence of the Overman is one of radical self-determination. As Golomb illuminates the idea further, *Übermenschen* are “authentically powerful persons...[characterized by] immanence, autarchy, and extreme individuality” (27). They break through the many boundaries of society and tower, as it were, *over* “man.” In pointed disagreement with Kierkegaard, one crucial movement inherent to Nietzsche’s process of becoming is the denial of historically derived meta-narratives—teleological delusions that force meaning onto existence—such as the Judeo-Christian God. Alongside the Overman as a particular mode of Nietzschean authenticity, Golomb argues for an even *more* tremendous ideal: the *free spirit par excellence*. This spirit totally rejects exterior influences (culture, religion, aesthetics, etc.) in order to spontaneously create its individuated, authentic mode of being. The *free spirit par excellence* is an artist “dancing” at the edge of the abyss (*GS* 347). By rebuking the myth of one cosmic and preconditioned truth, he or she is able—in an act of wild virtuosity—to construct a new world of meaning.

The ideals of the both the *Übermensch* and the free spirit par excellence are difficult to attain. As with Kierkegaard, Nietzsche presents *inauthenticity* as the norm. The most prominent manifestation of inauthenticity is “the herd.” This



is the great mass of weak-willed, conformist, and moralistic, peoples. They blindly move as one, like a herd of sheep, *condemning* those who strongly, and violently, rise above the common breed. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes:

The highest and strongest drives, when they break out passionately and drive the individual far above the average and the flats of the herd conscience, wreck the self-confidence of the community...High and independent spirituality, the will to stand alone, even a powerful reason are experienced as dangers; everything that elevates an individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbor is henceforth called *evil* (113-14).

The herd is a fearing, regulatory mob. They not only deny their own potential, but curse all others who threaten their assured and “holy” anonymity. Nietzsche, echoing Kierkegaard’s opposition of the God-relationship to despair, similarly presents the authentic and inauthentic as dialectically entangled.

Heidegger builds upon the basic idea provided by his existentialist forerunners—officially naming it “authenticity.” As with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Heidegger posits authenticity as the realization of a full and vibrant self. For Heidegger, authentic individuals take responsibility for their own actions. They are able to explain why they live such a way, and have made the particular decisions that they have made. He or she possesses “answerability.” An imperative requirement of authenticity, and thus answerability, is to grapple with one’s *Being-towards-death*. Life, to Heidegger, is meaningless without the realization that it will someday end. Death is the great potentiality to end all potentiality. It inevitably comes, and puts Dasein to an end. Authentic *being-towards-death* is to orientate oneself—and one’s future—based on this one

inexorable fact. The authentic individual is able to look beyond *everydayness*, the distracting and mundane facticity of routine life within society, and comprehend his or her own mortality. With this knowledge, the individual is more equipped to rise to the challenge of selfhood.

The fundamental contrast to Heidegger's ideal of authenticity is "*das Man*," or "the 'They,'" which constitutes the collective unconscious. We participate in *das Man* when we perform basic daily actions (e.g. wait at the bus station, or tie our shoes). To be *das Man* is to do something as anybody else would do it. "We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure," Heidegger writes. "We find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking" (*Being and Time* 164). One is *das Man* when doing something simply because it is "what is done." This hyper-sociality, he points out, has serious consequences: "This Being-with-one another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others'...Because 'the "they"' presents every judgment and decision as its own, it deprives the particular Dasein of its answerability" (164-65). *Das Man* is the mask of conformity. To live in fully in accordance with *das Man* is to embrace a *negative* existence—thus squandering the vast potentiality of the self in a distracted state of "fallenness" (*Verfallenheit*). Fallenness, in short, is the dispersion of one's freedom into the cares of the everyday, and, consequently, a total alignment with *das Man* (Grene 266). It is a mode of severe inauthenticity. As William Barrett suggests in *Irrational Man*, like Nietzsche's herd mentality, fallenness is contingent on a degree of fearful docility. "So long as we remain in

the womb of this externalized and public existence,” he writes, “we are spared the terror and the dignity of becoming a Self” (196).

In this light, *being-towards-death* is even more crucial:

Only by taking my death into myself, according to Heidegger, does an authentic existence become possible for me. Touched by this interior angel of death, I cease to be the impersonal and social One among many, as Ivan Ilyich was, I am free to become myself (Barrett 201).

Like Nietzsche’s depiction of the death of God, *being-towards-death* shocks one into a fuller realization of oneself. An authentic relationship to death reveals the great potentiality of Dasein. In the face of death, one must live in a state of “anticipation”: perceptiveness to “the possibility of *authentic existence*,” via the “understanding [of] one’s *ownmost* and uttermost potentiality-for-being” (307). Thus, Heidegger depicts the phenomenon of “**freedom towards death**—*a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the “they,” and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious*” (311; bold and italics by Heidegger). As I will discuss below, one is made anxious by the possibilities that lay open before him, of which he is the *sole* creator. The void deep within Dasein becomes terribly apparent. Heidegger calls this uncanny feeling “*angst*.” A necessary aspect of authenticity, then, is the conscientious awareness of this profound and challenging position. In a state of “reticence,” one must listen to the blaring yet silent “‘*voice of conscience*’ [*Stimme des Gewissens*],” which tells one that he is free (313). Dasein, however, often *flees* from its own freedom, and falls away from itself into *das Man*. Authenticity is a great challenge, perhaps the most daunting one of existence. It requires us to face the reality of death, resist the

magnetic pull of society, free ourselves from the mire of everydayness, and create our own dynamic selves.

This core challenge of existentialism, seeded by Kierkegaard and substantiated (though not finalized) by Heidegger, resounds at high volume in American postwar fiction. To begin with Ellison, notions of authenticity permeate the dominant metaphor and namesake of his epic: *invisibility*. It is the great paradox of the novel, which interrogates the possibility of responsibility and autonomy within hegemony. If one is endlessly marginalized from society, *made into* an invisible man, can one, in turn, achieve an individualized and *authentic* mode of invisibility? Can one exert freedom amidst a forced exile—making that exile, in effect, his own? Ellison leaves this tension as unresolved as his protagonist. Invisible concludes his narrative at the brink of a new spring, yet remains in hibernation. The existential predicament of the single, isolated African-American man, Ellison suggests, cannot be so easily classified. Nevertheless, *Invisible Man* is rife with clues. It concertedly addresses—and problematizes—authenticity.

The intricacies of invisibility, and thus authenticity, begin with the novel's opening lines. Ellison's underground man states: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). Invisible takes a passive stance, asserting that he has been born into a state of social and metaphysical negativity—*thrown into* invisibility. For this, as Heidegger would agree, he is not accountable. Yet at the same time, by revoking responsibility Invisible is in danger of inauthenticity. He allows society to determine his status of obscurity,

and seemingly denies his capacity for self-creation. Abraham Mansbach articulates this issue well in “Heidegger on the Self” (1991). The inauthentic mode of Dasein, he writes, “finds itself reflected by a world that has meaning given by Others. As a result, its self-understanding is not an understanding of its individuality...its possibilities are not determined by Dasein itself, but by the public realm, by the Others” (75). Indeed, Invisible acknowledges the despair—the aching lack of self—attendant to his passive attitude. “You often doubt if you really exist,” he regrets. “You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists” (3-4). If he thus despairs in the Kierkegaardian sense, Invisible is at least conscious of being so, and is closer to authenticity.

However, just as the hope of a God-relationship is incompatible with Invisible’s atheistic perspective, so is the total classification of “inauthentic.” The matter is more complicated. Ellison describes the social and phenomenological ignorance at play in de facto invisibility. “When *they* approach me *they* see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (3). This is the folly of *das Man*, or, in both Ellison and Heidegger’s words, “the ‘They.’” Fellow Americans are so absorbed in everydayness that they lack basic cognitive capacities. Invisible (or, rather, his obscurity) is a consequence of *Verfallenheit*—a phantom of fallenness. He is, in this regard, *exterior* to *das Man*. While marginalized to the edges of despair, Invisible is, at the same time, excluded from the game of inauthenticity. Truly, as Ellison muses, “it is sometime advantageous to be unseen” (3). Invisible is more

explicit at the novel's end regarding the interaction of *das Man*, fallenness, and discrimination.

Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states.  
Why, if they follow this conformity business they'll end up by  
forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a  
color but the lack of one. Must I strive toward colorlessness?  
(564).

He rephrases Heidegger's fear of a homogenized (and thus nullified) population. Conformity is pathological and coercive. It spawns "tyrant states" by "forcing" the individual into a single type of human that is, in essence, nothing at all: "*white*." In other words, invisibility is distinct from "colorlessness"—America's most rampant mode of fallenness.

Invisible is not merely exterior to *das Man* by virtue of his Thrownness. While being born with immunity to the white-hegemonic form of fallenness—as a black man, whose ephemeral profile is the product rather than consumer of the They's distracted indifference—Invisible also moves actively towards authenticity. It comes as an emphatic *participation* in his preconditioned obscurity. Invisible confronts the preformed nature of his existence, and shapes it according to his own will. One crucial move is his possession of answerability. "I myself," Ellison writes, "after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (7). He comes to terms with the life he arbitrarily must lead; rather than denying his invisibility—which surely pained him to realize—Invisible subsumes it further into his being. To return to Marjorie Grene's analysis of Heidegger and Sartre, Invisible performs quite admirably. Grene writes, "authenticity is a kind of honesty or a kind of courage; the authentic

individual faces something which the unauthentic individual is afraid to face...Freedom can inform necessity” (267). Brutal honesty with the facts of one’s existence allows for an *authentic* expression of autonomy. Such is the relationship of Invisible to his own invisibility. It endows him with a sense of authenticity: he “become[s] alive.”

Greene’s look at honesty and authenticity, while revealing, becomes problematic in light of invisibility’s more complex implications. Her assertion, that the full confrontation (i.e., *acceptance*) of set existential conditions is entirely beneficial to the creation of self, as a first step, only further provokes the paradox of invisibility. Ostensibly, Invisible discovers the fact of his obscurity and therefore lives a more authentic, vigorous life. While honesty—and a sense of responsibility—is important for an authentic life, his ultimately reflexive acceptance of invisibility has its consequences. While making the best of it, he nonetheless receives what *das Man* provides. The result is his own peculiar fallenness. A despairing absorption into everydayness is best revealed by his experience of time:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead (8).

His consciousness sporadically recedes into a dull non-cognitive state. This is, of course, a natural condition of being-in-the-world. In dealings with things which are “ready-to-hand” (in other words, are subject to such habituation that they require no thought), we easily slip into absentmindedness. For example, time

moves curiously behind the wheel of our car: a distant yet routine drive to work can *feel* like ten minutes. Although common—and, indeed, partially because of its frequency—this phenomenon is tinged with *fallenness*. Invisibility, as Ellison describes it, in fact exacerbates this problem. Moreover, the inauthentic root of Invisible’s experience of temporality reveals itself in a faint yet discernable *angst*. As William Barrett writes in his seminal work, *What Is Existentialism?*: “Anxiety (*angst*) is the fundamental feeling precisely because it directed to the whole world more plainly than any other feeling. Anxiety is indefinite: it is not about this or that object, we are simply anxious and we do not know what about” (1947; 58). In this exact sense, Ellison’s hero senses that all is not well—suffering a dull and unlocatable, yet gnawing existential ache. He senses his lack of authenticity via an uncomfortable placement in time, and thus life. He is “never quite on the beat.”

Distressing as it may be, Invisible’s *angst* is not wholly detrimental. As Heidegger posits, it does not stubbornly preclude him from authenticity. On the contrary, *angst* acts as a warning sign, as it were, notifying Dasein that it may move beyond its fallen state and access its great potentiality. “Anxiety,” Barrett continues, “more than any other feeling, discovers to us the world: i.e., brings us face to face with a world, to which we now sense ourselves to be in precarious relation...[It] thus gives us the first clue to an authentic existence” (59). Like Kierkegaard’s conscious despairer—who, when alert to his despair, suffers it more intensely, yet is closer to a God-relationship—Heidegger’s individual, cognizant of his *angst*, is closer to genuine selfhood. Invisible, likewise, realizes his “precarious relation” to existence. Moreover, invisibility, as a metaphysical



stance, is *defined* by an intense consciousness of its instability. This torment becomes a tool. Invisible's self-adapted flightiness and mistrust, his acuity to precariousness and discomfort with fallenness—all foster a budding authenticity.

In the final pages of *Invisible Man*, Ellison writes,

My problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible man* (560).

In this last context, “invisible” takes on a radically new meaning. It is no longer outwardly imposed, as a mere product of *das Man*. Rather, it is a vibrant, self-determined identity—born from a spontaneous act of artful defiance.

The decisive moment of authenticity, and of Invisible himself, is a bold return to the social realm. Dasein must exist *within* its world, human society. The challenge is to do so with integrity. “When the Self is summoned to authenticity,” writes Abraham Mansbach, “the human being chooses to be authentic within the communal framework... Only an individual can be absorbed into anonymity and only an individual can choose to be with Others” (1991; 86). Invisible is literally drawn underground. Running from two hoodlums during the twilight of the Harlem riots, Invisible accidentally falls into the bowels of the city. “Someone, for some reason,” he recalls, “had removed the manhole cover and I felt myself plunge down, down” (Ellison 553). The incident is a mystical experience—a gift in disguise, an opportunity to fully grasp his invisibility. While, in Mansbach's words, Invisible is indeed “summoned” (i.e., moved by something beyond himself), the action is definitively his own. He reacts to the darkness with

urgency. “Then I thought,” writes Ellison, “This is the way it’s always been, only now I know it.” Thus begins the hibernation: his complete retreat from *das Man*, into anonymity. Here, underground, Invisible forges himself out of nothingness. However, after being thus “summoned to authenticity,” Invisible is compelled to live it out in the over-world. “I’m coming out, no less invisible,” he assures himself. “Even hibernations can be overdone” (568).

Ellison is clearly suggestive, and seemingly optimistic, at the close of *Invisible Man*. A mode of authenticity appears within reach for his hero. However, it comes as an ideal toward which he strives. Authenticity, for both Heidegger and Ellison, is a project rather than a static mode of being. As a consequence, the issue is never resolved. While necessary, to Heidegger, the relation of the authentic person to society seems ultimately perilous. For Ellison—and for his modern black man in American—this dis-ease seems tenfold. Not only is society metaphysically dangerous as the great disperser of freedom, it is also violent and emphatically oppressive. It is, for instance, the *das Man* of institutional racism. Invisible indeed has his doubts—the ultimate effects of which are never fully disclosed. His newfound identity may be incompatible with any Other, and, consequentially, remain inauthentic. Or, moving away from Heidegger, such sociality may be toxic, and useless to the genuine individual. Perhaps authenticity is only located *away* from the world. Ellison refuses an answer. He leaves Invisible in his cavern, beneath New York City, prepared only to speculate about his place in the upper realm: “There’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (568).

The main complication obscuring Kerouac's conception of authenticity is opposite to Ellison's. Rather than holding back, he presents a *multiplicity* of options. His aliases are bewildered by competing—and at times antithetical—paths to genuine selfhood. He is a Nietzschean and Catholic; his work seems equally informed by Kierkegaard as Heidegger. *On the Road* tells the story of this existential oddity, and its consequences for Sal Paradise. While not exhausted, this tale has already been explored. I now move forward into the saga: as the Dulouz Legend continues, Kerouac's presentation of authenticity becomes more coherent. As I will exemplify with *Big Sur*, Kerouac ultimately discovers a selfhood most aligned with Kierkegaard. He commits himself to *absurd faith*—relating himself to himself, via *subjective passion*, such that he is rooted in the transcendent being that created him, God.

One passage from *On The Road* should first be addressed. Just as the novel is an early step in the saga, so is this moment a vital beginning to Kerouac's search for authenticity. Sal explains a recurring nightmare.

I told [Carlo] a dream I had about a strange Arabian figure that was pursuing me across the desert; that I tried to avoid; that finally overtook me before I reached the Protective City...I look back on it, this is only death: death will overtake us before heaven (124).

Sal recognizes his *being-towards-death*. He anticipates mortality as a fact. The flaw of public discourse on death, Heidegger claims, is that, by speaking of it so flippantly, we generalize and thus nullify its reality. Death becomes abstract, something which the Other experiences, not *me*. Sal, however, approaches death as a recurring dream—an irreducibly *individual* experience. While describing it to

a friend, he understands that no other person can truly access the dream. No one else can die his death. Sal thus takes on *being-towards-death* with validity. This has major implications for authenticity. “We are able to attain an authentic existence,” Barrett writes, “only if we come face to face unblinkingly with the possibility of our death, for it is death that tears us out of the external banality of everyday existence” (1964; 63). Indeed, the dream of the dark rider breaks through the usual disorder and distraction of time passing. Sal recalls, “In the rush of events I kept thinking about this in the back of my mind” (124). His chilling, personal confrontation with death serves as a venue—in the midst of the fallenness of life on the road—to strive for a meaningful, authentic existence.

Much can be said for a Heideggerean reading of *On the Road*. It is informed by the tension between freedom and conformity, the self and *das Man*. Nevertheless, such an interpretation ignores one of Kerouac’s major and unavoidable concerns, which Heidegger seems to dismiss: access to God.<sup>1</sup> A qualification of Sal’s *being-towards-death* reveals this disparity with Heidegger. “Death,” Kerouac writes, “will overtake us before *heaven*.” Death is not the end of Dasein, as it is in Heidegger’s account, but rather its passage to eternity. Kerouac’s idea of authenticity is enmeshed with faith. Subsequent chapters in the *Dulouz Legend* further develop this relationship, as his spirituality matures.

*The Dharma Bums* (1958) records Kerouac’s growing fascination with Zen Buddhism. Sal becomes “Ray,” and the spotlight turns from Dean to Gary

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<sup>1</sup> Barrett describes this subtle atheism in *Irrational Man*: “Heidegger has experienced the death of God, and this death casts a shadow over all of his writings; but he announces it quietly” (186).

Snyder (“Japhy Ryder”), an American Zen poet eight years his junior. Ray’s desire for kicks burns with equal ferocity towards enlightenment. He pursues a burgeoning conception of authenticity through faith.

Kerouac’s combination of Buddhism and Catholicism is understandable. As Catholic intellectual Thomas Merton illuminates in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), the two systems have many profound points of contact. Nevertheless, Kerouac’s conception of self-creation through this dual faith is muddled. Recalling a view of the Pacific, enjoyed on a stolen ride with the “Midnight Ghost” to L.A., Ray rejoices: “O Buddha thy moonlight O Christ thy starling on the sea” (88). This brief passage exemplifies this alluring yet contradictory stage of Kerouac’s theology. Ray employs a dual creation myth—envisioning a world in which moonlight, emanating from the eternal glow of Buddha, illuminates the water on which Christ walks. This vision of creation involves a significant problem, beyond the obvious and perhaps surmountable contradiction of employing two religions at once. Buddhism is non-theistic *in so far as* it denies the existence of one omnipotent God-head. In Ray’s Pacific Ocean, this philosophy is tossed against the power of the “one true” Christian God: one who Himself calms the water, allowing Christ to walk. Furthermore, Ray describes *Buddha* as the God-head, and makes Christ his son. “O Buddha,” he writes, “Oh Christ *thy* starling on the sea.” Following this logic, Buddha is the God of Abraham. Buddha instructed Noah to build an ark.

This analysis is not investigative journalism. Ann Douglas writes in her introduction to *The Dharma Bums*: “If no Westerner, and certainly not Kerouac,

could fully understand Buddhism, Buddhism served the West, in Kerouac's words, as a 'form of heresy,' 'gentle' and 'goofy,' but heresy all the same" (xxiv). His clumsy appropriation of Buddhism subverts the brutal rationality of the West. Kerouac understands the basic theological problems underscoring his Catholic American Buddhism, and revels in the folly. He is "mad to be saved" (*OTR* 5). Ray's spirituality is an act of rebellion, against the confines of categorization and reason itself. Ray moves toward an *authentic* religion, i.e., one determined by his own inner passion—his "subjective certainty" as Kierkegaard says—rather than dogma.

This mad spirituality becomes most apparent with the climax of *Dharma Bums*. Ray takes a summer job as a fire lookout at Desolation Peak, Washington. He finds peace after years of binging and moaning in the urban zones of America. "Suddenly I realized, I was truly alone," Ray remarks. "The little flowers grew everywhere on the rocks, and no one had asked them to grow, or me to grow" (180). Creation appears to him as spontaneous, continual, and illogical. Kerouac echoes Camus's depiction of a beautifully godless world: "In the universe suddenly restored to silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up... This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile" (*MOS* 91). Like Sisyphus, Ray delights in the silent, prosperous world before him. Kerouac's conception of a free and full existence amidst Nothingness—planted by Nietzsche and rephrased by Camus—manifests itself in this peace. Yet, at the same time, he desires quite a different cosmic order. "I'd go

out and sit in the grass and meditate facing west,” Ray muses, “wishing there were a Personal God in all this impersonal matter” (181).

A Christian cosmology is still more appealing than Nothingness. This intellectual and spiritual tension finally reaches a breaking point. Ray stumbles upon his own form of wisdom, which is—not paradoxically—a relinquishment of knowledge: “‘Poor gentle flesh,’ I realized, ‘there is no answer.’ I didn’t know anything any more, I didn’t care, and it didn’t matter, and suddenly I felt really free” (183-4). The self-assurances of an evangelistic “dharma bum” disappear. Ray does not make claims about the reality or unreality of the world; he does not recite the Diamond Sutra or the Bible. Unable to understand the mystery of creation, his only definitive claim refers to himself. Kerouac’s universe is absurd: utterly unreceptive to human cognitive capacity, gentle in its indifference. This does not silence the *individual*. Ray’s confession of ignorance takes the form of a joyful proclamation. Kerouac writes, “Down on the lake rosy reflections of celestial vapor appeared, and I said ‘God, I love you’ and looked up to the sky and really meant it. ‘I have fallen in love with you, God. Take care of us all, one way or the other’” (186). The effective muteness of God cannot extinguish Ray’s burning love *for* Him. Ray relates himself to himself—via subjective *inwardness*—such that he understands the power, and receives the grace, of his creator.

The manifest contradictions of Kerouac’s spiritual journey—from the exiled bewilderment of Sal Paradise to the helter skelter Buddhism of Ray Smith—have birthed a new, volatile, and affirmative, mysticism: *absurd faith*. As

Kierkegaard writes, “the movements of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd...not by virtue of the human understanding” (*KA* 116-18). Kerouac’s absurd faith is propelled by the dialectic of negative understanding and positive belief. His mysticism is rooted in cosmic opacity, founded on the reality of a silent universe. Yet, face to face with the void, Kerouac responds with the positive assertion of love for God. He replies with authenticity.

This story continues beyond Desolation Peak. While *Dharma Bums* sets the stage, *Big Sur* marks the full realization of Kierkegaardian authenticity. Published in 1962, this installment in Kerouac’s oeuvre details the physical and emotional decay of the King of the Beats. After years of revelry, beatitude, and exploration, Kerouac found himself to be an embittered and severely alcoholic outcast. *Big Sur* begins, significantly, with a hangover:

The church is blowing a sad windblown “Kathleen” on the bells in the skid row slums as I wake up all weebegone and goopy, groaning from another drinking bout and groaning most of all because I’d ruined my ‘secret return’ to San Francisco (3).

A covert homecoming dissolves into headaches and shame, just as the Beat playground—‘Frisco—looms like a nightmarescape. Rather than employing the usual past tense (and suggesting control over the narrative, which is his life), Kerouac throws us into the miserable present. He involves the reader in his crisis as it unravels. At this point of existential desperation, Kerouac’s religious zeal is more urgent than ever. Commit to the holy life and be healed; abandon the bottle and its disease, or continue in a living Hell. The struggle for authenticity becomes one of life and death.



Big Sur marks the point in Central California where the Santa Lucia Mountains rise out of the Pacific Ocean. Jack believes these canyons and beaches to be the location of his salvation. He stays at the empty cabin of his friend and fellow writer, Lorenzo Monsanto. It is to be his sanctuary. Kerouac summarizes his strategy thus:

No more dissipation, it's time for me to quietly watch the world and even enjoy it, first in woods like these, then just calmly walk and talk among people of the world...no binges, no bouts with beatniks and drunks and junkies and everybody, no more I ask myself the question *O why is God torturing me* (24).

This plan reverberates the existential tone of Kerouac's absurd faith. Jack takes responsibility for his own disease, and his own recovery. He rebels against a tendency to blame God for his drunken blunders. The authentic self, Jack suggests, freely aligns itself to the will of God. Faith is the individual's decision. Questioning a silent God's maliciousness is futile. The only thing to do is *act*.

Nietzsche's articulation of heroic action describes Jack's endeavor quite well: "Going out to meet at the same time one's highest suffering and one's highest hope" (*GS* 219). Indeed, he finds both at once. It begins with a sin. During one return to San Francisco, Cody Pomeray (aka Neal Cassady) introduces Jack to his girlfriend, Billie. They sleep together. This relationship, *as such*, does not cause the oncoming crisis; to Jack, premarital sex is not a sin in itself (148). There, Jack meets Billie's four-year-old son, Elliott. This incidental crew, along with Beat friends Dave and Ramona, soon ends up at Big Sur. The Babylonian shade of San Francisco quickly engulfs Jack's sacred place. Accordingly, Jack

and Billie's once edifying sexuality becomes unholy. Jack describes the catalyst of his spiritual, emotional, and physical (i.e., *existential*) collapse:

[We] make love in spite of Elliott pulling at her "Billie dont do it Billie dont do it" till right in the middle I'm yelling "Dont do what? what's he mean?—can it be he's right and Billie you shouldnt do it? can it be we're sinning after all's said and done? O this is insane!—but he's the most insane of them all" (190).

Jack commits a multitude of sins—against Billie, Elliott, himself, and his own lost innocence. Ann Douglas writes of Kerouac's novels: "childhood is the inescapable theme precisely because the narrator is avowedly an adult, enraged that the time of innocence is over... [they] are murder mysteries in disguise" (*The Dharma Bums* xxviii). Here, at Big Sur, Kerouac discovers that *he* is in fact the killer. Billie's son is rendered "the most insane of them all." His innocence turns psychotic; the *child* therefore dies. Jack murders both Elliott and the youth that he signifies. He is exiled from his Eden on the Pacific. This refusal begins immediately, with an "orgasm that suddenly releases not sweet genteel sympathy but some token venom that splits up the body" (191). To understate, he does not feel as if he's made love. Jack is, of course, not literally cast out of paradise, but perhaps worse: paradise itself becomes desolate. "Suddenly the water in the creek tastes different," writes Kerouac, "as tho somebody's thrown gasoline or kerosene in it upstream" (191-2). Water, life itself, is now tainted. It is poisoned by sin.

*Big Sur*'s classic narrative, paradise lost, ends with redemption. Jack describes his total resignation and acceptance of grace.

I see the Cross, it's silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, I hold out my arms to be taken away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts

dying and swooning out to the Cross...I say through all the noise of the voices "I'm with you, Jesus, for always, thank you" (205).

This experience is more violent, and absolute, than Ray's epiphany at Desolation Peak. The despairing self—as a distinct entity, compelled to deliberations ("I have fallen in love with you, God") and demands ("Take care of us")—is annihilated entirely, only to be risen again. Jack identifies himself fully with the Cross. While his faith becomes all the more absurd, the reticence of God is no longer problematic. It is not something to be *overcome* with a leap of faith. Rather, the Cross is all the more beautiful and attractive *for* its silence. Jack's clamorous body and mind finally find peace in God's stillness. At least for a moment, Kerouac depicts the bliss of authenticity.

The quest of Binx Bolling is not so severe. One could even call it refined. Kerouac likened himself to Melville's Pip—"the child who accompanies Ahab on his doomed quest for the white whale, and goes mad in the process" (*The Dharma Bums* xiii). His task began, and sadly concluded, not far from a suicide mission. Although not in its religious end, Nietzsche informs Kerouac's tumultuous means for authenticity. Percy's searcher takes a different road. And he prefers the bus. Binx's movement towards a vital stance in his own existence—an authentic creation of self—comes in a subtler manner. There is no delirious "swooning out to the cross" in *The Moviegoer*. Indeed, Binx finds himself knowing less than ever before (228). Authenticity for Percy in fact *requires* this sense of humble mystification. Furthermore, in more pointed opposition to Kerouac, Binx's resolution is contingent. To Percy, the genuine self relies equally on the Other as

it does on God, and on the moment as it does on eternity. Binx is not yet assured “for always.” His authenticity is one of *becoming*.

Accordingly, the recurrent signal of inauthenticity in *The Moviegoer* is less flagrant than a bad case of the shakes. That is not to say it is any less distressing. Binx is a victim of “*the malaise*.” With origins unknown, the malaise lurks on the periphery as an ever-looming threat of a mercurial nature. It can come from any place at all. Unsure of its exact source, Binx has a definite idea of how the affliction feels. Its assault is tangible. “The malaise,” he states, “is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo’s ghost” (120). This is not transcendence, but the epitome of alienation. It traps Binx in an evil solipsistic reality where only he, or his mind, exists. The malaise shuts him off from life itself. He becomes a ghost. Yet, unlike Invisible, Binx’s ephemerality is entirely negative and life-denying. Indeed, he may be experiencing what Invisible describes as absolute inauthenticity—“colorlessness” (564). The malaise coheres with Heidegger’s notion of *fallenness*; when we become bogged down in the facticity of daily life, the world is, in effect, “lost” to us. Nevertheless, as it depends on awareness yet comes from no apparent source, Binx’s malady is more reminiscent of the self-reflexive confederate to fallenness—*angst*. He finds himself in a precarious relation to existence, specifically, one of complete divorce. Take, for example, a second description of the malaise. Binx criticizes the car he used to drive on romantic outings with secretaries:

My fine new Dodge was a regular incubator of malaise. Though it was comfortable enough, though it ran like a clock, though we went spinning along in perfect comfort and with a perfect view of the scenery like the American couple in the Dodge ad, the malaise quickly became suffocating (121).

Binx constructs a list of qualities that would combat the malaise. While, in fact, these aspects antagonize it to the point of deadliness. The Dodge is what *das Man* would drive. It is the natural choice for an automobile, the *gut reaction*, as it were. Binx's referral to *das Man* results in an incredible sense of angst—or, more specifically, malaise. The car's luxuriousness and efficiency, its conformity with mainstream American, capitalistic joy, all synthesize into an alien and impenetrable reality. It is inorganic and strange, blocking Binx from the world: "a regular incubator of malaise."

The malaise, like angst, is the sting of inauthenticity. Similarly, it also has a necessary and redemptive existential function. Binx is able to realize his alienation and failure to fulfill his potential as a self. As Tolson summarizes it in *Pilgrim in the Ruins*: "The most alienated individual, Percy asserts, is the one who is least aware of the fact of his alienation" (257). The malaise jolts Binx out of this most alienated state. To return to Kierkegaard's framework, he becomes *conscious of his despair*. Percy welcomes this analysis. In the same breath, Binx describes the Dodge as both an "incubator of malaise," and "a little vortex of despair." They appear in unison. Yet, significantly, the despair has been present all along; it comes from within *Binx*, rather than the hopeless Dodge. Malaise, on the other hand, is the uncanniness provoking such an insight. Accordingly, *the*

*search*—Binx’s movement, through despair, towards authentic selfhood—depends on malaise as its major catalyst.

Moments when the malaise appears, and yet is vanquished, are equally significant to Percy’s take on authenticity. Again, Binx’s peculiar relationship with a car is indicative. Having long abandoned the Dodge, Binx takes his new assistant, Sharon, out on a date to the Gulf Coast. They drive the more malaise-resilient MG. Binx feels “fine”: they are “earthbound as a worm...rush[ing] along at a tremendous clip between earth and sky” (124). In other words, the MG is filled with a manageable level of angst. Binx is *pleasantly fallen*—mollified by a calm sexual attraction, absorbed in the rhythmic motion of the car and the “heavy fragrant air” of the nearby sea. Yet the streamline is suddenly broken. Caught by a U-turning Ford with a “hollow metal bang *b-rramp!*” the MG is thrown into a roadside drain hole (125). Binx passes out for a moment. The other driver flees the scene. To Binx’s delight, Sharon comes to his aid with newfound tenderness. While the crash is not life-threatening, his “bad shoulder” is in poor shape; Sharon examines the shoulder, discovering that it was wounded far before the accident. Before telling Sharon the truth, Binx reflects to himself: “I was shot through the shoulder—a decent wound...Decent except that the fragment nicked the apex of my pleura and got me a collapsed lung” (126). A rather inconsequential fender-bender thus triggers the memory of a near-death experience. Binx revisits the fact of his own mortality, just as he had done in Korea.

His reaction to this potentially disturbing repetition is far from morbid: “Farewell forever, malaise” (127). Although perhaps facetious about the longevity of his cure, Binx, nonetheless, experiences a moment of release. He returns to existence with vigor, no longer a ghost. Such a positive response to an accident, Binx admits, is unusual. “There are fellows I know,” Percy writes, “who would have been sorry it happened, who would have had no thought for anything but their damned MG” (127). The rational and “normal” reaction—that which the everyman would have had—diverges far from Binx’s. He is reinvigorated by a sudden repossession of *being-towards-death*. By this phenomenon (the realization of mortality—and thus orientation and valuation of his present towards the inevitable future), Binx is freed from the existential distraction of *das Man*. He does not act as the “They” would act. Rather, Binx rejoices in a full presence of being, bidding “farewell forever” to self-alienation. Percy soon depicts an even more explicit employment of being-towards-death, which clarifies the previous scene. In despair over the difficulty of the search in the midst of fallenness, Binx admits, “Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: when I lay bleeding in a ditch” (145). At the point of near death—with a nicked pleura aside a Korean river—Binx is finally allowed an unshakable stance in his own existence. Joy Tolson writes: “Percy could appreciate Heidegger’s argument that only a full awareness of death makes one able to appreciate the mystery and fullness of being” (1992; 239). But “appreciate” may be an understatement: Percy adopts this Heideggerean notion with profound urgency. A full awareness of death, as seen in Binx Bolling, is a *necessary* condition for an authentic life.

Binx is compelled towards the search by an ever-looming malaise, which places him in the poignant state of conscious despair. He embraces the thought of his own personal mortality, thus pulling him out of a state of fallenness—or, in the Kierkegaardian mode, *unconscious* despair. The question is how Binx builds upon this framework for authenticity. The answer, however, is far less clear. Percy is not interested in preaching. As he writes in “Why Are You A Catholic,” from *Signposts in a Strange Land*: “The Catholic faith is, to say the least, very important to me, but I have not the least desire to convert anyone or engage in an apologetic or polemic, or a ‘defense of the Faith’” (304-305). Or, in Binx’s words, “I am a member of my mother’s family after all and so naturally shy away from the subject of religion” (237). Without hiding his Christian faith, Percy defines his writing style as purposefully anti-didactic. His fiction is a method for working through his *own* personal faith and doubt. He leaves it at that. Consequentially, the cues for Binx’s possible movement towards authenticity, through faith or anything else, are obscured. One can only interpret suggestions embedded in *The Moviegoer*—signposts, as it were, of authenticity.

Two such indications come as relationships, wherein Binx accesses the Other in a truly loving and honest manner. First is Binx’s relationship with Lonnie, the young handicapped son of his remarried mother. Lonnie both mirrors and refracts Binx; he is indeed a half-brother. As Binx notes, Lonnie is also a moviegoer. They both understand the mystery of being, which is made manifest when projected on the screen. Still, beyond the obvious physical one, they have a



significant difference. Binx envies something only Lonnie possesses: *faith*. This discrepancy in fact enhances their relationship:

He knows that I do not feel sorry for him. For one thing, he has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ. For another thing, I would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is a serene business (137).

Binx perceives an authentic life. To him, Lonnie's existence is not "serene" with ignorance, but self-understanding. Sensing such ignorance in Lonnie's manner of living, Binx would surely grow uncomfortable. Lonnie is not, for example, like the wincingly earnest acquaintance, Nell Lovell: "dead, dead, dead" (102).

Rather, he is deeply alive—both in his conscious and precarious relation to mortality (i.e., being-towards death), and his unabashed, *active* devotion to God. Lonnie's life has a purpose. Thus, with this sense of unpitying awe, Binx enters into an authentic relationship with his crippled brother. Later, Lonnie expresses regret over envying his brother, Duval, who is dead. Binx responds, as Lonnie hopes, by supporting and agreeing with this sentiment. "Why shouldn't you be?" Binx asks. "He sees God's face and you don't" (163). Lonnie is overjoyed by this response. Binx notes, "I have entered the argument as a game played by his rules and he knows that I know it, but he does not mind." That is to say, Binx and Lonnie maintain a mode of transparent and respectful communication. They face each other fully. Through this connection, Binx achieves a mode of *authenticity*.

In *I and Thou* (1923), Jewish existentialist Martin Buber, a distant successor of Kierkegaard, argues that the self's relation to the Other—or, rather, the more direct "You"—bridges the gap of obscurity between the self and God.

Walter Kaufman rephrases Buber in his prologue to *I and Thou*: “God is present when I confront You. But if I look away from You, I ignore him. As long as I merely experience or use you, I deny God. But when I encounter You I encounter him” (28). Loving intersubjectivity enables authenticity. I, You, and God, melt together in a single instant. Binx relates to Lonnie in this fashion. He embraces his half-brother and thus encounters God—realizing his *own* self, rooted in the divine, by way of the Other.

Lonnie dies before *The Moviegoer* concludes. While significant, Binx’s relationship with him is finite. It cannot, on its own, sustain an authentic life. However, Percy portrays a similar unification of the I-You, which lasts beyond the limits of his narrative. Binx commits his *entire life* to an Other. He forsakes his philandering to marry his unstable yet magnetic step-cousin, Kate Cutrer. After a long relationship as close friends, and an awkward sexual encounter on a train, they tie the knot. Great fear accompanies this new promise. Nevertheless, they confront uncertainty *as one*. Parked outside of a church on Ash Wednesday, they exchange vows of their own—

[Kate:] I am frightened when I am alone and I am frightened when I am with people. The only time I’m not frightened is when I’m with you. You’ll have to be with me a great deal.

[Binx:] I will.

Do you want to?

Yes.

I will be under treatment a long time.

I know that...But you must try not to hurt yourself so much.

I will try! I will! (234).

Binx confronts the burdens of his lover, and, in them, perceives beauty. Kate, in turn, recognizes the skittishness and faults of Binx, seeing an extension, and a

peculiar redemption, of her own self. Neither of them “look away from [the] You.” They recognize one another with genuine, transparent love, thus encountering God.

For however transient a moment, Binx breaks his alienation—banishes the malaise—by fully engaging Lonnie and Kate, and therefore the divine power. Gabriel Marcel, according to Percy, had a greater influence on *The Moviegoer* than Buber. Marcel would similarly recognize authentic selfhood in Binx’s development. “It is Marcel’s conviction,” writes Preston Browning, “that there can be no such thing as selfhood apart from relationship and interpersonal communion...Percy’s major characters, all of them searchers for spiritual wholeness, seek to actualize the self in a process which, when successful, involves the self in a movement beyond its own boundaries” (1988; 279). The occasional bread and wine served at Mass is ineffectual without the “interpersonal” communion of everyday. It is the only thing, which can be seen and felt, that ties the self to its own existence—by the fact that it moves the self *beyond* its solipsism and into all that surrounds it. Binx’s engagement with the I-You relationship allows him to reenter the world.

This mode of grace—*authenticity via intersubjectivity*—seems to come only in moments. The malaise lurks forever on the periphery. It has “settled like a fall-out” (228). To Percy, the nature of *this* life is such that alienation is the norm. *The Moviegoer*’s epilogue is a response to this “habitual disposition,” as Lonnie is wont to say (163). Here, more than a year after his momentous thirtieth birthday, Binx has placed himself—not only in relation to one person at a time—but into an

entire community. By marrying Kate, and thus merging into a broader family, Binx commits himself to constant interpersonal communion. The search, he admits in retrospect, is not entirely effective. Kierkegaard, the “great Danish philosopher,” lived in a far different time; in postwar America, one can’t “do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself” (237). Binx, evidently, is pleased to have done just that. He has finally made it good with Kate. Walker Percy leaves us with an image of the authentic life. Or, at least, he shows us how it *feels*. The day before Lonnie’s death, Binx is surrounded by a score of young relatives. He treats them with respect and ease, assuring them, without a trace of irony, that their brother will not need a wheelchair in Heaven (240). Binx exists *within* this tragic moment, without hesitation or angst. Perhaps, he even believes what he says. In Binx’s own words: “It is impossible to say” (235).

### **The Utility of Existentialism: Postwar Crises and the American Self**

Existentialism seems ahistorical. It investigates the everyday phenomenon of Being, and the mystery of living a life that eventually ends. The existentialists expose the very nature of humanness—strike upon unchanging metaphysical reality. Reading Camus for the first time, Hayden Carruth muses, is like discovering your own personal thoughts written on the page (*Nausea* vi). Camus simply *gets* existence: humdrum, poignant, and bizarre. Yet this is not the full story. Existentialism, like any cultural product, is historically situated. History, as much as metaphysics, familiarizes *The Stranger*’s tone. While Meursault’s

indifference resonates with 20<sup>th</sup> century readers, it may have been previously opaque. Camus articulates a particular moment, wherein one's relation to the world has *become* Absurd. Moreover, Carreth makes his statement as a postwar American, and not a poor Algerian. Two separate cultures do not magically strike up conversation. Something has occurred in Carreth's own nation and era. French existentialism had taken American culture by storm in 1946, with Sartre as its perceived leader. This moment was predated, and perhaps made possible, by half a century of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard translations. Yet one question is left unsettled: *Why* has existentialism taken root in the United States of America? How has a European philosophy and literary movement been *utilized* to uniquely American ends? Why does it galvanize Ellison, Kerouac, and Percy's fiction?

One clue is explicitly political. Like the world map, the postwar self was subject to an increasing polarization between totalizing socio-economic systems. In "Reflections on the Cold War" (2009), Joseph Siracusa outlines this tension from the paranoid American viewpoint: "The post-World War II Soviet danger lay not only in military aggression, but even more in the limitless prospect of Moscow's ideological expansion aimed at world domination... To counter Moscow's ideological threat, Washington actively stimulated its own ideological foundations—a blind, knee-jerk anticommunism... 'control hysteria'" (2). While informative, Siracusa avoids one profound consequence of the Cold War. Namely, the individual was being consumed and spit out, placed into a prearranged order. She was destined to fit either under the wings of US capitalism, or behind the iron curtain of USSR communism. The self, as a single

entity, was rendered meaningless. This basic occurrence is not new to history. The Catholic Church, for example, makes clear that its particular persons belong to a larger whole, without which they themselves would lack meaning. With the Cold War, however, this ideology was broadcast with unprecedented efficiency and scope. “Us-versus-them” played on the radio, and on TV. It was splattered across billboards. This message blasted through mass media is, in essence, a call for conformity. It denies the inherent value of the single human being.

American ideology, of course, purports the radical autonomy of the individual. The Declaration of Independence (US 1776) demands liberty. Yet it is equally a call to arms, explicitly aggressive to any persons *opposing* its revolutionary goals. The Declaration, moreover, announces a fetishization of the self—which every American car advertisement exploits in one way or another. “In the early twentieth century,” write Uhlman and Heittman, “the automobile and driving became associated with many of the classic qualities of American identity...Indeed, mobility came to stand for liberty itself” (2015; 86). This statement illuminates two paradoxes of American selfhood: prescribed freedom and mass-produced individuality. All persons are created equal, thus none are distinct. Stalinism, while purporting to relieve the self from alienation, is, admittedly, more honest about its conformist agenda.

The postwar era is shadowed by two socio-political poles that refute the isolated self. Although few people *had* a choice, being born randomly into one realm or the other, the words of T. W. Adorno are relevant: “Freedom would not be choosing between black and white, but stepping out of such a proscriptive

choice” (*Minima Moralia* 140). Existentialism answers back. Beginning with Kierkegaard, it has rejected totalizing philosophical schemes. Hegel’s absolute idealism, which seeks to reduce all reality to a synthetic objective unity, is under particular attack. The world, to Kierkegaard and his successors, must be understood from a subjective, individuated standpoint. Systems that negate the individual—conceptualizing the world from a God-like, atemporal standpoint—do violence against humanity. Such systems were palpable as ever during the Cold War. Indeed, Marxism is a direct descendant of Hegelianism. Capitalism, similarly, is fostered by post-Enlightenment rational thought from which Kant and Hegel emerged. These totalizing philosophies were infiltrating territories left literally and politically vacant by World War II. In America, liberal capitalism increasingly appeared as the *only* choice. At this point in history, the language of *authenticity* seems very attractive. Nietzsche, for instance, condemns “the herd.” He does not demand that one join the war effort. Although his Nazism may betray such a critique, Heidegger decries *fallenness*—and effective non-existence—in disburdening one’s responsibility into *das Man*. Camus, regarding the Absurd, portrays the human as necessarily alone. The universe is silent and opaque, reality the *opposite* of total. More importantly, Camus seeks the redemption of this condition. His philosophy, as revealed by *The Stranger*, values the individual and mistrusts conformism. Meursault is executed for failing to grieve his mother’s passing in an acceptable fashion: his death, and thus life, is his *own*. In short, existentialism rebukes totalizing systems and hegemonic societies. It appeals to disconcerted postwar Americans.

Ralph Ellison utilizes existentialism, in this political fashion, more overtly than Percy or Kerouac. First, Invisible's disillusionment with the Brotherhood—a communist organization operating in New York City—reveals mistrust of Leftist ideology and tactics. The Brotherhood employs him for his ability to evangelize the black community in Harlem; he is singled out for his race. This action indicates violence against the unique self, yet is only part of Ellison's critique. When a policeman murders Invisible's friend and ex-colleague, Clifton, the Brotherhood reacts with disturbing calm. Human life is dispensable. Clifton's death is vindicated, and expected, as a means for furthering the end of universal justice. Moreover, Clifton had left the Brotherhood to sell Black Sambo dolls on the street. This practice leads to a deadly confrontation with the police. Thus, the Brotherhood is further pleased with their former servant's death. After having made use of Clifton, and becoming angered by his act of dissent, the organization simply shrugs. They in fact chastise Invisible for organizing a funeral (455). A single existence is engulfed by the communist totality. This realization spurs Invisible's break with the Brotherhood and reclamation of *self-determined* invisibility.

Mr. Norton, on the other hand, is the capitalist lost in his own mythology. He is the "great white savior" who donates sums of money to Invisible's Southern black college. From this vantage point, the value of any single student disappears. Invisible is but one of many who, when bound together as a needy community, protect Norton's conception of a benevolent capitalism. Existentially, Clifton would have experienced the same fate at this institution. Norton, significantly,



becomes ill when confronted by the raw humanity of the school's surrounding country. Shocked by an incestual Trueblood, and the chaotic Golden Day bar, the veneer of a faceless and grateful mass shatters. Norton's breakdown exposes his ideology of philanthropy as it lays fragmented before him. Moreover, Norton's mythology of benevolence reflects a more universal aspect of capitalism: persons are reduced to mere buyers and spenders, owners and laborers. They are cogs in an economic machine. Ellison, with the Brotherhood and Mr. Norton, employs the existential ethos to critique theoretically oppositional yet mutually totalizing systems, which dominate Cold War conceptions of the self.

Kerouac and Percy depict only one side of the equation: the capitalist American malaise. It cannot be condensed to a single figure, such as Mr. Norton, for it spreads across the entire nation. This specter is far less obtrusive than the Brotherhood, yet it disarms and alienates the self nonetheless. Kerouac and Percy, in defense, assume an existential posture. Ann Charters sheds light on Kerouac's reaction in her introduction to *The Portable Beat Reader* (1992), summarizing John Clellon Holmes's famous depiction of the Beat Generation:

[It is] a cultural revolution in progress, made by a post-World War II generation of a disaffiliated young people coming of age into a Cold War world without spiritual values they could honor. Instead of obeying authority and conforming to traditional middle-class materialistic aspirations, these young people dealt as best they could with what Holmes called their "*will to believe*" (xx).

The Beats are a diverse group of "disaffiliated young people," alienated by the shallow mores of capitalist society. They strive to create their *own* systems of meaning, and create the intimate spirituality so lacking in Cold War ethics. Like the existentialists, the Beats struggle against the nihilistic core of modernity. Their

goal is a radically life-affirming morality, which, among other things, values the individual. It is no surprise that a critical influence on the Beat ethos is Lucien Carr's self-proclaimed "New Vision": a philosophy of life and art with Nietzsche at its roots (Gewirtz 13). The Beats employed existential thought, as a *generation*, in response to the American postwar despair.

Kerouac himself, in his journals from 1948, reiterates the new morality of Beatitude. After crying over *Black Springs* by Henry Miller, he writes: "Thank God for flesh! Thank God for the sanity of wine and flesh in the midst of all those I.B.M.'s and prisons and diplomats and neurotics and schools and laws and courts and hospitals and suburban homes where children are taught to despise themselves" (Brinkley 163). Physicality is a crucial defense against the capitalist superstructure. Kerouac recognizes a dynamic relationship between pathological guilt—herd morality and gnawing *ressentiment* transmuted from the Judeo-Christian tradition—and the domination of corporations and public institutions. To Kerouac, self-contempt and acquiescence are two sides of the same coin. Reclamation of "wine and flesh" is necessary for liberation, through the realization of one's ultimate freedom and sanctity. While Nietzschean, Kerouac's assertion also mirrors Camus, who found relief from Christian history in worldly pleasure. Camus reflects on "Summer in Algiers" (1938):

For twenty centuries, men have strived to impose decency...to diminish the flesh and elaborate our dress. Today, reaching back over this history, young men sprinting on the Mediterranean beaches are rediscovering the magnificent motion of the athletes of Delos. Living so close to other bodies, and through one's own body, one finds it has its own nuances, its own life (*Lyrical and Critical Essays* 82).

He proclaims the same Dionysian hope. Namely, humankind is rediscovering its own vulgar dignity. Yet Kerouac is more urgent. While Camus revels in the Greek decadence of modern Algiers, Kerouac mourns its overwhelming absence in America. He is, as Allen Ginsberg says, a “prophet howling in the wilderness” (Campbell 267). Morality of the flesh, Kerouac cries, must resurrect the nation.

Percy carries out his own discourse on capitalism’s disavowal of the flesh. “What a sickness it is,” Binx mourns, “this latter-day post-Christian sex. To be pagan it would be one thing...to be Christian it would be another thing...But to be neither pagan nor Christian but this: oh this is a sickness” (207). Sex has been neutralized. It is now utterly average, like those who enact it. The natural enjoyment of paganism—and the fiery, conflicted passion of Christianity—has been *leveled down*, as Heidegger would say, into a bland consumer good. The body is owned by *das Man* and thus rendered lifeless. As Heidegger describes the “dictatorship of the ‘They’”—“Everything gained by a *struggle* becomes just something to manipulated. Every *secret* loses its force” (*Being and Time* 165). Like Freud theorizes, few things are more mysterious than sexuality. Similarly, sex demands certain ontological and physical struggle. However, modern capitalist utilitarianism has demystified sex. The Cold War malaise has neutered an age-old mode of individuality: the lover. In its place, Percy writes, cheerfully stand “Ozzie and Harriet, nicer-than-Christian folks.” Television characters have dismantled the American libido, a vital aspect of the self. Percy’s reading of Heidegger, evidently, sharpens his response to this crisis of modern mediocrity.

Existentialism's ability to critique Cold War hegemony is, naturally, involved with its attack on mass culture. It directs an even more specific examination of capitalism and its effect on individuality. For example, Percy's evocation of Ozzie and Harriet (from *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*) refers to a broader societal problem. Yet *the show itself* is also instrumental in the proliferation of "latter-day post-Christian sex." While standing in a dialectical relationship to it, mass culture also resides within capitalism. Moreover, capitalism denies the self on theoretical terms. While the theory has real effects, mass culture *actively* levels down its various consumers to create a homogenous population. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno go so far as to elect fascism as the ultimate form of mass culture. "The totalitarian thrust of the culture industry," summarizes Juan A. Suarez, "works to eliminate authentic experience and autonomous individuality. In the same way that it colonizes the living space of consumers, the culture industry colonizes their minds" ("Pop Queer or Fascist?" 1996; 127). An all-encompassing culture industry unifies the taste of the populace; determines seemingly personal emotions and reactions to events in our lives; and invades the private space, thus making it public (and *corporate*) domain. In short, mass culture creates a highly command-receptive conformist mob: the social condition for fascism. "One day," Horkheimer and Adorno warn, "the edict of production, the actual advertisement (whose actuality is at present concealed by the pretense of choice) can turn into the open command of the Führer" (Suarez 160).

American existentialists scrutinize this specific problem. Take for example Kerouac's description of suburbia. Midway through *The Dharma Bums*, Ray reflects:

If you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show; nobody talking; silence in the yards; dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of on wheels...It begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way...the millions and millions of the One Eye" (78).

Kerouac's vision of technocratic corporate fascism is now more haunting than ever. Yet, as relevant as it is to the Internet age, Ray expresses an anxiety situated firmly in the postwar consciousness. In "Haunted by Mass Culture" (2000), Susan Hegeman imitates the worst fears of American intelligentsia, writing: "the 'masses' were a potential army of zombies: headless, soulless sensation-seekers, free to be completely molded in their tastes and whims by the cynical purveyors of cultural and ideological goods" (299). Hegeman mocks this fear as a myth sculpted by pretentious high-cultural figures. She overlooks the likes of Kerouac—a figure overwhelmingly *dismissed* by his era of American intellectuals—who expresses an identical concern. Before he was anywhere near reaching commercial or "high-brow" recognition, Kerouac voiced these fears of mass culture. In a journal entry from early 1950, he swears: "the one great symbol of a disintegrating America is the Dave Garroway television show from Chicago!" (Brinkely 271). He reviles the same commoditized, pseudo-intellectualism Hegeman characterizes as *purveying* the fear of mass culture.

Kerouac further distances himself from the standard American intelligentsia by criticizing the New School for Social Research. He had begun taking classes there in September 1948, and surely received a dose of Horkheimer and Adorno's Critical Theory (*Journals* 159). Nevertheless, Kerouac identifies more with the nation's dropouts, claiming, "the 'revolutionary intelligentsia' in this country now do not go to school, they are on all the Times Squares of America smoking hay, talking Reich, reading the papers, listening to bop" (166). With his liminal position—as a New School and Columbia student turned drifter mystic—Kerouac exposes Hegeman's notion of a totally isolated intellectual sector to be, itself, a kind of mythology. Anxiety towards mass culture runs deep *throughout* postwar America.

Ironically, as Ronna Johnson illuminates the issue in "'You're Putting Me On'" (2000), Kerouac is himself a victim of the media age. His art—indeed, within the Beat idiom, his *individuality*—is eclipsed by his icon: the commodification and exploitation of an existence. Johnson examines this self-fulfilled prophecy. "The collapse of distinctions between his media image and fiction produced Kerouac as icon," she writes, "but also marks the postmodern condition his literature intimated...his literature registers the postmodern advent his iconic image embodies" (23). Kerouac's media-driven destruction attests to the genius, and implications, of his fiction. He rang the alarm, sighting a vacuous consumer state, and his legacy speaks to its acuity. Even Kerouac is consumed by the "One Eye." Surely, Nietzsche warned him: "when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you" (*BGAE* 89). Indeed, Kerouac in 1958, self-

conscious and guarded as ever, was hip to this development, declaring the death of the Beat Generation. “The bop visions became common property of the commercial, popular cultural world,” Kerouac writes. “The ingestion of drugs became official” (*Beat Reader* xxi). Previous work by Adorno, Heidegger, and of course Marx, underscores Kerouac’s existential and political awareness. Nietzsche, accordingly, equips him with knowledge of herd mentality and its construction of the average.

Walker Percy’s comment on the American suburb is less overt. Binx Bolling is generally more reserved than any of Kerouac’s aliases. Nonetheless, his critique seems most effective through its subdued tone. Bolling, awoken by the search, walks through his neighborhood down to the lake, and reflects:

The swimming pools steam like sleeping geysers. These houses look handsome in the sunlight; they please me with their pretty colors, their perfect lawns and their clean airy garages. But I have noticed that at this hour of dawn they are forlorn. A sadness settles over them like a fog from the lake (83-4).

Suburbia disturbs Binx on a deep emotional and psychological level. He is both melancholy and paranoid. The dark underbelly of mass-produced townships—*houses* rather than homes—reveals itself at dawn. Binx experiences what Freud calls *das Unheimliche*, or “the Uncanny.” Freud reinterprets Friedrich Schelling’s definition, as “something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light” (*Literary Theory*, 1998; 166). The basic contingency of Gentilly’s “reproductions of French provincials and Louisiana colonials” is that their inauthenticity remains shrouded. The gloss of perfection and quaint functionality, their Old South homeliness, must succeed. Binx, however, catches

the houses off-guard. He is thus vulnerable to the *uncanniness of mass production*. Every home reveals itself as a mere imitation, every resident a duplicate. Indeed, Freud cites “the double” as a classically *unheimlich* phenomenon. Percy situates Binx much like Nathaniel from E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann* (1816): realizing, to his dismay, that the woman of his fancy is an automaton. Moreover, “We are tempted,” Freud writes, “to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar” (154). Even the most familiar occurrences or objects in life can be uncanny; in fact, they are the most suspect. Suburbs are both *heimlich* (that is their selling point), and an utterly common sight. “Their perfect lawns and their clean airy garages” easily become, at dawn, a terribly unsettling sight. This uncanniness manifests itself, foremost, as an ethereal sadness, drifting “like a fog from the lake.” Binx glimpses the gloom of postwar society, which has seized even the nation’s architecture. Yet a profound existential dread lurks *beneath* his depression. Consciously or not, Binx finds his identity devoured, as it were, by the American automatizing cultural machine. As in Heidegger’s account, the sudden rush of uncanniness (*Angst*) alerts him to the challenge of authentic selfhood.

The young Percy, in fact, heavily annotated his copies of *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* and *The Basic Works of Sigmund Freud* during 1939-40 at Columbia (Tolson 151). He considered entering the field of psychiatry, and even sought help for a year from a strict Freudian, one Goddard Booth, yet finally regretted: “I could never effect a transference.” His poor grades in the subject couldn’t have helped either. Percy’s subsequent relationship with



existentialism at Trudeau, evidently, was more therapeutic. A large dose of existentialism better combated his alienation in the age of suburbia.

Ralph Ellison, it would appear, is most justified in his antipathy towards mass culture. For it is not really his. Ellison was born in opposition to the masses—as a minority. Indeed, seen most explicitly in Hollywood film, mass culture actively stereotypes and subjugates African-Americans. New York-based rap group Public Enemy's track "Burn Hollywood Burn," from *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990), exemplifies how this concern and rage among black individuals is not restricted to the early Cold War era. In the song's introductory skit, the group is apparently at a movie theatre. A banal white-man voice announces the evening's entertainment—*Driving Miss Daisy*—and they promptly leave the building. P.E.'s headman, Chuck D, soon summons insurrection. "For all the years we looked like clowns/ The joke is over smell the smoke from all around." Public Enemy, accompanied by Ice Cube and Big Daddy Kane, scorns the standard roles reserved for blacks in films: slaves, gang members, pimps, jovial bellhops, "jigaboos," chauffeurs. Later in *Black Planet*, with "Fight the Power," Chuck D gets more explicit. "Elvis was a hero to most," he quips, "but he never meant shit to me you see/Straight up racist that sucker was simple and plain/ Mother fuck him and John Wayne." To say the least, he feels differently than Binx—who, more than most other personal milestones, fondly remembers the heroics of John Wayne. Chuck situates himself instead in the oppressed minority tradition, proclaiming, "Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamp."

Looking back on postwar mainstream American culture, P.E. sees mostly white bigotry and black compliance. However, awareness of the racism proliferated by mass media arose long before hip-hop. Ellison, who *lived* the era of Elvis and John Wayne, expresses similar frustration. Coincidentally, Ellison found that one major strand of racism in popular culture ran through the Beat ideology, and the work of Norman Mailer. In a 1958 letter to friend and fellow black intellectual Albert Murray, Ellison fumes:

These characters are all trying to reduce the world to sex, man, they have strange problems in bed... That's what's behind Mailer's belief in the hipster and the "white Negro" as the new culture hero—he thinks all hipsters are cocksman possessed of great euphoric orgasms and are out to fuck the world into peace, prosperity and creativity. The same old primitivism crap in a new package (Murray and Callahan, 2000; 198).

White Negroism, a new mutation of primitivism—fostered by publishing houses, newspapers, television, and radio—denies the individuality of African-American persons by way of *idolatry*. To Ellison, the popular literature of “Kerouac and that crowd” essentializes a vast population of individuals into a single erotic mask. As Sal Paradise infamously muses: “I passed the dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes...wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (180). It could be called “Beatnik blackface.” Black identity, now a commodity, is made readily available by the configurations of mass culture and the capitalist system.

At a pivotal moment in *Invisible Man*, ex-Brother Clifton's death, Ellison addresses racism and mass culture with more ambiguity. To his horror, *Invisible* finds Clifton selling “Black Sambo” dolls on a street corner in Harlem. A

politically minded African-American is hustling a caricature of his own race. Ellison depicts “a grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper...which some mysterious mechanism was causing to move up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion” (421). Adding to the sting, Clifton advertises his twenty-five cent product with a ventriloquistic jingle: “*He’ll keep you entertained. He’ll make you weep sweet—/Tears from laughing/...For he’s Sambo, the dancing, Sambo, the prancing/ Sambo, the entrancing, Sambo Boogie Woogie paper doll.*” In other words, Clifton peddles the vicious stereotype that the likes of Chuck D revile. His doll, at the very moment it dances in the street, is exhibited across America on the silver screen. *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899), a children’s book written and illustrated by the Scottish author Helen Bannerman, caricatures a South Indian boy. Sambo has parents named Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo, and faces off with several hungry tigers. According to a 1924 education symposium, “The Teaching of ‘Little Black Sambo,’” the book’s illustrations were problematic only insofar as they were too small for the whole class to see. An examiner suggests “showing them large pictures made by hand,” adding: “I think this method would have worked admirably” (264). In 1935, after commercial success in America—and, evidently, institutional dissemination—Bannerman’s story was made into a cartoon film. Sambo is more minstrel show Negro than anything else. Thus, with full knowledge of the social and cultural weight of Clifton’s doll, Invisible is literally blinded by anger.

I felt betrayed. I looked at the doll and felt my throat constrict.  
The rage welled behind the phlegm as I rocked back on my heels

and crouched forward. There was a flash of whiteness and a splatter like heavy rain striking a newspaper and I saw the doll go over backwards...the hateful head upturned (423).

Invisible whites out, apparently, losing consciousness and attacking the dancing Sambo. He strikes out against a staple of American entertainment. Invisible fears less being sucked into *das Man*, joining the ignorant ranks, than suffering its dehumanizing and violent whims. Adorno illuminates the fascist tendency of homogenous culture. Ellison, as surely does Adorno, understands that every fascist society requires a scapegoat, towards which it can redirect its own contradictions. By attacking “Sambo Boogie Woogie,” Invisible identifies himself with this equally enraged minority.

This scene’s conclusion is a bit more equivocal. A policeman storms Clifton’s illegal setup. After refusing to pay a fine for selling merchandise without authorization, Clifton struggles with the officer, throwing several punches, and is shot dead (426). He is killed for selling racist dolls without the government’s permission. This is not quite a paradox. With Clifton’s death, Ellison suggests that even *cooperation* with an oppressive majority culture can be fatal. A black man is lethally punished for seizing an appropriation of his own racial-cultural identity. Clifton is forbidden from selling Black Sambo on his *own* terms, and making the best out of a dubious public symbol. Ellison, as an author and thus an agent within mass culture, seems to identify with Clifton’s situation. Invisible is certainly no Black Sambo. Nevertheless, through this protagonist, Ellison manipulates a societally preconfigured symbol—the “darker-skinned young man”—and thus engages the risk of ridicule and, indeed, censorship. The philosophy of Nietzsche

and Sartre, in this position, is an invaluable resource. They defend individuality, and preach the necessity of *overcoming* cultural boundaries: creating one's self out of chaos. The difficulty of such a task—within the postwar milieu of White Negroism and *Little Black Sambo*—only fuels the urgency of Ellison's existential vision. As Dwight Macdonald, editor of *Partisan Review* and founder of *politics*, proclaimed in 1946: "Whether Free Will exists or not, it thus seems necessary to behave as though it did" (Cotkin 119).

Mass culture, regarding the socio-economic structure supporting it, is clearly not an isolated phenomenon. Furthermore, its relevance to other issues thwarting the Cold War self stretches beyond capitalism. The Media Age also goes by another name: the Age of Doubt. Various meta-narratives, as Nietzsche says, have fallen apart. Structures of meaning and understanding the world—science, religion, and patriotism—reveal their empty core. And, while the content of such meta-narratives have come under much scrutiny, their worldly effects have proven all too real. In a dual destruction, science both invalidated belief in God and birthed the atomic bomb. Likewise, faith in America made the annihilation of Hiroshima possible. And, as Bob Dylan sings, it came to pass "with God on our side."

The American imagination perceived these ominous crossroads. Analyzing Kenneth Anger's film *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Juan Suarez notes the presentation of mass media concerning outmoded erections of meaning:

*Scorpio Rising's* mixture of high and low idols (of historical and mass culture figures) exemplifies the general equivalence and the flattening out of all images enthroned by the culture industry. By juxtaposing images of Hitler and Jesus with popular icons like

Brando, Dean, [and] Gary Cooper...the film establishes an analogy between media myths and greater historical and religious myths (126-27).

Jesus, Hitler, and pop sex icons, all hold the same cultural status. When seen through the television screen, they are all equally *fictional*. The Christian myth, to Anger, is a commodity like any other—fabricated from raw materials, mediocre and mass-produced. *Scorpio* may as well show Franklin D. Roosevelt and Albert Einstein, for historical consciousness is the same. Images of a mushroom cloud, or a German concentration camp, are disturbing yet illusory. They are horrifyingly unreal. Meta-narratives in postwar society thus fell prey to at least two disruptive forces: factual refutation and subjective inconceivability. The structures of reality were splitting from the seams.

American authors respond to this crisis of faith and understanding, even more intensely than to capitalism or mass culture. With the aid of their European counterparts, Ellison, Kerouac, and Percy, take up a crucial existential task: the fight against nihilism. For example, Invisible incinerates his suitcase of false promises and hindering ideology. However, his true struggle is to recreate an autonomous and vital self from these ashes—to move *beyond* the rubble of history. Ray Smith, in *The Dharma Bums*, reaches the top of Desolation Peak only to face the infinite silence of the cosmos. He has fled bedlam in the valley to find it waiting for him closest to Heaven. God does not answer back. The wind howls. Yet out of this nothingness, Ray creates his own absurd, subjective faith. In *Big Sur*, Jack takes this rejection of nihilism even further. Depicting his leap of blind faith, Kerouac aligns himself with the Kierkegaardian tradition—affirming

authenticity via rootedness in the divine. Percy proposes a similar response to the disillusionments of modernity. For him, Tolson explains, “science could speak about man only in general terms... The distinction of man, Percy believed, was precisely his individual existence” (240). Science, like suburbia and the tepid Christianity of capitalist society, reduces “the human mystery” to a data chart. Likewise, the “vertical” search fails to provide Binx with any valuable insight into his own being. Empiricism, just as it allows industrialized warfare, will never penetrate the crux of existence, and ultimately leads to despair. Percy, nonetheless, refuses to surrender into nihilism. In his 1984 essay “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” later attached to *Signposts* (1991), Percy depicts the mission of the author in postmodernity, and, consequently, the individual in general.

What is the task of serious fiction in an age when both the Judeo-Christian consensus and rational humanism have broken down? I suggest that it is more than the documentation of the loneliness and the varieties of sexual encounters of so much modern fiction. I suggest that it is nothing less than an exploration of the options of such a man. That is, a man who not only is in Crusoe’s predicament, a castaway of sorts, but who is also acutely aware of his predicament. What did Crusoe do? He looked around (217).

Henry Miller and his lonesome flesh can only go so far. The sanctity of sex and the sea should be defended; yet, without *metapsychical* hope, all is malaise. The modern individual, after embracing her corporeal despairing self, must then *look around*. She must attune herself to the search. It is with this hunger that Binx, after roaming through drowsy New Orleans streets, enters a movie theatre. He encounters the apex of a nihilistic mass culture—the “One Eye,” as Kerouac says—not with angst, but in anticipation of a clue. Binx, at the cinema, is like Crusoe on a desert island: with little to search for but himself.

As seen through Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Kerouac's "The Dulouz Legend," and Percy's *The Moviegoer*, European existentialism suited the needs of a particular moment in U.S. history. In the wake of World War II, and the rise of the Cold War, the American self was, as it were, having its own existential crisis. Things in the world lost their meaning. Temples became museums. The anti-individual ideologies of political and economic systems grew increasingly shrill and, indeed, daunting. Mass culture was actively producing a homogenous nation. At this critical moment, the American population—or at least key exemplars of their literary culture—heeded the foreign call of existentialism. Most importantly, they made it their own.

**“Out of the Blue and into the Black”:  
Entering the American Psyche**

Concluding *Existential America*, George Cotkin mourns the fate of the European philosophy in American pop culture. “Existentialism never died,” he admits, “nor has it faded away fully. It lives on, in in a tepid state, often reduced to a shorthand term for either teenage angst or yuppie nostalgia... The uneasy ubiquity of existentialism today renders it perhaps benign or even meaningless” (277). Cotkin exemplifies this “living death” with Woody Allen films, which seem to miss the point; a Microsoft advertisement in *Vanity Fair*, which jokingly posits Sartreism as the new bedtime story; and a film directed by Ben Stiller—*Reality Bites* (1994)—that exhibits a chain-smoking Ethan Hawke at a diner, casually flipping through *Being and Time*. Apparently Mr. Hawke, a real-life NYU dropout and slacker heartthrob, is not allowed to read a little Heidegger. For



him to do so, in fact, marks the demise of a movement once so vital in America. Finally, Cotkin prophesizes a future resurrection. The somber urgency of Dostoyevsky and Sartre will pierce the 21<sup>st</sup> Century hubris. “Our heady confidence will in the end be crushed by the woes of the world and the finitude of existence,” he writes. “At the moment when this shock of recognition hits home, existentialism will once again claim its place” (283).

Cotkin may be right. However, the influence of the postwar existentialists—the artists themselves—is surely still meaningful in American culture. Richard Ford, for example, is the most apparent of Walker Percy’s disciples. His breakthrough novel, *The Sportswriter* (1986), which Percy himself called a “stunning novel,” begins the saga of Frank Bascome (Samway 337). The youngish white man has recently divorced himself from both a wife and a career as a novelist, seeking satisfaction in sports journalism. Instead of the movie house, Frank goes to the ballpark. *The Sportswriter*’s main concern, in essence, is finding a *way to exist*. Frank “looks around,” as Percy would say. In the burgeoning knowledge of his own alienation, he seeks to reconcile freedom with his everyday, and existential, responsibility. Introducing a 2008 interview, *The New York Times*’ Steve Coates digs into this likening to *The Moviegoer*: “Ford views the book’s dynamic as a ‘renewing experience’ and Binx as a hero ‘headed toward the light’ and ‘trying to find a vocabulary for affirmation, trying to find the institutions in life that will let him like life better and be better at it.’” Haddam, New Jersey, a sleepy suburb of New York City, is Frank’s terrain of self-discovery. Subsequent additions to the Bascome story—*Independence Day*

(1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006), and *Let Me Be Frank* (2014)—continue Ford’s wistful exploration of the self in modern America. The bemused and wistful tone of these works alone testifies to the deep influence of *The Moviegoer*. Their existential vantage point and mission confirms it.

Percy’s lasting association with another force in American literature—John Kennedy Toole—is less orthodox. In the late 1970’s while teaching at Loyola in New Orleans, Percy began receiving calls from one Mrs. Thelma Agnes Ducoing Toole. She urged the established author and professor to read the unpublished fiction of her deceased son (Samway 333). Percy, after finally taking on this chore, was astounded by an unprecedented representation of New Orleans peculiarity, titled, *A Confederacy of Dunces*. He was seduced by the gargantuan hero, Ignatius J. Reilly, whom he later fondly depicts in the novel’s introduction, as “Thomas Aquinas gone to pot, transported to New Orleans” (9). Against significant odds, Percy championed John Kennedy Toole—who had committed suicide in 1969—until LSU Press published *Dunces* in 1980. The following year, Toole won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Moreover, Percy was not merely Toole’s patron. As Richard Simon observes in his essay “John Kennedy Toole and Walker Percy” (1994), Toole is profoundly influenced by both Percy and his precursor, Søren Kierkegaard. They are all inextricably linked. Toole, Simon states, is “Percy’s perfect reader, responding to him in exactly the same way that Percy had responded to Kierkegaard, and the two of them together can properly be considered as Kierkegaardian alter egos” (105). Toole represents the developing existential awareness of American letters. In an odd way, Percy passes the baton

to Toole—who, in turn, hands it back. The philosophy itself undergoes a “repetition.”

As in the case of Percy, the full impact of Jack Kerouac on U.S. culture cannot be fully discerned. Yet one can cite a few clear exemplifications. William Plummer, in his 1979 *NYT* article honoring the tenth anniversary of Kerouac’s death, paints with a broad brush. The “King of the Beats” has inspired nearly every ensuing American counter-culture:

His sympathy and mingling with blacks and Chicanos in the 40's and 50's anticipated the civil-rights movement, Cesar Chavez and, in general, the discovery of the "other America"; his communing with poet Gary Snyder in the mountains, their enthusiasm for Zen and other forms of Buddhism, their meditational "highs," broke ground for Ravi Shankar, the Beatles, Carlos Castaneda, the Whole Earth Catalog *Weltanschauung*, and all manner of Eastern and ecological gambits; his flirtation with drugs previewed the "tripping" of the next decade; the sexual *ménages* he shared with Neal Cassady, and his occasional homosexual episodes, modulated into the free-love movement, the 1960's "Age of Androgyny," perhaps even the advent of homosexual rights (“The Beat Goes On” 1).

Kerouac’s eroticization of oppressed minorities, and hesitant homophobia, should qualify this elegy. Nonetheless, Plummer’s overarching point—Kerouac is everywhere dissent thrives—is hard to deny. He is certainly at the heart of rock and roll. As keyboardist Ray Manzarek coolly writes in *Light My Fire*, “I suppose if Jack Kerouac hadn’t written *On the Road*, the Doors would never have existed.” Manzarek left Chicago, heading out to California in Sal Paradise’s footsteps. Jim Morrison caught the bug himself. Along with Kerouac and the Beats, Morrison read Louis-Ferdinand Celine and Arthur Rimbaud, becoming equally obsessed with Nietzsche *and* Elvis as an adolescent (DiCillo). His

Nietzscheism appears most vividly in “Break On Through” (1966). Morrison urges one to rupture everydayness: “Break on through to the other side” of society and temporality—like the *Übermensch*—far past the strictures of reality. On the other hand, “Riders On the Storm” (1971), the Doors’ last recorded and arguably most haunting track, points overtly to Heidegger. “Into this house we’re born,” Morrison laments, “Into this world we’re thrown.” The task of the rider is to conquer the chaotic sea, as it were—to live relentlessly, and affirm even a world of roadside murderers. We must resist a passive stance towards *Thrownness* and strive for authenticity. “Riders On the Storm” peaked at #14 on the US charts in 1971, and still plays on the radio today (*Allmusic* 2013).

Jim Morrison’s connection to the “King of the Beats” is more than epistemological. Like Kerouac, Morrison was ostensibly destroyed by his postmodern fame. The booze didn’t help him either. Additionally, Morrison’s macho “sex-machine” public image mirrors both Kerouac and the tradition they mutually inherit. This is not to say that Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Camus, were liable to expose themselves at public lectures. Nonetheless, the *Logos* of Morrison’s tight leather pants speaks volumes on the overwhelmingly masculine legacy of existentialism. There is Simone de Beauvoir—just as there is “Punk Princess” Patti Smith—yet the exception indeed proves the rule.

While not as loud as Morrison, Hunter S. Thompson, another of Kerouac’s famed descendants, took a few more hallucinogens and survived far longer. Thompson is best known in popular culture for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971)—a hilarious, poignant, and drug-fueled, *roman à clef*, depicting the

derelict circus of the post-60's West. Johnny Depp and Benicio del Toro star in Terry Gilliam's 1998 film adaptation. Like Kerouac, Thompson's remarkable body of work is largely obscured by an icon: "Gonzo." He is most viciously parodied in Garry Trudeau's political comic strip, *Doonesbury*, as "Uncle Duke" (Gibney; 2008). Thompson certainly embraced his celebrity to an extent. Consequentially, his significance as an American ethical figure—exemplified by such testimonies as *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (1973)—is often neglected in remembrance of a clown. With fate in mass media aside, Hunter S. Thompson also exposes Kerouac's lasting influence on American literature. Thompson places himself in the journalistic tradition—often called "New Journalism"—pioneered by Kerouac with *On the Road*. Likewise, while explaining the literary atmosphere of the Eisenhower era, he recognizes the political implications of Beatitude:

There was simply no room...for anybody who might want to bring a writer's fine eye and perspective to the mundane "realities" of journalism. Probably the first big breakthrough on this front was Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*...The "Beat" writers were a main force in the national uprising of 1960 that resulted in the shocking defeat of Richard Nixon (*Fear and Loathing in America* 420-21).

Kerouac, along with Norman Mailer, depicts history in a whole new way. Joan Didion, Robert Stone, and Tom Wolfe—to name only a few—follow in his footsteps. Kerouac's alternative social awareness, Thompson states, caused even John F. Kennedy's election. The ultimate consequences of this "national uprising" seem incalculable. Indeed, as displayed by Plummer's elegy, the full impact of Kerouac on the American consciousness is hard to fathom.

Regarding Ralph Ellison, a different problem arises. Few contemporary authors claim him as their own, certainly no “literary rock stars” such as Hunter S. Thompson. As *New Yorker*’s David Denby writes in “Justice For Ralph Ellison” (2012), “Ellison’s reputation as a man is in very serious danger.” Denby points to a modern trend of disapproval. Ellison has been condemned for “his aloofness, his elitism...his notorious clubiness...his becoming the favorite black intellectual of white literature professors and novelists...his honors...[and] his distaste for appeals to racial solidarity.” In short, Ellison does not fit serenely within the white literary world, yet he is also not “black” enough. “If only,” Denby mimics, “he had hobnobbed with Amiri Baraka rather than Saul Bellow!” Such public antagonism is telltale of an existentialist. However, although Ellison’s disposition has not made for a luxurious posterity, he has not been forgotten. Controversy speaks to relevance. Charles R. Johnson, accepting the U.S. National Book Award in 1990 for *Middle Passage*, credited Ellison as a major influence. He explains in a 1999 interview with PBS: “That one book of his, that first book, is probably the most influential novel in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century...Ellison raised the artistic and intellectual standards...It’s probably the first post-modern American novel.” That momentous yet lone novel is *Invisible Man*. Ellison is remembered as the inflexible yet brilliant author of one single epic—the only novel published in his lifetime—which changed the course of American fiction. Walker Percy displays one promising approach to Ellison’s legacy. At Loyola University, Percy grounded his course on existential fiction with ““novels of alienation”” (Samway 264). He assigned works such as *Notes from Underground*, *Nausea*, *The Stranger*,

and *The Fall*. Among these “classics” stood *Invisible Man*. Ellison entered Percy’s canon of existentialism.

The postwar existentialists I’ve examined—Walker Percy, Jack Kerouac, and Ralph Ellison—have affected American culture in various yet significant ways. *Their* fiction continues to influence artists and readers alike. European existentialism underscores *The Moviegoer*, “The Dulouz Legend,” and *Invisible Man*, and thus still reaches an audience. This interaction need not be obvious. Whether or not a teenager reads *Big Sur* with an eye for Kierkegaard’s “subjective certainty,” if she reads closely, existentialism will have informed her own manner of Being. A frat brother may not hear Nietzsche in the Doors, but there he is. Furthermore, one more contemporary superstar, David Foster Wallace, proves that the old inspirations for postwar fiction are still vital. As a teenager, the wildly acclaimed author of *Infinite Jest* (1996) troubled his family by a morbid fascination with existentialism—nailing to his black bedroom wall the headline of an article on Franz Kafka: “THE DISEASE WAS LIFE ITSELF” (Burn 164). This youthful obsession sadly foreshadowed his death in 2008. In a 2005 interview, Wallace praises the French and Russian authors: “Dostoevsky, and Camus, render so fully, passionately, the spiritual urgencies they felt as, saw as reality continue to fill me what an awe that is almost despair” (*ibid.* 157).

Despite the cultural identifications of his influences—Kafka, Camus, Beckett, Dostoevsky—David Foster Wallace omits the word “existential.” He guards philosophical content against idiomatic everydayness. Wallace likely suspected, as Cotkin argues, that the status of “Existentialism” is grim in modern

America. Perhaps the upper-case term has indeed lost its weight. That question deserves another chapter. Nonetheless, in light of David Foster Wallace's testimony, one thing is certain: American existentialism, labeled thus or not, is still in the air.



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