Reclaiming White Privilege: The Crisis of White Masculinity in Post-World War II American Literature

Submitted by Michail Angelos Keramidas to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which post-World War II American literature written by white men responded to the Civil Rights and Feminist movements that called for equality during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in the United States. I argue that these movements led to a crisis of white male identity, as white men saw their privileged position within American society being questioned. I chart this crisis of white masculinity in the fiction of three white male American novelists: John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth. Contrary to what current scholarship on these authors has proposed, I suggest that their novels, while purportedly espousing the ideals of the above movements, in truth defend and reinscribe white masculinity through a variety of ways. In Chapter 1, I argue that Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) and Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) ostensibly show support for the African American cause but upon closer inspection re-establish white privilege and restore the destabilised societal position of white Americans in the context of Civil Rights by merging white identity with that of African Americans. In Chapter 2, focusing on Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), and Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), I argue that these novels caricature second-wave feminism as a way of reinstating the social hierarchies that placed men at the top of American society. In Chapter 3, I propose that Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Roth's *American Pastoral*, and Bellow's *Herzog* turn to religious morality in order to revitalise the privileged position of white masculinity. Reading these novels in this manner, I show how they associate white masculinity with moral goodness in order to pull it out of its postwar crisis.

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Introduction

White Masculinity, Literature, and the Sociopolitical Environment of Postwar United States

My aim in this thesis is to explore the ways in which literature responded to the calls for equality initiated by African Americans in the Civil Rights movement and women in the Feminist movement during the period between the 1950s and the 1980s. More specifically, I argue that, as a result of this challenge towards white male authority, the privileged position of white male American identity was severely destabilised, leading to what I call a crisis of white masculinity. This crisis, and its impact, is recorded prominently in the fiction of John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth, three white male authors whose novels represent the typical white male American hero who finds himself amid this progressive shift in the social hierarchy of postwar United States. Through my literary examination of a selection of these authors' novels, I demonstrate the ways in which they defend and re-establish the privileged position of white masculinity while purportedly espousing a sympathetic attitude towards the social and political movements advocating for the rights of African Americans and women. Before looking more closely at the ways in which my chosen authors' novels responded to the real-life crisis of white masculinity in postwar United States, I will first contextualise this crisis of white masculinity historically.

As indicated above, the main subject of my thesis is the white, middle-class, cis, heterosexual American male of the second half of the twentieth century, and in particular of the 1950s and 1960s. During that time, as Mark Greif has argued, "Man became … the figure everyone insisted must be

addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the center, the measure, the 'root'" (8), because "'Man' was in 'crisis'" (3). While Greif uses the term "Man" to refer to the human subject in general, I believe the crisis he points towards can be construed as directly related to the male gender. For, as Sylvia Wynter has crucially argued, societal "struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation … are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle" (260-261), which has resulted from the fact that this particular identity category (white, middle-class, male, heterosexual) "overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (260). It was particularly after the end of the Second World War that the traditionally privileged position of the white male identity came under scrutiny and, at times, intense questioning. This was due to the fact that, as Michael Leja has claimed,

> World War, socialist revolution, political corruption, social conflict, economic depression, the rise of fascism, genocide, the development and use of nuclear weapons—each and all of these twentieth-century phenomena prompted meditation upon the makeup and situation of the human (white male) individual and what precisely within or outside him accounted for these tragedies (16).

By focusing on this type of person at this particular point in time, I wish to probe into the reasons behind, and the literary manifestations of, this cultural fixation on "Man". It is useful here to bear in mind that the male gender was the central point of discussion not only in the 1960s, nor only during the second half of the twentieth century, but has historically dominated conceptions of the human. However, it was particularly in the 1950s and 1960s that, through the very challenge to its authority by African American and feminist calls for equality, the fixation on it proved to be more pointed.

Of course, during the time period my thesis examines, there were other social movements fighting against the privileged position of the white, male,

heterosexual subject. Towards the end of the 1960s, the Gay Liberation movement prominently began advocating for the rights of gay people in the United States. As John D'Emilio has suggested, "[g]ay liberation groups saw themselves as one component of the decade's radicalism and regularly addressed the other issues that were mobilizing American youth" (26). The heterosexism permeating the novels I analyse comes in stark contrast to this kind of sociopolitical environment, whereby gay identities, like the identities of African Americans and women, came to the fore. But while my chosen novels directly react against the challenges faced by white masculinity as a result of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements, there is no similar response towards the Gay Liberation movement's calls for equality among all sexualities. Even when, in Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), the female protagonist has sex with another woman, the disparaging way that scene is rendered is used, as I demonstrate in Chapter 2, as a way of targeting feminism rather than homosexuality. This is not to say that white masculinity was not threatened by the societal advances made by gay people; guided by what the texts reveal, however, I have chosen to focus only on the effects of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements on their white male characters.

The Crisis of White Masculinity in the Postwar Period

As Sally Robinson has argued in an account of the crisis of white masculinity in 1960s United States, "[a] dominant or master narrative of white male decline in post-sixties America has developed to account for the historical, social, and political decentering of what was once considered the normative in American culture" (2). Robinson's use of the phrase "post-sixties" to denote the

sociopolitical transformations, as far as the central, normative, white male identity is concerned, that took place in the years and decades after the Civil Rights era as a result of what transpired during the 1960s is indicative of the subsequent implications of this crisis of white male identity in the United States. Robinson's attempt "to place white men, and white masculinity, within a field of struggle over cultural priority—rather than outside of those struggles, looking on, being affected by them but not affecting them" (4) illustrates the ways in which many white men sought to reclaim the societal hierarchies that placed their identity above all others.

As far as my chosen novels in this thesis are concerned, I argue that white male American characters acknowledge African American and feminist calls for equality, even though they result in the decentering and crisis of their identity. Reading these novels against the grain, however, I claim that they strive to restore the privileged and central position of white masculinity. As the Civil Rights movement and second-wave feminism began advocating for equal rights and, consequently, called for an end to the privileged position of white male identity, white male Americans found themselves in a troublesome, lugubrious and, at times, confusing, position: accustomed, for years, to a socially dominant identity, and reaping the privileges (social, economic, political) accorded to that identity, they now (in the 1950s and after) faced the prospect of these privileges being significantly diminished.

How did white masculinity react to the potential diminishment of its value and power? Robinson identifies a process whereby white masculinity presents itself as wounded. By designating itself as the victim of sociopolitical changes, white masculinity reclaims its privileged position by merging with the position of all those identities—particularly blackness and femininity—which, while

previously severely denigrated, were now coming to the fore. As Robinson argues, “the wounded white male stakes a claim to an entire set of cultural conventions originally designed to identify those bodies and subjectivities made to suffer so that white men could retain privileged access to a disembodied norm” (20). For Robinson, it is the corporeal aspect of white masculinity that is most significantly affected during the years and decades in which African Americans and women led the fight towards an equal society. Before the Civil Rights and Feminist movements made white masculinity corporeally visible, white men were able to occupy a disembodied, and thus privileged, invisibility, whereby their identity was considered to be the norm. As soon as the white male body becomes not just visible, but also the site of cultural contentions because of its role in subjugating others, white patriarchy comes under threat.

Hamilton Carroll, in another influential study on how white masculinity seeks to reclaim its power and privilege, has approached the issue of white masculinity’s crisis from another viewpoint. While agreeing with Robinson’s argument that claims to white male injury were an attempt on the part of white masculinity to reassert itself in an era in which the identity of white men was under increased pressure, Carroll opposes the idea that it was the visibility of white masculinity that made it especially vulnerable. Rather, he argues that “the true privilege of white masculinity—and its defining strategy—is not to be unmarked, universal, or invisible (although it is sometimes one or all of these) but to be mobile and mutable” (9-10). As such, white masculinity’s visibility in the Civil Rights era is not what really brought about its crisis. For the crisis itself can be construed as a construction through which white masculinity can maintain power through positioning itself as damaged, and in need of help. It is white masculinity’s anxiety over its lost status as the normative identity in

American society and culture that prompted the responses that I lay out in this thesis. As Carroll has accurately indicated, “[a]s the normative ground of white masculinity erodes, patriarchal privilege seeks new locations to stake its claims; as the politics of representation transform the grounds of identity, white masculinity turns to a reactive strategy under which it redefines the normative by citing itself as a marginal identity” (6). By adopting a marginal subject position, white masculinity would be victorious again.

In this thesis, I seek to unravel how this reactive strategy on the part of white masculinity is reflected in the novels of John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth. In doing so, and while being indebted to the work of Robinson and Carroll as well as more generally to the field of Whiteness Studies to which I aim to contribute, I go one step further: I do not view white masculinity’s self-presentation as either a wounded or a marginal identity as the only way in which it responded to the changing societal hierarchies of postwar United States. Rather, I examine a multiplicity of strategic responses whereby my chosen novels restore the privileged position of white masculinity. Woundedness is certainly an important aspect: as I demonstrate in my analysis of Bellow’s *Herzog* in Chapter 2, the titular character’s appearance as severely psychically and spiritually injured as a result of his wife’s abandoning him for his best friend is an implicit critique of a generalised version of feminism that allows women greater sexual freedom and agency—at the expense, in this case, of the white male protagonist. Additionally, when Rabbit, in Updike’s *Rabbit Redux*, seems transformed by the African American soul music he listens to at a predominantly black bar, this is an instance in which the novel merges white male identity with the marginal identity of African Americans in order to camouflage its decades-long exploitative function and closely link it to one of the subject positions that

has started fighting back. As I show in Chapter 3, however, there is a further way in which white masculinity offers a rearguard action to its diminishment, whereby the suffering white male is cast as beleaguered source of national morality and religious goodness. This adds to and departs from cultural commentaries regarding what David Savran has called “the fantasy of the white male as victim” (4), seeing (following Carroll) postwar white masculinity in the United States as an identity continually evolving and finding new and divergent ways to reclaim its previously privileged and unquestioned position.

Whiteness, Blackness, and the Civil Rights Movement

Throughout this thesis, I argue that many white American males of the 1960s exhibited a desire for the re-establishment of the powerful position traditionally accorded to their white identity. Prior to that, being white involved being in a privileged position that reduced those who did not share that identity, predominantly African Americans, to the lower echelons of American society. As George Lipsitz has argued,

> [w]hiteness has a cash value: it accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educations allocated to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations (vii).

Through a politics of racial discrimination, therefore, white male Americans were able to, over the years, amass a large amount of economic, social, and political power and value that, in turn, helped to endow their white male identity with unparalleled privilege. Additionally, they enjoyed what W.E.B. Du Bois described as “a sort of public and psychological wage” (822), which accorded a

degree of racial esteem and power even to white workers who did not earn a large amount of money. As, however, African Americans and women began, during the 1950s and 1960s, to advocate for equal rights—challenging in this way the normative, privileged status and status quo of white masculinity—the power to which white male identity was accustomed began to wane.

In this thesis, I will lay out how novels written by white male authors of that time period were comprised of narratives of white male protagonists who, in order to regain the prestige of, and the privileges traditionally accorded to, their white masculinity, are shown to be supportive of the African American and feminist calls for equality. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, for instance, Bellow initially presents the protagonist of the novel, Mr. Sammler, as someone who feels threatened by an African American character he meets in New York. When, however, towards the end of the novel, a group of white Americans are shown to be violently assaulting this African American, Mr. Sammler humanely and vehemently pleads with the crowd to prevent this crime. In this way, blackness is employed as a means of reinstating white masculinity, and my close readings in this thesis take into account ethnographic as well as literary criticism. In this respect, Matthew W. Hughey has judiciously examined the ways in which white male discourses on black identity are "not merely descriptive of race and gender but" rather "discursive repertoires that guide the construction of white masculinities. Dominant stories about black men frame the racialized and gendered meanings of the white masculine subjects who speak that discourse" (96). As such, the white male narratives I examine in this thesis, particularly those pertaining to issues of race as in the example I gave above, construct a false image of whiteness as sympathetic to the African American cause for the purposes of a new form of white racial dominance.

As I pointed out earlier, the end of the Second World War initially brought about a disillusionment with regard to how the American public viewed white masculinity. But, as Mark Newman indicates, World War II also "had significant effects on the lives of African Americans" (34). More specifically, Newman argues, "[t]he rapid growth of defence industries and hastily constructed military bases, many of them in the South, reignited African-American migration from the rural South to higher-paid jobs in the urban South, North and West" (34). This migration significantly "transformed the racial geography of the country" (Hall 1242) and resulted in greater visibility of African Americans in places where whiteness was considered to be the norm. Nevertheless, those African Americans who managed to relocate, "already burdened by the social and economic deprivations of slavery and Jim Crow, found themselves disadvantaged by employment practices and state policies" (Hall 1242) that further enforced segregation and discrimination wherever they sought to escape to. These employment and state policies, however, had their origins in southern practices, and it was against the latter that the Civil Rights movement initially emerged. Indeed, as Jack M. Bloom has contended, "the racial practices and beliefs that the civil rights movement confronted—the denial of political rights to blacks, forced segregation, and the degradation of blacks to second-class citizenship—were embedded within the class, economic, and political systems of the South" (5). By seeking to transform the racial—and racist—policies of the South, therefore, African Americans could hope for an expansion of the fight for equal rights across the whole of the United States.

The results of this expansion with respect to white-male-authored fiction are reflected in critical scholarship that attempts to provide a link between postwar American authors and the decentering of white masculinity that came

about as a consequence of African American calls for equality. Michael Szalay, for instance, takes as a starting point Norman Mailer's contention that, after the Second World War, the white "American existentialist—the hipster" (277) sought to follow "a black man's code" (279) in order to escape "the attrition of conformity" (291) permeating postwar American society. Szalay proceeds to examine the concept of hipness in relation to American writers, asserting that one of the primary concerns of postwar novelists was to remain "hip"—which in this context partly means fashionable—even as the authority of their identity during the 1960s was increasingly being challenged. In order to do so, they wrote fiction that "transported whites from their own bodies and into images of other bodies" (13). These bodies, going hand in hand with the sign of the times, were largely African American, and enabled real-life white Americans to indulge in a "fantasy that … could turn them black" (13). In this respect, I examine, in this thesis, how my chosen novels reaffirm the dominance of white identity by carefully and deliberately labelling it as black—or, perhaps more accurately, by conflating whiteness with blackness. As such, I seek to address the question posed by Toni Morrison on the interconnection between whiteness and blackness in American literature: "In what ways does the imaginative encounter with Africanism enable white writers to think about themselves" (51)? By choosing as the focus of my thesis three white authors whose protagonists are also white, in an era in which the Civil Rights movement sought to increase awareness of the African American struggle and to put an end to the privileged position of the white male identity, I explore how these novels put their white protagonists alongside African American characters in an attempt to obliquely retain the aforementioned privileged position by masquerading their white identity as black (not, as Robinson argues, by presenting their identity as

wounded). That is, whereas the vast majority of critical examinations of these authors' novels have seen these white characters' attitudinal transformation with respect to African Americans as genuine, I argue instead, and demonstrate in my literary analyses, that this is nothing more than a symbolic racial masquerade designed to reinforce whiteness's hold in postwar American society.

Masculinity, Femininity, and Second-Wave Feminism

Moving on from a consideration of the racial aspects and preoccupations of postwar American literature written by white men, I devote the second part of this thesis to the ways in which my chosen novels respond to the female emancipation that took place during the 1960s in the United States in order to re-establish the privileged status of white masculinity. Critics such as Alan Nadel have argued that, after the end of the Second World War, "American women … became the conflicted site upon which the nature of sexual license was both encoded and delimited" (117) and that, as a result, there was a "containment of [female] sexuality" that "permeated the full spectrum of American culture in the decade following the war" (117). Nevertheless, I look at how American literature written by white men during or about the 1960s essentially reverses this containment by ostensibly giving women characters the freedom to pursue their own sexual desires. I argue that my chosen novels display female emancipation in the form of women putting their own physical and sexual desires above the desires of men, but these representations use female sexual emancipation as a way of re-establishing the power and status of white masculinity: if they (the novels), as white male cultural artefacts, are

shown to be in favour of female emancipation through their narratives of sexually emancipated women, and through contrasting these women with their male protagonists, then they also appear to be in favour of the calls for equality made by, in this case, the Feminist movement. In this way, they are shown to deviate from the white male privileged norm that treated women as inferior members of society and appear, instead, to be siding with the feminist cause. But, as I show in my literary analyses, by depicting narratives that are supposedly sympathetic to that feminist cause, these novels reveal their true function: the restoration of the privileged position of white masculinity by ostensibly wielding it in favour of women. While critics have generally praised the ways in which women are portrayed in some of these authors' novels, I claim instead that not only do these portrayals not support feminism, but in actuality they caricature the Feminist movement in order to defend white masculinity in postwar US society.

As I pointed out earlier, second-wave feminism was comprised of a variety and multiplicity of calls, struggles, arguments, and viewpoints, but the ways in which my chosen novels respond to second-wave feminism is monolithic and constructs a generalised version of the women's movement. The Feminist movement's diverse and frequently conflicting standpoints are plainly shunned precisely so that the novels' critique can take place more easily. For this reason, it is necessary to provide more historical context for the feminism to which I refer in this thesis. This will hopefully allow for a useful comparison between the historical developments that took place in the 1960s and 1970s with regard to women's liberation and the ways in which the feminist struggle is parodied in the novels under examination.

There have been many accounts of how second-wave feminism emerged. One of the most convincing has been offered by Sara Evans, who argues that “in the history of the United States the struggle for racial equality has been midwife to a feminist movement” (24). Whereas an outright conflation of the two movements would be problematic, Evans’ proposition has historical and logical credibility, demonstrating as it does a close link between fights for racial and gender equality. According to her influential study,

> in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, women experiencing the contradictory expectations and stresses of changing roles began to move from individual discontents to a social movement in their own behalf. Working for racial justice, they gained experience in organizing and in collective action, an ideology that described and condemned oppression analogous to their own, and a belief in human “rights” that could justify them in claiming equality for themselves. In each case, moreover, the complex web of racial and sexual oppression embedded in southern culture projected a handful of white southern women into the forefront of those who connected one cause with the other (24).

The Civil Rights movement, and its significant attempts at a more equal, less discriminatory society during the 1950s, paved the way for a reconsideration of the social and political hierarchies of postwar United States. Seeing African Americans fighting for equal rights, as well as protesting the various ways in which they had been subjugated by whites, women began to envisage their own emancipation from the sexist and dominating practices of men. The spirit of collectivity evident in the African American struggle was similarly conducive to a more concerted effort, on the part of early second-wave feminism, to challenge sexism and fight for equality.

Nevertheless, as William Lawrence O’Neill has correctly pointed out, “[t]he parallel with slavery which the early feminists drew … was, on the face of it, strained and unreal” (10). The experiences of African Americans and women were decidedly different in nature, and to view female emancipation on par with

racial justice would harmfully erase those differences. Even so, O'Neill continues, despite the fact that "feeling enslaved is clearly not the same as being enslaved, there were real similarities between the women's rights" (10) movements and the Civil Rights movement. "Not only were women … active in both causes, but the causes themselves were in many respects alike", since they "aimed at removing unconscionable handicaps imposed by law and custom on specific groups in American society" (O'Neill 10). It was against those social, political, and cultural constraints placed on American women that early second-wave feminism fought. While the subjugation of African Americans had a long history of physical enslavement, women's bondage, at least as far as the initial feminist calls for equality in the 1960s were concerned, was symbolic and psychological—it had primarily to do with the ways in which women were trapped within a household-jail where they were reduced to serving men at the expense of their own feelings and aspirations (be they personal or professional).

This psychosocial imprisonment, the fate of many women between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the 1960s as a consequence of a female containment that incorporated the whole of women's realities, led certain women to begin speaking out. Betty Friedan, one of the greatest figures of second-wave feminism, directly addressed the condition of women in postwar American society by writing of a "problem" that "lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women" (15). This problem was

> a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children … lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to

> ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?" For over fifteen years there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers (15).

It is evident from Friedan's indictment of the material conditions of postwar American society that women of that time period existed within a capitalist system of oppression that both produced and perpetuated sexism as a means of subjugation and compliance. The division of labour in that capitalist system dictated that men should be the breadwinners of the family whereas women should stay at home to take care of their children and the household as a whole. The father would be the one to go to work in order to earn money so that the mother would be able to buy groceries and feed her children peanut butter sandwiches. What is more, all the discourses around femininity, "in all the columns, books and articles by experts" as well as on television and the radio, further promoted sexism by instilling into the mind of every single woman in the country that her role in society was to be a wife to her husband and a mother to her children.

In the only novel set in the 1950s that I examine in this thesis, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the main female character, Janice, is portrayed as a subdued wife whose role in the narrative has primarily to do with all the ways in which she is not able, according to her husband, Rabbit, to fulfill her obligations as a wife—leading to Rabbit's famous flight from their home—and as a mother—she accidentally drowns their new-born daughter while drunk. The novel effectively reinforces the political and spiritual subjugation of women in postwar America that Friedan reacted against by demonstrating the supposedly deleterious repercussions of women not adequately performing the societally constructed and assigned role of their gender. This portrayal, however, is starkly different

from the way Janice is presented in Updike's second novel in the *Rabbit* tetralogy, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), which was written and published after the 1960s and at a time when second-wave feminism was at its zenith. Here, Janice is depicted as possessing a high degree of agency, evinced by the fact that she has an extramarital affair and breaks away from the confines of her household and her role as a wife. The novel's insistence on displaying and describing the effects this affair has on her husband, however, demonstrates that Janice's agency is used as a means of critiquing second-wave feminism by misrepresenting its arguments. This misrepresentation has to do with feminism's attempts at women's sexual liberation, which, for the novel, become instances of feminists wishing to belittle men through their sexual escapades. As such, the sexual freedom that Janice is shown to have early on in the novel is eclipsed by the fact that her pursuing her sexual desires is infused with negative connotations and blamed for the emotional deterioration of her husband.

But the second-wave Feminist movement's demands with respect to female sexuality had nothing to do with any form of disparagement of men, nor were men per se the site on which feminist sexual politics manifested. Rather, feminist calls for the sexual liberation of women in the 1960s and 1970s were about empowering women to pursue their sexual desires freely and uninhibited by the gender norms created and perpetuated by the white patriarchy of postwar American society. As Jane Gerhard has suggested,

> conflicts about sexuality for many women—about what they wanted from sex, about what they had learned about themselves (and men) by learning about sex, about what counted as "real" sex—lay the groundwork for what would become their feminism. For a specific generation, coming of age in a certain historical moment, existing in an optimistic and activist era, much of what galled women into feminism was

> precisely the sense of injustice forged in and through all things sexual (3).

The sexual demands of second-wave feminism, therefore, were not about deriding men, but rather about helping women break free from the figurative cages into which they had been placed. The conditions of women's sexual imprisonment, material as well as symbolic, were one of the constraints against which the Feminist movement reacted. Of course, these conditions were created by men: as Kate Millett argued in her groundbreaking study, the "ethics and values … of our culture" are "of male manufacture" and designed so that "half of the populace which is female" can be "controlled by that half which is male" (25). But feminist calls were calls for equality, fights against male subjugation of women rather than attacks aimed directly towards men, as quite a few of the latter saw them. The fact that my chosen novels end up presenting female sexuality as unethical, and as damaging to their male protagonists, clearly demonstrates the extent to which white masculinity was threatened by the promising power of women's sexual liberation. And, what is more, it goes to show how fictional narratives in which women are supposedly allowed to have sex with whomever they want can actually be used as more than a simply implicit critique of what many men—precisely because they felt threatened—viewed as sexual promiscuity.

Interrogating Whiteness, Interrogating Jewishness: The Role of Religion

Having examined how white-male-authored American literature of or about the 1960s responds to the racial and sexual developments that took place in US society as a result of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements, I proceed, in the third part of this thesis, to an exploration of religious ethics in post-World War II

white male American narratives of race and gender. More specifically, I focus on the ways in which my chosen novels portray protagonists who are ostensibly desirous of guidance as to how one should live a morally good, humane life. I argue that, as the Civil Rights and Feminist movements began advocating for equal rights and laid bare the injustice brought about by white male Americans, the latter felt the need not only to justify the way in which they had, for years, been behaving towards their less privileged counterparts, but also to reaffirm a sense of their own ethical probity. I show that the characters' inner realisation of the adverse effects of their actions towards, in particular, African Americans and women, and the shame they felt as a result, led them, during that time period, to begin searching for God. God, in their view, as the ultimate moral arbiter, would guide them towards redemption: if they believed in Him, and, crucially, if He believed in them, He would not only absolve them of their past sins, but He would also, through that absolution, reaffirm the goodness of their seriously damaged identity. This kind of redemption narrative is characteristically a feature of the Christian faith and religion. Nevertheless, as James Baldwin has argued, in American society, Christianity has played a

> historical role … in the realm of power—that is, politics—and in the realm of morals. In the realm of power, Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels. This particular true faith, moreover, is more deeply concerned about the soul than it is about the body, to which fact the flesh … of countless infidels bears witness (45).

In a similar vein, I argue that, even though only one of my chosen authors (Updike) is Christian, and despite the fact my other two chosen authors (Bellow and Roth) are Jewish, they all make use of the redemptive potential of religion as a political tool. While purporting to be concerned with morality, with how one can achieve goodness, what emerges instead from a close reading of their

narratives is an attempt not to provide morally good answers to morally difficult questions, but rather to display goodness (and, equally important, striving towards goodness) as a core purpose of white male identity and of those who inhabit it. And, through this equating white male identity with goodness, white masculinity could power through any crises and emerge socially, economically, and politically victorious.

The relationship between religion and contemporary American society, and between religion and contemporary American literature, has had a varied presence in critical scholarship. Proposing a theory of American secularism, Charles Taylor has argued that there has been a "change … which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" (3). According to Taylor, it is not that religion has been completely superseded by other modes of living one's life, but rather that religious belief is now but an option among many. Amy Hungerford, recognising that "religious critique [is] so firmly a part of our secular condition" proceeds to argue for a different form of religious belief present in contemporary American culture: "belief without meaning", which "becomes both a way to maintain religious belief rather than critique its institutions and a way to buttress the authority of literature that seeks to imagine such belief" (xiii). In my analysis in Chapter 3, I demonstrate that my chosen literary characters' search for God is not guided by a genuine wish to discover or (re)affirm spirituality in a society which has become increasingly secular; rather, their concern with religious morality functions as a way of maintaining social hierarchies and buttressing the authority of a white masculinity that is perceived to be in crisis. While critics such as Mark Eaton have argued that postwar American writers sought to

"grasp and understand, perhaps even to expand, the possibility of faith commitments in a not quite secular America" (16), I demonstrate instead how my chosen novels used faith as a strategic response to the sociopolitical movements that challenged white masculinity.

This brings us to another issue that needs clarification in terms of my chosen authors' identities, and the relation between those identities and the fiction they produced: are Bellow and Roth white, Jewish, or both? And how does that impact the characters and narrative threads of their novels? It is important to note that Jewish people were not always considered to be white. Indeed, as Karen Brodkin has argued, "the history of Jews in the United States is a history of racial change" whereby "[p]revailing classifications at a particular time have sometimes assigned [Jews] to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit", something that has resulted in a form of "racial middleness … an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness" (1-2). In terms of the time period that I examine in my thesis, however, Brodkin writes that "[t]he privileges of whiteness … were extended to American Jews after World War II" (187). As such, while being certainly aware of the aforementioned "racial middleness" that was most acutely felt by Jews prior to the Second World War, since both Bellow and Roth wrote in the postwar period, I will consider them as authors who write about Jewish characters who either think of themselves as white or aspire to be considered white. This aspirational quality with respect to whiteness is particularly important, since it allows for a closer link between the Jewishness of Bellow's and Roth's protagonists and marginalised subjectivities. Bellow's and Roth's writings, therefore, can be conceptualised as attempts to upgrade the status of Jewish masculinity in

postwar American society by equating it with the identities of African Americans and women.

Bellow, Roth, Updike, and the Elusive Nature of Identity

As far as the authors I have chosen to examine in this thesis are concerned, my choice of these three particular authors stems from the fact that they, as well as their novels' protagonists, share the same identity characteristics as the white(/Jewish), middle class, heterosexual American male that is the main subject of this study; one of my central aims is to link the authors' identities to their literary output, as well as their conceptualisation of (the crisis of) white masculinity in the context of postwar social justice movements. My intention is not to produce the kind of biographical criticism that is difficult to decidedly prove and easy to dismiss as lacking concrete, relevant evidence. Closer to my project's objective is what Walter Benn Michaels has argued with respect to modernism: an "interest in the work of art as an object" and a "preoccupation with the relation between that work of art and its reader", bearing in mind that "these aesthetic concerns are themselves produced in relation to the accompanying invention of racial [and gender, and sexual] identity and then of its transformation both into the pluralized forms of cultural identity and into the privileging of the subject position as such" (12). In the literary analyses that follow, I take up the role of the critical reader in an attempt to uncover the various ways in which different forms of identity are viewed, opposed, (ostensibly) embraced, and frequently enacted by the white male subject. While the postwar period saw the rise of a multiplicity of voices in American literature (Morrison, Baldwin, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joan Didion, Sandra Cisneros, to

name but a few), and while looking at the insights with respect to race and gender those authors' novels provide would be a project equally worth pursuing, I believe that an exploration of how American literature written by white men deals with midcentury racial and gender transformations will shed light on the explicit relationship between this kind of literature and the historical context out of which it emerged.

This is why the identity (if not the intentions) of my chosen authors does, in the end, matter. A white man's experience of life in postwar American society would be completely different from that of a black man's or a black woman's. In this project, I am interested in how white male subjectivity perceives itself as well as what it more often than not categorises as the Other. How do white male authors portray white men? How do they portray African Americans and women? What do their portrayals signify, and how has history impacted them? What does the language used in these authors' novels reveal about the position of white masculinity in the 1960s and after?

But to what extent do my chosen authors exist within the novels they wrote? Is it appropriate to think of the authors at all, since what I am analysing and evaluating here are not the people who wrote the novels but rather the written texts themselves? While the intentions of the authors are not central, it would be a critical error to ignore the personal views these authors held, particularly since these views are frequently echoed by their white male protagonists.

When Roth set out to write his own autobiography in 1988 with a manuscript aptly (if not a bit ironically) entitled *The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, he paradoxically expressed a similar view. "For me, as for most

novelists," Roth begins, "every genuine imaginative event begins down there, with the facts, with the specific, and not with the philosophical, the ideological, or the abstract" (3). Yet he makes sure to emphasise that his fiction is not straightforwardly mined from his personal life, seeing his literary oeuvre as a project of "[u]ndermining experience, embellishing experience, rearranging experience and enlarging experience into a species of mythology" (7). Indeed, confusing Roth's characters for the author himself would be an easy—and erroneous—thing to do, leading to close readings not of texts and literary characters but of the author and his personal life. The relationship between fact and fiction is thus more nuanced than might initially seem. Even so, if his fictional creations both are and are not based on concrete and unembellished "facts", Roth's views with regard to a variety of social and political issues are similar to those communicated by the characters in the novels examined in this thesis. Since this appears to be the case not only for Roth, but for Updike and Bellow as well, it would be useful to have a brief look at these authors' personal beliefs with respect to, specifically, race and gender. Even if I do not directly take these beliefs into account in my reading of these authors' novels, privileging, as Michaels above indicates, the artwork and the reader over the author, this thesis would not be complete if no biographical elements were included so as to give a fuller, more substantive picture of how these authors' own sense of white masculinity interacted with their literary characters'.

Roth's personal relation to feminism, as it emerged in the 1960s and continued throughout the rest of his life, was full of antagonistic misgivings. Blake Bailey's recent headline-making, eyebrow-raising biography of the author, besides the various occurrences it depicts with regard to Roth's often vile treatment of women in real life, is also brimming with instances in which Roth is

quoted as being threatened by, and consequently quite disparaging towards, feminists. When he was informed, for instance, about some negative reviews of his 1974 novel *My Life as a Man*, Roth bemoaned, in a letter to British publisher Tom Maschler, that "he'd been tagged a 'woman-hater' by certain 'male critics who would please the feminist-militants'" (392). It is evident from this that Roth considered not only feminists, but also those who applied a feminist critique on his novels or who even pointed out his myopic portrayal of women, as aggressive, militaristic dissenters. This seemingly innate aversion to feminism, as well as a grossly misguided perception of what it seeks to achieve, persisted: when, in 1990, *Deception* was about to be published, Roth was wary about "what feminists would think of his novel", proclaiming that "'[t]hey'll probably hate it, but fuck 'em'" (530). In the second chapter of this thesis, I claim that *Sabbath's Theater*, a novel Roth wrote in the 1990s, epitomises Roth's fictive response to the Feminist movement of the 1960s. Considering the author's above-quoted sentiments with regard to second-wave feminism as late as in 1990, it becomes clear that his response is thus neither belated nor anachronistic: feminism remained, for Roth, an intimidating menace towards his writerly efforts and male identity all throughout his life.

Similar sentiments exist in Updike's consciousness. In his 1989 memoir, *Self-Consciousness*, Updike comments on the second-wave Feminist movement thus:

> Fists uplifted, women enter history. The clitoral at last rebels against the phallic. The long hair, the beads and bracelets, the floppy clothes of the peace movement made a deliberate contrast with the tight uniform and close haircut … of the military male … Though not consciously resisting the androgyny, which swiftly became—as all trends in a consumer society become—a mere fashion, I must have felt challenged. My earliest sociological thought about myself had been that I was fortunate to be a boy and an American (145).

Updike conceptualises the sociopolitical movements of the sixties, as well as the changes they sought to bring about, as an intimidation towards his masculine self. Men in the counterculture diverting from aggressive social forms of masculine appearance clearly challenged his sense of himself as a man. Additionally, Updike also views the counterculture (of which feminism was a significant part) as a trend, as something that will not last long but will rather wither away and give place to a new fashion. More importantly, in terms of this thesis' arguments, he admits to being challenged by feminism, recognising with gratitude his privilege in being a man in America. In order to appease what he therefore perceives as a feminist threat, he admits, in a 1989 interview to the *New York Times*, to deliberately starting to portray women with greater agency in an "attempt to make things right with my, what shall we call them, feminist detractors". The novels to which he refers, *Witches of Eastwick* (1984) and *S.* (1988), are from the 1980s, but Updike's project of defending white masculinity by showing it as ostensibly supportive of the feminist cause begins much earlier (and in a more nuanced way) in 1971's *Rabbit Redux*. And while not going so far as masculinising his female character as Roth does in *Sabbath's Theater*, the sexual agency purportedly granted to Janice in *Rabbit Redux* serves, as I have indicated above, as a means of lampooning feminism. In any case, this attempt on the part of Updike did not last long: in his 1992 novel *Memories of the Ford Administration*, one of the main characters avers that the "trouble with systematic feminism is that it heightens rather than dampens one's phallocentricity" (88), once again staunchly indicating that feminism remained, for Updike as for Roth, an acrimonious antagonist in his literary endeavours.

But apart from sexist attitudes, these authors, in their personal lives, have also expressed racist views. Adam Begley, in his excessively sympathetic

but inadvertently condemning biography of Updike, reveals that the “sound of civil rights oratory triggered [Updike’s] urge to mimic and mock. He would launch into his blackface routine with the apparent aim of amusing the children (and himself) and irritating his wife” (275). In addition, “marching in a civil rights demonstration provoked in him, like a kind of allergic reaction, a perverse and self-defeating display of callow humor” (275). The blackface routine in which Updike engaged has a corollary in his fiction: as I argue in Chapter 1, *Rabbit Redux*, in addition to its preoccupation with sexual politics, re-establishes the privilege of white masculinity by portraying a white male symbolically transformed, via a process that can only be described as metaphorical blackface, into an African American (though it should be clear that I am not arguing that Rabbit Angstrom of the *Rabbit* novels is an alter ego of Updike himself).

Bellow’s own stance with respect to race began to be seriously addressed when “some remarks that were attributed to him by Alfred Kazin in a *New Yorker* magazine article” (Blades) made the news in the mid-nineties. According to the article, Kazin had heard Bellow ask: “‘Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I’d be happy to read them’” (Blades). This revelation forced Bellow to defend himself in the *New York Times*, where he lamented that “[w]e can’t open our mouths without being denounced as racists, misogynists, supremacists, imperialists, or fascists”. Crucially, Bellow also railed against his “critics, many of whom could not locate Papua New Guinea on the map” and who “want to convict me of contempt for multiculturalism and defamation of the third world. I am an elderly white male—a Jew, to boot. Ideal for their purposes.” One the one hand, the fact that Bellow believes he is being targeted because he is a white male echoes the threat to white masculinity that

both Roth and Updike, as evinced above, themselves felt. On the other, Bellow mentions his Jewishness as another characteristic marked for the purposes of critique and even ridicule. Indeed, James Atlas's biography of Bellow shows the novelist to have experienced a sense of alienation as a Jew in postwar American society. According to Atlas, Bellow had the following "explanation for why he was drawn to anthropology" as an undergraduate:

> He was a savage himself, he joked; why not study his own kind? Anthropology, the study of foreign cultures, provided expression for Bellow's own sense of exclusion from American society—a condition that haunted him long after he had become an exemplary (and deeply assimilated) spokesman for the opportunities it offered" (50).

As such, Atlas continues, "[l]ike many Jewish intellectuals of his generation, Bellow never rid himself of the suspicion that he wasn't quite part of America" (50).

While the authors, as evidenced from their biographies, are explicitly sexist and racist, their novels are more implicit in their critique. As explained above, some of the characters in their novels, while initially inherently as sexist and racist as their creators, end up showing support for identities different from their own, but the way the novels are constructed paints a picture of African American and feminist struggles for equality as dangerous and damaging. It is for this reason that these novels bear, and even necessitate, a close reading that reveals this strategic response to the changing hierarchies of postwar America.

Updike, Roth, Bellow: Critical Considerations

Existing literary criticism on my chosen authors has been mixed and often produced heated debates regarding whether their novels are monolithically

sexist and racist or whether the authors sought to engage with issues of race and gender in a more nuanced way. Surprisingly, while all three authors' treatment of women in their fiction has been acknowledged as being at least partially problematic, only Updike's literary legacy has been explicitly tainted in that regard. A famous 1997 *New York Observer* article written by David Foster Wallace calls Updike a "literary phallocrat" and "a penis with a thesaurus", while Patricia Lockwood, in a recent article at the *London Review of Books*, maintains that he "wrote like an angel … except when he was writing like a malfunctioning sex robot attempting to administer cunnilingus to his typewriter". These two evaluations, while certainly to the point, were nevertheless published outside of academia, in reviews that were meant to reach a wider public audience and induce literary uproar (anger or laughter or both). Academic articles and book chapters on Updike's treatment of women in his novels have been more sympathetic. Stacey Olster, for instance, in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike* (2006), initially acknowledges that Updike's "representation of American normativity in terms … of middle-class white masculinity and apparent denigration of everyone else in terms of racialized, ethnic, and/or gendered otherness" has rightly "provoked controversy since the start of his career" (8). However, she goes on to argue that his later novels evince a different, more just stance towards women, allowing "readers to consider the degree to which the evolution of Updike's career" has offered "the possibility of change" (10). This is the kind of argument that my thesis seeks to unpick: what Olster and other critics have seen as a genuine change on the part of Updike's novels' treatment of women (within his early fiction as well), I consider a literary ruse that restores the privileged status of white masculinity through an apparent alliance with feminism.

The trajectory of Roth's reception in the academic and literary community is similarly startling. Particularly since his death in 2018, many feminist writers have come forward to defend either his portrayal of women or the personal qualities of the author himself. While I largely disagree with their views, I recognise my own limitations as a white male subject and critic and thus take their arguments into serious consideration. In an interview she gave to *Vulture* shortly after Roth's death, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie suggested that "[t]here was a humanity in Philip Roth's work that is often overlooked when we talk about his misogyny. I read his women and roll my eyes but there is a truth there, because there are many men like his men. Misogyny is a reality in the world". Adichie points out that the misogyny evident in Roth's novels is Roth's way of transposing on the page the stark reality of our deeply sexist society. This is a view widely shared by Updike's supporters (academic or otherwise), with Bob Batchelor, to give one example, describing Updike as "the nation's foremost literary social historian, offering readers penetrating analyses of what it meant to be an American from the mid-twentieth century through the first decade of the new millennium" (2). As I noted earlier, however, since it is virtually impossible—and not really the subject of literary criticism—to uncover whether the views of the literary characters are shared by their authors, the main chapters of this thesis focus solely on the novels themselves, and on what their linguistic and narrative evidence signify. As Elisa Albert argues in another supportive statement on Roth, we "don't have to wrestle with the flaws of the man himself, because the man himself is unknown and therefore irrelevant" (11). Even though Bailey's biography has shed light on Roth as a person, has essentially made Roth known, his novels are going to continue being read, discussed, and analysed, revealing the gaps previous discussions and past

criticism have left for future flâneurs of language and literature to redress. Nevertheless, the sexism and racism of his novels still need to be critiqued, so as to pave the way for a literature and culture that is not hurtful towards the social groups that have been victimised throughout the history of the United States (and the world).

As far as Bellow is concerned, critics have generally adopted a similar stance with respect to his own treatment of women in his novels. Ram Prakash Pradhan, for instance, in a book-length study of Bellow's depiction of female characters, has argued that his "attitude towards women appears to be self-contradicting and paradoxical. He seems to be a feminist and anti-feminist at the same time. He maintains a balance between feminism and anti-feminism" (53). Pradhan bases his argument that Bellow's novels could be thought of as supportive of women on the fact that the "novelist has portrayed a great variety of women who possess contradictory traits and elude any attempt at generalisation" (52). But, as I show later, Bellow's portrayal of women who are granted the power and agency to pursue their own desires, while ostensibly feminist, presents feminism as something gruesomely deleterious because of its psychopathological effect on men. As such, Pradhan's claim about the author's balance between feminism and anti-feminism illustrates what I think is a general critical misinterpretation of Bellow's novels. In no way is a novel like *Herzog* feminist; rather, it is a novel that caricatures feminism while purporting to support it.

Methodology and Parameters of Study

In order to complete this thesis, I have used a combination of methodological tools. First, through close reading of the primary texts, I have selected, examined, and analysed passages of novels to display how they respond to the crisis of white masculinity that took place in the 1960s in the United States, choosing sections that obviously advance my argument but also looking at parts that might seem, on the face of it, to contradict my position. The secondary research to which I refer is principally focused on post-1945 American literary and cultural studies, and in particular the relationship between US literature and the sociopolitical and cultural environment of the United States. Looking at the broader historical context in which my chosen novels were written and published, and linking that context to the texts themselves, enables me to produce a historically informed textual analysis that sheds light on the ways in which the postwar crisis of white masculinity played out in the fiction of my chosen authors.

Why this period of US history and why these novels? The African American and feminist calls for equality, which sought to challenge the privileged position of the white, middle-class, heterosexual male identity, predominantly unfolded in the 1960s, and, for this reason, half of my chosen novels (*Herzog*, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and *Rabbit Redux*) also take place during that time. As far as the other half of my chosen novels are concerned, *Rabbit, Run*, which takes place only one year before the beginning of the decade that is my main focus, has been chosen to take the literary temperature of white masculinity in the United States as this period of upheaval and radicalism was just starting. Both of Roth's novels were written in the 1990s and serve a particular purpose in my thesis: *American Pastoral*, predominantly set in the 1960s, enables me to consider Roth's act of historical remembering, and to

compare his version of that time period to that of the other two authors, a comparison that will highlight the authors' differing perspectives as a result of the particular time of their writing. *Sabbath's Theater*, on the other hand, the only novel in my thesis both written and predominantly set in the 1990s, allows me to evaluate the (enduring? transitory?) effect the 1960s had on American society and culture, bearing in mind that the protagonist of this novel, while shown to be living, in his later years, in the 1990s, in essence represents the logic of the white masculinity of the 1960s.

Of course, these are not the only novels in the oeuvre of my chosen authors that engage with issues of race and gender. Indeed, the fragile nature of white masculinity can be seen in almost every novel each of these authors wrote. *Portnoy's Complaint* (Roth, 1969), for instance, is considered the urtext of audacious male libido at a time of severe masculine crisis. What is missing from that novel, however, and the reason I analyse *Sabbath's Theater* instead, is a powerful female presence that changes the way the reader views the male protagonist. Portnoy's mother is certainly oppressive, but the fact that Sabbath's Drenka is so deliberately and stereotypically masculine has given me the opportunity to examine and comment on the sexual politics at the heart of Roth's fictive preoccupations. Elsewhere, I have chosen *Mr. Sammler's Planet* instead of *Henderson the Rain King* (Bellow, 1959) because, though the latter actually takes place in Africa and can offer interesting insights on how the West views African culture, the former is more directly relevant to my interest in African Americans and the white-dominated United States. Finally, I read *Rabbit, Run* rather than the more explicitly theological *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (Updike, 1996) because the first novel in the *Rabbit* tetralogy provides a clearer link between adulterous sexuality, religion, and the historical context that led

Updike, as I observed above, to use Christianity as a means of reinstating white masculinity.

Chapter Breakdown

My thesis is divided into three chapters, each comprised of three sections that allow all my chosen authors to be examined in depth. Chapter 1, “Race and White Masculinity”, looks at the ways in which American literature written by white men during or about the 1960s constructs an image of white masculinity as sympathetic towards and supportive of the Civil Rights movement’s struggles for racial equality in order to re-establish its power and privileged position in American society. Chapter 2, “White Masculinity’s Faux Feminism”, proceeds to examine the ways in which my chosen authors’ novels caricature the second-wave Feminist movement in order to, again, reinscribe the power and privilege of white masculinity. Finally, Chapter 3, “White Masculinity’s Redemptive Religion”, explores the ways in which my chosen authors’ novels make use of religious morality in order to equate white masculinity with ethical goodness and thus restore its image and position in a progressively changing American society.

Les us see, then, how these three writers superficially bent to accommodate the social change afoot in postwar America—but their fiction proved unyielding in making white masculinity the main attraction of US society.

Chapter 1

Race and White Masculinity

As African Americans began to advocate more stridently for equal rights in the 1950s and 1960s, laying bare the injustice that had been taking place against them for years, there was a shift in the social hierarchy of US society whereby the privileged position of white male identity began to be questioned. White male American authors writing during or about that time period responded to this by including in their fiction white male American characters who found themselves adrift in this crisis of white masculinity. In this chapter, through a literary exploration of John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) and Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), I will be concerned with how each of these novels in one way or another constructs a distorted image of white Americans as welcoming to and accepting of African Americans during the Civil Rights era. As explained in the introduction, one of the most significant desires of many white Americans is the desire for the honour and prestige and pre-eminence of their white identity to always be at the forefront. This desire came under threat in the postwar period, as a result of African Americans' calls for equality, and the novels of the three authors I am examining re-establish the privileged position of the white male identity that was thought to be in danger.

Writing *Rabbit Redux* close to the Civil Rights era, Updike initially does offer a picture of white America's racism: his white protagonist views African Americans as an alien, animal-like Other who has come to take over. In order, however, to restore what white Americans deem the lost honour of their white

identity, Updike's novel shows Rabbit interacting with a variety of African American characters so that he can seem to better understand them, begin to feel towards them, and, ultimately, symbolically even become them. By contrast, Roth's *American Pastoral*, concerned with the same time period but written approximately two-and-a-half decades later, completely effaces the racist attitudes white Americans exhibited towards their African American counterparts. In my reading of this novel, I argue that the white protagonist, Seymour, appears comprehensively oblivious to the African American experience and plights during this, or indeed any other, decade; and the lack of African American voices in this novel proves emblematic of white Americans considering themselves tolerant while being, in fact, racist. In a similar act of restoration of white identity's privileged position, Bellow presents the Jewish protagonist of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* as unable to assimilate into the white American society he lives in, and he instead shows him siding with African Americans, the racial identity that many white Americans considered, in the 1960s, to be hip. While, therefore, all these three authors' novels portray these characters as ostensibly open and sympathetic towards African Americans' calls for equality during the Civil Rights era, they do so in a way that maintains the dominant social hierarchies of US society.

I. 'Men emerge pale from the little printing plant at four sharp, ghosts for an instant': Race Reduced in *Rabbit Redux*

Critical debates regarding Updike's portrayal of Rabbit's racism in *Rabbit Redux* revolve around two different axes. On the one hand, critics such as Eugene Lyons (49), Edward M. Jackson (451), and Marshall Boswell (100) have heavily

criticised the way Updike deals with the issue of race in this novel, arguing that, for all of Updike's attempts at constructing a redemptive narrative in which his protagonist, Rabbit, is able to completely change his racist attitudes towards African Americans, in the end Rabbit remains the same. On the other hand, Adam Lively is (carefully) sympathetic towards Updike, claiming that the writing of *Rabbit Redux* "represents an attempt by a white author to write about race without buying into any of the available racial mythologies" (272), a view that is also shared by Charles Berryman (118). Somewhere in the middle, Jay Prosser maintains that "[t]he novel shows Rabbit's partial transformation" ("Postcolonial Project" 79) but points out that, in Updike's fiction, "blackness has served as a mirror image for whiteness, a paradigmatic surface for constructing white, typically white American, subjectivity" ("Under the Skin" 579-580).

In my own analysis of *Rabbit Redux* in this chapter, taking my cue from Sally Robinson's argument that "the novel is situated at the very beginning of an era marked by a crisis in the symbolic (if not social) position of white masculinity" (342), I argue that Updike's novel justifies, on the one hand, Rabbit's overt racism towards African Americans and, on the other, restores the privileged position of white masculinity in 1960s United States by constructing a strong kinship, verging on racial masquerade, between the white American protagonist and African Americans. More specifically, I seek to demonstrate that Updike spends a large part of *Rabbit Redux* assiduously and unflinchingly describing the various ways in which Rabbit either harbours racist thoughts and attitudes or behaves in a racist way towards African Americans in order to explain and illustrate the reason(s) behind Rabbit's racism. By offering as the main reasons behind, and justifications for, Rabbit's racism the various entanglements of his desires and feelings, the novel paints a sympathetic

picture of Rabbit, who appears to be racist simply and primarily because of the inferiority he feels when he is compared (or compares himself) to African Americans in the 1960s.

Furthermore, in terms of the redemptive narrative mentioned above, most critics who consider Rabbit as a character who is, by the end of the novel, transformed, someone who has been able to overcome his racism and become welcoming to African Americans, focus on a black character named Skeeter, whom Rabbit takes in his house and who teaches Rabbit about African American history and the African American experience, as the driving force behind this transformation. One critic, for instance, has argued that Skeeter "is the most vibrant and credible black in literature written by a white man" (Vargo 160), and another sees Skeeter as the character through whom Rabbit "confronts his social and generational fears" (Wilson 11). As I argue, however, *Rabbit Redux* constructs a redemptive narrative much earlier in the novel. Focusing on the affective qualities of African American soul music, the novel essentially masquerades Rabbit as black; and, in this way, through a practice that is as racist as any of the protagonist's, repositions Rabbit's identity at the forefront of postwar US society.

To begin with, the first part of *Rabbit Redux* is brimming with instances in which the dominance of Rabbit's white identity (and, correspondingly, his desire for the honour commonly accorded to that identity) is seen to be faltering as a result of the perceived threat posed by African Americans in the 1960s. Rabbit, once his high school's basketball star, is now "verging on anonymity" (4), and, even "[t]hough his height, his bulk, and a remnant alertness in the way he moves his head continue to distinguish him on the street, years have passed since anyone called him Rabbit" (4). These physical characteristics "that once

made the nickname Rabbit fit now seem" (4), Updike informs us, "clues to weakness" (4). Despite the fact that, in this case, the white colour of Rabbit's skin is not explicitly mentioned as one of the characteristics that, whereas once considered conducive to greatness, are now evidence of "weakness", it is precisely this that Updike seems to point towards a few pages later when Rabbit ponders the state of the game in which he was, for some time, great. "The game different now, everything the jump shot, big looping hungry blacks lifting and floating there a second while a pink palm long as your forearm launched the ball" (15). What was once a sports game which allowed Rabbit, even if briefly, to excel in something, is now viewed by him as something from which not only he, but also all the others like him (meaning all the others who are not "blacks"), are excluded. And the fact that African Americans are described here as "looping" and "hungry" is a clear indication of the threat Rabbit feels as someone who is not black. Not only are African Americans surrounding white Americans with dubious intentions, they also seem, in Rabbit's eyes, to possess an increased appetite for the things that were previously deemed to be predominantly for people who were white.

Commenting on the sociopolitical environment of 1960s United States, Mariann Russell has argued that, during that decade, "a new intrusion of blacks upon the white consciousness" (93) took place, which had as a consequence the emergence of African Americans in walks of life traditionally thought white. Significantly, in this instance, when Rabbit explains the ideas in the above sentence to Nelson, his son, unable to comprehend the changing nature of America's sociopolitical environment and hence of America's sports as well, unwittingly notes that "you were good. You were tall" (15). Whereas in the 1950s, when Rabbit was still playing basketball and when basketball was still a

predominantly white sport, physical characteristics such as height were considered important because they served as distinguishing factors among the white players, in the 1960s, when African Americans rose to the top of the game and effectively stole the limelight, the only physical traits that seemed (and seem, in this novel) to matter were the colour of one's skin and the athletic prowess ascribed to African Americans by racist stereotypes. And that is why Rabbit's "height", "bulk", and "alertness", even taking into account his "thick waist and cautious stoop bred into him by a decade of the Linotyper's trade" (4), seem to have decreased in (and almost completely lost their) value: because Rabbit is white, and whatever his other physical characteristics, he cannot compete in a sport that he thinks has been made black.

In order to squelch the inadequacy he feels, as a white man, when he is compared to African Americans, Rabbit begins paying extremely close attention to the African Americans he sees around him, focusing on their physical characteristics and attempting to both undermine and demonise them. That is, despite Robert Alter's argument that, in *Rabbit Redux*, "a vague, passive, ineffectual character is discovered trying to hang on to a viable sense of self in the eroding terrain of his early years" by solely "sustaining himself with the fading memory of youthful success" (70), Rabbit's attempt to regain his "sense of self" seems to actually be focused more on the undercutting of the way African Americans look rather than on any past achievements of his own. More appropriately, Robinson has argued that, in *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit's "experience of disempowerment" is "exacerbated by the nagging suspicion that white male bodies simply fail to measure up … to black bodies (344). As a result, as "Rabbit notices them more and more" (10), he starts pondering, in omnipotent faux commiseration, that it is a "[s]ad business, being a Negro man, always

underpaid, their eyes don't look like our eyes, bloodshot, brown, liquid in them about to quiver out" (11). Essentially, what Rabbit is doing in this passage is trying to trivialise his athletic deterioration, on the one hand, and African Americans' skillful athletic competency, on the other, by unfavourably commenting on the latter's disadvantageously perceived physical characteristics.

He then proceeds to further weaken African Americans in his mind, so that his own weaknesses, real instead of imagined, can be effectively concealed: "Read somewhere some anthropologist thinks Negroes instead of being more primitive are the latest thing to evolve, the newest men. In some ways tougher, in some ways more delicate. Certainly dumber but then being smart hasn't amounted to so much" (11). Not content with solely undermining the external characteristics of African Americans, Rabbit, in this case, seems to move on from physical characteristics to mental capabilities (a move that, through the novel's deliberately haphazard rendering of it, is telling both of Rabbit's sense that he has lost control over his identity's significance and of his urgent need to regain it). Perhaps realising that, however much he tries to deride the way African Americans look, their physical characteristics will still be considered superior in the sport in which he himself used to be considered superior, Rabbit attempts, this time, to also disparage African Americans' intelligence. And, by associating cleverness with the people who invented "the atom bomb and the one-piece aluminum beer can" (11), that is with white Americans, Rabbit seeks here to reinstate, at least in his mind, the (mental) superiority of his own white identity. That is, while C. W. E. Bigsby has argued that "[t]he explosion of the two atom bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki may have been viewed unambiguously at the time but ambiguity began to coalesce

early” (3) so as to incur a “questioning” (3) of the illusion that “America emerged from the Second World War confident of its own supremacy” (3), Updike’s novel presents here a significantly divergent narrative whereby the white American protagonist, Rabbit, not only views the atomic bomb as a product of (and evidence for) white American cleverness, but also, through his grouping “the atom bomb” with “the one-piece aluminum beer can”, appears to consider it as something that has a practical use, something that is beneficial—in particular, beneficial to his attempts for the restoration of his white identity’s superiority.

Rabbit’s preoccupation with the way African Americans look and think, however, does not spring solely from the aforementioned need to, in a way, feel better about himself and his identity. Rather, as is further revealed while he is traveling on a bus with “too many Negroes” (10), behind his thoughts and opinions regarding African Americans’ physical and mental characteristics lies “a certain fear” (11). For one thing, “he doesn’t see why they have to be so noisy. The four seated right under him, jabbing and letting their noise come out in big silvery hoops; they know damn well they’re bugging the fat Dutchy wives pulling their shopping bags home” (11). Even though he acknowledges that “that’s kids of any color” (11), Rabbit appears here to be frightful of the various sounds African Americans make, as if their sounds are not part of the commonplace occurrences of daily life, but rather something more akin to the sounds of war. And this war is revealed to be none other than the war Rabbit imagines African Americans to have declared on him and his fellow white Americans. The fact that he compares the African Americans he sees around him to “lions”, wild animals who are “strange about the head, as if their thoughts are a different shape and come out twisted” (11), is clear evidence of Rabbit’s imagining whites as normal, peaceful people and African Americans as “a

strange race" (11) which, having wild-animal-like qualities, wants to devour the former. As Rabbit believes, "[i]t's as if, all these Afro hair bushes and gold earrings and hoopy noise on buses, seeds of some tropical plant sneaked in by the birds were taking over the garden. His garden" (11). America, in Rabbit's mind, represents the Garden of Eden, and he is the white Adam who needs to be on guard against an invasive species from the tropics poised to destroy his version of goodness, purity, and, ultimately, whiteness. "Rabbit knows it's his garden and that's why he's put a flag decal on the back window of the Falcon even though Janice says it's corny and fascist" (11). He needs to mark his territory, protect his territory, and, in doing so, he essentially conflates America with whiteness. As a consequence, Rabbit's identity appears to merge with the identity of America, and Rabbit's (perhaps egotistical) desire for the honour accorded to his particular, white identity correspondingly, in his mind, becomes a ubiquitous desire for the honour of the American nation.

Besides the whiteness of America, there is another significant characteristic that Rabbit believes traditionally defines his country and symbolically shields it from the African Americans that try to impinge on it: hard work. In the same paragraph, mentioned above, in which Rabbit essentially imagines a war between the white and the black race, Rabbit condemns the threatening and menacing presence of African Americans in the US (as is evidenced by the clearly exasperated "[m]ore and more this country is getting like that" [11]), by mentioning that America is a country made "of people laying down their lives to build it" (11). This notion of "laying down" one's life for one's country, of devoting one's life to "making America great" (15), is a form of nationalistic duty that, according to Rabbit, exists only in white Americans like himself. While African Americans seem to Rabbit to have sprung out of nowhere

and to have invaded his white country and risen to the top of his favourite sport, white Americans “have to get on with the job” (15) because it is their duty as Americans to do so. In their efforts to fulfil this duty, however, the superiority of their identity seems to them to have diminished, as is demonstrated from the way Rabbit views his father (and, by association, himself and other white Americans like himself), in the following passage:

> Pop stands whittled by the great American glare, squinting in the manna of blessings that come down from the government, shuffling from side to side in nervous happiness that his day’s work is done, that a beer is inside him, that Armstrong is above him, that the U.S. is the crown and stupefaction of human history. Like a piece of grit in the launching pad, he has done his part (10).

For white Americans like Rabbit and his father, being an American means working as hard as possible in order to achieve the supposed greatness (a notion whose abstractness and indefinability hides behind the mention, here, of Neil Armstrong and, throughout the novel, the repeated references to the Apollo moon landing) that a nation like America has, throughout its history, inspired.

This, however, has had the adverse effect of reducing the majority of white Americans to “the little man” (9), each white American essentially powerless and indistinguishable from the next. And, even though, at one point, Updike describes, through Rabbit’s eyes, Rabbit’s neighborhood as a place full of “half-timbered dream-houses, pebbled mortar and clinker brick, stucco flaky as pie crust, witch’s houses of candy and hardened cookie dough with two-car garages and curved driveways” (12) and writes that “there is nowhere higher to go than these houses; the most successful dentists may get to buy one, the pushiest insurance salesmen, the slickest ophthalmologists” (12), Rabbit’s sense of being (or fear of becoming, during the 1960s) indistinguishable from his fellow white Americans, someone whose self and identity are not important,

in no way diminishes due to the fact that he lives in such a neighborhood. Rather, “everywhere in his own house [he] sees a slippery disposable gloss”, things that do not alleviate his feelings of insignificance and whose “synthetic fabric” and “synthetic artiness” (22) do a bad job at camouflaging the genuine diminishment of his identity’s prestige. Carl Abbott has argued that “Rabbit is … deeply embedded—mired—in his local environment” (60), and nowhere is this embeddedness, this inescapability from the commonplace and the mundane and the indistinguishable that is Rabbit’s white America more clearly seen and more acutely felt than in this early part of *Rabbit Redux*.

This indistinguishability of white Americans, placed in juxtaposition to the emerging prominence and distinction of African Americans, is also depicted, in *Rabbit Redux*, through Updike’s description of Rabbit and his (white) co-workers leaving work at the very beginning of the novel: “Men emerge pale from the little printing plant at four sharp, ghosts for an instant, blinking, until the outdoor light overcomes the look of constant indoor light clinging to them” (3). In this first sentence of *Rabbit Redux*, the novel essentially conflates whiteness (through the use of its metonyms “pale”, “ghosts”, and “light”) with emotional and physical fatigue stemming from hard (and routine, uneventful) work. Rabbit and his co-workers are “pale” and look like “ghosts” because their work has effectively sucked the life out of them, has rendered them passively unconscious beings devoid of anything resembling human qualities. In this case, their whiteness, instead of being a characteristic which they are proud of, something that they consider a privilege and that accords prestige, is revealed to be something quite different instead, something that is “clinging to them” and which they need to go out, go somewhere else, in order to escape from. For, in the context of the 1960s, white Americans like Rabbit and his co-workers feel

that it is their very whiteness that has affected their having to work so hard, and for so many hours during the day (the fact that they leave their place of work “at four sharp”, not a second later, is telling of their eagerness to finish work, and of their disgruntlement with their working hours). The identity of white Americans, therefore, in the 1960s, is seen to be experiencing a diminishment of honour as a result of the large amount of work they are required to complete. White people are presented as at risk of degenerating, of becoming weak, because they are worn out by urban industrial life.

The way in which the novel symbolically re-establishes white Americans’ perceived lost honour in the 1960s is evinced through its description of the scenery Rabbit and his co-workers are faced with when they exit “the little printing plant”. More specifically, while “[i]n winter, Pine Street at this hour is dark, darkness presses down early from the mountain that hangs above the stagnant city of Brewer” (3), when the pale men, in the above passage, leave work

> now in summer the granite curbs starred with mica and the row houses differentiated by speckled bastard sidings and the hopeful small porches with their jigsaw brackets and gray milk-bottle boxes and the sooty gingko trees and the baking curbside cars wince beneath a brilliance like a frozen explosion (3).

Against this darkness, therefore, which is both literal (the sun has set and the sky has grown dark) and metaphorical (in the same way that light is used by Updike’s novel as a metonym for whiteness, darkness is similarly used as a metonym for the blackness of African Americans), all the parts of the scenery of Rabbit’s hometown that are variously both black and white (the “granite curbs”, the “speckled … sidings”, the “gray milk-bottle boxes”, the “sooty gingko trees”) are shown to succumb to the white light of the summer, to the white “brilliance” that is so powerful (and detrimental to the darkness) that can only be compared

to “a frozen explosion”. While, therefore, in 1960s US society, African Americans are seen to be advancing at the same time that white Americans seem to be receding (in power, in honour, in distinguishability), the novel offers here a symbolic prevailing of whiteness over blackness in the scenery of this fictional rendering of 1960s United States. And its writing, whether consciously or not, reveals this process thus:

> The city, attempting to revive its dying downtown, has torn away blocks of buildings to create parking lots, so that a desolate openness, weedy and rubbled, spills through the once-packed streets, exposing church facades never seen from a distance and generating new perspectives of rear entryways and half alleys and intensifying the cruel breadth of the light (3).

The personification of Brewer, in this case, of the “city” that is “attempting to revive its dying downtown”, is crucial. For this “city” is none other than the novel itself, which is attempting to revive what is perceived by the white Americans in crisis as the dying of their white identity (or, more accurately, as the diminishment of the privileges and of the honour traditionally accorded to their white identity). As Jack DeBellis has argued, Rabbit, in this novel, “needs a fresh direction, especially one uniting his own sense of powerlessness to his former vitality” (214), and that is the reason why Updike’s novel has employed Rabbit’s city, and its scenery, to bring about and restore the ebullient prestige and honour that the protagonist, on his own, is not able to achieve.

Furthermore, after the aforementioned contrast and symbolic battle between whiteness and blackness, between white Americans and African Americans, the novel proceeds to approach the issue of race from a different point of view. More specifically, while in the early part of the novel, as I have shown, whiteness and blackness are portrayed as two markedly opposing, and frequently antagonistic, identities, the largest part of the rest of the novel

attempts to create a connecting bridge between the two that seemingly allows Rabbit to get closer to and better appreciate African Americans and the novel to re-establish the honour of white identity by imagining it as, or attempting to merge it with, the identity of African Americans. The construction of this connecting bridge between the two identities is primarily effected through the novel's showing Rabbit actively interact with various African American characters (instead of passively observe them from a distance). When an African American co-worker of his invites him to "Jimbo's Friendly Lounge", a predominantly African-American bar in which "all the people are black" (98), Rabbit initially shows the usual signs of blatant and ignorant racism that he has displayed throughout the novel so far. He sees "their faces shine of blackness turning as he enters, a large soft white man in a sticky gray suit" and immediately "fear travels up and down his skin" (98). Even his co-worker, who "has materialized from the smoke" inside the bar, makes him frightful: "His overtrimmed mustache looks wicked in here" (98). As an African American woman, Babe, asks him to give her "one of those hands, white boy" (98) so that she can tell him his fortune, Rabbit is "[a]-prickle with nervousness" (99) and "[h]is mind is racing with his pulse"; and, after finally giving her his hand, he deems "[h]er touch reptilian cool", imagines that it "slithers … as a snake", and only the fact that he sees "she has taken such care of herself leads him to suspect she will not harm him" (100).

What seemingly changes, at this point, Rabbit's attitude towards African Americans, the thing that ostensibly mollifies his anxious desire for the honour and prestige bestowed upon his white identity, is music—more specifically, African American soul music. While still at the bar, and a little bit after Babe

reads his hand and tells him his fortune, “Rabbit asks her shyly, ‘You play the piano?’” (105). Babe, who not only plays the piano but also sings,

> pushes herself out of the booth, hobbling in her comb-red dress, and crosses through a henscratch of applause to the piano painted by children in silver swirls. She signals to the bar for Rufe to turn on the blue spot and bows stiffly, once, grudging the darkness around her a smile and, after a couple of runs to burn away the fog, plays (105).

The meticulous attention Rabbit pays, in this case (and throughout the rest of the passage as well: “Her hands, all brown bone, hang on the keyboard hushed like gloves on a table; she gazes up through blue dust to get herself into focus, she lets her hands fall into another tune” [106]), to the way Babe prepares to begin playing music is indicative of the significance of what is to follow. For if, up to this point, Rabbit has spent the majority of his time inside Jimbo’s Friendly Lounge (and, indeed, the majority of his time inside the narrative of *Rabbit Redux*) being frightened and disapproving of, and expressly racist towards, African Americans, as soon as Babe gets up and gets ready to play and plays “[a]ll the good ones. All show tunes. ‘Up a Lazy River,’ ‘You’re the Top,’ ‘Thou Swell,’ ‘Summertime’ … ‘My Funny Valentine,’ ‘Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,’ ‘I Can’t Get Started’” (106), popular African American soul songs, an apparent change in him begins to take place.

Initially, he realises that “[t]here are hundreds, thousands” of these songs. “They flow into each other without edges, flowing under black bridges of chords thumped six, seven times, as if Babe is helping the piano to remember a word it won’t say. Or spanking the silence. Or saying, *Here I am, find me, find me*” (106). Rabbit’s imagining, here, Babe, on the one hand, and the piano she is playing, on the other, as two both separate and intricately linked entities that desire to eradicate the silence and make themselves be heard, and be visibly heard, directly reflects the very nature and purpose of the soul music that

comes out of Babe and the piano and that emerged, in the 1950s and 1960s, as the principal and most recognisable form of African American music. As Portia K. Maultsby has argued, soul music, "[o]ne of the most innovative and generative forms of music that evolved from the 1960s Black Power Movement served to elevate the consciousness of an African heritage among black Americans" (51). "Through their texts", Maultsby continues, "soul singers not only discussed the depressing social and economic conditions of black communities but they also offered solutions for improvement and change" (51). In this way, "[s]oul music, in the 1960s, served as a vehicle for self-awareness, protest and social change" (Maultsby 51). When, therefore, Updike's novel shows Rabbit imagine the piano speak the words "*Here I am, find me, find me*" through its music, what these words seem to be advocating for is an awareness of African Americans and of their need to be seen and be heard and to make themselves be seen and be heard. And since it is Rabbit himself who recognises the political message of the soul music that Babe plays (it is important to note that there are no lyrics mentioned in this passage, and so this political message is conveyed to the reader solely through Rabbit's consciousness and reaction to it), the ostensible change he experiences becomes all the more striking. For the first time in his life, Rabbit seems to be able to actively listen to what African Americans have to say (even if what they have to say is, in this case, symbolically articulated through their music). As Craig Hansen Werner has argued, "the simultaneous quality of music—its ability to make us aware of the many voices sounding at a single moment—adds another dimension to our sense of the world" (xiv), and Rabbit's sense and awareness of the world substantially, while he is listening to African American soul music, expand; and this expansion brings about the creation of enough

space for the presence of African Americans to supposedly, at least as far as Rabbit is concerned, be accommodated and accepted.

"[S]tarting to hum along with herself now, lyrics born in some distant smoke" (106), Rabbit appears to cease believing in a concept of America as singularly white, and he instead becomes capable of conceiving African Americans as part of America as well, as American as white Americans:

> decades when Americans moved within the American dream, laughing at it, starving on it, but living it, humming it, the national anthem everywhere. Wise guys and hicks, straw boaters and bib overalls, fast bucks, broken hearts, penthouses in the sky, shacks by the railroad tracks, ups and downs, rich and poor, trolley cars, and the latest news by radio (106).

The fact that Rabbit, here, does not refer to African Americans as "African" but simply as "Americans" (while previously, for him, Americans meant strictly white Americans), and the fact that he creates a link between African Americans and the "American dream", perhaps the essence of what America is and what America promises, clearly demonstrates how, in a matter of a few minutes, Rabbit is supposedly able to shed his racism and become understanding and accepting of African Americans—all through his listening to soul music.

The precise way in which African American soul music appears to have a significant (and positive and ostensibly transformative) influence on Rabbit can be explained as follows. As I argued earlier in this chapter, the main reason why Rabbit, in the first third of *Rabbit Redux*, harbours such negative, racist attitudes towards African Americans is because one of his main desires, the desire for the dominance of his white masculinity to always be honoured, blends with his feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, on the one hand, when he compares himself to African Americans, and his fear, on the other, that African Americans have come to take away the privileges traditionally accorded to his white

identity. While Rabbit is listening to African American soul music, however, he is imbued with a series of positive, jubilant feelings that not only sidestep, but also seem to eradicate his previous desire to defend the honour of his white masculinity.

In *Rabbit Redux*, the apparent impact that African American soul music has on Rabbit can be seen in the way Updike's novel describes Rabbit's thoughts and feelings while Babe is singing and playing the piano. As he is listening to this music, "Rabbit sees circus tents and fireworks and farmers' wagons and an empty sandy river running so slow the sole motion is catfish sleeping beneath the golden skin" (106). This kind of emotive and metaphorical language is pointedly used by the novel to demonstrate the state of Rabbit's emotional state and realm, which is, at this moment, so full of convulsive emotional impressions that the novel imagines it to be comprised of luminous "fireworks" on the one hand and "an empty sandy river" in "slow … motion" on the other. Additionally, for Rabbit, "Babe has become a railroad, prune-head bobbing, napkin of jewels flashing blue, music rolling through crazy places, tunnels of dissonance and open stretches of the same tinny thin note bleeding itself into the sky, all sad power and happiness worn into holes like shoe soles" (107). The emotional paroxysm that pervades this passage likewise suggests that something is happening inside Rabbit, that a part of him is being transformed, that the previously negative feelings he so deeply held and harboured are now being annihilated as a result of the music that is "rolling through" him and that is supposedly vigorously transforming him.

Moreover, as African American soul music continues to echo throughout the bar and throughout Rabbit's ears and mind, another kind of transformation begins to take shape. "Into the mike that is there no bigger than a lollipop she

begins to sing, sings in a voice that is no woman's voice at all and no man's, is merely human … A time to be born, a time to die. A time to gather up stones, a time to cast stones away" (107). Initially, the biblical feelings that this kind of music stirs in Rabbit make him stop seeing Babe (and, by association, African Americans) as someone who is different from him, but rather as a person who "is merely human". Therefore, while previously Rabbit desired to "gather up stones" and attempt to stamp out what he saw as the African Americans' prominence in postwar (white) US society, he now thinks that it is "time to cast stones away" and instead embrace African Americans as equal human beings. Babe's "singing opens up, grows enormous, frightens Rabbit with its enormous black maw of truth yet makes him overjoyed that he is there; he brims with joy, to be here with these black others, he wants to shout love through the darkness of Babe's noise to the sullen brother in goatee and glasses. He brims with this itch" (107). Even though he still, in this passage, refers to African Americans as "these black others", the feeling of "joy" with which he is brimming as a result of his listening to African American soul music and the "love" that has permeated his whole being make him seem not only accepting of and welcoming to African Americans, but also delighted to be with them and be part of them and, even, at least to a certain extent, be them.

Significantly, he considers an African American "in goatee and glasses" to be a "brother" of his, thus effectively constructing a certain familial and racial kinship between himself and African Americans. He begins to feel what W. E. B. Du Bois has described as "a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others … two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (3). This notion of double-consciousness, originally used by Du Bois to construe the

"twoness" (3) of African Americans who "wishe[d] to make it possible … to be both a Negro and an American" (3), can be directly applied to this instance in *Rabbit Redux*. For, "[s]unk in [Babe's] music, Rabbit is lost" (107): his previous identity, that of the singularly white American, seems, here, as a result of the soul music and of the emotive effect it has on him, to wear off enough to allow the African American identity stemming from the music to seep into him. Rabbit thinks that "there is no other music, not really, though Babe works in some Beatles songs, 'Yesterday' and 'Hey Jude'" (106). At this moment, Rabbit feels closer to the soul music that Babe predominantly plays than the music of, for instance, in this case, the Beatles; effectively, he feels more akin to African Americans than to whites.

The novel's attempt, however, to present Rabbit as possessing two identities at the same time, that of the white American and that of the African American, is as racist as any thought or action of Rabbit so far in the novel. In this respect, Michael Szalay has identified a strong similarity between this racial practice of the novel and the blackface "minstrel show from which it is descended" (4). Blackface minstrelsy, as Eric Lott informs us, originated from a "strong white fascination with black men and black culture" ("Love and Theft" 25), and its performers "were conspicuously intrigued with the street singers and obscure characters from whom they allegedly took the material that was later fashioned to racist ends" ("Love and Theft" 25). "In music, on stage, and in film" (17), according to Michael North, "white artists dubbed in a black voice and often wore … a black mask. Because this mask, and the voice that issued from it, already embodied white America's quite various feelings about nature and convention, it became an integral part of" (North 17) early twentieth-century white American culture. In *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit is clearly captivated by Babe's

singing (at one point he “shakes his head and says, ‘She’s too good’” [107] and, after she has finished singing, he absorbingly exclaims “‘[t]hat was beautiful, Babe’” [107]); and, even though it is Babe who is performing the African American music, Rabbit, as has been seen above, at various points (even if he does not literally wear a black mask) actively participates in this performance by “starting to hum along with herself now” (106).

Moreover, the whole of Babe’s performance becomes, since it is being seen through Rabbit’s eyes, a white, albeit fictional, American, a kind of blackface minstrel show as well. When Rabbit displays an initial interest in hearing Babe sing, an African American in the bar “teases her. ‘Babe now, what sort of bad black act you putting on? He wants to hear you do your thing. Your darkie thing, right? You did the spooky card-reading bit and now you can do the banjo bit and maybe you can do the hot momma bit afterwards” (105). In effect, the novel stages here a blackface minstrel show for the reading public in which an African American can be seen performing African American music, a white American can be part of and actively participate in this performance, and the readers themselves can feel the same strong kinship to African Americans as Rabbit. As Alexander Saxton has explained,

> Blackface performers were like puppets operated by a white puppet-master. Their physical appearance proclaimed their non-humanity; yet they could be manipulated not only to mock themselves, but also to act like human beings. They expressed human emotions such as joy and grief, love, fear, longing. The white audience then identified with the emotions, admired the skill of the puppeteer, even sympathized laughingly with the hopeless aspiration of the puppets to become human, and at the same time feasted on the assurance that they could not do so (27).

Rabbit Redux, therefore, constructs Rabbit as a white character who, due to the various, and mostly positive, emotions that the African American soul music has stirred in him, ostensibly becomes capable, precisely because of these

emotions, of becoming African American. And, accordingly, in this way, the reading public can also "view themselves as simultaneously … possessed of both white and black skin" (Szalay 4) as a result of a "conveniently rationalized racial oppression" (Lott, "Seeming Counterfeit" 223) in which the white-authored novel, the white protagonist, and the white audience all attempt to subvert what they view as the rapid emergence of African Americans in the 1960s and re-establish the dominance of their white identity by blurring the Manichean distinctions of (the) black and (the) white.

II. 'The tragedy of the man not set up for tragedy': Race Remembered in *American Pastoral*

American Pastoral, a novel written and published towards the end of the 1990s, engages in an act of historical remembering whereby it looks back to the Civil Rights era and constructs, or reconstructs, an inaccurate image of white Americans' response to race during that period. The novel is largely concerned with how the daughter, Merry, of a seemingly perfect white, even if Jewish, middle-class American family becomes radicalised in the 1960s and how her setting off a bomb in protest against the Vietnam War, on the one hand, and the treatment of African Americans, on the other, has a grave impact on her father's, Seymour's, falsely idealised American pastoral reality. Set mostly in Newark, New Jersey, part of the novel chronicles the racial unrest that plagued the city towards the end of the sixties and describes how Seymour, the Jewish owner of a glove factory, Newark Maid, responds both to this racial unrest and to his daughter's radicalisation.

Roth's relation, as evinced through his writing, to race, has been a matter of considerable debate among critics. In the introduction to a special issue of the journal *Philip Roth Studies* on Roth and race, for instance, Dean J. Franco begins by asking this very question: "Does Philip Roth write about race" (83)? Franco proceeds to argue that "[t]he answers—'yes,' 'no,' and 'it depends'— … point to the wider arena wherein race itself is defined, described, performed, negotiated, and deconstructed: America itself" (83) and wonders whether "writing about Jews … is already writing about race" (83). This—whether Jews can be considered a distinct race or whether they can simply think themselves as white—is an issue I will return to later. For the purposes of this section, I will keep referring to issues of race as those specifically pertaining to white Americans' treatment of African Americans. In this respect, most critics have identified Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000) as the foremost novel in Roth's oeuvre that deals with race. In a recent article, for instance, Luminita M. Dragulescu argued that it is in *The Human Stain* that "Roth explores how racial boundaries are drawn, modified, and effaced to emphasize the performative nature of race" at the same time that he "points towards the traumatic effects of the double-voiced racial exclusion that besets racial in-betweenness" (91-92); arguments that, as I have already shown in the first section of this chapter, can be readily applied to *Rabbit Redux* as well. Similarly, Julia Faisst, taking her cue from Norman Mailer's definition of the "White Negro", has argued that the protagonist of *The Human Stain* is "on equal footing with the hipster" because of "his desire to pass racial boundaries of some sort by assuming the characteristics of the opposite race" (121), something that, again, firmly echoes what I have argued above about Rabbit.

What these, and other, critics writing about Roth and race have neglected, however, is the extent to which *American Pastoral*, the first novel of the trilogy that ends with *The Human Stain*, is more suitable for an academic examination of the African American race in Roth's fiction, precisely because it purports to not be about African Americans at all, but rather about a Jewish American who is, or aspires to be, or believes he has become, as white as Updike's Rabbit. Monika Hogan, one of the few critics who have read *American Pastoral* through a race lens, is highly critical of Seymour and his relationship to African Americans in the novel (11), as is Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, who contends that Seymour's attitudes towards African Americans are solely based on the exploitative ideals of capitalism (16). Additionally, Derek Parker Royal believes that, in *American Pastoral*, African Americans are only included in the narrative so that the Jewish protagonist can feel himself to be white (2). Only a handful of critics, such as Edward Alexander (183) and Clare Sigrist-Sutton (66), view Seymour as a sympathetic character due to his supposedly welcoming attitude towards African Americans.

In my own close reading of *American Pastoral*, I argue that the novel does paint a sympathetic portrait of Seymour that is benevolent, tolerant, and supportive of African Americans. This is evident in the desire, on the part of the protagonist, to show that he is a good person—someone who wants and chooses to behave in a humane way towards all people, African Americans included. In this way, Roth's novel, like Updike's, attempts to re-establish the pre-eminence of the white masculinity that, as I have mentioned before, during the 1960s, was in crisis. The extreme preoccupation, however, on the part both of Seymour and of other white American characters in the novel, with their own responses to and opinions of African Americans, coupled with the absence of

African Americans' own responses to and opinions of white Americans in general and of Seymour in particular, firmly reveals the novel's racial strategies. And the fact that the reader is able to detect the real reasons behind Seymour's seemingly compassionate behaviour towards African Americans demonstrates that the novel's attempt to prove the supposed racial innocence of white Americans during the 1960s has comprehensively failed.

To begin with, in a particular episode in *American Pastoral*, Roth's novel invokes the real-life figure of Angela Davis, the prominent African American political and civil activist, in order to help Seymour justify himself against his daughter's accusations of his exploiting black workers as part of his running of the glove factory. As Seymour is sitting at the kitchen table of his home one night, Angela Davis, taking the place of his daughter who, after setting off the bomb, has vanished, magically—and symbolically—appears and starts chastising him with regard to issues of racial injustice and the exploitation of black labour. However, as

> [s]he tells him that imperialism is a weapon used by wealthy whites to pay black workers less for their work … that's when he seizes the opportunity to tell her about the black forelady, Vicky, thirty years with Newark Maid, a tiny woman of impressive wit, stamina, and honesty, with twin sons, Newark Rutgers graduates, Donny and Blaine, both of them now in medical school (161).

In this case, in order to appear sympathetic to the phantasmatic apparition of Angela Davis, and in order for the novel to elicit sympathy for him from the reading public, Seymour begins talking about an African American woman working for him in a complimentary, and even congratulatory, tone. In a clear gendering of race (it is not coincidental that Seymour chooses, in this instance, to talk about an African American woman instead of about an African American man), and in complete contradistinction to the way Rabbit initially talked about

African Americans in *Rabbit Redux*, Seymour praises this African American woman, but his compliments seem to stem from a desire to show how appreciative of African Americans he supposedly is. And by pointedly mentioning how this African American woman's "twin sons" are "now in medical school", and thus on their way towards a lustrous career in a significantly esteemed profession, Seymour also implicitly suggests another of her laudable characteristics: that of the ability to raise children in the best possible way, in a way that has led, or will eventually lead, these children to (professional) greatness.

It is evidently not enough for Seymour to talk about African Americans, and about this African American woman in particular, in a highly appreciative manner; rather, instead of only showing his own positive attitudes towards African Americans, he also needs to demonstrate the positive attitudes and opinions African Americans purportedly have for himself. For this reason, in the same paragraph and while still talking to Angela Davis, Seymour also

> tells her how Vicky alone stayed with him in the building, round the clock, during the '67 riots. On the radio, the mayor's office was advising everyone to get out of the city immediately, but he had stayed, because he thought that by being there he could perhaps protect the building from the vandals and also for the reason that people stay when a hurricane hits, because they cannot leave behind the things they cherish. For something like that Vicky stayed (161).

In 1967, in Newark, African Americans rioted in order to protest the racist and inhumane treatment they had been receiving from white Americans. In this passage, however, Seymour tells us that the African American woman working for himself "stayed with him in the building" while the riots were taking place outside. Effectively, what he tells us is that this African American woman chose to stay with him, a white American man, rather than join the people of her own race. In this way, he brazenly attempts to diminish the importance and the

magnitude of African Americans' revolt against white Americans. For if the only African American character specifically mentioned in the narrative of the novel stands by, as Seymour seems to propose, white Americans rather than African Americans, then how can the African American struggle against white racial oppression and injustice be legitimised, in the implied reader's eyes at least? And if the reason Seymour puts forth for this African American woman's acting in this way is that she cherished the building in which she, for many years, had been working, then how can the protest against everything this building represents be condoned? Especially since, "[i]n order to appease any rioters who might be heading from South Orange Avenue with their torches, Vicky had made signs and stuck them where they would be visible, in Newark Maid's first-floor windows, big white cardboard signs in black ink: 'Most of this factory's employees are NEGROES'" (161)? For Seymour, Newark Maid is apparently a recipient of African American approval and support, and nowhere is this more evident than in Vicky's being shown to actively help a white boss and a white establishment against the threat of African American insurgence.

Furthermore, I believe it is evident from the above passages that, while the novel could have used Angela Davis to delve into issues of racial injustice and educate both the protagonist and the reader with regard to African American history, it in fact only includes her in the narrative in order to give the opportunity to the white protagonist to rationalise, and validate, his position towards African Americans. Seymour is aware, thirty years after the Civil Rights era, of the fact that being supportive of, and behaving in a humane way towards, African Americans is the right, the just, thing to do. But for Seymour, in *American Pastoral*, whether he really is supportive of African Americans, whether he really behaves in a humane way towards them, does not truly

matter; rather, what matters for him is to show that he is good, and that he behaves in a humane way, even if, in reality, he is not and does not. Seymour presents substantive, in his mind, evidence that his attitudes and behaviour as far as African Americans are concerned are impeccable. And since, at the same time, Seymour wants to appease his desire for the honour and prestige of his white identity to always be upheld, at this moment he feels indignation at Angela Davis's and his daughter's accusations that he, as a white person, is treating African Americans unfairly. And that is the reason why, in these quoted passages, he goes on at length and in detail about how his relationship with African Americans, in particular with the African Americans that work for him in his glove factory, is nothing less than exquisite.

Nevertheless, what is revealed from a close reading of these passages is that Vicky, the African American worker whom Seymour specifically mentions, is not shown to speak on her own at all. What we get is not Vicky's viewpoint, but Seymour telling us how Vicky thinks and feels, and thought and felt during the 1967 Newark riots. What we get is essentially a white man's version of an African American woman's opinion of him, a practice that strongly resembles Rabbit's blackface performance in *Rabbit Redux*. As Jung-Suk Hwang has argued, the African Americans working for Seymour, and Vicky in particular, "are an important group that offers a counterreality to [Seymour's] narrative. Yet Roth underrepresents their voices in a layered rhetoric … their voices are represented mainly through [Seymour]" (163). And I think it is fairly obvious why such a practice is problematic and why the way this novel chooses to remember the racial unrest of the Civil Rights era, and the white Americans' response to this racial unrest, is politically dubious: *American Pastoral* promotes a narrative

according to which the white protagonist is shown to be accepting and supportive of African Americans simply because he says so himself.

A few pages later, however, the blatant racism of white America that Updike, in *Rabbit Redux*, firmly documented, does make its appearance in *American Pastoral*. In a lengthy soliloquy, Seymour's father, Lou, who initially built Newark Maid and then handed it down to his son, severely condemns African Americans for the havoc they have wreaked, during the riots, both on the city of Newark in general and on the Levovs' glove factory in particular:

> A whole business is going down the drain … I built this with my *hands*! With my blood! They think somebody gave it to me? Who? Who gave it to me? Who gave me anything, ever? Nobody! What I have I built! With work—w-o-r-k! But they took that city and now they are going to take that business and everything that I built up a day at a time, an *inch* at a time, and they are going to leave it *all* in ruins! And that'll do 'em a world of good! They burn down their own houses—that'll show whitey! Don't fix 'em up—burn 'em down. Oh, that'll do wonders for a man's black pride—a totally ruined city to live in! A great city turned into a total nowhere! They're just going to love living in that (163-164).

In this passage, Lou makes a clear division between whiteness and blackness—or, more accurately, between the characteristics (mostly as far as work is concerned) of white Americans and African Americans. On the one hand, white Americans like Lou have, according to him, worked hard to make it to the top: with apparently no help at all, they have done what is necessary to build something important and to manage to make a lot of money out of it. On the other hand, as Roy Goldblatt has argued, Lou "implies that African Americans are lazy, unskilled, destructive shirkers who want things handed to them; they have thus clearly not internalized the white values of industry, ambition, hard work, and delayed gratification embraced by the Jewish model minority" (97). Goldblatt's argument is of significant interest here; for, as the above passage from *American Pastoral* also suggests, not only does Lou

demarcate the (supposed) characteristics of white and African Americans, he also equates Jewishness with whiteness. As a consequence, his furious remarks about the immeasurable amount of work he has put into making Newark Maid, and his palpable scorn for African Americans' having no qualms about destroying something that is not theirs, are revealed to stem not from an authentic resentment towards African Americans, but rather from a need, or desire, to "fulfil [his] dream of total assimilation" (Goldblatt 95), to be able to fully consider himself, a Jew, as white.

What Lou does not understand is that the cause of the riots, the main reason why African Americans proceeded to (as he put it) "burn down their own houses", was the inhumane way in which they were treated, in all walks of life, by a substantial part of white Americans. As Michael Kimmage has argued, "[f]or Newark's black residents, the barriers of exclusion were radically higher; transformation was more impossible than arduous. If anything, multicultural Newark—in one of the few Northern states that voted against Abraham Lincoln in 1860—harbored a virulent brand of racism" (31). It was against this racism, and in order to bypass these "barriers of exclusion" and to seek better, more humane, working and living conditions, that Newark's African Americans, in 1967, protested. But Lou cannot grasp the inequality and injustice African Americans have been faced with; for him, the sole fact that he has hired, in Newark Maid, African Americans, is enough:

> *I* hired 'em! How's that for a laugh? *I hired 'em!* 'You're nuts, Levov'—this is what my friends in the steam room used to tell me—'What are you hiring schvartzes for? You won't get gloves, Levov, you'll get dreck.' But I hired 'em, treated them like human beings, kissed Vicky's ass for twenty-five years, bought all the girls a Thanksgiving turkey every goddamn Thanksgiving, came in every morning with my tongue hanging out of my mouth so I could lick their asses with it. 'How is everybody,' I said, 'how are we all, my time is yours, I don't want you complaining to anybody but

> me, here at this desk isn't just a boss, here is your ally, your buddy, your friend' (164).

Lou's repeated phrase, "I hired 'em", is a clear indication of his ignorance regarding the subpar working conditions of African Americans during that time period. As a white man, or as someone feeling himself a white man, and a white businessman most of all, he believes that, by solely giving a few African Americans a job, he has done everything he can to eliminate the race problem. And what is more, he also thinks that, by being excessively (verging on mockingly) polite to his African American workers, they ought to be thankful to him despite the low wages with which they are expected to be satisfied.

According to Lou, as Robert Boyers has convincingly contended, "[w]e are also asked to accept … that those who set the cities on fire, who beat on 'bongo drums' while their neighbors looted and sniped and left behind a 'smoldering rubble,' were actually in flight from the good life" (40)—a good life, however, that is defined not by the African Americans who are living it, but by the white Americans who purport to be providing it. As Boyers goes on, "[w]e are to accept—so the logic of the novel dictates—that the blacks of the inner city must have been incomprehensibly dissatisfied with their wonderful jobs and turned on by the prospect of liberating something vital and long buried in their otherwise admirable lives" (40). As such, in Lou's mind, African Americans are not protesting because they are being treated unfairly (by white Americans and by Lou himself), and because they are being paid poorly (by white Americans and by Lou himself), but rather because there is something inherently wrong with their own selves that they are trying to figure out—a racist assumption firmly echoing Rabbit's own while he is riding the bus.

Nevertheless, these instances of blatant racism, similar to *Rabbit Redux*'s, in *American Pastoral* are used in order to, again, promote the protagonist's seeming innocence. For, significantly, it is not Seymour who appears explicitly racist, at least in the above passages; it is his father. Seymour appears to be highly critical of Lou, and to disagree with and even defy his father. He "could not submit to the old man's arguments" (165) and "each time [Lou] flew up from Florida to plead with his son to get the hell out before a second riot destroyed the rest of the city" (163), Seymour always seems to hold his ground. In stark contradistinction to his father's racist blubbering, he claims he "is trying to do everything for the liberation of" (165) African Americans. "He reminds himself to repeat these words to [Angela Davis] every night: the liberation of the people, America's black colonies, the inhumanity of society, embattled humanity" (165). Lou, the novel wants to convince us, is part of an older epoch, of a time when being racist was the norm. Seymour, on the other hand, represents the new white American, the progressive hipster who really feels for African Americans and who wants to do everything he can to help them. However, by trying to show he is just through his supposedly humane behaviour towards African Americans, Seymour ultimately fails precisely because the justice he seeks to demonstrate as having has nothing to do with what really is inside him, but rather everything to do with what he appears to be doing on the outside.

The main reason why Seymour is so intent on making it seem that he is innocent and just and accepting of African Americans is to appease his daughter, Merry, who, after setting off the bomb in protest against the way her father and grandfather and other white Americans like them have been treating African Americans, has disappeared without a trace. The first time that "[a]t the

kitchen table one night Angela Davis appears to" him, Seymour "thinks, Angela Davis can get me to her" (160). He believes that if he manages to persuade the apparition of Angela Davis of his racial innocence, she will be able to lead him to his lost daughter, and so everything he says to her he simply says with this purpose in mind: "He tells her whatever she wants to hear, and whatever she tells him he believes. He has to" (160). And that is also why the previous apparent racial contradiction between Seymour and his father is also deceitful. Because, if Merry becomes aware of her father's having the same, or at least similar, racial views as her grandfather, who, as I have argued, is presented as being clearly racist, she will never return, she will forever remain hidden and, quite possibly, on the run:

> Whatever it cost him to deny his father relief from his suffering, stubbornly to defy the truth of what his father was saying, [Seymour] could not submit to the old man's arguments, for the simple reason that if Merry were to learn … that Newark Maid had fled the Central Avenue factory she would be all delighted to think, 'He did it! He's as rotten as the rest! My own father! Everything justified by the profit principle! Everything! Newark's just a black colony for my own father. Exploit it and exploit it and then, when there's trouble, fuck it!' (165).

Seymour is clearly frightened of his daughter's potential anger towards him, and so he makes himself appear racially aware and his factory seem inclusive. Anything less "would surely foreclose any chance of ever seeing her again" (165).

His real thoughts about his daughter, however, and, consequently, his real thoughts about her cause, are not spoken out loud to Angela Davis, but are rather revealed through the novel's quiet narration of them: "He does not tell Angela that his daughter is childishly boasting, lying in order to impress her, that his daughter knows nothing about dynamite or revolution, that these are just words to her and she blurts them out to make herself feel powerful despite her

speech impediment" (165). In this case, Seymour is shown to not only be completely unmoved and unconcerned by white Americans' treatment of African Americans, but also to be degrading both his own daughter and her fight against racial inequality by attributing Merry's social and political ideals to merely a symptom of her (in his mind) aberrant, and severely damaged, psychopathology. His internal monologue, therefore, reveals what he has so far been trying to hide: that he does not truly care about African Americans, and that he believes that the only reason Merry does care is her supposed need to feel better about herself. And since "Angela is the person who knows Merry's whereabouts" (165), he blatantly lies in order to get Angela to get him to her:

> So he says to her *yes*, his daughter *is* a soldier of freedom, yes, he *is* proud, yes, everything he has heard about Communism *is* a lie, yes, the United States *is* concerned solely with making the world safe for business and keeping the have-nots from encroaching on the haves—yes, the United States is responsible for oppression *everywhere*. Everything is justified by her cause (166).

After trying so hard to appear compassionate towards African Americans, and a true advocate of their calls for equality, Seymour, towards the end of his meetings with Angela Davis's apparition, reveals himself as solely a father who is cajoling his daughter into coming back to him and their home.

III. Race and the End of US Society as We Know It: *Mr. Sammler's Planet*

In *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, Bellow portrays the eponymous Jewish protagonist of this novel as someone who, unlike Roth's Seymour, has not managed to assimilate to the white American society he lives in and is a part of. Wishing and struggling to become white, desirous of acquiring the white identity that for many years has had a monopoly on a wide array of societal privileges, Mr.

Sammler is initially shown to harbour the same racist thoughts regarding African Americans as many white Americans of that period and as Updike's Rabbit. By associating himself with white Americans' racist perceptions, and by fighting against what was considered to be the antithesis of white Americans, Mr. Sammler feels that he will manage to be accepted by the white American society he inhabits. However, unable to fully assimilate, finding it exceedingly difficult to subscribe to the inhumane behaviour with which some white Americans in the novel treat an African American character, towards the end Mr. Sammler is shown to sympathise with and try to save an African American pickpocket whom he initially reported to the police.

Critical scholarship regarding *Mr. Sammler's Planet* and Bellow's portrayal of Mr. Sammler's racism has been mixed. On the one hand, critics such as Stanley Crouch (93), Laurie Grobman (80) and Gerald F. Manning (217) have mostly applauded what they see as Bellow's portrayal of Mr. Sammler's humanity, arguing that Mr. Sammler is able to overcome whatever racial prejudices he held at the beginning of the novel and become a fully-fledged, humane character who cares about his African American counterpart. Similarly, in a philosophical reading of the novel, Sukhbir Singh has argued that Mr. Sammler's standing against the inhumane treatment of the African American character at the end of the novel represents his "humane outlook toward evil whereby it turns harmless and helps him tread the path of benevolence" (312), an argument that is also made by Regine Rosenthal (81) and, in a less philosophical vein, D. P. M. Salter (57). On the other hand, Derek Wright is highly critical of what he deems as Mr. Sammler's "one-sided vision" in which "American blacks are seen, stereotypically, as fantasy-metaphors for violence and white-envied sexual prowess" (22). Along the same line, Ethan

Goffman sees in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* a collection of racial prejudices that are reinforced through the relationship between Mr. Sammler and the African American character (705). Going one step further, however, Goffman argues that the consolidation of the novel's racial stereotypes is evidence of Jews' having "assimilated to the point where the Jewish gaze is indistinguishable from dominant American society" (705) which considers African Americans as Other.

In my own analysis of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in this section, I make two main arguments. First, I slightly differ from Goffman's claim: Bellow's novel is not, I argue, evidence of Jews having assimilated to the white American society so much so that they end up invariably harbouring racist thoughts against African Americans. Rather, Mr. Sammler, feeling like an outsider due to his Jewishness, develops racist sentiments towards African Americans precisely because he has not in truth managed to assimilate. Seeing all around him the demonisation of African Americans by a significant portion of white Americans, he assumes that, in order to be considered white, he needs to subscribe to that demonisation himself. If African Americans are considered by white Americans to be the Other, he feels he needs to consider African Americans as Other as well. In other words, by labelling African Americans as the Other, as that which is not white, he believes he will manage to identify as white himself. Therefore, for a large part of the novel we see a slight divergence in terms of how the protagonist operates. Since, unlike Seymour in *American Pastoral*, Mr. Sammler does not think of himself as white right from the start, his main wish at this initial point of consideration is not, like in the two novels examined above, the re-establishment of the privileged position of his white identity (since he does not possess a white identity to begin with). Rather, his main desire at this stage is solely the desire to be(come) white, to acquire the white identity that will make

him an indistinguishable part of the American society he has come to inhabit, and that will allow him to reap the privileges that are traditionally accorded to that white identity.

While the first part of this argument is character-driven, stemming mostly from the way the protagonist of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* thinks and acts in the novel, I direct the second part of my first argument in this section to the novel itself. In this sense, I echo some of the arguments made above: I argue that the novel spends a large part of the narrative portraying the protagonist as racist in order to, paradoxically, elicit sympathy for Mr. Sammler from the reader. If Mr. Sammler is shown to harbour racist views merely because he needs to appease his desire to become white, to stop being an outsider and finally fit in—if Mr. Sammler's racism is not something that he is directly responsible for—then his behaviour can, the novel seems to want the reader to believe, be justified. And it is in this justification of racist behaviour that many white Americans' desire for the re-establishment of their white masculinity in the 1960s comes into play. Bellow, a Jewish American author who, partly due to his having gained fame through his writing, had managed to fully assimilate to white American society, published *Mr. Sammler's Planet* in 1970—after the conclusion of the 1960s but at a time when the effects of the countercultural and the Civil Rights movement's calls for equality were still being felt. Indeed, in a recent exploration of race in the novels of Bellow, Martín Urdiales-Shaw sees *Mr. Sammler's Planet* as "epitomizing Bellow's about-face toward conservatism and his bitter reaction to the late 1960s, with its militant student movements, the emergence of civil rights and Black Power movements, and the liberation of the new youth culture, signalled by the advent of May 1968" (125). In order, therefore, to restore what many white Americans were seeing as the diminishing honour of

their white masculinity during the 1960s, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*'s narrative includes an abundance of instances in which Mr. Sammler is shown to harbour racist views and behave in a racist way to fit into white American society.

The second argument I make in this section is that the novel's attempt to restore what was perceived as the diminishing honour of white masculinity is not only evident in its appearing to justify Mr. Sammler's racism, but also, towards the end of the novel, through its showing Mr. Sammler ultimately siding with African Americans. As I demonstrated above, many critics view Mr. Sammler's ultimate kinship with the African American character as a genuine transformation on the part of Mr. Sammler. Joyce Carol Oates, in a contemporaneous article about the state of literature in the *New York Times*, goes as far as to say that Mr. Sammler's transformation, and Bellow's rendering of it, is so strong and so vivid that it effects a transformation on readers as well: "But let us consider the conclusion of 'Mr. Sammler's Planet,' which is so powerful that it forces us to immediately reread the entire novel, because we have been altered in the process of reading it and are now, at its conclusion, ready to begin reading it". For Oates, as for many critics, Mr. Sammler's racial metamorphosis at the end of the novel significantly alters the way in which they view him; in effect, it makes them engage in a wholesale re-evaluation of the character of Mr. Sammler.

I argue that the placing of Mr. Sammler's apparent transformation towards the end of the novel is a choice that functions to have precisely that effect: to make readers re-appraise their opinions regarding Mr. Sammler, to make the impression of Mr. Sammler as a humane and conclusively good character last, and, in a more subtle way, to prevent the readers (since nothing much takes place between the scene of Mr. Sammler's transformation and the

end of the novel) from seeing whether Mr. Sammler has actually changed or whether his show of humanity was limited only to that one particular moment. Furthermore, I also argue that *Mr. Sammler's Planet*'s attempt to form a racial kinship between Mr. Sammler and the African American character is a similar practice to *Rabbit Redux*'s showing Rabbit engage in a form of racial masquerade while listening to African American soul music at the African American bar. Mr. Sammler's racial transformation, deliberate and fabricated, is in truth nothing more than a symbolic racial masquerade that functions to make Mr. Sammler appear black. While, therefore, Susan Glickman has argued that *Mr. Sammler's Planet* represents to a certain extent "Bellow's intensely sincere refutation of Mailer's ethic in The White Negro" (577), I argue that through constructing a certain kind of cordially rendered humanitarian relationship between the Jewish-who-wants-to-become-white protagonist and the African American who was previously considered to be the antagonist, Bellow's novel transforms Mr. Sammler into a Jewish-White Negro in an attempt to re-establish the privileged position of white masculinity.

Bellow's preoccupation with race in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, and the crucial role the African American character plays in the novel in terms of the arguments I have put forth above, is evident and becomes apparent even from the second page of the novel. "Mr. Sammler", Bellow narrates, "returning on the customary bus late afternoons from the Forty-second Street Library had been watching a pickpocket at work" (2). The pickpocket "was a powerful Negro in a camel's-hair coat" (2). Even from this rather simply rendered differentiation between Mr. Sammler and the African American, Mr. Sammler's desire to assimilate to the white American society, to be considered white, is evinced. On the one hand of the social spectrum, Mr. Sammler is someone who spends a

significant part of the day at “the Forty-second Street Library”, presumably buried in books and therefore a man of culture. In contrast, on the other hand of the social spectrum, the African American is a pickpocket, a criminal. Additionally, when the African American “turned toward Sammler … the face showed the effrontery of a big animal” (2). Sharply echoing Rabbit’s view of African Americans on the bus in *Rabbit Redux*, Mr. Sammler thinks of the African American on the New York bus as “a big animal”. The fact that the African American’s coat is made of camel’s hair, of the hair of an animal that originates in and is associated with Africa, also reinforces the African American’s being equated with animality. And when Mr. Sammler mentions this African American to his family, he describes him as “this striking, arrogant pickpocket, this African prince or great black beast … seeking whom he might devour between Columbus Circle and Verdi Square” (10). This crisp contrast between Mr. Sammler and the African American character, the repeated attempts on the part of Mr. Sammler to differentiate himself, a man of culture, from the African American whom he sees as a criminal animal-like creature, are evidence of Mr. Sammler’s strong wish to be considered white.

In this respect, Carol R. Smith has argued that “Bellow’s construction of racial difference operates to reify a positive notion of the Enlightenment as central to assimilated (white) America” (104). Indeed, culture is equated here with whiteness, while blackness is thought of as both criminal and animal-like. That is why Mr. Sammler is shown to have a “civilized face” that is “colored strongly” (2). He is a Jewish man who wants to be considered white; he associates whiteness with culture and therefore civilisation; his face is thus coloured civilised (meaning coloured white). He has created an image of himself as someone who is civilised simply and solely so as to make himself in this way

white. And against this (his?) whiteness, he shows the African American character as Other: Other than himself, and so, by association, other than white (and vice versa). Mr. Sammler is here so desirous of his assimilating into the white American society, of acquiring the white identity that brings with it privileges and honour, that he feels the need to (symbolically, not spatially) distance himself from and denigrate the African American character he sees committing a crime. In this regard, Hana Wirth-Nesher and Andrea Cohen Malamut have argued that "[w]e should be careful not to assume that the use of a black man as physical force and 'other' to Sammler's cerebral nature constitutes a blatant straightforward reaffirmation of an ugly racist stereotype" (66). But Mr. Sammler's forceful labelling of this African American character as a criminal animal-like Other sharply different from himself shows that he in fact consciously adopts this white-constructed stereotype for his own purposes of racial assimilation.

The fact that Mr. Sammler reports this African American character's crime to the police might not necessarily be suspect, might not have any racial implications. "He saw a crime committed. He reported it to the cops" (6). It could be as simple as that. Nevertheless, if we consider the matter more carefully, Mr. Sammler does not actually report the crime to the police, but rather the (African American) criminal. The novel's description of the crime, as seen through the eyes of Mr. Sammler, is pointedly focused on the movements of the African American character. Mr. Sammler is "staring down at the masculine hand that came from behind lifting the clasp and tipping the pocketbook lightly to make it fall open"; he "saw a polished Negro forefinger without haste, with no criminal tremor, turning aside a plastic folder with Social Security or credit cards … [t]hen with the touch of a doctor on a patient's belly the Negro moved back the

slope leather, turned the gilded scallop catch" (6). He even fixates on the way the African American character looks, possibly so that he will be able to describe the criminal to the police with as much detail as possible: "[t]he dark glasses, the original design by Christian Dior, a powerful throat banded by a tab collar and a cherry silk necktie spouting out. Under the African nose, a cropped mustache" (7).

These frankly very impressive observation skills that Mr. Sammler is shown to possess make him stand out from the rest of the (white) crowd as someone singularly capable of assisting the police in catching the African American criminal. As a result, we can see that one of the reasons why Mr. Sammler reports the African American's crime to the police is because he wants to consider himself as the guardian of the white American society. As a Jewish man who wishes to be regarded as white and be respected in the same way as a white person, Mr. Sammler, in a similar manner to Rabbit's considering America as his garden, assumes the role of the guardian in order to protect what he wants to consider as his white America from what he sees as the black intruder. The character feels empowered, mighty; he will save peaceful white America from what he thinks of as the black criminality that seeks to disrupt it. What is more, he feels that white America needs him as its guardian; that he is white America's only chance of being saved. He deems the white woman whom the African American steals from as having "[z]ero instincts, no grasp of New York" (7). In contrast, he, who not only has observed the crime but the criminal as well and so will help the police to catch him, has a better grasp of New York than her; he is more fully aware of the white society he inhabits, and of the way in which the black outsiders wish to wreak havoc; in essence, he is even whiter than her.

Moreover, while Mr. Sammler "might then have stayed away from that particular bus … instead he tried hard to repeat the experience" (6). Indeed, "Mr. Sammler had to admit that once he had seen the pickpocket at work he wanted very much to see the thing again. He didn't know why. It was a powerful event, and illicitly—that is, against his own stable principles—he craved a repetition" (7). I would argue that the reason why Mr. Sammler "craved" to see the African American character repeat his crime stems, again, from his desire to be considered white. It is as if, in his mind, he believes that by continually associating blackness with criminality, his differentiation from that unlawful blackness will be made even more transparent: his whiteness will effectively and beyond all doubt be consolidated. The novel describes Mr. Sammler as having "received from the crime the benefit of an enlarged vision. The air was brighter—late afternoon, daylight-saving time. The world, Riverside Drive, was wickedly lighted up. Wicked because the clear light made all objects so explicit" (8). Again, as in *Rabbit Redux*, we have here words and phrases such as "brighter", "lighted up", and "the clear light" that are used as metonyms for whiteness. After Mr. Sammler has seen the African American character commit the crime, after he has validated (to himself more than to anybody else) his whiteness, he feels everywhere around him whiteness (the whiteness of the American society into which he has been trying to assimilate) absorbing him. He now, after having so forcefully distinguished himself from blackness, feels—or wants to feel—as much part of the white American society as any white American in New York.

All the aforementioned racist thoughts and attitudes, however, do not stem solely from Mr. Sammler's desire to become and be considered white. Bellow's novel, in an effort to justify how its protagonist thinks and acts, makes

the case for Mr. Sammler having developed a form of xenophobia as a result of the treatment he himself received as a Jew by the German Nazis during World War II. When Mr. Sammler "for the first time … mentioned [the African American pickpocket] to Margotte, his niece and landlady" because it "was too much to keep to himself" (10), Bellow's novel insinuates a stark contradistinction between the way Mr. Sammler thinks and feels and the way Margotte does—all, as I will show, due to their different experiences of persecution during the war. While, therefore, Mr. Sammler views and describes the African American character in the way I have demonstrated above, as a primitive, animalistic, and monstrous Other devoid of all humanity, Margotte, much like Seymour's daughter in *American Pastoral*, is shown to be casting aside all damning prejudiced misconceptions regarding African Americans and to be interested in the African American as a person. She raises questions about the African American: "Who was this black? What were his origins, his class or racial attitudes, his psychological views? Was he a revolutionary? Would he be for black guerilla warfare?" (10). Even though some of these questions are, indeed, racially tinged, they do not convey any kind of prejudice on behalf of Margotte; they are simply evidence of the sociopolitical background against which the novel takes place. What is more, they reveal a character who really cares about her fellow person irrespective of the colour of their skin, unlike Mr. Sammler: "Unless Sammler had private thoughts to occupy him, he couldn't sit through these talks with Margotte. She was sweet but on the theoretical side very tedious, and when she settled down to an earnest theme, one was lost" (10). On the one hand, this manner of thinking on the part of Mr. Sammler is a form of social commentary with regard to how racist views are formed and perpetuated: it is easier to one-dimensionally disparage someone simply

because they look different from oneself than to invest some time in trying to understand that person by being positively oblivious to their external, physical characteristics.

On the other hand, and more importantly with respect to what I am arguing, the novel also demonstrates a high level of care and concern for its protagonist, attempting, as I have noted above, to justify and humanise him. For this reason, while it presents Mr. Sammler's racial attitudes towards African Americans in a bad light, it portrays Margotte as someone "enormously desirous of doing good. And really she was good (that was the point), she was boundlessly, achingly, hopelessly on the right side, the best side, of every big human question: for creativity, for the young, for the black, for the poor, the oppressed, for victims, for sinners, for the hungry" (15). But this contrast between these two characters, between the good Margotte and the (seemingly) bad Mr. Sammler (however simplistic and monolithic such terms and distinctions might be), originates from the characters' starkly different experiences of the horrors of World War II. This is evidenced "one week when [Margotte] wished to analyze Hannah Arendt's phrase The Banality of Evil, and kept him in the living room, sitting on a sofa" (11). Margotte "in her goodness speculated" that "there is no great spirit of evil. Those people were too insignificant … They were just ordinary lower-class people, administrators, small bureaucrats … A mass society does not produce great criminals. It's because of the division of labor all over society which broke up the whole idea of general responsibility" (11). In this instance, Margotte's belief that the German Nazis were not inherently evil seems to stem from her "goodness", from a personal quality that does not allow her to put any kind of blame on people, even on those who were responsible for something as vile as the

Holocaust. But Mr. Sammler "couldn't bring himself to say what he thought" because "he doubted that he could make himself clear" (11). And this, in turn, is due to the fact that, even though "most of [Margotte's] family had been destroyed by the Nazis like his own … she herself had gotten out in 1937. Not he" (11).

In this respect, S. Lillian Kremer has argued that postwar, post-Holocaust Jewish American literature "reveals the survivors to be so maimed by Holocaust experience that they regard themselves as fundamentally apart from those unscathed by Holocaust trauma" (45). It is in this instance in the novel, I argue, that the novel's attempt to justify Mr. Sammler's racial thoughts and attitudes reaches its true zenith. Mr. Sammler is shown to have developed xenophobic views not only because he wishes to distinguish himself so much from African Americans so that he can become himself white, but also as a result of the deeply traumatic xenophobic treatment that he himself received by the German Nazis because he was considered to be Other. In this way, Mr. Sammler's experience of the Holocaust in this novel "sounds more like a survivalist creed in a postmodern world of … violence than the legacy of the survivors who had somehow maintained their human dignity and preserved a Jewish identity" (Sicher 58). For the novel spends much time, both in this instance and throughout the whole narrative, recounting Mr. Sammler's experiences of the Holocaust in order to elicit sympathy for its protagonist from the reader—in order, that is, to make the reader forgive him for the way he views African Americans. In this way, similarly to the other two novels analysed in this chapter, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* reinscribes the white dominant racial hierarchy of American society.

Commenting on the intellectual ideas that *Mr. Sammler's Planet* puts forth and negotiates, Douglass Boilling has argued that "[i]n one of the controlling patterns we find Mr. Sammler's involvement in ethical and philosophical concerns at a primarily speculative and intellectualized level … he is an intellectual for whom ideas are alive and precious in their own right as well as being crucial to the ethical task of forging one's humanity" (190). While this is certainly the case for a large part of the novel, in this instance we are confronted with an ethical question deliberately devised not by Mr. Sammler the character, but rather by the novel itself, in order to make us reconsider our own views regarding Mr. Sammler's racial attitudes. For who wouldn't feel the slightest sympathy towards a character who has endured what Mr. Sammler did: "The war had caught him, with Shula and his late wife, in Poland … She was killed in 1940, and her father's optical-instrument factory (a small one) was dismantled and sent to Austria. No postwar indemnity was paid … He had actually gone through it, lost his wife, lost an eye" (11). In stark yet striking prose strongly reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's "So it goes" motto in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), the novel reveals a side to Mr. Sammler that the reader had almost certainly not considered before. More importantly, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* seems to be asking the reader whether it is any wonder that someone who has both physically and psychologically suffered so much for being different would go on to develop similar xenophobic attitudes towards others different from himself.

In this sense, Mr. Sammler's position seems to confirm Stephen Schryer's assertion that he "is also a member of this explaining class" (111), a band of (white) individuals attempting to explain to others their every thought and action, something that also exemplifies the novel's own attempt at

explaining and justifying Mr. Sammler's racism. Moreover, and finally as far as this strand of my argument is concerned, the Gothically vulgar and dolorous way in which Mr. Sammler is presented in this instance, while Bellow is recounting his horrific experience of the Holocaust, unveils yet another reason for Mr. Sammler's racial views: fear. "Uncle Artur, sitting, knees high in the sling chair, his pale-tufted eyes shaded by tinted glasses, the forked veins coming down from the swells of his forehead and the big mouth determined to be silent" (11) is afraid that if he does not manage to assimilate to the white American society in which he lives, if he does not succeed in becoming white, if he remains the Other in the same way that he was the Other in relation to the German Nazis, maybe some white Americans will begin behaving towards him in a similar manner to the frequently abhorrent way in which they behave towards the other Others of postwar United States—that is, African Americans.

As explained above, there is another kind of fear the lurks beneath the surface of Mr. Sammler's racial attitudes: the fear that the white masculinity he so strongly wishes to attain, or to start considering as part of his own self, might not be as high and mighty as he originally thought. For, as a result of the African American calls for equality during the 1950s and 1960s, of the Civil Rights movement's attempt to be seen, heard, and considered as equal, many white Americans began showing signs of anxiety with respect to how their white masculinity would fare in this context. This anxiety, which Mr. Sammler, in his quest for white assimilation, inevitably espouses, is evident a few pages later when the African American pickpocket fiercely confronts him. "[W]hen Mr. Sammler entered the lobby of his building", the African American pickpocket "came up behind him quickly, and not simply behind but pressing him bodily, belly to back. He did not lift his hands to Sammler but pushed" (39). This

premeditated lurking that ends up with the African American pressing and pushing the Jew-who-wants-to-become-white is a very potent metaphor for the sinister intentions many white Americans ascribed to African Americans' striving for equality during the 1950s and 1960s. In a similar way to how Rabbit is afraid that African Americans have come to mischievously take over his—and his race's—privileges, we see here Mr. Sammler's similar fears being symbolically represented by the African American pickpocket's confrontation.

But the manifestations of Mr. Sammler's racially fearful fantasies do not stop there. When

> the man held Sammler against the wall with his forearm … [t]he pickpocket unbuttoned himself. Sammler heard the zipper descend … He was directed, silently, to look downward. The black man had opened his fly and taken out his penis … Over the forearm and fist that held him Sammler was required to gaze at this organ (40).

Widely commented on by critical literature, this scene exemplifies white (even if Jewish) man's fears over the shift in white America's social hierarchy during the 1960s as a result of African Americans' calls for equality. As Michael Szalay has aptly put it, this instance in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* "specifies the nature of the phallic authority bound up with fantasies of black expressivity at the end of the sixties" (223). Set up and functioning like a dream sequence, the African American pickpocket's exposing himself to Mr. Sammler demonstrates white male Americans' association of sex with violence and, in turn, violence with blackness—in contrast, always, to the supposed purity of whiteness.

Regarding the ways in which race and sexuality seem to merge in this scene, Susan Gubar has argued that Bellow makes use of "shockingly explicit images that, on the one hand, correlate black male subjectivity with the body and specifically with the penis, an association that has obviously contributed to the idea of the hypermasculinized black stud; on the other hand, by virtue of

exposing the black penis for/to the white gaze", the novel seems to attempt to "deflate it, thereby self-consciously participating in the manifold ways in which a racist culture wrests authority and symbolic power from African Americans" (170). While I agree with the first part of Gubar's argument, I believe that, at this early point in the narrative, the novel has not begun its attempts at diminishing black masculinity yet. The purpose of this scene is not to take power away from African Americans, but rather to symbolically demonstrate white Americans' fear that African Americans have come to take power away from them. That is why "[n]o compulsion would have been necessary. He would in any case have looked" (40). Mr. Sammler would have looked in any case because the African American pickpocket's exposing himself to him, instead of being a concrete episode in Mr. Sammler's life, more closely resembles a dream, a figment of Mr. Sammler's imagination devised and recounted by the novel for the purposes of sociopolitical commentary. After "Sammler was released" and "[t]he fly was closed", the pickpocket "picked up Sammler's dark glasses and returned them to his nose" (40), echoing the distinctive routine movement that a person who wears glasses (but has taken them off in order to go to sleep) makes as soon as they wake up. And after that, after Mr. Sammler has metaphorically woken up, he "dropped and stretched on his bed"—that is more like a psychoanalytic couch—"just as he was, with smarting feet, thin respiration, pain at the heart, stunned mind and … a temporary blankness of spirit … Between head and pillow, a hard rectangle was interposed, the marbled cardboard of a notebook, sea-green" (40). Having woken up from this terrible nightmare, it is time for him to start thinking about what it all meant—time, in typical psychoanalytic fashion, to begin interpreting his dream. And time also, for the reader that Bellow

undoubtedly anticipated, to start pondering about the symbolic and metaphorical essence and purpose of the whole scene.

Nevertheless, towards the end, in an inordinately divergent scene that serves as both the narrative's climax and the culmination of Mr. Sammler's experience as a Jew trying to become white, the novel stages a kind of blackface minstrel show similar to that of Updike's Rabbit. This moment reverses the narrative and the characterisation of Mr. Sammler. Up to this point, Mr. Sammler has been seen going through a spiritual search for whiteness, presented as a character who strives to assimilate into the white American society he inhabits. The Others of this American society, most notably African Americans, are completely foreign to him, even aggressive and dangerous (exemplified by the African American pickpocket). This search for whiteness, doomed to fail, opens up another possibility. For Mr. Sammler, the white America of the 1960s does not keep its promise of a better life. As Gilbert H. Muller has argued,

> [t]he contemporary immigrant experience retains at its core the mythology of the American Dream, but a dream that must contend with forces of psychic and cultural dislocation—with the reality that the new immigrants are 'others' who because of race and ethnicity … do not fit comfortably into the traditional mythology of the Melting Pot (2).

That is why, when Mr. Sammler is being driven through Broadway, and "he inspected the subculture of the underprivileged (terminology recently acquired in the *New York Times*), its Caribbean fruits, its plucked naked chickens with loose necks and eyelids blue", he comes to the realisation "[b]y a convergence of all minds and all movements … transmitted by this crowd" that "reality was a terrible thing, and that the final truth about mankind was overwhelming and crushing" (232). These "underprivileged" people seem to Mr. Sammler as being closer to what he believes and to what he represents than any other white,

privileged American he has become acquainted with throughout his relatively brief foray into the United States. This “final truth” that is purportedly universal but also very personal to Mr. Sammler is that whiteness will never bring him happiness—or, if happiness is not what he desires, then neither will it give him the safety and the sense of belonging that having one, stable identity might bring. He equates his one-sidedness, or his trying to acquire a one-sided whiteness, with a “disease—the disease of the single self explaining what was what and who was who” (232). After having tried so hard to become (singularly) white, Mr. Sammler seems here to be wishing for a doubleness that does not include whiteness at all.

This doubleness that excludes whiteness is revealed to be a symbolic merging of Mr. Sammler’s Jewish self and the black (instead of white) identity that the African American pickpocket possesses and represents. When Feffer, a friend and colleague of Mr. Sammler’s, engages in a violent street fight with the pickpocket, Mr. Sammler is shown to side with the African American pickpocket rather than with his white acquaintance. The violence that the pickpocket is seen to be inflicting on Feffer displays the novel’s attempt to make Mr. Sammler’s support for the African American even more extraordinary. Indeed,

> [s]truggling in the criminal’s grip, Feffer was forced back against the big cumbersome machine. His head was knocking on the windshield below the empty driver’s seat. The man was squeezing him, and Feffer was scared. He resisted, he defended himself, but he was inept. He was overmatched. Of course. How could it be otherwise … Upturned, the broad cheeks flamed, and his wide-spaced brown eyes appealed for help … Shifting his grip, the Negro grabbed and twisted his collar … He choked Feffer with the neckband (237).

Against all these raw and vivid descriptions of violence being inflicted by an African American whom so far Mr. Sammler severely detested, violence against a white American with whom he is acquainted, Mr. Sammler is shown to exhibit

a high level of indifference; or, at the very least, a concern that is merely superficial, verging on the ironic: “How shall we save this prying, stupid idiotic boy? He may be hurt. And I must go” (238). While he eventually does shout to the crowd that has gathered around the fight to do something to help, “suddenly Sammler felt extremely foreign—voice, accent, syntax, manner, face, mind, everything, foreign” (238). Here he is amid all these white Americans, witnessing an African American harming and hurting one of them, and yet he does not feel a part of them at all: while he previously felt foreign towards African Americans, he is now foreign towards whiteness. He even justifies the African American’s fighting Feffer: the latter took a picture of the former committing a crime, and the former wishes to take the camera that holds the evidence. Again, while previously it was Mr. Sammler who first notified the police about the African American pickpocket, obstinately demarcating any relation to that African American as a person, he now seems to be in favour of the criminal and, consequently, of the criminal act as well.

Commenting on the (evolving) personal and racial relationship between Mr. Sammler and the African American pickpocket, Joshua L. Charlson has argued that “[r]ather than conceiving of the African American pickpocket as the other against whom Sammler must define himself, I see him as a kind of double who in fact allows Sammler to recognize the realities of oppression and victimization, and his own implication within that network” (529). As I have illustrated above, Mr. Sammler does, for the largest part of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, define himself against the otherness of the African American pickpocket. In this late episode, however, the roles of “oppression and victimization”, as Charlson puts it, are reversed so much so that Mr. Sammler’s racial allegiances are also similarly altered. For when Mr. Sammler asks Eisen, his son-in-law, to

“separate” the two men, Eisen, “shrugging, grinning, making a crooked movement of the shoulders, working them free from the tight denim … drew up the sleeve of his right arm … Then shortening his grip on the cords of the black bag, he swung it very wide, swung with full force and struck the pickpocket on the side of the face” (240). Now it is the African American pickpocket who is severely hurt, who is “[o]bviously stunned” from this “hard blow” (240). And only now does Mr. Sammler display any kind of emotional response to the inflicted violence; only when it is the African American who is hurt is Mr. Sammler shown to exhibit extreme concern and even anguish: “This is much worse! This is the worst thing yet. Sammler thought Eisen had crushed the man’s face. And he was now about to hit him again, with his medallions” (241). At this point in the novel, for Mr. Sammler, it is “much worse” to hurt an African American than to inflict violence on a white American, something that points towards Mr. Sammler’s abandoning any kind of link between his self and white Americans as well as any previous attempt to assimilate into white America, to become white. Now, when Eisen “heaved his weapon back over the shoulder, prepared to slam it straight down on the man’s skull”, we are surprised to see that “Sammler seized his arm and twisted him away” (241). While previously, when Feffer was being subjected to violent hits, Mr. Sammler chose to not do anything about it apart from asking (not very urgently) someone from the crowd to stop the fight, he now, with the African American being knocked almost to death, physically intervenes to save the African American’s life.

All this, of course, is to seemingly align Mr. Sammler with the African American character—to make a Jewish protagonist who was previously trying to become white appear, now, in effect, black. In this sense, Bellow’s novel, like Updike’s and Roth’s, attempts to restore the privileged position of white

masculinity by masquerading it is as black. Mr. Sammler, who never managed to become white, experiences a symbolic racial transformation that makes him fight on the side of the African American against the white American who is violently hitting him. This transformation, stemming from the barbarity of Eisen's violent act, is depicted in the novel thus:

> It was a feeling of horror, and grew in strength, grew and grew. What was it? How was it to be put? He was a man who had come back. He had rejoined life. He was near to others. But in some essential way he was also companionless … He had to turn to someone else … a man himself very far out on another track, orbiting a very different foreign center. Sammler was powerless. To be so powerless was death. And suddenly he saw himself not so much standing as strangely leaning, as reclining, and peculiarly in profile, and as a *past* person. That was not himself. It was someone—and this struck him—poor in spirit. Someone between the human and not-human states, between content and emptiness, between full and void, meaning and not-meaning, between this world and no world. Flying, freed from gravitation, light with release and dread, doubting his destination, fearing there was nothing to receive him (240).

In this passage, we witness the various stages of being which Mr. Sammler finds himself in, both throughout the largest part of the novel and towards the novel's seemingly transformative conclusion. On the one hand, there is his old self; the self that strove to become white, the self that could not be whole unless it was engulfed by a sea of whiteness; the whiteness of postwar American society that would help him find a purpose in life despite the traumatic effect of the atrocities he had endured during the Second World War. When he sees that it is not possible for him to find any common ground, any spiritual similarities, between himself and white Americans (represented in this scene by the murderous, avenging Eisen), Mr. Sammler takes a leap of faith ("flying, freed from gravitation") and adopts the racial identity that he thinks more closely resembles his experiences and ideals. It is no wonder that, having himself been the victim of violence, he closely associates himself with the African American only when the African American is likewise being victimised. But, again, this is

something which Bellow is certainly conscious of. Whether the novel has deliberately employed the concept of Holocaust victimisation so frequently and so comprehensively in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* merely to make the link between Mr. Sammler and the African American pickpocket even stronger is up for debate; in any case, the way the narrative of the novel is constructed, the way Mr. Sammler's initial aversion to the African American, coupled with descriptions of his odious experience of the Holocaust, is transformed to the point where he sees in the African American "a certain princeliness" and "an idea of *noblesse*" that result in his having "sympathized with him" (243) by the end, is, in my view, clear evidence of a postwar white American writer like Bellow (and like the other two authors examined in this chapter) transcribing in his fiction white men's pressing anxieties over the state and status of white masculinity in the context of 1960s United States.

The way narrative and narrative techniques either function to promote certain ideas or serve to reveal certain societal anxieties becomes even more evident when we consider that all the three authors I have examined in this chapter have employed female characters at key points in their respective novels in order to explore and deal with the crisis of white masculinity that took place during the 1960s in the United States. Babe, the African American singer, in *Rabbit Redux*; Angela Davis, Vicky, Seymour's African American worker, and Merry, Seymour's daughter, in *American Pastoral*; and Margotte, Mr. Sammler's niece, in *Mr. Sammler's Planet* are all female characters who in one way or another assist their male-authored novels in the latter's attempt to re-establish the privileged position of white masculinity. The role that gender plays in how the crisis of white masculinity is tackled by white male authors in relation to the

Feminist movement's calls for equality in 1960s United States will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

White Masculinity's Faux Feminism

At the same time that the Civil Rights movement was calling for equality between white Americans and African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, the second wave of the Feminist movement began taking significant steps to achieve equality between men and women. The 1960s and 1970s saw a plethora of what are still considered to be seminal feminist publications that sought not only to raise awareness of what it is to be a woman in a patriarchal society, but also to subvert the way women are treated and overturn their treatment as inferior. To name a handful of the most well-known texts, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Gloria Steinem's "Women and Power" (1968) article in *New York Magazine*, Katie Millet's *Sexual Politics* (published in 1970 but written during the latter years of the 1960s), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (which advanced and brought the feminist ideas of the 1960s into the 1970s) all introduced feminist thought to a wider audience at a period when the subservient role of women was fervently being challenged. Not always in agreement with one another, these and other feminist critics excoriated the monolithic image and characteristics traditionally ascribed to women and thus played a key role in what became known as second-wave feminism. Similarly, feminist novels like Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966) paved the way for a literature that would seriously consider the identities and lives of women and that would depict female experience from women's point of view.

Against this societal, cultural, and intellectual rise in female voices and in feminist calls for equality, many white men felt threatened. As was the case with the Civil Rights movement, these men considered the Feminist movement's attempts to achieve equal rights as an affront towards their privileged identity. Witnessing a shift in the social hierarchy of 1960s United States, male-authored novels of the time period sought to re-establish the privileged position of white masculinity by incorporating pro-feminist sentiments into their fiction. Masquerading their heavily masculinist narratives as examples of feminist literature that seemingly put female characters at the forefront, these novels attempted to paint a picture of white masculinity as sympathetic to the feminist cause. Analysing John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971), Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), and Philip Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), this chapter explores how these supposedly feminist sympathies play out; rather than promoting feminism, in truth the portrayals of women in these novels end up being mere caricatures that serve as proof of white masculinity's ontologically societal anxieties.

I. The Unbearable Lightness of Sex: Female Sexual Revolution in *Rabbit Redux*

A literary mosaic of 1960s North American society, Updike's *Rabbit Redux* is nevertheless engraved in most critics' memory as dealing solely with African Americans and the Civil Rights movement. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, the relationship between Rabbit and African Americans does, indeed, take up a large part of the novel—but this is by no means Updike's sole preoccupation. Much of the existential dread that Rabbit feels in *Rabbit Redux* does not stem from the inferiority complex he has developed as a result of his comparisons

between himself and African Americans, but from the fact that, early on in the novel, his wife Janice leaves him for someone else.

From those critics who have considered the role that gender and sex play in *Rabbit Redux*, only Mary O'Connell (109) and Mary Allen (109) have forthrightly pointed out the masculinist framework that, despite Janice's apparent sexual emancipation, still dominates the novel. Most critics, including Matthew Wilson (10), William M. Curtin (334), Kerry Ahearn (68), and John Neary (144) regard Janice's trajectory from a complacently subservient housewife in *Rabbit, Run* (1960) to a sexually liberated woman able to not only have an extramarital affair but also to unabashedly desert her husband as an honest and laudatory effort on the part of Updike to give his female character the freedom she deserves. Similarly, Pradipta Sengupta has gone so far as to claim that "Janice's adultery is at once a means of her liberation from the asphyxia of her domesticity … and a tacit protest against the patriarchal structure represented by the whimsical nature of her antiseptic husband" (47), an argument also made (in a more cautious manner) by Kathleen Verduin (71).

My purpose in this section is to illustrate what these critics have failed to notice: by ostensibly granting the female character the freedom to pursue her sexual desires irrespective of her husband's thoughts and feelings, Updike's novel has made use of a distorted notion of feminism in order to re-establish the privileged position of white masculinity in the countercultural and emancipatory context of 1960s United States. Janice's extramarital affair may well give her the sexual and emotional satisfaction she was barred from acquiring in the first novel of the tetralogy, but she is a fictional fabrication and not a person in the world; everything she feels and does is part of the narrative that comprises *Rabbit Redux*. Indeed, Updike has been dubbed by at least one critic as "an

assiduous chronicler of contemporary American adultery" (Iannone 55), but Janice should not be read as an avatar of referents beyond Updike's fiction: her adultery is a construction on the part of Updike's novel that functions to elicit sympathy for a white masculinity that was under increasing rhetorical assault for its male chauvinism.

For the first part of the novel at least, Janice's apparent sexual emancipation weighs heavily on Rabbit. Being straightforwardly rejected by his own wife is a huge blow to his masculinity, and the anxiety that stems from having his identity wounded to such an extent is abundantly evident in both the novel's descriptions of Rabbit's thoughts and in the dialogue Rabbit exchanges with Janice and her lover, Charlie. Nevertheless, I argue that these instances where Rabbit seems to be going through an existential crisis as a result of his wife's infidelity are again constructed by Updike's novel in order to create an image of wounded masculinity that bows to what appears to be an all-powerful female identity. In this sense, *Rabbit Redux* exemplifies many male Americans' erroneous perception of what feminism is and wants to achieve. Just as the character of Rabbit sees in African Americans a desire to take over the American society that he thinks belongs to whites, so too does the novel itself seem to think of second-wave feminism not as a movement that seeks equality, but rather as an attempt to take over the traditionally male-dominated American society. By showing masculine identity as severely injured and even debased due to the powerfulness of women, *Rabbit Redux*, while clearly a masculinist novel, masquerades itself as a feminist one—and, in this way, restores the privileged position of masculine identity by supposedly wielding it in favour of women.

To begin with, Janice's sexual emancipation becomes evident even before the reader is given the chance to witness it in action. When Rabbit, sensing that something is going on behind his back, asks her about an inconsistency in something she has said to him, Janice "halts in the center of their bedroom, staring into the bathroom" (30). This is not because she is afraid she has been caught, but in order for Updike's novel to allow her to revel in the symbolic power that adultery has granted her. This symbolic power is manifested in the way the male character is now the one that is being objectified by the female one (whereas in *Rabbit, Run* the opposite was resoundingly true): "she sees his big white body, his spreading slack gut, his uncircumcised member hanging boneless as a rooster comb from its blond roots. She sees her flying athlete grounded, cuckolded. She sees a large white man a knife would slice like lard" (30). In one of the most famous feminist essays regarding the power of looking, Laura Mulvey has indelibly pointed out that "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed" (346). In this case in the novel, the traditionally gendered roles of looking have been reversed: instead of the man looking, or gazing, at the woman, it is the woman who very intensely gazes at the man. What is more, this form of female gaze is not sexual in the same way that the male gaze would normally be. Janice does not look at Rabbit because she is in any way sexually aroused by him, but rather in order to belittle him—or, more appropriately, in order for Updike's novel to demonstrate to the reader the belittling way in which Janice views her husband.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf wrote that "[w]omen have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (37). Here, this form of looking-glass seems to have been completely shattered; not only because it is not the man who is looking at the woman, but also due to the fact that, when the woman is looking at the man, the man's natural size is very small (figuratively if not entirely literally) indeed. As a consequence, the only reason why Rabbit has "a big white body" is because of his "spreading slack gut"; and his penis, which would traditionally be the symbol of his virile sexuality, is now simply a "member" of his slacking body that is likewise "hanging boneless". This is clearly a symbolic representation of second-wave feminism as a female identity that gazes men into submission. Indeed, Janice's "eyes must burn on" Rabbit, "for he turns his back and begins to step into her water" (30). Unable to endure the powerfulness of the female gaze, Rabbit retreats in shame and goes to hide his body in the water. And, in this moment, "his buttocks merge with her lover's, she thinks how all men look innocent and vulnerable here, reverting to the baby they were" (30). Again, this is the kind of generalisation ("all men") that many men would ascribe to feminists. But it is also an additional example of how Janice seems to have become so emotionally emancipated that she has no qualms about equating her husband with her lover and, in doing so, belittling both.

Even so, the sexual satisfaction that she derives from Charlie becomes a focal point in the novel and a way in which husband and lover are differentiated to allow for the dismantling of the traditional role of the woman as being subservient to her husband. The novel's descriptions of Janice engaging in sexual intercourse with Charlie become evidence of ostensible feminist thought

translated into fictional prose. “The way while making love Charlie sells her herself, murmuring about her parts, giving them the names Harry uses only in anger, she resisted at first but relaxed seeing for Charlie they were a language of love” (45). Having sex with Rabbit is here contrasted to “making love” with Charlie; the former gave Rabbit the opportunity to express his “anger”, whereas the latter promotes the idea of mutual sexual satisfaction that derives from being in love. But this is not simply an example of Janice’s divergent experiences with two different men; rather, as Robert S. Gingher has noted, it is more appropriately a manifestation of “[t]he conflict between passion and marriage” (102). For Janice, marriage represents a trapped environment where she is not able to do as she wishes, a figurative space from which she is not allowed to escape and in which she is continually told to behave according to her husband’s whims. However, as Betty Friedan argued in *The Feminine Mystique* with regard to the place of many suburban housewives of the postwar period, “the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off” (31). In *Rabbit Redux*, Janice has managed to break away from her husband’s chains. Occupying the space of 1960s US society, where the Feminist movement’s calls for equality have opened up new pathways for female emancipation from the confines of marriage, she has become aware of her own power and her own freedom—at least, this is what the novel wants the reader to believe.

If the aforementioned description of Janice’s sexual intercourse with Charlie was merely meant to emphatically and genuinely demonstrate a

woman's sexual and emotional satisfaction, what follows this description would have been omitted, would not have been written in the first place at all:

> She doesn't panic as with Harry, knowing he can't hold it much longer, Charlie holds back forever, a thick sweet toy she can do anything with, her teddy bear. The fur on the back of his shoulders at first shocked her touch, something freakish, but no, that's the way many men still are. Cave men. Cave bears. Janice smiles in the dark (45).

It is clear from this quote that the novel has purposely put what it erroneously considers to be feminist ideas into Janice's thoughts. For it seems that Janice is not simply content with having a sexual partner that satisfies her; she also feels the need to think of him as her "thick sweet toy she can do anything with". She seems to need to objectify her male sexual partner in order to counteract, or at least counterbalance, the objectification many women for many years have been subjected to by men. And by having her smile in the dark, Updike's novel lends Janice a certain malicious quality: she is not smiling out of satisfaction or happiness or even hope, but rather in a wicked manner, as if she has accomplished what we are led to believe she set out to do: the complete and total annihilation of masculine identity—of men.

Moreover, the sexual freedom that Janice has ostensibly attained is also evident in one of the most striking scenes not only in this novel, but in the whole tetralogy as well. This scene, which I will henceforth quote from extensively in order to accurately convey its meanings and effects, is the only time in which we are not simply allowed to eavesdrop on Janice's thoughts, but also in a way to occupy her consciousness (something that I will come back to in due course). Janice's stream of consciousness is evocative of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a first-person narration as Molly masturbates next to her husband in bed (Janice is similarly shown to masturbate while Rabbit is sleeping next to her). In contrast to *Ulysses*, however, Janice's stream

of consciousness is narrated here in the third person; as a consequence, the sexual and narrative agency that the novel seems willing to grant its female character is in fact illusory. Even though we are prompted to believe that these are truly Janice's thoughts, that this is an instance in the novel in which the female character's supposed powerfulness is manifested, the fact that these thoughts are expressed in the third person greatly undermines the novel's narrative experiment.

But let us look more closely at how this third-person self-pleasuring (but whose self? Janice's or the male reader's?) stream-of-consciousness narrative plays out:

> Her body feels tense as a harp, she wants to be touched. She touches herself: hardly ever did it as a girl, after marrying Harry it seemed certainly wrong, marriage should make it never necessary, just turn to the other person and he would fix it. How sad it was with Harry now, they had become locked rooms to each other, they could hear each other cry but couldn't get in … She imagines it in her, like something you have swallowed. Only big, big. And slow, slow as sugar melts. Except now that she'd been with him so many times she could be quick in coming, sometimes asking him just to pound away and startling herself, coming, herself her toy, how strange to have to learn to play, they used to tell her, everybody, the gym teacher, the Episcopal minister, Mother even one awful embarrassing time, not to make your body a plaything when that's just what it was (47).

And this is only the first part. Even from the beginning of this scene, we can see how Updike's novel lampoons emancipated female sexuality. Janice's body is initially compared to "a harp". Choosing this particular instrument as a musical simile seems curious enough; indeed, there are many other musical instruments that have strings which are "tense". Why a harp, then? Even though it might have originated elsewhere, the harp is usually associated with ancient Greek culture. Since there are visible similarities between this scene in *Rabbit Redux* and Molly's monologue in *Ulysses*, a novel that in a sense reimagines *The Odyssey*, there is a strong link between *Rabbit Redux* and *The Odyssey* as

well. But what is this link exactly? If Molly is the alter ego of Penelope, then Janice represents Penelope, too. And what does Penelope represent?

In another reimagining of *The Odyssey*, but this time from Penelope's point of view, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) offers the following social commentary with respect to how the character of Penelope was appropriated for the purposes of masculine discourses on femininity:

> Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation—almost the compulsion—to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? (2).

According to this view (the view of Penelope herself), because of her stalwart faithfulness to her husband, Penelope has become a symbol of female subservience. By associating, therefore, Janice with Penelope, *Rabbit Redux* is encouraging a view of Janice that is subservient to her husband at the same time that she performs a self-induced sexual act that is supposed to free her from her marriage's confines. What is more, by comparing her body to a harp, instead of demonstrating her sexual emancipation, the novel in fact transforms the supposedly free body of Janice into a docile body that is controlled, if not by Rabbit, then by the novel itself. This stream-of-consciousness narration of Janice's thoughts while she is masturbating, therefore, represents Janice as submissive. Instead of granting her the freedom to pursue her sexual desires irrespective of her husband (he is lying next to her, asleep and totally oblivious to what is taking place beside him), Updike's novel has constructed an ersatz, even farcical, scene of female sexual revolution whose main function is to suppress itself through symbolic and associative language.

The obedient, dependent nature of Janice's masturbation can also be seen in the rest of the passage quoted above. While she is masturbating,

Janice is vigorously thinking of herself having sex with Charlie. In order to be able to experience bodily pleasure, she needs to think of the man, and of the body part of the man, that would normally provide her with that pleasure. If, therefore, *Rabbit Redux* wants the reader to think of this scene as one of female sexual liberation, this is immediately counteracted by the fact that this supposed liberation is only achieved due to a man. Of course, it would be difficult to achieve bodily pleasure without some form of visual (even if mental) stimulus. Even so, the explicit language that Updike's novel has used to describe this stimulus is suggestive of female sexuality as being dependent on men. Since Janice "imagines" Charlie's penis "in her" in order to derive bodily pleasure, then the ostensibly emancipatory nature of this masturbation scene loses its meaning; in effect, this is another sex scene posing as masturbation.

Additionally, these verbally rendered thoughts are too masculine for the reader to believe they are actually hers. Phrases such as "like something you have swallowed" and "asking him just to pound away" are deeply connotative of the language men might use when they talk about (or, in this case, write about) sex. In this respect, Hélène Cixous has identified traditional "male writing" as

> *marked* writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak (879).

The kind of writing that Janice's masturbatory monologue exemplifies is one laden with masculine sexual language; or, at least, with language that has been formed in and is an indispensable part of the "libidinal" masculine culture and society that Cixous writes about. As a result, what the novel imagines Janice

might be thinking has nothing to do with women as subjects and everything to do with male subjectivity attempting to libidinously dream up femininity. As is the case when Rabbit imagines himself to be black while he listens to African American soul music at Jimbo's Friendly Lounge, effectively engaging in an act of racial masquerade, here the novel envisions female fantasy as a fulfillment of male fantasy. As a consequence, the novel's infusing Janice's consciousness with sexual thoughts that might more closely resemble a man's (or a male-dominated society's) is a very potent example of how postwar masculine writing sought to re-establish the privileged position of male identity by disguising masculine thoughts and sentiments as feminine and feminist.

These masculine thoughts, as well as the inconsistencies in the novel's discourses on female sexuality and emancipation, are further evident in the latter part of Janice's stream-of-consciousness masturbation:

> Determined to bring herself off, Janice returns her hand and opens her eyes to look at Harry sleeping, all huddled into himself, stupid of him to keep her sex locked up all these years, his fault, all his fault, it was there all along, it was his job to call it out, she does everything for Charlie because he asks her, it feels holy, she doesn't care, you have to live, they put you here you have to live, you were made for one thing, women now try to deny it burning their bras but you were made for one thing, it feels like a falling, a falling away, a deep eye opening, a coming into the deep you (49).

This part of Janice's masturbation begins with the word "[d]etermined". It seems that, for Janice, an act of self-pleasuring is also an act of (self-)determination. Women, for many years accustomed to having their sexuality being controlled by men, are now free and able to determine their own sexual selves (the novel seems to be saying here). In an essay that significantly influenced the Feminist movement of the 1960s, Valerie Saiving Goldstein argued that "the feminine dilemma … is important for men, too … because it is a loss to every man when a woman fails to realize her full self-identity (110). Once again distorting feminist

discourses, *Rabbit Redux* presents itself as a novel both interested in and supportive of women's efforts at self-definition. In order to do this, it portrays Janice as a woman determined to achieve such self-definition through her ability to "bring herself off". She is a woman who does not need a man to help her achieve orgasm; she is quite capable of doing this on her own. And when "she opens her eyes to look at Harry", Updike's novel infuses her thoughts with what, again, it considers to be feminist sentiments. Janice thinks that it was "stupid of him to keep her sex locked up all these years", pointing to the feminist critique of masculine containment of female sexuality during the earlier years of the Cold War that Alan Nadel, as I showed in the thesis' introduction, extensively wrote about.

There is an implicit juxtaposition here, therefore, of the patriarchal culture that sought to control and contain femininity before the 1960s (represented by the husband Rabbit) and the feminist ethos (symbolised by the supposedly emancipated wife Janice) that attempted to subvert this containment during the 1960s by liberating female sexuality and putting it at the forefront. However, this feminism that the novel purports to support crumbles within a few lines. For almost immediately afterwards, Janice thinks that women "were made for one thing", that is sex. Very quickly, therefore, the novel's attempt to supposedly overturn the masculine control of female sexuality is counteracted by its own/Janice's belief that women are only made for sex. As a consequence, there emerges here another form of control whereby the female body is governed by the sexual desires of men who would ascribe to it sex as its only purpose, significance, and function.

Moreover, Janice criticises those women who "now try to deny" the male-fabricated fact that women are only made for sex "by burning their bras". This

refers to one of the most important feminist protests that took place during the 1960s in the United States: the Miss America protest of 1968. In a historical account of the Feminist movement's many calls for equality, Paul D. Buchanan informs us that, in 1968, "more than 150 women … protest[ed] what was considered the pinnacle of chauvinist society's demands on women: the annual Miss America Pageant" by "hurl[ing] tokens of their own oppression into the 'Freedom Trash Can': high-heeled shoes, curlers, detergent, fake eyelashes, wigs—considered instruments of female torment—as well as copies of *Good Housekeeping* and *Playboy*" (50) However, because "[s]omeone had apparently told the media that there was an intention to burn bras", "the indelible image of 'bra-burners' became etched in the national collective memory, and became associated with the radical feminists" (51).

Published in 1971, only three years after the Miss America protest of 1968, *Rabbit Redux* seems here to be directly engaging with the cultural moments that defined the historical period it portrays. This form of engagement, however, rather than ebulliently constituting a resonating link between the Feminist movement's calls for equality and the US society that the novel sought to depict, is used in this instance to very blatantly counter the progressive changes that second-wave feminism managed to achieve. For one thing, by having Janice criticise in such a way the Miss America protest, by essentially telling the reader that this was merely an attempt to deny the facts of life that have to do with female sexuality and its subservience to male sexuality, *Rabbit Redux* emerges as a novel that is not only unsupportive of the feminist cause, but one of its most ardent critics. The fact that it refers to the Miss America protest as an instance in which women burned their bras, when, as Buchanan cautions, there were no bras burned, points towards a form of fear-mongering

designed to turn feminism and feminist protest into a moral panic. In this respect, Stanley Cohen identifies moral panic as "[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons" that "become[s] defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (1). In this case, the societal values that, to many white men of postwar US society, are under threat are precisely the same values that the Feminist movement attempted to subvert: that is, the traditional omnipotence of men that for many years helped designate and regard women as inferior. During a transitional period when the social hierarchy of US society began to shift as a result of the Feminist movement's protests and calls for equality, Updike's novel makes a moral panic out of these same protests and calls for equality in order to both stymie feminism's reach into the 1970s and restore the privileged social position of white masculinity.

To slightly shift gears, I have focused so far in this section on Janice, and on how *Rabbit Redux* employs this female character for masculine purposes and effects. But how does the character of Rabbit also assist Updike's novel in its attempt to re-establish white masculinity's place at the vanguard of postwar US society? I have touched somewhat on the belittlement that Rabbit is subjected to by Janice, a belittlement that also stems from his own inability to come to terms with the changes that the Feminist movement's calls for equality have effected. Indeed, while masturbating, Janice in a way further pokes fun at him by "strok[ing] his wrist with the fingers" (49) she used to "bring herself off". This image of male powerlessness, this feeling of being powerless literally at the hands of a woman, can also be seen when Rabbit, along with Janice and their son, meets Janice's notorious lover, Charlie Stavros.

To begin with, from the moment that Charlie sets foot in the restaurant where Rabbit and his family have gone to eat, "Rabbit feels naked in his own

threadbare little family" (34). He feels naked because he is vulnerable, exposed; seeing the man who has taken his woman creates in him a sense of impotence, a sense of being not good enough and so, inevitably, discarded. His family is "threadbare" not because his wife is about to leave him and their son, but due to the fact that the husband, the "man" of the family, has lost so much of his masculine identity and masculine power that he almost seems to have completely vanished. Moreover, when Charlie eventually sits down at the table with them, Rabbit also "feels, with Stavros's broad shoulders next to Janice's, and the man's hands each sporting a chunky gold ring, that the table has taken a turn down a road Rabbit didn't choose. He and Nelson are in the back seat" (36). His masculinity obviously feels threatened by the masculinity of his wife's lover, but it is not so much Charlie's "broad shoulders" per se that Rabbit fears than the fact that these manly shoulders are "next to Janice's". In effect, it is not the contending masculinity that intimidates Rabbit, but the power of femininity that is able to choose which type of masculinity, which man, it desires to be with. And the table at which they are all sitting represents the changing US society that places Rabbit, his form of masculinity, "in the back seat". The front seat is now occupied by femininity, by Janice, in whom Rabbit now observes a "peculiar glow" (37) that was totally absent while she was solely, so to speak, his. Rabbit sees that Janice is at this moment "all circles in happiness, squirming on her round bottom and dancing her hands through arcs of exaggeration quick white in the candlelight" (37). She is the conductor of femininity's musical symphony that is resoundingly sounding throughout US society at which Rabbit is forced, powerless, to witness and marvel.

Rabbit's sense of powerlessness, however, is both deceptive and short-lived. For this image of wounded masculinity in Updike's novel falls apart almost

instantaneously. When Janice finally deserts him and their son, categorically deciding to go and live with Charlie, Rabbit is actually none too dismal about it. Losing almost no time at all, Rabbit begins an affair (he is technically still married to Janice) with a teenager named Jill. Conversing with her in his house, moments before they have sex for the first time, the topic of Janice springs up and "Jill asks, 'Was she a good wife?'" (121). This seemingly simple question is in fact what symbolically transforms Janice, from a sexually emancipated and free woman, back to a "wife", with all the ideological implications such a designation entails. Indeed, "the question plants Janice back in the house, quiet in the kitchen, crouching at the head of the stairs" (121). In effect, Janice is figuratively brought back to where Rabbit believes she belongs, and to where many men of the postwar period believed women belonged: the "house" and the "kitchen". As a consequence, Janice's act of adultery, what the first part of the novel lauds as an example of female emancipation, is here symbolically completely cancelled out: Janice is not outside (outside marriage, outside the patriarchal society she used to be a part of) with her lover, but inside the house, a wife to her husband, while Rabbit is the one who is actually having an affair "on the rug where he and Janice last made love" (122). And what is more, after they finish having sex and Jill "falls asleep", Rabbit "masturbates" next to her on the bed, "picturing Peggy Fosnacht" (127), another woman. In this way, he also manages to reclaim the masculinity he had momentarily lost: he masturbates over Janice's own prior masturbation, replacing her emancipatory power with his traditionally phallocentric one.

This cancelling out of Janice's supposed emancipation and the re-establishment of the power of masculine identity in *Rabbit Redux* are evident in the novel's conclusion. For Janice's affair with Charlie ends when she discovers

that he had been cheating on her with someone else. This brings about a moment of heartbroken sentimentality that is designed to demonstrate what the novel perceives as Janice's emotional weakness:

> She had made him make love to her. She had done everything for him. She had worshipped him, she had wanted to cry out her sorrow that there wasn't more she could do, that bodies were so limited. Though she had extracted her lover's semen from him, she failed to extract testimony that his sense of their love was as absolute as her own. Terribly—complainingly, preeningly—she had said, "You know I've given up the world for you" (333).

What is evinced from this internal bemoaning is Janice's utter dependency on the man with whom she had an affair. Rather than being a strong female character driven by her sexual desires (as the first part of the novel wished to portray her), Janice is revealed here to be a very fragile character that sought in her lover not sexual satisfaction so much as emotional safety and stability. In addition, the emotional detritus that the end of their affair leaves in its place is expressive of a sentimentality that men tend to ascribe to women, and that Updike's novel makes use of here in an attempt to imagine (female) life after the end of the Feminist movement. Janice's becomes a cautionary tale of the dangers of trying to escape domesticity, of the very uncertain (and most likely to bring emotional chaos) terrain that emancipation will inevitably lead to.

And in the very end of the novel, after her affair with Charlie has irrevocably perished, there is a reconciliation between the again-wife Janice and her husband Rabbit. Their house having been completely destroyed and rendered uninhabitable in a fire, Rabbit and Janice now proceed to briefly stay at a motel. While there, Janice admits: "'I feel so guilty'" (352), to which Rabbit replies that she should not, because "[n]ot everything is your fault" (353), perhaps implying that her attempt to break away from their marriage was influenced by the emancipatory fervor of the Feminist movement that Updike's

novel seems to think poisoned the mind of many women of his generation. And in the final paragraph, *Rabbit Redux* puts everything in what it deems to be its right, male-dominated place:

> The space they are in, the motel room long and secret as a burrow, becomes all interior space. He slides down an inch on the cool sheet and fits his microcosmic self limp into the curved crevice between the polleny offered nestling orbs of her ass; he would stiffen but his hand having let her breasts go comes upon the familiar dip of her waist, ribs to hip bone, where no bones are, soft as flight, fat's inward curve, slack, his babies from her belly. He finds this inward curve and slips along it, sleeps. He. She. Sleeps. O.K.? (353)

Not only is the male gaze reinstated here; Rabbit's copious noting of his wife's every body part, his stark private indulgence in all the places of the flesh and of the self that would normally arouse him, is by no means sexual. Rather, it is more akin to taking an inventory of what he considers to be his property (or properties), a veritable account of everything that is his. And after he has finished this symbolic (verging on literal) stock-taking, after he is certain that all of Janice is there with him, he allows himself to sleep in her embrace, content that things have gone back to the way they were. He merges with his wife, they become one, one single entity that cannot be separated by society's progressive changes. The final word, the accusatory and mocking "O.K.?", is the novel's final nail to what it sees as the figurative coffin of feminism. With this narrative, the novel has played its part: long live masculinity, it seems to be saying.

II. 'I do love you, Madeleine': *Herzog*'s Wounded Masculinity

If *Rabbit Redux*'s Janice represents masculinist values disguised as feminism, then *Herzog*'s Madeleine, the former wife of the novel's eponymous protagonist, is a strongly exaggerated caricature of what many men of the time period

considered feminists to be. Having divorced Herzog in an unabashedly crude fashion, Madeleine is shown to be further demeaning towards her former husband at various points in the novel, and the resulting depreciation of pride that Herzog experiences becomes the epitome of postwar wounded masculinity. Herzog's fervent—and obsessive—letter-writing soon after his divorce is but a symptom of the blankness he feels as a result of the psychological debasement his being and his masculinity have undergone after Madeleine's affair with his best friend is brought to light—and after her subsequent throwing him out of the house which he has paid for and where their daughter also lives.

In contrast to Updike's Janice, whom most critics have viewed as a strong, independent woman who persuasively personifies the female ideal that second-wave feminism sought to introduce and attain, critical scholarship regarding Bellow's Madeleine seems to be conscious of the novel's attempt to luxuriously reveal the emancipated woman of the 1960s as a meandering Medusa. Paule Lévy, for instance, has referred to Madeleine as the "caricature of the ruthless phallic woman" who "triggers constant fears of castration in Herzog" (111), while in a similar vein, Gloria L. Cronin deems Herzog's former wife as belonging to a distinct category of women in Bellow's fiction, that comprising of "castrating unstable man-eaters" (50). Morris Dickstein, in his comprehensive and wide-ranging study of postwar American literature, has also expressed a similar view (174). Earlier scholars, such as Robert Boyers (42), Constance Rooke (186), and Leslie A. Fiedler (363), also read Madeleine in such a way, demonstrating a surprising critical consensus unencumbered by historical time differences. Only a very few critics, such as Elyse Zucker (27), have seen Madeleine as a truly empowered woman.

In my own critical analysis of the novel, I build upon existing scholarship regarding Madeleine's castrating portrayal but focus my attention on the wounded husband, and on how his ex-wife's zealously rendered behaviour towards him is used by Bellow's novel to create sympathy for a character who otherwise gives no apparent reason to earn the sympathy of readers. This choice on my part is based on the fact that, rather than spend a lot of time, like *Rabbit Redux*, describing the wife's emancipatory character and behaviour, *Herzog* focuses more on the male character and on how he perceives and experiences the effects of his failed marriage. In this respect, critics such as Jeffrey Meyers have examined Bellow's oeuvre alongside his personal, real-life marital and sexual predicaments (160), and it is true that the narratives of Bellow's novels more closely resemble the psychosexual battlefields into which real-life households frequently transform than the liminal space in which fiction invariably exists and is etched. But in terms of this study, Bellow's personal life does not matter; his personal views, however, do.

The less-than-ideal relationship between husbands and wives is one of the main themes of Bellow's fiction in general, not just in the novels he wrote from the 1960s onwards. As early as in 1956's *Seize the Day*, for instance, the devasted and devastatingly portrayed good-for-nothing protagonist exclaims with exasperation with regard to his former wife's behaviour: "But if she ruins me, Dad, how can she expect me to come back? No, I have a sense of honor. What you don't see is that she's trying to put an end to me" (46). What is absent from this earlier novel is masculinity's fighting back against those (in this case, women) who have allegedly been trying to degrade it. It is *Herzog*, I argue, that functions as a way of reinstating masculinity into the positions of privilege of postwar US society. The novel is brimming with instances of inaccurate

perceptions of feminist sentiments in order to re-establish the privileged position of white masculinity that, during the 1960s, was questioned by the Feminist movement. Madeleine is, indeed, a woman quite different from what postwar American culture up to that point had painted women as: her no-nonsense attitude towards everything and her agentic ability to follow her desires—desires that, in this case, are not merely sexual but also of a seemingly power-grabbing nature—stand in stark contradistinction to the image of the subservient wife that had dominated marriage narratives following the end of the Second World War (and also, of course, earlier). But the monster-like portrait of a woman whose primary aim seems to be the torturous vilification of her husband more closely describes *Herzog*'s view of feminists rather than feminist thought per se. And the all but literal wreck that Herzog is left as serves as the tipping point of masculinity's attempt to regain its power through presenting itself as earnestly wounded and in urgent need of a sympathetic, and sympathetically understanding, helping hand.

The novel begins in medias res, informing us about Herzog's current state of being before telling us who Moses Herzog is and what has led him to this point. The very first sentence of the novel, "[i]f I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog" (1), predisposes the reader to the protagonist's perhaps haphazard individuality, to a man whose existence titters on the verge of insanity. This insanity, however, does not point to an unreliable narrator like the one in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), to name but one evocative example, who attempts to justify his (in that case, criminal) misdeeds by force-feeding the reader a broth of pretexts and rationalised explanations. Rather, in *Herzog*, the protagonist is cognisant of the fact that something is amiss as far as his mind is concerned, and he simply wishes to

acknowledge this to the reader right from the start. One page later, however, the reason for Herzog's having ended up doubting his sanity is poignantly revealed, a revelation that indicates a certain outward-looking perspective instead of the introspective inwardness that the novel's first sentence has prompted us to expect: "His friend, his former friend, Valentine, and his wife, his ex-wife Madeleine, had spread the rumor that his sanity had collapsed. Was it true" (2)? What the novel, in third-person narration, wishes to make the reader aware of is the fact that Herzog's ex-wife and her lover have been engaging in a form of psychological manipulation (commonly known as "gaslighting") leading Herzog to doubt his own mind. From very early on in *Herzog*, therefore, the primary purpose behind the novel's narrative is obstinately divulged: Bellow's novel is going to recount how a man's former wife has made him lose his sanity. And the fact that, in the above-quoted sentence, *Herzog* initially refers to Madeleine as Herzog's "wife" before going on to correct himself and to call her Herzog's "ex-wife", and he initially refers to Madeleine's lover as Herzog's "friend" before going on to correctly call him Herzog's "former friend", exposes a certain bitterness on the part of Herzog with regard to how life and two of the people he used to hold dearest to his heart have treated him.

Herzog's resulting wounded masculinity is described at this early point in the novel (which, it is useful to bear in mind, takes place during a late stage in Herzog's life) as he rests "alone in the big old house" he lives in "in the Berkshires" (1). Aside from the fact that Herzog has taken up residence in a place, the Berkshires, famous for its eerie isolation, he is now "alone", with no one to keep him company, and living in a house that appears too big for one person. The house is also "old", which perhaps adds to the place's eeriness and matches the old age of Herzog whose life is as static as the house, and the

house is a “house” rather than a home, meaning either that Herzog feels so empty as to not be able to really occupy any place with his non-existence or that the house cannot be thought of as a home because there is no family inside.

Additionally, whereas Herzog was “[n]ormally particular about food, he now ate Silvercup bread from the paper package, beans from the can, and American cheese” (1). In what can be considered a cliché that nevertheless firmly describes reality, but also an example of how sometimes husbands view wives and men view women, absent of a wife who would cook for him or who would at least make sure he ate well, Herzog has wound up eating anything he can get his hands on. And “[a]s for sleep, he slept on a mattress without sheets—it was his abandoned marriage bed—or in the hammock, covered by his coat. Tall bearded grass and locust and maple seedlings surrounded him in the yard” (1). First of all, there is a kind of nonchalant indifference in the way the novel has used the phrase “as for sleep” in order to introduce Herzog’s sleeping arrangements. It is as if sleep does not matter to someone who is soon going to die, whose waking life is as lethargic and as lacking in any real-life consequence as sleep.

Moreover, the mattress he sleeps on is “his abandoned marriage bed”, indicating that the husband has been left in a state of abandonment. The bed is no longer a bed but a mere mattress, a place where Herzog deposits his body rather than sleeps. When he does not place himself on that mattress, the novel informs us, Herzog does so outside “in the hammock”. Not bearing to sleep on his own where two people are supposed to sleep together (and where two people used to sleep together), on what used to be his large marriage bed, Herzog now sometimes chooses to sleep on a surface (the hammock) that only has space for one person. And the hammock’s swinging lull serves, one is led

to imagine, as a substitute, painful yet imperative, for the loving lull of sleeping next to someone you love. Now, Herzog's only company in sleep are the locusts whose incessant clicking noise is a hundred times worse than any sound emanating from a sleeping human body. Finally, there are also "maple seedlings" surrounding Herzog during the night. Whereas in a family environment there would be maple syrup in a kitchen cupboard to lusciously accompany pancakes or waffles, in the dreary environment of Herzog's house's there are only humdrum maple seeds that will never be made into the sweet liquid of childhood dreams and familial longings.

The kitchen's dissolution from a vibrant communal space where family members would gather to eat together into a non-place of colourless indifference provides another potent example of the state Herzog has been left in after the divorce. "The white paint was scaling from the brick walls" (1), leaving in its stead only the bare material that had been used to build the house; the paint, what had transformed the barren building into an inhabited home, is disintegrating; the character of the kitchen is being torn apart; life is becoming lifeless. What is more, "Herzog sometimes wiped mouse droppings from the table with his sleeve, calmly wondering why field mice should have such a passion for wax and paraffin. They made holes in paraffin-sealed preserves; they gnawed birthday candles down to the wicks" (1). Whereas, previously, the only food droppings found on the kitchen table would belong to either himself, his wife, or their daughter June, now it is only mice which leave small pieces of food on the table, chewing paraphernalia that serve as reminders of the house's, and Herzog's, disarray. Forgotten or unused birthday candles are being torn to pieces: no one is ever going to celebrate their birthday in Herzog's house again. And instead of being the opposite of human, the gnarly intruders

that defile familial snugness, mice and rats are the only living things that deign to be with Herzog: “A rat chewed into a package of bread, leaving the shape of its body in the layers of slices. Herzog ate the other half of the loaf spread with jam. He could share with rats too” (1-2). Abandoned by his wife, who has taken their daughter with her, Herzog is now forced to eat alongside quivering creatures that tend to haunt the soul.

Commenting on what he views as the novel’s inherent optimism, Allan Chavkin has argued that *Herzog*’s “rejection of pessimistic wasteland modernism that has dominated twentieth-century literature [has its] basis in English romanticism, particularly that of Wordsworth, who believed in the power of the human mind to overcome alienation and reconcile the individual to the everyday world” (326). But as is evident from the above passages, not only is Herzog utterly unable to overcome his alienation from the world following his estrangement from his wife, but he has also in fact ended up living within the confines of the literal wasteland of his former home.

The fact that Herzog “share[s] with rats too”, apart from an instance of Bellowian tragicomedy, may also be interpreted as an oblique indication of Herzog’s good nature as opposed to his former wife’s atrocious behaviour towards him; a matrimonial innuendo for a marriage that is no more. For very soon afterwards, the novel proceeds to narrate how Madeleine’s divorce from her husband came to be, replete with all the ways in which she wronged him. While he admits that “he had treated miserably” his first wife, Daisy, he claims that “Madeleine, his second, had tried to do *him* in” (4). This emphasis on the male pronoun “him”, as well as the contrast in the power dynamics of the two genders depending on the historical period in which they operated, evinces the cultural change the Feminist movement’s calls for equality between men and

women brought about during the 1960s—or, more appropriately, the way in which the novel views these calls. When he was married to his first wife in the 1950s, Herzog was able to treat her miserably because the patriarchal US society permitted him to. In the 1960s, however, it is now his (second) wife who is free to behave as she pleases towards him. And not only that, she wishes now to also metaphorically kill him—or, rather, to kill the patriarchy he represents.

Moreover, when "Madeleine decided that she and Moses couldn't make it after all—she wanted a divorce", Bellow writes that Herzog "had to give it" even though it "was painful" (6) because "people's wishes have to be respected. Slavery is dead" (7). Equating sexism and misogynism with racism, Herzog reveals in this instance his apathetic ignorance with respect to issues relating to both race and gender. Despite the fact that the novel seems to be presenting Madeleine as an emancipated woman, Herzog's own stance towards what the Feminist movement fought for seems to be one of complacency. So, for instance, even though Madeleine "had great charm, and beauty of person also, and a brilliant mind" (5) and appears to have a high degree of agency and independence, when the novel informs us that she "refused to be married to" (7) Herzog, she is also described as "domineering" (8) and as having seriously "damaged" Herzog's "sexual powers" (5). Rather than the equality between the sexes that the Feminist movement advocated for, feminism is faultily presented here as an insidious, power-grabbing endeavour.

This is further manifested in the scene during which Madeleine announces to her husband that she wants a divorce. When she explains to Herzog that "[t]heirs was not a marriage that could last" because she "had never loved him" and she "never will love [him], either … [s]o there's no point in going

on", Herzog's reply, the plaintive and pleading "I do love you, Madeleine" (9), becomes a pitiful rallying cry against the inferiority in themselves many men began to feel during the 1960s as the stably male-dominated social hierarchy of US society began to wilt. And the novel's description of Madeleine following this is no less illuminating: "Step by step, Madeleine rose in distinction, in brilliance, in insight. Her color grew very rich, and her brows, and that Byzantine nose of hers, rose, moved; her blue eyes gained by the flush that kept deepening, rising from her chest and her throat. She was in an ecstasy of consciousness" (9). As a result of what the novel views as the complete and utter deprecation of her husband, *Herzog* imagines that Madeleine must feel like an all-powerful queen (how else are we to perceive the fact that her nose is described as "Byzantine"?) who rises above everyone and most importantly above her submissive servant (her husband). The "distinction" in which Madeleine has succeeded in rising is a clearly sarcastic remark on the part of the novel, which equates Madeleine with all women and Madeleine's depreciation of her husband with what it views as the Feminist movement's attempts to overpower the protagonist's gender. It is only by emasculating men, Bellow's novel seems to suggest, that the female gender can gain any degree of distinction. What is more, Madeleine is at this moment experiencing "an ecstasy of consciousness". Not only has she humiliated Herzog, she is also sadistically feeling joy for having done so. And not only is she feeling joy, she is also for the first time in her life able to understand herself and her consciousness, as if her subjectivity can only exist in relation to men; as if, even in her moment of independence, she is dependent on Herzog for her own existence.

Up until this point, Herzog has appeared as apathetic, as accepting of his bad luck (for lack of a better phrase or adequate space to properly describe the

dissolution of a marriage) as the protagonist in *Seize the Day* I quoted above. Armed with a disarmingly alarming acquiescence, Herzog seems to be going through life as a puppet or a puppy that is eagerly awaiting its master to tell him what to do. It is only through Bellow's writing that, in a deconstructive manner, one can evince the hidden meanings of language, description, and narrative that reveal the novel's inner workings—those, at least, pertaining to its attempts at re-establishing the privileged position of masculinity.

After Madeleine announces to Herzog that she does not love him and wants to divorce him, however, there follows an inner monologue on the part of Herzog that, to a very large extent (if not completely), tears away the veil of wounded inertia and inadvertently unmasks masculinity's violent, blood-thirstily revenge-exacting unconscious. As Mary Beard has argued, "women, even when they are not silenced, still have to pay a very high price for being heard" (8). Here is the passage that has led me to use the very damning words above:

> Herzog, a solid figure of a man, even if pale and suffering, lying on his sofa in the lengthening evening of a New York spring … in the coop of his privacy and still strong in body … pictured what might have happened if instead of listening so intensely and thoughtfully he had hit Madeleine in the face. What if he had knocked her down, clutched her hair, dragged her screaming and fighting around the room, flogged her until her buttocks bled. What if he had! He should have torn her clothes, ripped off her necklace, brought his fists down on her head (10).

To begin with, the references to Herzog's bodily strength as a man ("a solid figure of a man", "still strong in body"), coming as they do directly before Herzog's internally imagined exertion of physical violence on his wife, are strong evidence of the novel's making use of traditional gender stereotypes in order to get its message through to the reader. For it seems these very physical characteristics enable Herzog to imagine himself hitting his wife. If he were not a man, and so if he did not possess that kind of strength, he would not be able to fathom doing something like that. In other words, the novel seems here to

suggest that, because men are considered to be stronger than women, they have every right to use that strength on the opposite sex. In this way, therefore, Bellow's novel re-establishes the power of masculinity by tying it to the physical strength of men that somehow, by some strange and perverse logic, makes them superior to women.

This is further evidenced from the phrase the novel has used to mark the precise moment in which Herzog's fantasy begins: Herzog "pictured what might have happened if instead of listening so intensely and thoughtfully he had hit Madeleine in the face". Herzog seems to be pushing back against certain qualities in himself that are traditionally (and, again, stereotypically) ascribed to women, that is, the intense and thoughtful listening and paying attention to what the other person is saying. These qualities, however, are only momentary; they are not part of Herzog's fundamental character and personality, but rather make their appearance only at the moment when Madeleine states that she does not love him and wants a divorce; at the moment, that is, that he is being emasculated by his soon-to-be ex-wife. As such, his violent reaction is a response not only to Madeleine's rise in independence and powerfulness, but also to what he perceives as his symbolic castration. Keith M. Opdahl argues that "Bellow uses sex … to define our place in the universe" (1), but whereas he is talking about sex in the sense of sexual intercourse, I would argue that it is sex as gender that drives the novel's narrative and that assists *Herzog* in drawing up strictly bordered societal molds from which men and women ought to break free. On a figurative level, and in consonance with this chapter's argument, the violence that Herzog fantasises about inflicting is not only a literary assault towards the Feminist movement's reorganisation of the social hierarchy of traditionally male-dominated, postwar US society, but also a

beseeching charge against masculinity's own woundedness that has come as a result.

Furthermore, the indelible description of Herzog's imaginary act of aggression is delivered in a linguistic manner that is also indicative of the societal chess board on which Bellow's novel has placed the two sexes in preparation for battle. The parts of Madeleine which Herzog targets are the very ones that stereotypically (I am using this word a lot, but its essence is palpably visible in the novel a lot, too) women pay more attention to themselves as well—the parts, essentially, that supposedly make them women. Herzog imagines hitting Madeleine "in the face"; he "clutched her hair"; he thinks he "should have torn her clothes" and "ripped off her necklace". The "face", women are invariably told (by men), is the most important part of a woman's body, since it is what men become attracted to in the first place. Make-up is thus a prevalent feminine mode of removing any facial blemishes and making a woman's face more attractive. The "hair" is also highly important, and women are consistently thought of as taking care of their hair as frequently as they do their face. Shopping for "clothes" is a clichéd routine that women are endlessly engaging in. And jewellery such as necklaces customarily make women brighten. What I am driving at is that Herzog is not fantasising about attacking Madeleine as a person, but rather (perceived) womanhood as a whole.

Iris Marion Young, following Maurice Merleau-Ponty, talked about "a particular style of bodily comportment that is typical of feminine existence" and that "consists of particular *modalities* of the structures and conditions of the body's existence in the world" (31). In this instance in *Herzog*, we find the novel taking advantage of stereotypically perceived feminine characteristics—characteristics which, in one way or another, all relate to the female body—in

order to create a thinly veiled attack at everything that femininity is thought to represent. Viewing Madeleine as a stand-in for all women (or, at least, women living in 1960s United States), Bellow's novel shows Herzog viciously (even if in his imagination) assault Madeleine's face, hair, clothes, and necklace—those very characteristics and parts that women more often than not are reduced to even when, perhaps especially when, considering their place in society and the world as a whole. Susan Bordo has argued that "[t]he body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture" (165). For a novel like *Herzog*, anxious about the discombobulating state of masculinity in an increasingly progressive American society, the female body is not only a medium of culture, but a medium through which the patriarchal culture of the United States can cunningly victoriously re-emerge.

This kind of imaginary and symbolic violence on the part of Herzog becomes concrete and literal later in the novel when, "with a pistol in his pocket" (254), he proceeds to go and find Madeleine and Valentine in order to kill them both. While driving to their house, Herzog fearlessly rationalises and justifies to the reader his decision to become a murderer. The first reasons he gives for the impending violence on his part are the "name-calling and gossip" (254) that followed his and Madeleine's divorce. Again, name-calling and gossip might be construed as feminine stereotypes used by Bellow's novel for the purposes described above. More important, in this instance, is the fact that these have allegedly given Herzog "the opportunity to kill with a clear conscience" (254). The religious connotations of such a thing as "a clear conscience" I will examine in depth in the next chapter, but for the time being, Herzog's belief that what he is about to do is just and good suggests a similar guilt-eliminating practice on

the part of the wounded masculinity whose figurative battle to regain its prominence is furtively mirrored here.

"They had opened the way to justifiable murder. They deserved to die. He had a right to kill them" (254), Herzog blatantly professes. The agency that the phrase "had opened the way" signifies firmly brings to mind the agency that *Herzog* has purportedly granted Madeleine (and *Rabbit Redux*, as I demonstrated in the previous section, Janice) by allowing her to independently pursue her wishes and desires. But this agency is neither valorised nor applauded. For, instead of opening the way to female emancipation, instead of paving the way for feminist thought to escape the margins and become deeply embedded in societal discourse, this agency only leads to the "justifiable murder" of those it belongs to—that is, women. In this regard, Ada Aharoni has claimed that, even though "it is Herzog, the hurt ex-husband who tells the story of his painful divorce … underneath the male's point of view we can also discern that of the female" (102); an argument that has also been made by Masayuki Teranishi (20). But while it is true that there are moments in the novel in which the point of view of Madeleine can be effortfully glimpsed, the novel's attempt to incorporate feminist sentiments into its narrative is all but wiped out by its own use of language to describe the impact and importance of these sentiments. As Martin Corner has correctly pointed out, "[f]or Herzog, Madeleine and Gersbach are exemplifications of the demand for freedom in self-expression which has, in the later twentieth-century, become irresistible, ceased to acknowledge any limits. He sees them as embodiments of the unrestrained conative self" (373). This is an argument that would readily apply to Bellow's novel itself as well, which, it is evident from the above passage and throughout, strongly disparages feminism while appearing to portray a feminist character.

Rather than truthfully acknowledging the significance of feminism, *Herzog* seems to see in feminism the democratic ideal of freedom run amok. For the novel as well as the character, Madeleine's forceful independence is a mere attempt of the for-years subjugated to turn into the concrete, free, independent, authoritative subject—characteristics they consider appropriate only for men. And when imagining Madeleine's reaction "[w]hen he stood before them", about to shoot them dead, we read that "Madeleine would shriek and curse. Out of hatred, the most powerful element in her life, stronger by far than any other power or motive" (255). Implicit in this last sentence is, again, the novel's true attitude towards feminism. It sees feminists (via Madeleine) as shrieking and cursing creatures, whose incomprehensible howls for equality are not driven by anything other than "hatred" for men. The whole of the Feminist movement's calls for equal civil and political and social rights between men and women, therefore, are reduced and metamorphosed into animalistic grudging cries of no viable consequence.

All this, however, is turned around the moment Herzog reaches the house where Madeleine, Valentine, and June live and takes a peek through the bathroom window at June being bathed by Valentine. The image of "his daughter's little body" inside "the rushing water with floating toys" and "her black hair" now "tied up for the bath with a rubber band" (256) instigate an emotional reaction in him that recalls Rabbit's own while he listens to soul music at Jimbo's Friendly Lounge in *Rabbit Redux*. "He melted with tenderness for her, putting his hand over his mouth to cover any sound emotion might cause him to make … Moved, he watched her, breathing with open mouth, his face half covered by his hand" (256). Herzog's previous anger at his former wife and her lover completely dissipates and turns into an emotional "tenderness" towards

his daughter. This anger, of course, was more akin to the hatred that he accused Madeleine (and all women) of. Essentially, Herzog has recognised in his former wife what he is not able to admit to himself: feelings of hatred for the opposite sex. It is not Madeleine or women who feel hatred towards Herzog and all other men, but Herzog's own sex that harbours loathing feelings in relation to those women who have been advocating for gender equality. Herzog's realisation of his own fallibility comes at the precise moment when he witnesses something as natural, as innocent and innocently human, as his daughter taking a bath. And the very fact that, consumed by this newly found tenderness, he covers half his face with his hand reveals another novel feeling, that of embarrassment: Herzog is embarrassed at his previous thoughts, at his previous anger and hatred, at the murder he was about to commit. Already we begin to see in him a change similar to that of Mr. Sammler in *Mr. Sammler's Planet*.

But does this change in his feelings reflect a corresponding change in his attitude towards women and the Feminist movement as well? Bellow's novel wishes to convince us that, yes, Herzog is indeed suddenly and conspicuously a changed man. First of all, as Herzog sees Valentine bathing his daughter, as he witnesses "how he was with June, scooping the water on her playfully, kindly" (257), his hateful feelings towards his ex-wife's lover turn into ones of sensitive affection. The tenderly rendered descriptions make Herzog see him in another light: "Gersbach ran fresh water on her, cumbersomely rose and opened the bath towel. Steady and thorough, he dried her, and then with a large puff he powdered her. The child jumped up and down with delight" (257). It is a universal characteristic of parents to feel happy every time their children are happy, and, as June is now brimming with delight at Valentine's having bathed

her with such cordial zeal, Herzog cannot help but feel delighted himself, and grateful towards Valentine for taking such good care of his daughter. But why are Herzog's feelings towards Valentine, a man, important when talking about feminism? Indeed, if Herzog had been feeling the same degree of hatred towards Valentine as he had towards Madeleine, why would this hatred translate into a generalised disparagement of the Feminist movement as a whole? I would argue that Valentine Gersbach represents what many men perceive as the masculine in feminism; the ludicrous idea that, in order for women to come to power, they need to adopt certain stereotypically masculine traits of tenacity, fortitude, and virility. That is why Valentine and Madeleine are treated in the same way by Herzog, as if they were one person of the same sex rather than two different people of two opposite sexes: because they are, for Herzog, symbolically the same person, one that encompasses both the masculine and the feminine: the feminist. By showing compassion towards Valentine, therefore, Herzog becomes symbolically compassionate towards the one half of feminism. But what about the other half?

Having observed the camaraderie and rapport between Valentine and June, Herzog then witnesses a similar loving relationship between June and Madeleine: "He saw his child in the kitchen, looking up at Mady, asking for something" (257). Even something as seemingly simple as June "looking up at" her mother is enough to make Herzog swoon, and to think of Madeleine as "Mady" (one need only take a look at the emotional effect gazes are able to induce in Robert Bresson's films to fully grasp how such a natural, spontaneous, apparently inconsequential act can turn into an act of utter affective significance). As a consequence, Herzog comes to the realisation that he was about to "make such a complete fool of himself" not only because of the

hatred he felt towards Madeleine in particular and women in general , but also of the hatred he deeply felt towards himself. “Only self-hatred could lead him to ruin himself because his heart was ‘broken.’ How could it be broken by such a pair” (258)? How could something as benevolent as the masculine-feminine pair that he considers feminism to be engender such a violent emotional response from him? “His breath came back to him; and how good it felt to breathe” (258), Herzog exclaims right after. By adroitly acknowledging the importance and rightness of the freedom and equality the Feminist movement sought to achieve, Herzog is now able to feel free (from) himself as well. The transformation Herzog experiences with regard to how he views feminism functions, therefore, to present masculinity as supportive of the women’s cause and, in this way, to reinstate its power.

III. Where the Wild Sexual Desires Grow: The Second Sex in *Sabbath’s Theater*

Philip Roth’s relation to gender has long monopolised critical discussions of his work (Gooblar 7). His often unfavourable treatment and characterisation of women in his fiction has led many critics to denounce not only his work, but also the author himself, as sexist and misogynist. In perhaps one of the most famous of these feminist critiques, Vivian Gornick, reiterating well into the 21st century an argument she had made as early as 1976, sharply obliterates the distinction between Roth the author and Roth’s texts by contending that, in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), “the reader could still believe that the women are monstrous because Portnoy experiences them as monstrous. In all the books to follow over the next thirty years, the women are monstrous because for Philip Roth women are monstrous” (125). Such a polemical stance is shared by other critics, whose

readings of Roth's novels, however, do not always align with the view that the author should be held responsible for the sexism and misogynism rampant in his books. Even so, it is a testament to Roth's prodigious yet problematic legacy that, one day after his death in 2018, an article with the title "Was Philip Roth a misogynist?" appeared in *The Conversation*. The article reverently but relatively objectively recapitulates the main strands of feminist criticism of Roth and his novels, but goes further to note the ways in which Roth quite often responded to that criticism by including it, and sometimes mocking it, sometimes shielding himself against it, in his fiction.

My aim in this section is not to examine whether Roth is or is not sexist. As with the previous sections on *Rabbit Redux* and *Herzog*, I seek to explore in depth the ways in which Roth's fiction (rather than the author himself) constructs an image of masculinity as supposedly sympathetic to second-wave feminism. This practice can readily be viewed in *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), a novel notorious for its multiple explicit sex scenes (not to mention the arduous references to all things sex) and libidinous white male protagonist. A middle-aged former puppeteer, Mickey Sabbath spends the largest part of his waking life (though we perhaps should not presume his dreams are any different) either having sex or thinking about sex. The pectoral pastorality permeating the first part of *American Pastoral* (before all hellish America breaks loose) is in *Sabbath's Theater* completely absent. The latter novel does not have a clear, distinctive narrative, but rather proceeds in an oneiric manner to recount the stultifying effect of placing sex above everything else. As I point out, however, it is not the male protagonist whose strained concupiscence becomes the epicenter of the novel's creasing narrative; rather, it is Sabbath's female lover

and sidekick, Drenka, who seems to hold the novel's sexual reins—as well as the key to my argument in this section.

As always when it comes to literary criticism of Roth's novels, *Sabbath's Theater*'s reception, both by early reviewers and later literary scholars, has been mixed. On the one hand, Michiko Kakutani found the novel "static and claustrophobic … sour instead of manic, nasty instead of funny, lugubrious instead of liberating" (17). On the other, Harold Bloom considered the novel as Roth's "sublime achievement" (529), while William H. Pritchard similarly called *Sabbath's Theater* Roth's "richest, most rewarding novel", and went on to caution against equating "the book's protagonist" and "Philip Roth the novelist or man" (7), a recurrent concern in Roth criticism. In terms of the novel's narrative and thematic concerns, scholars have for the most part chosen to focus either on the character of Sabbath or on that of Drenka, and their readings of the novel vary according to which character's trajectory they have opted to trace. From those scholars focusing and commenting on Sabbath, only Elaine B. Safer (67), Ranen Omer-Sherman (169), Gurumurthy Neelakantan (93-94) and, to a certain extent, David Brauner (143) have found any cause to sympathise with this detestable male protagonist; even when they do so, however, they still recognise his misogynistic tendencies. Many critics, such as Peter Scheckner (222), Christopher Koy (23), and Zheng Yang (72), view Sabbath as a contemporary Shakespearean character, complete with all the tragic features of a man doomed largely due to himself. Quite a few critics, such as Omid Delbandi (243) and David Lodge (28), have also drawn comparisons between Sabbath and Portnoy of *Portnoy's Complaint*, another Roth novel famous for its exploration of masculine sexual desire but one whose distinctively comic tone has managed to bypass accusations of misogyny on the part of both

its author and its protagonist: hence any comparisons between the characters of these two novels automatically pander to claims that, rather than being misogynist, “Sabbath is masculinity ironized” (Greenham 165) and thus *Sabbath’s Theater*, one might hastily claim, even feminist.

But it is the character of Drenka who, in my opinion, is of much more interest in terms of the various ways in which the novel deals with sex and sexuality and which has led some critics to, at the very least, imply that the novel might be considered feminist. In this regard, Debra Shostak has argued that “Roth’s representation of Drenka escapes objectification because she is a full, active, and volitional participant in her own selfhood. Like Sabbath, she creates herself through voice and body as a desiring subject” (133); while Alex Hobbs has gone so far as to claim that “she is [Sabbath’s] equal” because she “embraces her sexual identity” (87), an argument that Frank Kermode also made at the time of the novel’s publication (20). In a more lucid take, at least as far as my argument is concerned, Frank Kelleter has read Drenka as Sabbath’s “female alter ego” (rather than his equal), a female who “actively strives to be a mirror male” (276).

Therein, I argue, lies the novel’s essence and essential literary purpose. In Drenka, Roth has indeed created a character who not only embraces her sexuality, who not only seeks sexual pleasure at any time, for however long, and with whomever, but who also is very much conscious of her needs and desires—and of the importance of gratifying those needs and desires—as a human being. But whereas these characteristics of hers might be construed as feminist, in the sense that we witness a woman free (and willing) to follow her sexual imperatives, the way these imperatives are rendered on the page are nothing resembling what feminism has historically stood for. For Drenka does

not seek regular, ordinary sexual gratification, but rather a gratification that can be recounted in the novel in very vulgar terms. That is, instead of representing an emancipated female figure, Drenka embodies a view of women as sexually uninhibited creatures who desire sex with the same forceful and violent vengeance as many men—and as Sabbath. Whereas, therefore, the critics I have cited above consider Drenka as sexually emancipated, I argue instead that her sexual nature is held captive by the novel's wish to undermine female sexuality by supposedly revealing it as something boorish, tawdry, and as indecent as Sabbath's own "Indecent Theater" (198).

Moreover, while Kelleter above maintains that Drenka agentically endeavours to become a mirror image of masculinity, to look and behave like her male counterpart as much as sexually possible, I argue instead that Roth's novel defends masculinity against feminism's accusations of sexism and misogyny by producing a female literary character who embodies masculinity to so large an extent that the reader would not be at fault in having trouble distinguishing between her and her male lover. It is important to bear in mind that this novel, in contrast to the other two I have examined in this chapter, was written and published in the 1990s, some thirty years after the advent of the Feminist movement in the US. Sabbath, middle-aged as he is, may well represent the patriarchal masculine figure of early postwar America, but Drenka, we are led to believe, is a (distorted, of course) stand-in for all women and all feminists since the first calls for gender equality began circulating in the United States during the turbulent years with which my thesis primarily deals. Rather than produce an image of wounded masculinity like *Herzog* (though a reading of Sabbath as a wounded male trying to figure out what is left of his life would garner interesting insights), *Sabbath's Theater* invests instead in this female

character in order to ostensibly expose the masculinity inherent in women and feminism.

To decide which parts of the novel, which sexual acts, to single out for analysis is a very strenuous task indeed. So abundant—and superfluous—are the sex scenes that demonstrate the novel's attempt to supposedly reveal Drenka's insatiable cravings that this very attempt more often than not verges on unconscious parody. To begin with, just after we learn very early in the novel that Drenka has died of cancer, Sabbath is shown to recollect a very detailed account of a sexual play he and his deceased lover used to engage in. This involved Drenka telling Sabbath about all the sexual encounters she had had with other men throughout her life and was having even while they were together. Of course, this is something that Sabbath "had asked her to" do, and he got a "diabolical pleasure" as well as "happiness" from that: "When she was alive, nothing excited or entertained him more than hearing, detail by detail, the stories of her" (36) sexual escapades. On the one hand, the fact that Sabbath appears to be so desirous of hearing about Drenka's sexual adventures, and not at all disturbed by something like that, can be symbolically construed as a form of sexual control he willfully exerts on his female counterpart. Drenka's enjoyment of having sex with other men does not matter in and of itself; what does matter is the pleasure Sabbath invariably gets by listening to his lover's sexual experiences. As such, Drenka's sex exists solely in order to entertain Sabbath. This can also be thought of as a metaphor for the novel's own employment of Drenka as a creature of sex, as a female character whose bountiful sexual life is densely described so as to induce the effect explained above.

More importantly, the agency that Drenka appears to possess during the aforementioned sexual antics again evinces the novel's wish to present her as a sexually emancipated female character, on a par with Updike's Janice and Bellow's Madeleine. This is how Roth's novel depicts Sabbath's reminiscence of Drenka's profane descriptions of her sexuality:

> It's a very physical feeling that I get. It's the appearance, it's something chemical, I almost would like to say. There's an energy that I sense. It makes me very aroused and I feel it then … I feel it inside, in my body. If he is physical, if he is strong, the way he walks, the way he sits, the way he's himself, if he's juicy … I often look at their hands to see if they have strong, expressive hands. Then I imagine that they have a big dick. If there is any truth to this I don't know, but I do it anyway as a little research. Some kind of confidence in the way they move. It isn't that they have to look elegant—it is rather an animalistic appearance under the elegance. So it's a very intuitive thing. And I know it right away and I have always known it (37).

Is this a real depiction of how women feel about men, or is it just the novel's fantasy? Whichever holds true, the fact is that Drenka, rather than being a strong female character who is rightly not ashamed to talk about sex and sexual physical attraction, becomes in Roth's rhapsodic rendering of her intimate interiority a sexualised being whose crude manner and language leave a far more lasting impression than the actual linguistic content of her sexual preferences in men. What the reader receives is not an honest sense of Drenka as an ordinarily sexual being, but an almost animalistic sexuality similar to that she purports to be attracted by herself. What is more, despite the not-at-all-eloquent enumeration of the male characteristics she is most readily aroused by, we get the sense that she is a woman highly dependent on men, not just for sexual gratification, but for a kind of spiritual satisfaction as well. Her soulful intuition ("it's a very intuitive thing") merges with her bodily disposition ("It's a very physical feeling") to produce a female character whose body and soul essentially belong to men.

There is another kind of sexual satisfaction at play here, too. For Drenka soon reveals that she is also aroused by watching men masturbate in front of her: “What I enjoyed was to see how they were by themselves. That I could be the observer there, and to see how they played with their dick and how it was formed, the shape of it, and when it became hard, and also the way they held their hand—it turned me on” (37-38). This could very well be considered as an instance of a male-authored novel’s pleasurably imagining what women curiously think of men’s private moments (after all, masturbation is something that is widely and openly—even if erroneously—acknowledged as a primarily male sexual act). But Drenka’s arousal does not really, or mostly, stem from the physical fact of men masturbating; rather, she focuses in her description on the moment of their orgasm, “when they get so hot they can’t stop themselves in spite of being shy, that’s very exciting. That’s what I like best—watching them lose control” (38). In the same way that in the passage quoted above Drenka appears to be dependent on men for sexual satisfaction, men, through the act of masturbation, appear both dependent on and helpless in front of Drenka for their own sexual gratification. Crucially, Drenka admits she enjoys seeing men lose control. This, of course, refers to the loss of control induced by sexual pleasure—but only on the surface. For, in *Sabbath Theater*’s anti-feminist-posing-as-feminist narrative, the sexual loss of control transforms into the loss of power that masculinity has been steadily facing since the advent of the Feminist movement in the 1960s. Honour, power, control, social dominance: these are the characteristics masculinity has most passionately treasured (and come to the verge of losing), and in having Drenka concede experiencing pleasure from male loss of control, Roth’s novel—for which all women are the same and so Drenka is a stand-in for and mouthpiece of a generalised, catholic

womanhood—seeks to muddy and vilify the waters of progressive US society by throwing dust into the reading public's eyes with regard to where feminists' aims truly lie.

Additionally, Roth's novel also employs Drenka's exceedingly erogenous inclinations as a means of exposing what it views as feminine indecency—and then chastising femininity for it. That is, instead of merely demonstrating that the extent of women's sexual desires is as large as that of men's, *Sabbath's Theater* makes the case for a female sexuality that is more indomitable, urgent, and even amoral than men's ever could be. While for a large part of the novel it is true that, as Ansu Louis has noted, "a transgressive take on the prevalent moral and social order is integral to Sabbath's … world of sexuality" (89), we do find Sabbath sometimes attempting to be the voice of moral reason when he encounters Drenka's transgressions (rather than his own). That is why, even though Sabbath "was tremendously stirred" by Drenka's meticulous descriptions, these also inadvertently "made him jealous, maddeningly jealous—now that she was dead he wanted to shake her and shout at her and tell her to stop. 'Only me! Fuck your husband when you have to, but otherwise, no one but me'" (38)! Rather than an instance of wounded masculinity similar to Herzog's (as examined above), Sabbath's pleading cry for a form of exclusivity is a covert attempt to present himself as a morally prudent man seeking to put some righteous sense into an obscenely unethical woman. While Joel Diggory has commented on Sabbath's sexual proclivities as constitutive of his "anarchic libido" (49), it is actually Drenka who, in the conveniently prudish eyes of Sabbath, encapsulates sexual anarchy. In addition, in a very interesting and innovative exploration of how sound and listening operate in this novel, Ben Davies has focused on "the spatiotemporality of sexual listening in Sabbath's

life and in reading the text, arguing for Sabbath's 'theater'—the text itself—to be appreciated as a space for and of listening" (351). While, however, he views Drenka's recounting to Sabbath her sexual experiences as part of an "auricular relationship" that "elicits the mutual, interpersonal connection between the lovers" (353), I argue instead that this is all a performance staged by Roth's novel in order to undermine feminism's calls for equality by seemingly exposing, first, the traditionally masculine trait of excessive sexuality in femininity, and, second, femininity's supposedly deep-seated indecency. Whatever real-life feminine valence Drenka's sexual descriptions might have had, both linguistically, in terms of content, and aurally, what remains at the end of this two-page erotic gestalt is simply Sabbath's howl of faux morality.

Not much later in the novel, Sabbath gets the chance to directly (meaning visually instead of merely aurally) experience an instance of Drenka having sex—but, this time, with a woman. Initially, this seems another way in which Sabbath might get sexual pleasure. Not fully content with listening to Drenka's sexual adventures, he arranges one such adventure for her himself, provided that he will be able to be there in the attic room and watch. But "[t]hough Sabbath had masterminded the evening and given Drenka the money to participate, he'd found himself more or less superfluous from the moment Drenka knocked on the door and he let her into the attic room" (66). On a surface level, this superfluity refers to the fact that, since Sabbath is going to be simply an observer, the sexual act between Drenka and the other woman, Christa, can take place with or without him. On a symbolic, more subtle level, however, *Sabbath's Theater* seems to comment here on the expendability of masculinity, which, from the 1960s onwards, has been anxiously facing the prospect of societal oblivion (at least in the fearful eyes of those who possess

it). No longer is a man necessary in order for an act masculinity has always prized itself on to transpire. Sex can exist without men.

Moreover, the way the novel describes Drenka's initial meeting with Christa just before they have sex once again displays Drenka as a masculine, even if female, subject. At the exact moment she lays eyes on Christa, she steadfastly "walked directly across to where Christa was sitting on the secondhand couch" and, "[s]inking to her knees on the bare floorboards, Drenka grabbed Christa's close-cropped head between her two hands and kissed her strongly on the mouth" (66). There is a hint of sexual violence in this narrative instance that is usually attributed (in literature, film, and the media, at least) to men. The image of Drenka grabbing Christa's head, and then kissing her mouth "strongly", are two physical gestures that we might usually expect of men. Having Drenka adopt a masculine intimacy is thus but one way in which Roth's novel seeks to blur the boundaries between masculinity and femininity and demonstrate that women are in fact not much different from the violent, often distasteful men feminism supposedly fought against. But Drenka's masculine sexual ethos does not stop there: "The speed with which Drenka unbuttoned Christa's jacket and with which Christa undid Drenka's silk blouse and cleared aside her push-up bra astonished Sabbath" because "[h]e had imagined a warm-up would be required—talking and joking overseen by him, a heart-to-heart talk, maybe even a sympathetic look through Christa's boring quilts to put the two of them at their ease" (66). Again, what we have here are masculine stereotypes being used by female characters and, conversely, female stereotypes being completely rejected by them. Drenka undresses Christa with "speed" and Christa, similarly fast, takes Drenka's bra off. Filtered through Sabbath's perspective, it is very much like watching two men, instead of two

women, undressing each other; or, at least, two women posing as men. The possibility of lesbian sex, unencumbered by societal stereotypes, does not even cross Sabbath's mind.

What is more, there is a stark contradistinction between the masculine sexuality exhibited by these two women and the feminine stereotypical sexuality that Sabbath "had imagined". Phrases like "warm-up", "talking and joking", "a heart-to-heart talk", and "a sympathetic look" at Christa's "quilts" all in one way or another allude to sexual clichés usually attributed to women. Women, according to the novel and Sabbath's subjectivity, would not rush straight to sex. They would talk with their partner first, get to know their partner well before allowing them to see and touch their body, and they would even take a (feminine, because sympathetic) look at their partner's room's decoration. By having Drenka and Christa completely reject their femininity and choose instead to embrace masculinity, therefore, *Sabbath's Theater* inconspicuously presents feminism as a snatching creature intent on taking over everything masculinity has ever indulged in, namely societal dominance based on their gender. In perhaps the most famous feminist text ever written, and from which the title of this section derives, Simone de Beauvoir argued that "[w]oman is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with man; that is to say, her *possibilities* should be defined" (66). This is not to say that Roth was consciously aware of these words while he was writing *Sabbath's Theater*; but his text has perhaps perversely altered the content of de Beauvoir's sayings in order to fictionally create a female character whose completeness rests on her having essentially become a man.

This is further complicated—and, in the novel, legitimised—when Drenka converses with Sabbath after she has finished having sex with Christa. Their

conversation—or, more accurately, what Drenka says—stands as yet another example of the novel's covert derision of the Feminist movement through metaphorical and metonymic language. Drenka confesses that she is finally able to "find the cunt actually quite beautiful" (the fact that the female sexual organ is referred to in this offensive way countless times in the novel is equally telling of how the masculinity depicted here views the female gender) even though she "never would have thought that looking in the mirror. You come with your shame to look at yourself and you look at your sexual organs and they are not acceptable from the aesthetic perspective" (68). What Roth's novel seems to imply here is that women feel ashamed of what essentially makes them women, that is, their sexual organs. Every time she looked in the mirror, therefore, Drenka felt a sense of embarrassment about being a woman, about not having been born a sensibly shameless man.

In a symbolic sense, the novel portrays second-wave feminism as having arisen out of femininity's shame at itself; effectively, out of women's desire to become men. It is only after Drenka manages to symbolically become a man that she is able to find her sexual organs beautiful. As she ethereally puts it: "in this setting, I can see the whole thing, and although it is a mystique that I am a part of, it's a mystery to me, a total mystery" (68). Yet this mystique Drenka mentions is but another symptom of her resulting masculinity. Even though she can now "see the whole thing" that is femininity, the true idea of woman and womanhood remains "a mystery" to her. Critiquing Freud's masculine discourse on women and femininity, Luce Irigaray has argued that "the enigma that *is* woman will … constitute the *target*, the *object*, the *stake*, of a masculine discourse, of a debate among men, which would not consult her, would not concern her. Which, ultimately, she is not supposed to know anything about"

(13). Drenka's own femininity remains a mystery to her precisely because she is, in a sense, Sabbath incarnate, a masculine self hidden inside a woman's body. And the real reason she finds her sexual organs beautiful is because, as a symbolic man, she is now attracted to women. That is why she lasciviously confesses that she is now able to "find very erotic a young woman's body, the beauty of it, the round curves, the small breasts, the way she is shaped, and the smell of it, and the softness of it" (68). The way she talks about another woman's physical characteristics is as if she has never encountered them before in her own body, as if she is now seeing them for the first time in someone else; and how else could that be possible other than if she was not a woman herself but a man? And when recalling a particular moment during her sexual intercourse with Christa, her transformation into a man is carnally concluded: "when Christa, her muscular tongue anchored between Drenka's thighs, went groping around the sheets searching blindly for a vibrator … Sabbath was able to locate one for her, the longest of them, and to place it, correctly oriented, into her outstretched hand" (67). Christa wants to place a vibrator inside Drenka's vagina not in order to induce pleasure in both of them, but rather so that the novel can complete its narrative turning of Drenka into a man. It perhaps need not be theorised in so much detail, but the "longest" vibrator is the penis that is going to be attached to Drenka's body in order to make her a man. And the fact that Sabbath supplies it in a manner reminiscent of the passing on of a baton at a relay race can be interpreted as masculinity's metaphorical passing on of its masculine societal power to women.

But what about Sabbath, as a masculinist character next to Drenka's formerly female, newly male one? After all, in order for the reversal of sexual roles I talked of at the beginning of this section to effectively take place, it is not

enough simply for Drenka to symbolically assume the position of the traditionally male; Sabbath needs to symbolically assume the position of the traditionally female. And it is certainly not enough to equate Sabbath's seeming passivity with respect to Drenka's sexual endeavours with the stereotypical male view of feminine passivity. Nor is an account of, in this case, Sabbath's wounded masculinity (rampant, indeed, throughout the novel) adequate in examining the novel's attempt to re-establish the societal dominance of white masculinity. For, if I have shown so far how the second sex in *Sabbath's Theater* has become what might be called the first sex, then an investigation of how the first sex becomes the second sex, and the way this is used in Roth's novel to reinstate it into its former, prominent position, is undoubtedly in order.

To this end, I will concentrate my attention on one particular scene in the novel which best substantiates my argument. Right after Drenka fully adopts her male form in the plot, we see Sabbath visiting Drenka's grave. First of all, the very close proximity between these two instances in the novel, between Drenka's symbolically becoming male and her appearing dead inside the grave which Sabbath visits, points to the fact that, as far as the novel is concerned, she has served her purpose as a literary character: after her sexual and gender roles are successfully reversed, there is no other reason for her to exist, alive, at all (of course, she does appear alive in flashbacks throughout the whole novel, but in this case, the putting together of these two scenes does not seem, cannot be, accidental). While at her grave, Sabbath subtly foreshadows his own symbolic transformation into a woman. "Looking down at the plot" (68), thinking about his dead lover, engaging in a rambunctious remembrance of sexual things past, he becomes "susceptible to … a flood of straightforward feeling" (69) probably for the first time in his entire life. In addition, he "threw himself

onto the grave, sobbing as he could not sob at the funeral" (69). In *Sabbath's Theater*, every act of ordinary circumstance is infused with solemn significations whose precise meanings need to be delved into, and when the novel shows Sabbath sob, it makes its male literary character adopt an emotion that he thinks of as female.

On the relation between feelings and gender, Roth himself said in an interview with *The Paris Review* that was reprinted in his autobiographical collection of essays *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), that he is "sorry if [his] men don't have the correct feelings about women, or the universal range of feelings about women, or the feelings about women that it will be okay for men to have in 1995" (133). Already quite some time before the publication of *Sabbath's Theater*, we see Roth predicting his own novel's literary trick of having the main, male protagonist exhibit emotion as if he were a woman. Commenting on the novel's emotionality (or lack thereof), Heinz-Günter Vester has argued that "[t]he culture in which Sabbath lives and its rituals have lost every authentic meaning. It is a postemotional culture which is unable to give orientation in emotional troubles" (23). But if the culture to which Vester refers is the traditional, patriarchal culture dominating American society, then it is not true that it has lost its authenticity and meaning, for masculine discourse has long been associated with an absence of emotions. Rather, in this case, we see Roth's novel attempting to transfer what is stereotypically thought of as the emotionality of women onto the male character in order to make him appear as feminine as possible. Of course, this is not the first time that a man in Roth's fiction acts like, or symbolically becomes, a woman; the most famous and blatant example of that still remains his 1972 novella *The Breast*, in which the male character of the story Kafkaesquely transforms into a female breast. But

here, the symbolic change in gender, even if relatively short-lived and certainly inconsistent, is all the more striking since it happens to a man whose main characteristic seems to be his egotistically erective egregiousness.

But the most startling instance of symbolic gender change takes place not on an emotional level, but on a physical one, as one would expect from a novel of such animal physicality. While reminiscing about Drenka in front of her grave, Sabbath does seek to retain his masculinist essence: by masturbating. Towards the end of his act, however, a stranger approaches Sabbath: "Sabbath was completing his mourning—by scattering his seed across Drenka's oblong patch of Mother Earth—when the head-lights of a car turned off the blacktop and into the wide gravel drive where the hearses ordinarily entered the cemetery" (73). This stranger very closely resembles an authorial *deus ex machina* who makes his appearance at the precise moment when Sabbath's masculinity is at its ejaculatory—both literally and metaphorically—climax. For right afterwards, Sabbath's symbolic transformation into a woman becomes to take effect. "Zipping up his trousers, Sabbath scurried, bent over, toward the nearest maple tree. There, on his knees, he hid his white beard between the massive tree trunk and the old stone wall" (73). By zipping up his trousers, Sabbath essentially hides his masculinity by putting away his male sexual organ. By scurrying, he makes small steps like those a woman might (stereotypically) make, and he then bends over in a manner very often associated with women in men's erotic fantasies. The fact that he goes towards a maple tree might also be significant since, as mentioned in the previous section, maple syrup has familial, domestic connotations. Sabbath also hides his beard: long associated with masculine virility, his beard is now nowhere to

be seen, and the previously strong, and strongly masculine, Sabbath is now small when compared to the “massive tree trunk” beside him.

And not much later, when the stranger, Lewis, who turns out to be a former lover of Drenka’s as well, in a contrastingly masculine way “unzipped his fly and from his shorts extracted the erection” that Sabbath is no longer—for the time being, at least—able to have himself and begins “rocking back and forth, rocking and moaning, until at last he turned his face upward” (77) and comes, Sabbath is both disgusted and devastated. He considers Lewis’s act—an act he only minutes earlier engaged in himself—as an “abomination” (77), which is perhaps how a woman, and not someone like Sabbath, would view male masturbation in front of a grave. What is more, when Lewis leaves, Sabbath goes once again towards Drenka’s grave and takes with him a bouquet of flowers that Lewis had left behind (flowers being another thing one would usually associate with femininity). But “the bouquet was wet” with Lewis’s semen: “The flowers were drenched with it” (78). As a result, Sabbath’s “hands were covered with it” as well (78). And it is here, I argue, that Sabbath’s symbolic transformation fully takes place and effect. For, like a pornographic, sexualised adult Little Red Riding Hood “in the woods a quarter mile down from the cemetery”, Sabbath starts “licking from his fingers Lewis’s sperm and, beneath the full moon, chanting aloud, “I am Drenka! I am Drenka” (83)! Sabbath is left licking the semen of someone else’s self-pleasuring act; no longer able to emit his own semen, he eats someone else’s as if semen is something alien to him—or, at least, as alien as it might be to a woman. And, finally, when he shouts that he is Drenka, the reversal of sexual and gender roles is completed: Drenka has become a man, and Sabbath has taken the role of a woman.

Through this reversal, therefore, of the traditional and stereotypical sexual and gender roles of the masculine man and the feminine woman, *Sabbath's Theater* brings its purportedly feminist sentience full circle. Not only does Drenka follow her sexual needs and desires in a manner akin to a man's unperturbed sexual abundance, via a series of linguistic turns and gestures that assiduously manifest a masculine erotic ethos, but Sabbath himself also symbolically turns into a feminine pigeonhole whose whole existence rests on adopting what one might view as a feminine sexual worldview. The crisis of masculinity that began taking place during the sexual and feminist revolution of the 1960s, and that continued all through the rest of the twentieth century and during the twenty-first, has led to the production of a novel which has incorporated into its narrative an inaccurate and distorted impression of what the Feminist movement stood and fought for. The liberal and progressive image of masculinity that the novel seeks to evince ultimately reveals itself as merely a ruse: we cannot really take either Drenka's masculinity or Sabbath's femininity seriously, for the way this reversal has been rendered is, as I have shown in my analysis of key moments from the novel, both inauthentic and implausible. In the end, what lingers is the sense of masculinity's striving to reassert itself in a society in which its authority seems increasingly farcical.

Not only in this novel, but also in others discussed in this thesis, there are many instances in which the morality of the main characters is put into question. The language used by the novels, and the often scandalous deeds of the protagonists, make the attempts to re-establish the prominent societal position of white masculinity quite difficult indeed. With regard to Roth and *Sabbath's Theater*, David J. Zucker has argued that "[t]hey highlight America's schizophrenic fascination with, and supposed distaste for, matters explicitly

sexual” (136). Indeed, one would be correct in thinking of Roth as the enfant terrible of American erotica. Yet this is not a convincing reason why we come back to him and his characters, and to Updike and Bellow and their characters, with such passionate proclivity, with such ardor, again and again. Is there any way out for them, a way out from the amoral thoughts and actions that their novels so vehemently seek to justify and excuse? The next chapter will attempt to answer this very question, by looking at the role religion plays in these novelists’ fiction, by looking at how religion is used as potentially offering redemption—not least from the indiscreet charm of the transgressive poésie.

Chapter 3

White Masculinity's Redemptive Religion

In the previous two chapters, I argued that the protagonists of my chosen novels demonstrate an alliance with, and support of, marginalised identities so as to rehabilitate their own: my close readings revealed the political aims of the characters' attitudes and behaviours. Having examined the ways in which this faux identification and support plays out, I shall now proceed to shed light on another, largely neglected, narrative strategy aimed at reinvigorating white male dominance in this context: religion. Whether in the foreground or in the background, religion is always present in the novels as well as in the ways in which the protagonists' thoughts and actions seem to either be guided by or clash with their respective faiths' ethical prescriptions. The Christian faith, in the case of Updike, and the Jewish faith, in the case of Roth and Bellow, play a very important part not only in terms of how the fictional characters are moulded, but also—and more importantly—with respect to how the reader views them. In other words, a certain adherence—or lack thereof—to religious doctrines is thought to be responsible for how we judge these characters and their ethics.

It is my aim, therefore, in this chapter to explore the role of religion in post-World War II American narratives written by and about white men and as it pertains to race and gender. More specifically, I argue that, after the end of the Second World War, and in particular after the Civil Rights and second-wave Feminist movements attempted in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to bring about a change in how US society treats African Americans and women, the three

authors examined in this thesis were particularly enamoured by religion's promise of redemption. As I showed in the previous two chapters, the way these novels' protagonists deal with African Americans and women is nothing short of reprehensible—even when they seek to prove otherwise. In order to re-establish the societally dominant position of white masculinity, these authors' novels sought to complicate their protagonists' often vile actions by embellishing their narratives with theologically ethical concerns that would absolve the white male characters' racism and sexism. That is, even as the protagonists of these novels behave in less than favourable ways towards their African American and female counterparts, the rampant anxiety permeating the aspirational, ideal ethical self they have derived from religion elicits a sense of sympathy and perhaps also understanding.

The construction of the self along the lines of (particularly Christian) religious doctrines has had a long and fascinating history. Exploring this connection, Michel Foucault posited that "Christianity imposed a set of conditions and rules of behavior" whereby "[e]ach person has the duty … to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things … and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself" (40). These codes of conduct required an intense form of introspection that would then lead to "a purification of the soul" (40). Living according to Christian religious imperatives, therefore, was thought to promote a higher level of existence, resulting in the creation of a self that would be able to transcend material needs and pursuits and help people "attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (18).

But how is that idealised, Christian version of the self realised in the lived, embodied realities of the white men examined here? Richard Dyer argues for a strong connection between Christianity and corporeal whiteness. Examining Christianity's Mary and Christ as "both exemplary and exceptional human beings" (17), Dyer maintains that these two figures function as standards of perfection to which white people aspire. This aspiration "is registered in suffering, self-denial and self-control … and constitute[s] something of a thumbnail sketch of the white ideal" (17). For Dyer, therefore, the white self is always constructed with a view of attaining the ideal that Christian religion propagates—even before becoming embodied, it is directly linked to an ethical transcendence.

Bringing Foucault's and Dyer's arguments together, I show how, in the novels analysed in this chapter, namely *Rabbit, Run* (Updike, 1960), *American Pastoral* (Roth, 1997), and *Herzog* (Bellow, 1964), the protagonists are always in direct dialogue with a religious spirituality whose ethical precepts more often than not come in marked contrast to their acts and behaviour. But the very fact of their engagement with and concern about the ethics of their religion and of their selves is used as proof of their ultimately good nature. In this respect, Hedda Ben-Bassat has argued that the fiction of postwar American writers like Updike abounds in "traditional technologies of producing a vanishing self" (12) that "render him or her politically invisible" (12). What I contend instead is that the white male protagonists of the novels examined here produce a view of their selves as religious precisely so that their identities can be politically restored. As it is being threatened, the white male self is not "vanishing" but visible—and visibly (re)constructed. In this way, therefore, the function of these novels is fully and resolutely materialised: whatever their views of and behaviour towards

African Americans and women, the protagonists' religious ethical interiority serves as the last means of saving white masculinity from its descent into insignificance.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine the ways in which Updike's *Rabbit, Run* makes use of Christian religion in order to reinstate white masculinity. In my analysis of the novel, I focus on the substantial discrepancy between Rabbit's morally erroneous sexual deeds, thoughts, and behaviour and the ethical prescriptions of his Christian faith. Rather than instances of sincere repentance and concern, I argue that Rabbit's worries with regard to how he should be behaving according to what his religion and God dictate are once again an attempt to cement white masculinity's power after a World War that significantly destabilised masculine self-esteem. Even before the Civil Rights and Feminist movements effected changes that would reverberate in one way or another throughout the rest of the twentieth century, there was a need for white masculinity to rediscover itself through spiritual means. In one of the late-period Updike novels also concerned with religion, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), the narrator writes that the universe's "metaphysical content had leaked away, but for cruelty and death, which without the hypothesis of a God became unmetaphysical; they became simply facts, which oblivion would in time obliviously erase" (7). Even though the novel begins in the 1910s and this passage does not refer to either of the twentieth century's world wars, this sense of one's loss of selfhood's metaphysics (potently present in *Rabbit, Run*) very methodically mirrors masculinity's need for God to guide and guarantee its societal-cum-spiritual dominance.

In the second section of this chapter, focusing on Roth's *American Pastoral*, I argue that the novel employs the traditional Jewish morality its author

ostensibly sought to eschew in order to pull white masculinity out of the crisis it found itself in during the second half of the twentieth century. As I showed in Chapter 1, Seymour, the protagonist of *American Pastoral*, begins behaving in what he deems is a civilised way towards African Americans so as to appease his daughter who accuses him of racism. Having examined how this purportedly civilised attitude functions to restore the privileged position of white masculinity, I explore in this chapter the ways in which Roth's novel equates Seymour's white masculinity with Jewish morality in another attempt to restore white masculinity to the upper echelons of American society. In doing so, I reconfigure what David Tenenbaum has seen, in Roth's *The Human Stain*, as "America's desire to shed its racist past [via a] moralistic paranoia" (49).

In the third and final section of this chapter, I argue that Bellow's *Herzog* employs a generalised, socially constructed morality on the part of its protagonist in order to pseudo-chronicle white masculinity's attempt to remain ethically good in a world which it views—because it feels threatened—as deeply immoral. Through my reading of the novel, it becomes clear that Herzog's preoccupation with morality is again resolutely linked to the sociopolitical changes that the Civil Rights and Feminist movements brought about during the second half of the twentieth century. The moral and spiritual collapse mentioned above is exactly how Herzog views a society in which white masculinity is not the powerful, privileged, dominant societal identity. A discordance between how things ought—according to Herzog—morally to be and how they truly are in postwar American society is the novel's principal, if not always explicit, locus.

I. What Is and What Should Always Be: God, Religion, and Complicated Morality in *Rabbit, Run*

Updike's frequent preoccupation with religion in his fiction is well documented, both in critical literature and by his own account in his essays, interviews, and memoir. In a 1966 interview with *Life* magazine, for instance, Updike famously said that his main "subject … is the American Protestant small-town middle class" (11), something that indicates that for the lives of his fictional characters as well as for him as an author, religion is as important as monetary income. This sentiment is echoed by the critic Alex Engebretson, who views Updike as one of "the two representative American Protestant authors of the postwar period" (221), along with Marilynne Robinson. In a similar vein, Marshall Boswell has examined Updike's Christian Protestantism through the lens of the author's main theological influences, Kierkegaard and Barth (43). But what this focus on religion as the sole or primary impetus behind Updike's literary outpourings misses is the other grand theme with which Updike deals: sex. As Ann-Janine Morey-Graines has fittingly noted, throughout his oeuvre "Updike persistently confronts the reader with a sexualized sacramentality that spotlights with demanding clarity the usually submerged tensions between religion and sexuality in American Culture" (595). The covert tense relation between religion and sexuality: this, more than anything else, characterises much of what Updike wrote. And this, I argue, is at the core of *Rabbit, Run*, the first of the *Rabbit* novels and the one that catapulted Updike into the critical limelight.

In contrast to *Rabbit Redux*, written and published a decade after its predecessor, a decade that significantly shook American society, *Rabbit, Run* is completely absent of the imitative progressivist essence with which Updike sought to infuse the second novel of the tetralogy. Written towards the end of

the 1950s and published on the cusp of second-wave feminism's emergence, *Rabbit, Run* tells the story of how a young ex-basketball player lives his life in constant flight from his wife. The ostensibly sexually emancipated Janice of *Rabbit Redux* is portrayed in this earlier novel as the traditionally subdued and submissive housewife whom the husband cannot stand to be near and for this reason develops an extramarital relationship with a former prostitute named Ruth. The allusions to sex in this novel are both ample and one-sided, as while Janice is forced to stay at home and wait for her husband's return, Rabbit is free to demonstrate and indulge in his I-can-do-whatever-I-want-since-I-am-a-man attitude. What complicates matters is a priest named Jack Eccles, who along with Rabbit's own conscience and religious concerns provides the novel with a pylon of ethicality.

As to be expected, critical scholarship regarding the novel's ethical and spiritual achievements is as conflicted as the protagonist. On the one hand, David Crowe has identified in the novel the concept of "metanoia, a turning around and repenting of sins" as "a genuine possibility and a solution to" (81) Rabbit's moral quandaries, something to which David Heddendorf has also alluded in reference to the whole tetralogy (644). Similarly, Peter J. Bailey (29) and Thomas M. Dicken (71-72) are both sympathetic towards what they deem Rabbit's genuine attempt to truthfully follow his faith's meaningfully filigreed maxims. On the other hand, Ralph C. Wood has argued that the novels of Updike that deal with religion are "imbued with spiritual passivity" (452), while James Wood diagnoses in Updike's literary religion a sense of unremitting unrepentance, of convalescent recurrence (208): despite any ethical doubts and second thoughts, things will eventually continue as normal. Earlier reviewers, such as John Stephen Martin (104) and Derek Wright (41), kept a more neutral

stance, while Jack De Bellis (29) and Baker et al. (275) have chosen to focus simply on the religious connotations of the characters' names.

Rabbit's relationship with his wife and his resultant adultery are very much the opposite of what Christianity normally teaches with respect to marital faithfulness, and so the novel's showing Rabbit appear tormented by his spiritual morality, on the one hand, and his physical sexual satisfaction, on the other, could be construed as a postwar masculine crisis of conscience. What I argue, instead, is that the novel's religious inculcations function to seal masculinity from criticism and debasement. More specifically, Updike's novel imbues the adulterous husband with a guilty conscience stemming from religious ethical concerns in order to quarantine masculinity for as long as possible against any accusations of immorality. For instance, I find ironic to say the least Rabbit's feeling bad—due to his religious faith—about the prospect of having sex with another woman but going ahead and doing it anyway. And then doing it again. And again. What is more, there is a sense of vulnerability permeating Rabbit's self, precisely because of his guilt and conscientious pretense. This vulnerability, combined with the fact that Rabbit appears to be so profoundly concerned about morality and ethics and religion and what his acts mean for his self, is also used to elicit sympathy for the tormented male character.

As I have already indicated, references to God and religion in *Rabbit, Run* are rampant. One of the most striking is when Rabbit is on his way to have extramarital sex with Ruth for the first time. When they reach Ruth's building ("Here I am", she announces promisingly and invitingly), Rabbit's eyes stray away and look at a church opposite: "Across the way a big limestone church hangs like a gray curtain behind the streetlamp" (65). Despite the apparent

simplicity of this sentence, the novel has managed to pack an array of meanings and antitheses that demonstrate Rabbit's haphazardly guilty frame of mind as he is about to cheat on his wife. The mention of "limestone" in this instance can be thought of as an allusion to John 8:3-7 in *The Bible*, when Jesus defends a woman who has committed adultery by admonishing a crowd of angry people who demand that that woman be punished: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her". The throwing of a stone as punishment is linked in this instance in *Rabbit, Run* to the church at the other side of the street from where Rabbit is about to commit adultery of his own. The church is of course a symbol of religion and also a symbol of what religion teaches and dictates, and so by equating his religion's precepts with a punishment that, according to Jesus above, should not take place since all people are in one way or another sinful, Rabbit's conscience is soothed to the extent that he will not feel guilty or bad about what he is about to do. Surely, narrator and protagonist seem to ponder, if all people are sinful, then the very meaning of the word sin becomes obsolete and is therefore without consequence. Nevertheless, Rabbit is not able not to feel guilt. For, in the same sentence, the narrator has used the words "hangs" and "curtain" to denote religion's ever-present reality in Rabbit's thoughts and mind. The fact that the church does not simply exist but rather "hangs" metaphorically matches the way Rabbit's conscience hangs on his mind. Despite being accustomed to the freedoms accorded to white men in the postwar period, there is still a moral sense looming over Rabbit at this moment. Additionally, by likening the church to a "curtain", Rabbit reimagines the institution that facilitates one's relation to God; now it is no longer the means to imbibe moral codes laid down by an

almighty deity, but a screen lowered so that God will not be able to see one commit sins.

This metaphorical curtain turns literal as soon as Rabbit and Ruth are inside Ruth's apartment and they are on the verge of undressing just before sex commences. Rabbit asks Ruth whether he should "pull the shade", and Ruth replies that he should, because there is "a depressing view" (70) outside. Writing on the relationship between Rabbit and Ruth, Ramchandran Sethuraman has argued that "Ruth occupies the space of the analyst and compels Rabbit to embrace the hole in his desire" (114). But by asking Rabbit to pull the window's shade, we see that, regardless of whatever discussions regarding God and religion ensue between them later, Ruth at this point in fact serves as Rabbit's accomplice in amorality; rather than asking him to accept the hole that the church may leave in his adulterous and so amoral desire, Ruth is there to help him close it. Looking out the window "to see what she means", Rabbit glimpses "only the church across the way, gray, grave, and mute. Lights behind its rose window are left burning, and this circle of red and purple and gold seems in the city night a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning underneath" (70). It is not enough for Rabbit to conjure in his mind an imagined curtain between himself and the church; he needs to put a real, tangible curtain (in the form, in this case, of the window shade) in place as well. What is more, the church that needs to be hidden constitutes "a depressing view" precisely because it represents a morality that neither Rabbit nor Ruth can abide. Though it is "mute" (God is not going to magically appear out of the blue heaven to chastise them for what they are about to do), it still looks grave, as if inside saints and angels have congregated in order to vehemently weep for two human beings' immoral lives. And the way the novel

describes, through the eyes of Rabbit, this church further evinces the moral ideal that humanity—and Rabbit himself—may aspire towards but find difficult to attain. The lights behind the church's window are like "a hole punched in reality to show the abstract brilliance burning underneath". Human reality is fraught with sin, and so the light of the church leaves a hole of correctness; should anyone manage to get through, it leads to the "abstract brilliance" that living an ethical life rewards. Unable to obtain it, Rabbit "lowers the shade on it guiltily" (70).

After they have sex—again—in the morning, Rabbit hears "[c]hurch bells ring loudly" (78). It is Sunday of course, and that is what church bells do on Sundays; but the loud ringing of these bells cannot but signify God's anger (or Rabbit's sense of God's anger) towards the adultery that has taken place. Rabbit "pulls up the shade" of the window "a few feet" in order to "watch the crisply dressed people go into" (78) the church. It is as if he is afraid of them, these religious and ethical people who are very much unlike himself, but still "[t]he thought of these people having the bold idea of leaving their homes to come here and pray pleases and reassures Rabbit" (78). Seeing them duly and diligently attend Sunday Mass, Rabbit begins to feel that there is still hope for him as a person—after all, is not Christianity about repentance and forgiveness? As such, Rabbit is led "to close his own eyes and bow his head with a movement so tiny that Ruth won't notice", and prays: "*Help me, Christ. Forgive me. Take me down the way … Amen*" (78). Can the reader not feel sympathy for a fictional character who has strayed from the word of God but nonetheless asks for forgiveness? It is the closing of his eyes and the bowing of his head, more than anything else, that make Rabbit seem genuinely guilty, ashamed, and repentant. And the way he prays, italicised, the way he asks

Christ to forgive him and show him how to behave, the way the words of this prayer are lopsided and therefore belonging to a different realm than the rest of the novel, a higher realm perhaps, the realm of aspirational morality, all combine to create a portrait of the adulterer as a remorseful man. Indeed, in his memoir, *Self-Consciousness* (1989), Updike divulges that one of the main topics he wished to write about was "the desperate effort of faith" which "belonged to a dark necessary underside of reality that … should not be merely ignored, or risen above, or disdained" (135). In this instance in *Rabbit, Run*, we can really feel Rabbit's "desperate effort of faith" not only because he prays in such a surprisingly focused manner, but also because his general comportment evinces a sense of genuine wonder at the theoreticality believing and praying inevitably requires.

Nonetheless, no sooner has Rabbit prayed for forgiveness than he once again succumbs to the earth-bound temptations of the flesh. "'Come here,' he asks" (79) Ruth. "The idea of making it while the churches are full excites him" (79). But, this time, we cannot in any way justify Rabbit's deeds by attributing them to the imperatives of his biological and hormonal apparatus. For this attempt to initiate sex with Ruth incorporates a mocking attitude towards religion, using religion as a sexual stimulant. No longer shading and hiding himself from the church, it turns him on. Commenting on this particular scene, Lewis A. Lawson has argued that "[t]he numinous excitement afforded by the church edifice encourages [Rabbit] to think that a spirit may flow through that hole to him, even as his spirit flows out of the other hole that he seeks" (238). But rather than requiring the spiritual nature of the church in order to become sexually excited, Rabbit in fact conjures the church out of a need to subtly scold the religious system of morality that impinges on his masculine sexual and

moral freedom. As a consequence, the novel's attempt to present Rabbit as an ethically conscious man, as someone who is concerned about how his actions reflect on his religious faith and beliefs, is revealed to be as fabricated as the instances of pro-feminist and pro-African American sentiments in *Rabbit Redux*.

A little later in the novel, Rabbit's thoughts about God and adultery, about what you ought to do versus what you want to do, are further elaborated during a discussion between Rabbit and the Reverend Jack Eccles. When Eccles nonchalantly asks him, "'[d]o you believe in God?", Rabbit, "[h]aving rehearsed that this morning … answers without hesitation, 'Yes'" (92). Crucially, Rabbit has rehearsed this answer; his belief in God seems to not be real but rather performative, as if by convincing himself and others that he is religious, he will receive God's blessing—and the reader's sympathies—nevertheless. In this respect, Donald R. Anderson has been correct to point out the "central role" that Eccles plays in the novel's "moral battlefields" (327), but the way Eccles is used in this scene and in others throughout the novel more appropriately unveils him as a theatrical pawn designed to be the co-star in Rabbit's theatre. Moreover, Eccles' response to Rabbit's answer is meant to stir feelings of moral remorse similar to those in the scene analysed above: "Do you think, then, that God wants you to make your wife suffer" (92)? To which Rabbit replies: "Let me ask you. Do you think God wants a waterfall to be a tree" (92)? On the one hand, Eccles tries here to instill a sense of ethics on Rabbit, by inviting him to think of his wife's suffering in terms of the will of God. Rabbit, according to his religion (and Eccles), should only do what is ethically right and morally just; but the way he answers reveals his true sentiments regarding God. He implies that God is inconsequential, that what He wishes and teaches and expects does not matter at all because in fact what goes on in the world does not interest Him at all; He

does not care about humanity, and so Rabbit does not care about anyone but himself, either.

This is further illustrated when Rabbit explains his thinking with regard to God, religion, and his wife's suffering: "Well, I'm not going back to that little soppy dope no matter how sorry you feel for her. I don't know what she feels. I haven't known for years. All I know is what's inside *me*. That's all I have" (93). It is important to note here the way Rabbit equates Eccles with God. For Rabbit, it is not God who does not want his wife to suffer, but Eccles who actually feels sorry for her. Rather than a preacher of God's will, Eccles is thought of in Rabbit's eyes as an avatar of religion. God may or may not exist, may possess no actual gravity in humans' reality, but the priest who represents God in all matters moral is very much the flesh and blood of religious doctrines. In this way, religion ends up wholly losing its valency: if what it dictates is based not on a higher, all-knowing Being but on a human being who just happens to have been designated (by other human beings) as the Hermes of God, then why should people follow abstract moral imperatives that come from this socially constructed endeavour? In this regard, John McTavish has been wrong to claim that "Updike is no more abstract about religion than he is about sex" (x), for whereas sex is indeed described in detail (as I showed in the previous chapter in terms of *Rabbit Redux*), *Rabbit, Run*'s narrator usually talks about religion in the abstract in order to make it easier for the novel's protagonist to eschew it.

Furthermore, Rabbit's short monologue above evinces another side of his state of mind regarding the issue of morality. He boldly proclaims that he does not know (and does not care about) how his wife feels, that he only knows what is inside himself: his own, pugnaciously precious desires and feelings. That is, when it comes to a moral, figurative fight between Christianity and

Rabbit, for Rabbit, the winner is always going to be his personal egotistical self. It is not a matter of whether he should be doing what is morally right, or that he should be abiding by what religion or God advise; it is a matter of what feels good for him, of what makes him happy, of what makes his selfish self content. All this moral ambivalence and conflict, therefore, lying at the heart of *Rabbit, Run* seems here to be merely an attempt on the part of Rabbit to renew his confidence in his masculine, self-serving credentials.

Yet this selfishness is always, throughout the whole novel, juxtaposed with instances in which Rabbit genuinely seems to want to know the truth about God, religion, and morality. And, perhaps inevitably, these moments of careful curiosity allow the narrator to put forth the argument that Rabbit, despite all his masculine Machiavellianism, is in fact a good person. For instance, in another of his talks with Eccles, there is this interior thought: “Underneath all this I-know-more-about-it-than-you heresies-of-the-early-Church business he really wants to be told about it, wants to be told that it is there, that [Eccles is] not lying to all those people every Sunday” (115). Church, in this case, seems to stand on a different plane of existence to both God and religion. Indeed, Updike noted in an interview with a French literary journal his personal disdain for the church as the epitome of organised religion (Salgas 188). But even if what the church dictates is not an accurate description of what God wants or would want, the fictional protagonist still appears to gain a moral lesson from it. And even though Eccles this time critically castigates him in a way that confirms Rabbit’s egotistical nature (“you’re monstrously selfish. You’re a coward. You don’t care about right or wrong; you worship nothing except your own worst instincts” [115]), this is merely a lapse in Eccles’ composure that actually strengthens Rabbit’s repentant enquiries and ostensibly genuine moral concerns.

Towards the end of the novel, when his new-born baby has died and "Eccles comes later in the afternoon, to complete the arrangement for the funeral" (241), Rabbit once again asks Eccles to give him a lesson with respect to how he should behave in a morally right way: "'What do you think?' Rabbit asks. 'About what?' 'What shall I do'" (241)? There is a sense of resignation this time, a resignation possibly stemming from the fact that the death of his baby has added to his guilt about the way he has treated his wife, his baby's mother. Rabbit seems to feel the death of the baby was due to himself. And, in a sense, it could be thought of as such, since though it was his wife who accidentally drowned the child, it would not have happened had he been at home with them. This aura of resignation is reflected in the rest of the dialogue between them in this scene: "'Be a good husband. A good father. Love what you have left.' 'And that's enough?' 'You mean to earn forgiveness? I'm sure it is, carried out through a lifetime'" (241). Here, towards the end, there is a palpable prospect of subsequent and ever-lasting goodness. The seeds of moral possibility have been sown. Rabbit's asking what needs to be done in order to be forgiven lends his masculinity a scent of sympathy. And Eccles' subsequent soliloquy drastically drives the point to the readers' home:

> Harry, it's not for me to forgive you. You've done nothing to me *to* forgive. I'm equal with you in guilt. We must work for forgiveness; we must *earn* the right to see that thing behind everything. Harry, I *know* that people are brought to Christ. I've seen it with my eyes and tasted it with my mouth. And I do think this. I think marriage is a sacrament, and that this tragedy, terrible as it is, has at last united you and Janice in a sacred way (241).

There are three points I wish to raise here. First, the emotive element of Eccles' speech is enough to make even the most ardent critic of Rabbit as a literary character at least reconsider their view of him. Even though it is Eccles who voices these words, the fact that Rabbit has asked for them, as well as the fact

that they seem to apply aptly to Rabbit as a person, are two reasons why the reader cannot help but be moved by this story of a troubled young man who cheats on his wife and treats her badly but still manages to cling to a goodness in him that is desirous of finding the true purpose and meaning of an ethical life.

Second, the fact that Eccles admits he is guilty himself ("I'm equal with you in guilt"), without telling us why precisely this is so, scales down the extent of Rabbit's moral wrongness. If a priest in such a profoundly honest way claims to be guilty, implying that all people are guilty about something in one way or another, then the moral wrongdoing of Rabbit cannot really be that bad. Third, the colossal importance Eccles places on marriage is curious to say the least. Granted, marriage is indeed very important in Christianity, and the language of sacramentality that Eccles employs firmly echoes Christian religious teachings with respect to the spiritual joining of two people. But I think the principal reason why Eccles believes that the death of their baby has united Rabbit and Janice "in a sacred way" is because marriage is able to help Rabbit continue to behave as the all-powerful male husband towards what he views as the subservient female wife. Religion and sacramentality, therefore, are used here not in order to link the flawed but repentant male human to God and morality, but as a bridge between the masculine power of the past—nested in marriage—and its hopeful continuation—and, why not, eternal permanence—in the future.

The very end of the novel complicates matters even further. For, after pleading with Eccles for forgiveness, Rabbit ultimately decides to leave his wife—at the time of their dead baby's funeral, no less. And even though a husband leaving his wife would not be considered amoral in and of itself in contemporary society, the way this is rendered on the page by the narrator strongly displays the moral issues which I have been discussing. "As he goes

down the stairs" in order to leave, "worries come as quick as the click of his footsteps. Janice, money, Eccles' phone call, the look on his mother's face all clatter together in sharp dark waves; guilt and responsibility slide together like two substantial shadows inside his chest" (263). First of all, the fact that the word "worries" has been chosen to denote what Rabbit feels at the moment of his leaving is telling of the lack of seriousness with which Rabbit truly views issues pertaining to morality. Being worried implies that you are only slightly anxious about something that is going to take place imminently; certainly not about something as everlasting as the moral goodness that Rabbit seemed to aspire towards during his dialogue with Eccles above. It is not a moral concern that Rabbit feels; it is merely a bout of anxiety stemming from the fact that he is about to leave his past behind. This is confirmed when "[s]tanding on the step [Rabbit] tries to sort out his worries" (263). Rather than genuinely caring about the people he would leave behind, he constructs mental justifications in order to assuage his guilt. For example, "Ruth and Janice both have parents: on this excuse he dissolves them both" (263). For Rabbit, erasing moral wrongness is as simple as that. In addition, the fact that Rabbit's guilt and responsibility are likened to "shadows inside his chest" is also indicative of the minute role morality really plays in his thoughts and behaviour. These shadows may be "substantial", but still they are not fully formed, they have not managed to merge with Rabbit's being to such an extent that his actions will be influenced by and based on them from now on. They are there like two annoying flies at which you only need to jerkily wave your hands in order to brush them away.

Moreover, I believe that the fabricated nature of Rabbit's moral ponderings is further exposed in the following sentence during Rabbit's fleeing:

> The mere engineering of it—the conversations, the phone calls, the lawyers, the finances—seems to complicate, physically, in front of his mouth, so he is conscious of the effort of breathing, and every action, just reaching for the doorknob, feels like a precarious extension of a long mechanical sequence insecurely linked to his heart (263).

For Rabbit, morality is a form of engineering: you construct it as much as it constructs, as much as it moulds, you as a person. Throughout the whole novel he has been struggling to find out the truth about God's existence, has changed his mind at various points, but in the end he reveals to us that, for him at least, both morality and God are engineered by humans. That is why his leaving his wife, his "reaching for the doorknob" that will open the doors of freedom to him and that will take him away from the past world of moral imperatives, is likened to an "extension of a long mechanical sequence". Because it is the final brick of the building of morality that the narrator has engineered in *Rabbit, Run*. The mechanical sequence is everything that happens to Rabbit in the novel, and his moral adventures have been recounted to us in a way that has made Rabbit feel authentic and true, regardless of all his moral imbalances.

And it is this sense of genuine authenticity that, I argue, the novel has made use of in order to reach the reader's sensitivities. In this respect, Stephen H. Webb has argued that "Updike is too invested in reality to permit his readers simply to revel in his roguish verbosity, just as he is too fine a craftsman to let them think they can penetrate the thicket of his words to a level moral clearing" (564). But it is precisely this ambiguous, uncertain relation to morality that Updike's novel employs in the narration of Rabbit's moral conundrums in order to effect a serious change in how readers view not only Rabbit, not only morality in general, but also the masculine ethos that eloquently escapes moral condemnation. It is true that, in the end, Rabbit remains amoral; he chooses amorality, or rather, he chooses to expose morality as fake. When, in the final

page of the novel, he “lifts his eyes to the church window”, he sees that “[i]t is, because of church poverty or the late summer nights or just carelessness, unlit, a dark circle in a limestone façade” (264). It is lights out for the church and lights out for the final flame of morality in Rabbit’s heart and mind. Yet this conscious choice against the church and God and religion and morality is rendered in such a way as to attempt to elicit sympathy towards this male protagonist, and masculinity in general. The postwar American male will cheat, will behave reprehensibly, will do whatever he damn well pleases, but because he is conscious of himself and at various points even asks for forgiveness, the reader is supposed to feel for him and follow him as if he were God and they his disciples. When, in the very final sentences, Rabbit’s “hands lift of their own and he feels the wind on his ears even before, his heels hitting heavily on the pavement at first but with an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter, he runs. Ah: runs. Runs” (264), this repetitive sense of newly acquired freedom is not so much freedom from his wife (what he sought, in any case, to achieve by having an extramarital affair with Ruth in the first place), but from the confines of moral religion and an ethically over-bearing God: freedom, more than anything else, from whoever and whatever would think to chain or contain masculinity, from whoever and whatever would dare to think could stop masculinity from continuing its winning home-away-from-home run towards all-encompassing power.

We know the rest.

II. Beneath Good and Evil: Jewish Moral Imperatives in *American Pastoral*

From the very beginning of his career, and throughout his whole literary journey as a Jewish American writer, Roth was stringently accused of hatred towards Jewish people. His frequent preoccupation with the lives and stereotypical behaviour of Jewish people, and his more often than not critically damning appraisal of these, earned him a name for Jewish self-hatred (Glenn 95). In an early scholarly reflection on Roth's standing as a young writer whose work wryly engaged with issues of Jewishness, Joseph C. Landis reported that "[s]o great was the outcry" against Roth's portrayal of Jewish people in his fiction, "that the Jewish Book Council announced, in February 1961"—two years after Roth's first book, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), was published—"its decision to consider in the future only fiction characterized by 'an affirmative expression of Jewish values' as well as by literary merit" (259). Indeed, Roth was effectively forced to defend himself in an article he wrote for *Commentary* in 1963, where he vehemently argued that

> what readers have taken to be my disapproval of the lives lived by Jews seems to have more to do with their own moral perspective than with the one they would ascribe to me: at times they see wickedness where I myself had seen energy or courage or spontaneity; they are ashamed of what I see no reason to be ashamed of (446).

What is evinced in both Roth's article and the Jewish Book Council's decision is a pervading sense of Jewish morality: that there are certain moral and ethical values shared and propagated by Jewish people and Jewishness in general which authors writing about Jews should always abide by (Levine 163). In 1963, therefore, Roth significantly drew a line between this Jewish morality and his own; whatever moral quandaries arose from his fiction were not his fault at all, but rather his readers'.

Yet there has been a staggering number of critics who not only have shown support for the way Roth portrays Jews in his fiction, but who have also

detected in Roth's oeuvre a morality much like the one he sought to starkly differentiate himself from. Quite early on, for instance, Josephine J. Knopp argued that, whereas Roth had "acquired a reputation for scathing denunciation of Jewish life in America, admiration for the Jewish idealistic tradition persists and plays an important role" (71) in his writings, an opinion also shared by Theodore Solotaroff (90-91), Michael Aaron Rockland (30) and Hana Wirth-Nesher (269); while 24 years later, Robert M. Greenberg similarly noted that "a substratum of Jewish feelings and ideas in Roth has resulted in a far more explicit burden of moral/ethical sensibility" (487) than the author himself ever admitted. Relevant to what I argue in this section, Maggie McKinley has read at least one of Roth's characters (Peter Tarnopol, from *My Life as a Man*) as someone who "finds himself wracked by a genuine shame when he rejects the ideals of a moral masculinity endorsed by his Jewish upbringing, but is simultaneously plagued by what might be termed a 'false' shame when he finds himself unable to fit the model of American masculinity exhibited by a white Gentile society" (91). It is this very relationship, between Jewish morality and postwar white American society's masculine mentality, that I wish to comment on here.

The epitome of the Jewish American dream of assimilation, Seymour is not only considered by everyone to be as white as the stars on the flag of the United States, but has also managed to live a comfortable life complete with a well-paying job, a Miss America wife, and a daughter with the optimistic name Merry. When this idyllic pastoral reality is annihilated as a result of Merry bombing the town post office, Seymour is forced to grapple with both his daughter's act and her accusations of racism towards him. It is in this sense, I argue, that Roth's novel tackles issues of wider societal significance, through

the prism of this ill-fated family. Throughout the whole novel, we gorge on an abundance of exuberant descriptions of all the ways in which Seymour is a good and honest person, admired by everyone not only for what he has achieved, but also—and more importantly—for the moral compass of which he invariably makes use to guide the trajectory of his family's life. This heightened sense of morality is shown in the novel to be the result of Seymour's Jewish upbringing: in effect, he is such a good person because he was raised according to the morally good values of Jewishness. By placing so much laudatory significance on the Jewish moral character of the male protagonist, and by contrasting so intensely Semour's effusive ethicality with Merry's accusations of unethical behaviour, Roth's novel invites the reader to ponder: is it really possible that someone so good would actually be so bad? (The answer, we are pressed to concede, is "no"). What is more, since Seymour represents post-World War II white masculinity, *American Pastoral* further creates a connection between masculinity and Jewish virtuousness. All that is delicately combined to revitalise the damaged white masculinity of the postwar United States.

Contrary to what I argue in this section, the vast majority of critics have viewed Seymour as a genuinely morally good person. Gary Johnson, for instance, has considered Seymour as "a symbol, someone who represents or stands for a multitude of abstract positive ideas (hope, strength, innocence, purity)" (239), while Alex Hobbs (77) and Anthony Hutchison (117) have expressed similar sentiments. Timothy L. Parrish, on the other hand, has come closer to identifying the moral conundrums *American Pastoral* displays, arguing that an "uneasy mixture of cultural identities paralyzes" (91) Seymour. These two contrasting cultural identities are evidently Jewishness and whiteness.

While Jewishness is responsible for the goodness in Seymour, whiteness, Parrish implies, should be held accountable for any ethical deviations on Seymour's part. Indeed, it is Seymour's behaviour as a white person towards his African American counterparts that lead Merry to accuse him of racism. For this reason, I argue, Roth's novel merges these two identities so that the moral goodness of Jewishness will come to be tautological with whiteness.

As Kathleen L. Macarthur (22) and Christopher Eagle (12) have correctly pointed out, after Merry bombs the post office, Seymour is led to start reassessing his past, trying to figure out how and why his daughter came to commit such an atrocious act, particularly since she was lucky and blessed to experience the most ethical of upbringings. Eagle, in particular, writes of Seymour's "desperate attempt to pinpoint the original sin that propelled him and his family out of their Edenic paradise" (12). In the literary analysis that follows, I go a step further: I see Seymour's reconsideration of his past not as a sincere internal struggle to diagnose his ultimately anti-pastoral predicament, but rather as an attempt to fuse the ethically jubilant act of atonement (stemming from his Jewish religion and upbringing) with the morally damaged whiteness he has come to possess and represent. As such, the novel's preoccupation with the generalised morality of the Jewish people is not a true manifestation of a concern over the religious precepts of the Jewish faith, as other critics, such as Liliana M. Naydan (335) and Andy Connolly (10), have claimed; rather, *American Pastoral* makes use of Jewish morality merely in order to equate that morality with whiteness and thus help white masculinity recover from its aforementioned crisis.

In order to begin to uncover and recount how this meticulous moral merging is formed and evinced in *American Pastoral*, I will first pore over the

instances in the novel in which Seymour's moral character is initially delineated. These descriptions, I argue, are crucial in developing the moral sympathy towards Seymour that Roth's novel asks of its readers—especially when, later on, Seymour's morality is questioned by Merry. It is important here to bear in mind that the novel is supposedly written, in classic Rothian fashion, by Roth's literary alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman. It is therefore Zuckerman's impressions of Seymour, the all-white and admired-by-all "Swede" of the story, that drive the moral narrative forward. Not Roth's, the author who has a subtle yet direct relationship with those who are going to read *American Pastoral*; rather Zuckerman's, whose fictionality is in tandem with that of Seymour's and is thus, to use a mathematical term, canceled out. In this respect, Steven Milowitz has considered Roth's using a literary intermediary in this as well as other novels as "an inability or unwillingness … to create a narrative with the father as the mediating force" (83). I argue instead that the use of Zuckerman functions to create a plausibility which the writer himself could not readily effect on his own. That is, even as Zuckerman is another character created by Roth, the fact that he occupies the story in the same sense and sphere as Seymour makes him somehow more trustworthy; we can believe anything he says because he has a stronger relation to the novel's world than the author himself. Moreover, Patrick Hayes has argued that Zuckerman "is not just presenting the Swede's world to us, [he] is granting it a glow of vivid appeal through the delight of reading such lucid and solidly realized prose" (121). But it is not only Seymour's world that gains this "vivid appeal", but Seymour himself. Not only is Roth's use of Zuckerman meant to make Seymour's morality more credible, it also pyrotechnically imbues that morality with a scintillating and sparkling brilliance.

To begin with, very early on in the novel, there appears the first link between Seymour and religious morality: in describing Seymour as a high-school kid, Zuckerman writes that he was seen by all the other pupils as, “if not divine, a distinguished cut above the more primordial humanity of just about everybody else at the school” (5). Hesitant as Zuckerman may be to assign to Seymour God-like qualities, there is nevertheless in this short sentence an allusion to Seymour’s possibly “divine” nature. What is more, the fact that he is “above the more primordial humanity” of his fellow pupils is further evidence of his being considered a super-human being, someone who, like God, does not possess the primitive, animalistic, basic biological needs with which humans are invariably fraught. As I showed in Chapter 1, it is Seymour’s human desires that govern his thoughts, attitudes, and actions, and it is these very desires—pertaining to how he lives his life without truly caring about his African American counterparts—that lead Merry to accuse him of racism. Here, then, is a paradox: how can a person of such holy stature, someone who, we are initially told, does not possess human desires, be revealed later in the novel as a human being not at all different from everyone else? The answer is simple: by constructing, so early in the novel, such strong links between his white male protagonist and a superior divinity, the narrator preemptively defends and seeks to shield this character from the moral accusations that ensue later.

However, Zuckerman later describes Seymour’s morality as a “heroically idealistic maneuver, this strategic, strange spiritual desire to be a bulwark of duty and ethical obligation” (79). Note that here the word “desire” is used, but rather than being a human desire, it is a “spiritual” one, again concretely connected with God. But more importantly, Seymour’s morality, his “ethical obligation”, is interpreted in this instance as a strategic ploy. Very brazenly,

therefore, the narrator admits that there is at least a certain possibility that Seymour's moral character is not genuine but rather constructed. But, again, the presentation of Seymour's moral character has been so carefully thought through that even the slightest doubt on the part of the reader as to whether what we hear about Seymour is the bona fide truth is literarily eliminated. For the reason why Seymour's morality is identified as a manoeuvre and an "obligation" is presented as none other than a (God-like, again) responsibility: "The responsibility of the school hero follows him through life. Noblesse oblige. You're the hero, so then you have to behave in a certain way—there is a prescription for it. You have to be modest, you have to be forbearing, you have to be deferential, you have to be understanding" (79). Rather than illustrate Seymour's obligatory ethicality as a reason why we should perhaps not think of his character as genuine but, in a way, forced, the narrator intelligently manages in the above passage to preserve the protagonist's moral nature through the literary aeons. We first glimpse Seymour as a divinely moral high-school pupil. Since, as the narrator suggests, this morality creates a "responsibility of the school hero" which "follows him through life", we are led to believe—long before the accusations of racism make their appearance in the novel— that Seymour will always be this morally good person, irrespective of what happens later in the novel and in his life. Past morality links to present morality links to future morality, proposing that our view of Seymour should remain stable and positive.

Finally, to conclude this reading of the ways Zuckerman's initial descriptions of Seymour's moral character elicit from the reader a form of lasting loyalty, let us consider the narrator's likening of Seymour to John F. Kennedy. This is a moment in the novel that has generally been neglected by

critics. Macarthur, cited above, has read this allegorical equation as a contemplation of the fragile nature of the American Dream, whereby inevitably "a portrait of trauma emerges" (16). Even though the American Dream, and the more often than not screaming awakening from it, is one of the novel's major themes, I see this particular scene as another attempt to paint Seymour as a moral saint whose amiss destiny comes in stark contrast to his honest ethics. Zuckerman writes:

> His great looks, his larger-than-lifeness, his glory, our sense of his having been exempted from all self-doubt by his heroic role—that all these manly properties had precipitated a political murder made me think of the compelling story … of Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, only a decade the Swede's senior and another privileged son of fortune, another man of glamour exuding American meaning, assassinated while still in his mid-forties just five years before the Swede's daughter violently protested the Kennedy-Johnson war and blew up her father's life. I thought, But of course. He is our Kennedy (83).

It is important to note that this passage appears before we have had the chance to fully delve into Seymour and Merry's story, before we can judge for ourselves the events that comprise the majority of this novel. Long before we get acquainted with Merry, Zuckerman subtly guides our perception of her—and also, by implication, of her father. She "violently" protested the Vietnam War and so "blew up her father's life". This kind of language is a violent assault in itself, a violence inflicted on the reader's readerly consciousness. It is really difficult for us to think of Merry as a good person, since not only has she committed a cruel act, but she has also cruelly destroyed the venerable life of her exemplary father. While Merry is violent, Seymour, we are led to think, is calm, peaceful; while Merry is morally bad, Seymour is morally good—no matter what Merry's accusations will reveal later.

More importantly, the above passage creates a moral link between Seymour and Kennedy. The mythical stature that Kennedy has attained from

the moment of his death to the present day (an enduring legacy which Roth was very well aware of writing this novel in the 1990s), as a force of good that was destroyed by bad, violent forces, is exploited here by the narrator in order to consolidate the protagonist's moral appeal. Glorious, heroic, larger than life: these are characteristics that Kennedy possessed during his lifetime and that Seymour also significantly shares. The privileged position of their white masculinity which was instrumental for the ascendance of both into the white male clouds of American society is here hidden behind the phrase "another privileged son of fortune". Kennedy and Seymour were just very lucky to have so much luck: the power their subject positions held in the postwar years had apparently nothing to do with it. While, therefore, both are symbols of white masculinity, they are also emblems of a morality that is also the cause of their initially good fortune. The fact that this fortune becomes in the end unfathomably fractious, their luck stale, is owing to extraneous amoral forces that have nothing to do with them. Of course, I am not implying here that Roth believes Kennedy was responsible for his own killing, but that both Kennedy's and Seymour's white masculinity and the privileges that ensued from it are seen in the novel as what made others target them. And, finally, notice that possessive "our" before "Kennedy" at the very end of the passage. The link between Kennedy and Seymour is evidently not strictly moral; or, to put it another way, there is a merging here of morality and whiteness that reinforces the sense of Seymour as a moral white male. If Kennedy represents white masculinity, and the possessive pronoun "our" is used to denote Jewishness (something—someone—that belongs to the Jews, and so having all the characteristics of traditional Jewish morality), then the uniting of the two in the

face of Seymour successfully blends morality and white masculinity, as I argue the novel attempts as a whole.

Having established how the narrator presents Seymour as a morally good person from the outset, let us examine how Seymour's ethical concerns from the moment he learns that his daughter has set off a bomb are also used to make white masculinity appear moral. *American Pastoral* is laden with instances in which the stunned, bewildered father engages in an interior monologue in which he tries desperately to understand what went wrong, how a daughter brought up in such a loving and caring household environment could grow up to do something so despicable. While the vast majority of critics I cited above don't see anything wrong with such a passionate search for answers, indeed deem all this introspection as a genuine parental response, I argue that there is a noticeable persistence, a focus—sometimes covert, sometimes blindingly overt—on the father's moral character. Even when critics do see in Seymour shades of immorality, a preoccupation with how that immorality is rendered has the effect of obscuring the overarching theme of Seymour's striving to prove his morality. RL Goldberg, to give one recent example, contends that "Roth's cosmology … imagines father-daughter incest as the locus for destruction, rupture, and devastation" (35). While there is a moment in the novel when Seymour kisses his daughter on the mouth, in a way that echoes (but is quite different from) Humbert Humbert's salacious proclivities in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), I read this as further proof of his fatherly love. What is of more critical interest is Seymour's fervent defence against his daughter's signified accusations of immorality—his ferocious attempts to prove to the reader his own morality.

Pondering what had psychologically damaged his daughter so much that she went and set off a bomb, Seymour wonders: “What then was the wound? What could have wounded Merry … What had they done other than to love her and look after her and encourage her, give her the support and guidance and independence that seemed reasonable to them—and still the undisclosed Merry had become tainted” (92). There are many layers of meaning here that firmly reveal how the narrator, in rendering Seymour’s interiority thus, subtly shapes the readers’ empathic sympathies. First, there is the mention of a “wound”—singular. Even if Seymour is responsible in any way for his daughter’s heinous act—and this is an if that the novel again and again fervently dismisses—, it is not because of Seymour’s character or general behaviour, but rather due to something that happened only once and that led to a wound that is singular and passing. Second, the phrase “what could have wounded Merry” revises responsibility, alters the subject responsible for the wounding. It is not Seymour who actively wounded Merry, but something else, something that may or may not have come from him. Third, Seymour presents a series of positive attributes ostensibly characterising his relationship with his daughter: “love her”, “look after her”, “encourage her”, “give her the support and guidance” she needed. These are too cliché-sounding for us to believe they are true, resembling a fatherly defence rather than an accurate portrayal of how a parent behaved towards his daughter. They are familial boxes that needed to be ticked.

Finally, there is another positive attribute mentioned, which I have deliberately singled out: “independence”. Independence is something that parents should certainly foster in their children, but in the context of the narrative, it sounds like another way of eschewing responsibility. Whereas he did his best to provide his daughter with love and care and support and

guidance, and he also very importantly and rightly gave her independence, because of that independence, Seymour suggests, his daughter went and did what she did. In this respect, Claudia Franziska Bruhwiler has argued that Merry's parents "only preached independence in the creation of the self and, at the same time, total conformity, submission to the shiny surface" (106). But conformity is not one of the attributes that Seymour mentions, and neither is it one of the characteristics that Merry, throughout the novel, is shown to have been influenced by. Rather, the mention of Seymour's instilling independence into his daughter is only used in an attempt to transform parental responsibility into filial autonomy. Merry's transgressive act, the narrator proposes, had nothing to do with Seymour as a father, but with the daughter's own independent and autonomous self—it was solely and surely no one else's fault, but her own.

Furthermore, this form of introspective bewilderment at the way things turned out, at the immorality that sprung out of the blue against the morality which Seymour purportedly represents, is perceived by him as a "torment of self-examination" that "never ended" (92). "Torment", "self-examination": this is religious language that functions to transform, once again, Seymour into a saint, or at least into a symbol of Jewish religious morality. During this never-ending religious torture, Seymour thinks that "he could never again take life as it came or trust that his life wasn't something very different from what he perceived" (92-93). I read this as faux philosophical self-questioning, a literary trick seeking to make us marvel at and be extremely saddened by this person's predicament. More than anything else, it illustrates Seymour's belief that he is a deeply moral person in a deeply amoral world. Reminiscing about his past life, and about the morality he erroneously thought permeated the world, Seymour sees "his own

happy childhood, the success that had been his boyhood, as though that were the cause of their blight. All the triumphs, when he probed them, seemed superficial; even more astonishing, his very virtues came to seem vices. There was no longer any innocence in what he remembered of his past" (93). This kind of self-deprecating language is used here to not only emphasise how moral Seymour is (for only a person who thinks himself moral could think of his virtues as vices, and state it), but also make the reader commiserate with the miserable father who has lost everything. In a religious manner, this can be construed as a verbal, interior self-flagellation, a punishing oneself but, in this case, for something the person has not really done, is not really responsible for.

This introspective soliloquy of moral self-praise reaches, momentarily, a crescendo when Seymour imagines his daughter's bombing, her act of accusation, as another manifestation of her stuttering:

> He had been admitted into a mystery more bewildering even than Merry's stuttering: there was no fluency anywhere. It was *all* stuttering. In bed at night, he pictured the whole of his life as a stuttering mouth and a grimacing face—the whole of his life without cause or sense and completely bungled. He no longer had any conception of order. There was no order. None. He envisioned his life as a stutterer's thought, wildly out of his control (93).

As I have already indicated, Merry bombed the post office in order to protest both the Vietnam War and her father's treatment of African Americans in the glove factory. The very act of bombing represents her accusations of racist behaviour on the part of her father. Everything that happens to Seymour after this bombing, all the disparagement and desolation and disarray of his once perfect life, stems from this act, from this accusation of immorality that comes in stark contradistinction to Seymour's moral perception of himself. In the passage quoted above, Seymour visualises his daughter's accusations, as well as what his life has been reduced to after the bombing, as "a stuttering mouth and a

grimacing face". This is how he sees his daughter, and his daughter's convictions: as a menacing flaw intent on revenge. More startingly, these accusations, seeing as they make their appearance through stuttering, through what is considered as the opposite of "fluency", do not make sense for Seymour (and should not make sense for anyone reading this novel, the narrator suggests). They are senseless accusations and therefore resoundingly untrue. As a consequence, stuttering comes to represent the immoral nature of Merry's false accusations, while on the other hand, the moral fluency that Seymour embodies is used once again in order to link white masculinity with morality—and white masculinity's detractors with its opposite.

But what about tangible proof of Seymour's, and by association white masculinity's, morality? Talking to himself about his own extremely moral character would certainly not be enough to prove how truly moral Seymour is. As such, *American Pastoral* stages a scene in which Seymour's morality can be palpably, unconditionally observed. Crucially, there is no point in the novel where Seymour is truly accepting of African Americans. As I showed in Chapter 1, he seeks to demonstrate to his daughter that he is sympathetic towards African Americans by using rhetoric. As a consequence, the act of morality that I am going to analyse has to do with sexual morality rather than an ethics of acceptance; nevertheless, its aim is to further reinforce the reader's image of Seymour as a deeply moral person.

When Rita Cohen, an accomplice and friend of his daughter's, promises to give him information as regards Merry's whereabouts if he agrees to meet with her in a hotel room and give her five thousand dollars, Seymour immediately agrees. When he enters the hotel room, however, he encounters Rita lying on the bed; she asks him to have sex with her. Here the narrator

describes in vivid and painstaking detail Seymour's attempts to evade Rita's sexual offer. "'Come to fuck Rita Cohen, have you?'" Rita teasingly initially asks, to which Seymour matter-of-factly replies, "'I've come … to deliver the money'" (143). And then she continues, "'You came here to fuck me … Say it, just say, 'I came to fuck you. To fuck you good.' Say it, Swede'", to which Seymour declares, "'I don't want to say any such thing. Stop all this, please'" (143). This verbal exchange, from which only a small part I have quoted, functions not only to present Rita (and, by association, Rita's personal convictions which she shares with Merry) as immoral—teasing the disconcerted father in a brazen way—but also to demonstrate how morally robust Seymour is. Seymour only cares about finding his daughter; nothing, not even a sexual offer like this, can steer him away from his purpose. This can also be seen in his interior thoughts while the above dialogue takes place: "Could this lead to Merry, this onslaught of sneering and mockery? She could not insult him enough … He had braced himself not to become entangled in her loathing for him, not to be affronted by anything she said. He was prepared for the verbal violence and prepared, this time, not to react" (143-144). As a father who deeply cares for his daughter, he is willing to accept anything, any "sneering", "mockery", or "insult", any form of "verbal violence", if they are to lead him to Merry.

As the scene progresses, Rita's sexual offerings become even more pressing and impudent. "She had raised her knees toward her chest and now, with either foot planted on the bed, she left her legs fall open. The floral skirt was gathered up by her hips and she wore no underwear" (144), which still does not sexually entice Seymour. And when Rita, "by rolling the labia lips outward with her fingers, exposed to him the membranous tissue veined and mottled and waxy with the moist tulip sheen of flayed flesh", Seymour "looked

away" (145). Seymour remains moral, by looking away from what would make him sin—for, if he were to engage in sexual intercourse with Rita, not only would he betray his wife, not only would he have sex with someone who could very well be his daughter, but also he would act against his Jewish religion's ethical precepts. But does he really look away? The narrator tells us that he does, but before that, the description of Rita's sexual organs is too detailed, too voyeuristic. And, even though this might be construed as an example of traditional male literary voyeurism, we cannot help but think that Seymour did in fact look very closely at what he purportedly quickly averted his eyes from. Indeed, no more than a paragraph later, the narrator reports that Seymour ended up "fixing on her eyes, the one mark of beauty she was blessed with—a child's eyes, he discovered, a *good* child's eyes that had nothing in common with what she was up to" (145). Unlike sexual organs, eyes are safe to look at, according to the morality assigned to Seymour in the novel. Their striking difference from the rest of the human body, their liquid fleshlessness, makes them a space totally secure from the indecent and sinful thoughts of the flesh. What is more, it is not accidental that Seymour sees in Rita's eyes "a *good* child's eyes": faced with such a prominent show of immorality, the narrator lets us know that Seymour is nonetheless capable of perceiving the good in even such a bad person.

Still Rita persists. But what she does next, her physical performance of "*depraved*" (146) sexual behaviour, has an allegorical quality unlike any I have commented on so far:

> She must have reached inside herself with her hand, her hand must have disappeared inside her, because a moment later it was the whole of her hand that she was extending upward to him. The tips of her fingers bore the smell of her right up to him. That he could not shut out, the fecund smell released from within (146).

I read this smell coming from inside Rita's sexual organs as a metaphorical rendering of how Seymour perceives Rita's and Merry's accusations of racism. "'You know what it tastes like? Want me to tell you? It tastes like your d-d-d-daughter'" (147). It is a "fecund" smell because it has been borne up by Rita's and Merry's interior selves; it is, one could say, made—invented. The accusations of racism towards Seymour are likewise fabricated: it is not that Seymour has done anything to warrant these accusations, but rather that those accusing are doing so out of their own haphazard, not-to-be-trusted consciousness. In other words, the accusations come from inside Rita and Merry; they are not the result of something Seymour has done—he is innocent. Even so, Seymour cannot escape from these accusations, he cannot "shut out" Rita's and Merry's smell: his life is now redolent with what he thinks of as the stench of false allegations. His moral world has been shaken to its core by the immorality which accuses him of immoral behaviour, and he is left helpless to bear the unfair consequences.

This is sorrowfully displayed in the way the narrator describes Seymour's interior emotional workings: "There was so much emotion in him, so much uncertainty, so much inclination and counterinclination, he was bursting so with impulse and counterimpulse" that "[a]ll his thinking seemed to be taking place in a foreign language" (147). Rita's and Merry's accusations are so stuttering, so tendentious, that Seymour's own linguistic capabilities seem, for the moment, to have ceased. A whirlwind of emotions has taken the place of what was previously a calm and focused composure; all the supposed unfairness of Seymour's predicament bursts through, and the reader is invited to share Seymour's feelings unequivocally. Mark Shechner has correctly read the novel

as “a thunderous cloudburst of grief” (158), but it is not a genuine grief; rather, it is a staged grief that functions to elicit the kind of sympathy a white male character like Seymour pleadingly needs. And so certain is the narrator of Seymour’s moral robustness, that he lets slip a couple of thoughts which are more aligned with masculine aggression than masculine morality: “still he knew enough not to pass over the line. He would not pick her up and throw her onto the floor. He would not pick her up for any reason. All the strength left in him would be marshaled to keep him paralyzed at the foot of the bed. He would not go near her" (147). The narrator tells us that Seymour would not engage in violent behaviour towards Rita, but the fact that he even mentions all these things that Seymour would not do reveals that picking up and striking Rita passes through Seymour’s mind—it is just that he chose not to do it. Can Seymour be considered moral if his actions are shown to be moral, but his thoughts are not?

Indeed, in the end, Seymour “bolted the room. With all his strength” (147). Unlike Rabbit’s flight in *Rabbit, Run*, Seymour’s is not an escape from the moral boundaries of his religion’s imperatives, but rather a running away from the immorality that Rita represents. His white male identity, Roth’s novel suggests, may be inclined towards violence, towards taking advantage of his physical strength in order to exert power, but Seymour chooses instead to use that strength to embrace and uphold morality. White masculinity is thus also morally safeguarded. To put the novel’s final sentence in the context of this section’s arguments: What on earth is more praiseworthy that the moral character of Seymour “the white male” Levov?

III. A Vindication of the Morality of Men: *Herzog* and White Male Spiritual Transcendence

Whereas Updike and Roth construct their afore-examined novels along their respective religions' ethical axes, in Bellow we find a strong preoccupation with a morality that stems from a generalised amalgamation of the moral values present in twentieth-century America. The vast majority of these values did arise from different religions: Christianity and Judaism, the two largest religions of the United States then as well as now, did have a significant impact on the ways in which US citizens navigated life in a morally conscious manner. But even though Bellow was a Jew, and his characters are often Jewish, his moral narratives and descriptions do not abide by any specific religious doctrines attributed to Judaism. Indeed, in one of the many interviews he gave throughout his life, Bellow had this to say with respect to his own identity and its manifestation (or lack thereof) in his novels:

> I have never consciously written as a Jew. I have just written as Saul Bellow … I never thought of writing for Jews exclusively. I never wanted to. I think of myself as a person of Jewish origin—American and Jewish—who has had a certain experience of life, which is in part Jewish. Proportions are not for me to decide. I don't know what they are: how much is Jewish, how much is Russian, how much is male, how much is twentieth century, how much is midwestern (13).

A venerable man of letters, absorbing sponge-like every kind of information and experience that comes his way, Bellow believes himself a human product not of his personal cultural upbringing, but of a collection of the diverse identities that he inhabited during his lifetime. This is a sentiment echoed by Andrew Hadfield, who similarly argues that "Bellow would seem to be caught between a number of identities to which he can legitimately lay claim and has often chosen to explore in his work … the assumption of which demand importantly different

ethical responsibilities and demand different, often conflicting, moral responses" (39). Likewise, there is a cosmopolitan morality permeating Bellow's oeuvre, and in particular the novel analysed in this section, *Herzog*. Mentions of what it means to be morally good, of how one should live an ethical life, are not presented as consequences of Judaism or any other particular religion. Rather, all religions with which Bellow was familiar, all the philosophical manuscripts (alluded to, as I will show, in the novel) that Bellow himself had read and admired, are delicately combined in his prose to evince a sense of spiritual morality that is (or should be) both universal and strikingly specific to the general category which his protagonist represents: white masculinity.

Of course, this is not a factual given, nor is it widely accepted that Bellow's fiction does not conform to Jewish religious precepts. There have been critics who hold a similar view to mine, namely that "[p]rofessing no allegiance to any theological system, [Bellow] deals in his novels with problems which are not, in the strict sense, religious; most of his protagonists are Jews, but Judaism is not of much importance in their lives" (Fossum 197) and "he never invokes the authority of dogma" (Pifer 7). But most literary scholars do consider Bellow a Jewish novelist preoccupied with Judaism. Sanford Pinsker, for instance, has argued that "there is a strongly religious component to Bellow's intimations of higher spheres" that is the result of and "speak[s] to his Jewishness" (89), while L. H. Goldman has suggested that "Bellow's works strive to re-establish the foundations of society by reaffirming the world's need … for the return of the humanism of Judaism" (83). In an earlier scholarly consideration of Bellow's narrative themes, Irving Halperin identifies Jewish humanism as encompassing characteristics like "[h]uman perfection, spotless idealism, immaculate benevolence, [and] saintly behavior" (480). These virtuous traits are, indeed,

present in Bellow's fiction, but I argue that it is not the morality of Judaism, specifically, that Bellow has in mind while constructing his literary works. For attributes such as these are not specific to the Jewish religion, but can rather be applied (as Bellow does) to general codes and modes of moral behaviour which every society would do well to prize. And, accordingly, it is not the moral "foundations of society" that Bellow's novels and characters wish to restore, as Goldman proposes above. Rather, I see Bellow's protagonists' preoccupation with issues of morality as stemming from a wish to renew the authority of white masculinity, and to facilitate a return of those former societal hierarchies and power structures that privileged white male identity above all others.

As far as *Herzog* specifically is concerned, a large number of critics have deemed the novel's narrative as a religious parable and viewed its white male protagonist as embodying a form of "religious yearning" (Opdahl 23). Early reviews emphasised Herzog's Jewish identity and identified him as a Hebrew religious prophet (Fisch 47). Dan Vogel, for instance, called Herzog "the literary progeny of the philosopher-king of ancient Israel, who also undertook a search for the meaning of life in his times" (73), while James M. Mellard noted that, even though "Herzog himself is not too keen on the church or the synagogue, he does have a strong feeling for the impulses they represent" (88). Subsequent critics focus more on Herzog's dire psychological and spiritual condition, looking at it as a symptom of his disgruntlement at the perceived declining morality of postwar United States. Peter Hyland, for example, commented on Herzog being "uprooted and spiritually dislocated into the chaos of contemporary American materialism" (64), as did Helge N. Nilsen (320). Similarly, Michael K. Glenday argued that, in *Herzog*, "Bellow's representation of post-1960 America has proposed a culture of moral and spiritual collapse, a materially-driven and

deeply philistine reality from which [Herzog is] forced to retreat in dismay" (12). For these critics, Herzog is concerned with morality because he sees all around him a society which does not share his own moral values. But the specific conditions of moral and spiritual decline are not mentioned in their analyses, nor the gendered and raced reasons for Herzog's seeking of spiritual transcendence.

In Chapter 2, I explored how the portrayal of Herzog as a wounded white male serves as a means of defending white masculinity against, and lampooning, second-wave feminism. But the novel's attempt to re-establish the privileged position of white masculinity becomes even more abundantly clear when we consider the ways in which the morality play it stages renders Herzog an ethical hero who strives to retain his sense of humanism against what he views as the amoral tidal waves of postwar American society seeking to drown him. For a large part of the novel, we encounter Herzog writing letters to any number of people, letters through which he seeks to define what it means to be moral, and to castigate modern society for being (in his eyes) amoral. As with Seymour in *American Pastoral*, Herzog wants to prove to whoever is going to read these letters (most of them he never sends; as such, we are their sole readers) how moral he is by demonstrating a deep and serious concern for morality. This morality may not be tied to any particular religion, may have nothing to do with religion at all, but the narrative that surrounds it nevertheless provides Bellow's novel with the means to offer white masculinity the chance of redemption for its societal sins against African Americans and women—even while implicitly criticising them.

There are various episodes in the novel in which, through a combination of Herzog's letter writing and thoughts on a variety of moral issues, the narrator

presents the white male protagonist as a person very much concerned about the state of the world as well as his own personal ethics. To begin with, writing a letter to a Dr. Bhave relatively early in the novel, Herzog announces his fervent wish to be part of a movement that would help those in need: "*I'd like to join your movement. I've always wanted very much to lead a moral, useful, and active life. I never knew where to begin. One can't become Utopian. It only makes it harder to discover where your duty really lies. Persuading the owners of large estates to give up some land to impoverished peasants, however…*" (48). There are several details I want to comment on. In the first part, Herzog straightforwardly tells us that he has always desired to be a moral person. Not even 50 pages in, the narrative is interrupted so the protagonist can declare how moral his character is. There is, however, a sense of an internal conflict in Herzog; he confides that he struggled to become moral in the first place. Not being able to do so on his own, he seeks to find guidance from someone or something else, and it is implied that this is those people who are responsible for the sociopolitical changes that were taking place in the period. To put it in more specific terms, the mention of the capitalised adjective "Utopian", rather than merely an idealised state of moral perfection, also in my mind subtly refers to Herzog's view of 1960s American society as a place which the Civil Rights and Feminist movements seek to make equal for all. Utopian, in this case, is therefore a synonym for progressive, or liberal, or tolerant, but a utopia also has connotations of an impossible-to-reach illusion; as such, while Herzog supposedly shows support for the morality propagated by those social movements' calls for equality, at the same time he critiques these calls as impossible to fulfil. He manages to proclaim, on the one hand, himself as moral

and as supportive of activism for social change, while on the other undermining that very same morality.

In ostensible contrast to Seymour's all-talk-and-no-action mentality in *American Pastoral*, Herzog displays here a wish to actively do something to help other people (and thus confirm how moral a person he is). He specifically mentions making "*the owners of large estates ... give up some land*" to those people who have been pauperised by the same system that made the landowners rich. Herzog even offers to give his own house to those in need: "What he had vaguely in mind was to offer his house and property in Ludeyville to the Bhave movement" (48). This initially appears as a moral act indeed. Stephanie S. Halldorson has viewed Herzog as "a hero in search of a heroic narrative" (19), and it initially seems that Herzog has managed to find this heroic narrative by declaring that he would be more than happy to provide those in need with a house in which to properly live. Alas, only slightly later in the same paragraph, Herzog describes how "[t]hat house was one of his biggest mistakes. It was bought in a dream of happiness, an old ruin of a place but with enormous possibilities—great old trees, formal gardens he could restore in his spare time. The place had been deserted for years" (48). That is the real reason why he so generously wants to gift his house: because it reminds him of his failed marriage and is now deserted. He also wonders "what could Bhave do with it? Send Hindus to the Berkshires? It wouldn't be fair to them" (48). Why would it not be fair to them? Because the Berkshires have traditionally been a holiday destination for white middle-class families and those from India who live in the United States are here reduced to poor people who would not know how to behave in a place as bourgeois as this.

While seeking to present himself as moral, Herzog manages the opposite. For his mention of Hindus specifically in the quoted passage above is not random. Rather, it is an attempt on the part of Herzog to demonstrate how moral he is by being kind and considerate to those he considers as the Other. Herzog imagines the "*impoverished peasants*" as "[t]hese dark men going on foot through India" (48). As such, he brings up a famous Indian film, *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955), in order to show how such a cultural artefact affected and made him think more pressingly about the lives of people different from him: "*Two things affected me greatly—the old crone scooping the mush with her fingers and later going into the weeds to die; and the death of the young girl in the rains.*" (48). These brutal and macabre images stirred Herzog exceptionally, evoked something deep inside: "Herzog, almost alone in the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, cried with the child's mother when the hysterical death music started … It was raining also in New York, as in rural India. His heart was aching. He too had a daughter, and his mother too had been a poor woman. He had slept on sheets made of flour sacks" (48). This is not so different from Rabbit's and Mr. Sammler's racial masquerade in *Rabbit Redux* and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (as discussed in Chapter 1): Herzog seeks to create a link between his individual past circumstances and those of the poor in India. He wants to seem as someone who has suffered in the same way as the minorities from whom his white masculinity is accused, in the 1960s, of having benefitted. As a consequence, his empathy for those he considers Other is used in the above passage as a potent example of his highly moral character, for what is more moral than empathy in such a context? But again, the language the novel uses in rendering this empathy is telling of the protagonist's real attitudes. The music that, more than anything else, made Herzog cry, was created by a "musician

with a native brass horn, imitating sobs, playing a death noise" (48). The sobs in the film are not genuine, the film crew is imitating those sobs, and so what Herzog saw in the film might not be true, either, but rather a cheap imitation, fake, designed to produce the same emotional reactions that Herzog himself cunningly employs to assert his morality.

This assertion of Herzog's morality is further evinced in those instances in the novel in which Herzog is seen pondering both the state of postwar US society and the philosophical underpinnings that lie behind his morality. In another letter, this time to a fellow writer by the name of Shapiro, Herzog expounds on what he views as the moral degeneracy that has come to dominate modern (1960s, American) society. It is here that we most clearly encounter Bellow's own scholarly influences as far as morality is concerned. In the letter, Herzog writes that "*I think it must have started in that seminar on Proudhon and the long arguments we had … about the decay of the religious foundations of civilization*" (74). Herzog credits the social philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (rather than any theological text or religious thinker) as leading him to think about the role of morality in society. In the following passage, it becomes even clearer that the mention of religion is not used to denote any particular doctrine but is an umbrella term encompassing the moral values prevalent in Herzog's construction of civilisation that seem under threat in this period. Herzog gloomily goes on:

> *Are all the traditions used up, the beliefs done for, the consciousness of the masses not yet ready for the next development? Is this the full crisis of dissolution? Has the filthy moment come when moral feeling dies, conscience disintegrates, and respect for liberty, law, public decency, all the rest, collapses in cowardice, decadence, blood* (74)?

It is not a coincidence that this series of moral questions makes its appearance in a novel that was written during the time when the Civil Rights and Feminist

movements were making the most progress as far as equality in US society is concerned. Herzog speaks of traditions that are used up, and these are of course none other than those allowing white men to be at the top of America's social hierarchy. This previously white male-dominated society is, in Herzog's eyes, now in dissolution, in a spiritual disintegration that is making way for a new world order.

Writing about one of Bellow's earlier novels, *The Victim* (1947), Andrew Furman has indicated that "[t]he most crucial question Bellow engages in [that] novel is, simply, how should a Jew live in a Gentile world brimming with anti-Semitism" (95). In *Herzog*, the question becomes, how can the white male protagonist live in an immoral society full of white masculinity's (and its supposed virtues') detractors? This is, for Herzog, a "*filthy moment*" in the history of the United States, and the pure morality that used to characterise America has been taken over by a new form of society within whose jurisdiction "*moral feeling dies*" (74). The apocalyptic language used here exacerbates the fright and terror, and African Americans and women are, by association, imagined as vampiric creatures intent on feasting on the white masculine self.

Furthermore, Herzog makes specific mention of liberty, law, and public decency as qualities that white masculinity represents but that are, as a result of its loss of authority, being eclipsed. White male Americans, represented here by Herzog, view this loss of authority as the removal of their liberty, the fundamental characteristic of American democracy. What is more, the laws that previously allowed the segregation and denigration of African Americans and women were being altered to allow these groups equal civil and political rights. Accordingly, the public demonstrations that sowed the seeds of progressive change and equality are thought of by Herzog as an example of public

indecency, again in contrast to the decency white male Americans supposedly propagated in the public sphere. The new world order's most visible traits are "*cowardice, decadence, blood*". Evidently, he views African Americans' and women's struggle for equality as an act of cowardice, while at the same time evoking the language of war: all that this change is going to result in is an allegorical bloodbath. Finally, decadence denotes, again, the moral disintegration that such a society is purportedly a consequence of. In this respect, Daniel Fuchs has argued that "the Bellow protagonist longs for community" (74) in order to deny and escape from "[i]mmoralist activity, the ultimate nihilistic act" (75), but not only are Herzog's views completely absent of any sense of collective longing, his wholehearted damnation of the immorality of 1960s America, while helping white masculinity to restore its previous privileged position, sounds very much like the egotistical grumble of a damaged, defensive white male.

This apocalyptic description of US society is repeated throughout the novel, and it reaches its most evocative state around 100 pages later, when Herzog, writing a letter once again, condemns the fact that "*'spiritual' honor or respect formerly reserved for justice, courage, temperance, mercy, may now be earned in the negative by the grotesque*" (164). This phrase is similar to the one I commented on above: it mentions virtues that white masculinity supposedly espouses in contrast to the immorality of the new, progressively tolerant society that the United States strive to be. But at this moment Herzog's letter writing becomes frantic, almost incomprehensible and illogical, jumbling together things and theories and tenacious transfigurations of meaning whose aim is to disorient and thus menacingly mimic the state in which US society finds itself in. For instance, Herzog claims that "*this development is possibly related to the fact*

that so much of 'value' has been absorbed by technology itself. It is 'good' to electrify a primitive area. Civilization and even morality are implicit in technological transformation" (165). This is the first time that technology is mentioned in the novel, and for Herzog to hold it responsible for the moral disintegration of society would be to take back his accusations on the part of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements.

But while seeking to present the morality "*implicit in technological transformation*", while he begins wondering, "[i]*sn't it good to give bread to the hungry, to clothe the naked? Don't we obey Jesus in shipping machinery to Peru or Sumatra? Good is easily done by machines of production and transportation. Can virtue compete?"* (164) Herzog reaches the conclusion that this "*rationality* [and] *benevolence*" (164) in fact obstruct the higher "*attainment of beauty, nobility, integrity, intensity … an inspired condition, to know truth, to be free, to love another, to consummate existence, to abide with death in clarity of consciousness*" (165). He perversely links social movements to technology, he then links that technology to moral goodness, only to finally assert that this moral righteousness is in fact less benevolent that one might initially think, since there are higher spiritual states of being and mental capacities that are significantly hindered as a result. The technology that is used to do good is in this case disparaged as "*the technology of destruction*" (165), but what Herzog leaves unsaid is that the destruction he refers to is not really the destruction of civilisation or civilised morality but the complete and utter dissolution of the societal mechanisms traditionally used to oppress African Americans and women and allow white masculinity to be the dominant social category. As he also says, "[a]*nnihilation is no longer a metaphor. Good and Evil are real*" (165), meaning: the perceived societal obliteration of white male identity has led him, a

white male American, to try to re-establish the morality of the good and the evil and condemn those seeking change as immoral.

Against this degeneracy and immorality, as he views the sociopolitical changes of 1960s United States, Herzog presents himself as a moral man, perhaps the last beacon of American morality. But while he believes in his own morality, there is in fact a defensive attitude characterising his writing. In a direct address to the reader, Herzog proclaims:

> Thus I want you to see how I, Moses E. Herzog, am changing. I ask you to witness the miracle of his altered heart—how, hearing the sounds of slum clearance in the next block and watching the white dust of plaster in the serene air of metamorphic New York, he communicates with the mighty of this world, or speaks words of understanding and prophecy (165-166).

Perhaps realising that white masculinity's immoral acts towards African Americans and women would be difficult to pass as moral, he seeks to defend himself by showing that he is doing his best to change. This propensity to internal moral change, rather than something new that he only now seeks to equip himself with, is put forth as proof of his always having been moral. In the above-quoted passage, Herzog vividly announces that seeing the evictions of the city's poor, and in particular "watching the white dust of plaster", makes him want to understand others, to show empathy and sympathy towards them. The language used reveals something deeper: the white dust of plaster does not refer merely to the physical destruction of those people's homes, but also—and more importantly—it can be conceptualised as the dust, the deterioration, the leftovers, of white masculinity. While for many years being a concrete, privileged presence in American society, white masculinity is now just dust in the wind, and this spectral vision makes Herzog want to change his attitudes. Not out of a genuine proclivity for moral goodness, but due to an all-

encompassing terror at the state of his identity, does Herzog begin to have an "altered heart".

This wish to change, to repent for the past, does not last long—nor does it survive the novel's end. In one of his final letters, Herzog appears in a state of complete disarray, pleading for an end to the personal suffering resulting from all this introspective searching for goodness. In order to do this, he offers a lengthy explanation for why suffering should by no means be pursued by the individual (that is, himself). He begins by examining Kierkegaardian philosophy, and in particular Kierkegaard's argument that "*truth has lost its force with us and horrible pain and evil must teach it to us again, the eternal punishments of Hell will have to regain their reality before mankind turns serious once more*" (316). This is exactly how Herzog views the fact that he has been forced to examine his past. He imagines his introspective attempt at repentance as a form of hellish punishment, as something that brings about pain and suffering, and through this he will supposedly become morally good. To all that, he resoundingly but nonchalantly replies: "I do not see this" (316). He does not agree with the terms of his repentance, the argument for suffering put forth by Kierkegaard. What is more, he holds the changing societal hierarchies of the 1960s as responsible for the punishment being inflicted upon himself: "Let us set aside the fact that such convictions in the mouths of safe, comfortable people playing at crisis, alienation, apocalypse and desperation, make me sick" (316). In his eyes, it is African Americans and women who are "safe" and "comfortable", enjoying the privileges previously accorded to white masculinity; this newfound prosperity on their part, Herzog suggests, allows them to play with his life and induce the aforementioned suffering. Additionally, he considers this form of sadistic practice as "a poor sort of moral exercise" and part of a

series of “shivery games” (317). African Americans and women are toying with him, he complains, and his repentance is nothing more than a moral exercise that functions to test his physical and psychological limits.

Herzog then proceeds to put forth a logical argument as to why repentance cannot properly take place through suffering. He does so by first incorporating into his letter a theological view of suffering (again, without ascribing it to any religion in particular):

> *You have to have the power to employ pain, to repent, to be illuminated, you must have the opportunity and even the time. With the religious, the love of suffering is a form of gratitude to experience or an opportunity to experience evil and change it into good. They believe the spiritual cycle can and will be completed in a man’s existence and he will somehow make use of his suffering, if only in the last moments of his life, when the mercy of God will reward him with a vision of the truth, and he will die transfigured* (317).

Already we can glimpse Herzog’s aversion to suffering as propagated by a generalised form of religion. Phrases such as “*the power to employ pain*”, “*an opportunity to experience evil*”, and “*he will die transfigured*” all point out that repentant suffering is actually counterproductive and even immoral in and of itself. Suffering, thus conceptualised, encompasses making use of pain as something good, allowing yourself to be dominated by evil (even if, in the end, you might “*change it into good*”), and, perhaps more importantly, it results in your being a truly changed person only in death. If the success of suffering takes place only “*in the last moments of his life*”, is that an adequate incentive to try to morally repent?

Herzog’s emotive response to these religious arguments in favour of suffering is telling:

> *More commonly suffering breaks people, crushes them, and is simply unilluminating. You see how gruesomely human beings are destroyed by pain, when they have the added torment of losing their humanity first, so that their death is a total defeat … Why not say rather that people of*

> *powerful imagination, given to dreaming deeply and to raising up marvelous and self-sufficient fictions, turn to suffering sometimes to cut into their bliss, as people pinch themselves to feel awake* (317).

The language Herzog uses here is bleak, and the reader cannot help but feel all the ways in which suffering has broken, crushed, and destroyed Herzog. The view of suffering Herzog proposes is one of barren desolation; instead of becoming moral, the white male individual only succeeds in losing his own humanity. In this respect, Stanley Trachtenberg has been correct to point out that Herzog "attempts to establish his credentials as a victim" (the victim of suffering and of his tormentors), but I disagree with his argument that Herzog is also "convinced that enlargement of the heart is dependent upon suffering" (47). For while Herzog has spent a large part of the novel trying to demonstrate his genuine morality, writing letters preoccupied with the subject, when it comes to the one act of morality in which he is made to actively engage, he refuses it and any reasoning behind it. Moreover, Herzog manages to add, amid all this despairing forlornness in the above passage, a compliment to himself and to the white masculinity he represents. He considers himself a person of "*powerful imagination*" with the higher purpose of creating "*marvelous … fictions*". A man of such high spiritual standing, it is implied, should not participate in such a denigrating, low-level act as repentant suffering. As such, he views suffering as an attempt on the part of his inquisitors to "*cut into*" his "*bliss*", to intrude into and utterly shutter the happiness he gets from being engaged in this form of mental work. All these arguments, therefore, serve as a means for Herzog to unequivocally reject repentance because the suffering this form of moral penitence entails is detrimental to his whole being.

Herzog's final plea against the suffering required to turn him into a truly moral person is indicative, yet again, of the ways in which he views those who advocated for equal civil and political rights during the 1960s:

> *I am simply a human being, more or less. I am even willing to leave the more or less in your hands. You may decide about me. You have a taste for metaphors. Your otherwise admirable work is marred by them. I'm sure you can come up with a grand metaphor for me. But don't forget to say that I will never expound suffering for anyone or call for Hell to make us serious and truthful* (318).

In this passage, Herzog initially seeks to retain his humanity, and to propose that, despite anything he has done, he is "*simply a human being*". Next to that, however, there is the implication that whether or not Herzog is really human (in the sense of possessing humane, virtuous qualities) is up to his detractors to decide. These detractors are of course none other than those who have been advocating for equality in the United States and, in the eyes of Herzog and other white men like him, criticising white masculinity. Vulnerable, powerless, Herzog sees himself as in the hands of African Americans and women, a victim in (and of) this new, progressive society where white masculinity is not the dominant societal and cultural identity. Even so, he makes clear that he will not accept suffering in order to repent: he rejects repentance altogether, and he is (or sees himself as) so helpless that he does not care what, in the end, will happen to him.

Have any of the afore-examined characters, in the novels explored above, repented? Has white masculinity made up for its detestable behaviour towards African Americans and women? The answer is, of course not. As I have shown above, the novels I have been focusing on in this thesis only portray their white male protagonists as either changed—morally, spiritually, tangibly—or as being completely oblivious to the unfavourable impact their

attitudes and actions have had on other people. Rabbit's, Seymour's, and Herzog's extreme (and extremely suspect) preoccupation with matters of religion, or morality, or both is merely an example of how white masculinity, anxious about its place and status in the changing American society of the 1960s, sought to re-establish its privileged position by presenting itself as ethically good (or as striving to attain ethical goodness). What remains, in the end, is an image of deep vulnerability, of somber powerlessness, of victimised, bogus rectitude. White masculinity, as encapsulated in these novels, has failed to convince us of its righteousness; yet its power, after the 1960s, throughout the rest of the twentieth century, and well into the twenty-first, lingers.

Conclusion

In Search of That Lost Time: White Masculinity, Literature and Culture in the 21st Century

We would rather be ruined than changed,

We would rather die in our dread

Than climb the cross of the moment

And let our illusions die.

- W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*

On January 6, 2021, a mob comprised primarily of white men and prompted by the then-President of the United States Donald J. Trump stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to obstruct the confirmation of President-elect Joe Biden's victory at the 2020 presidential election. More so than anything that has been said about this violent attack against American democracy, it is the plethora of photographs taken during this hours-long terrorist assault and occupation that reveals the true and fullest extent of what happened on that day and why. Raging, proudly domineering white male faces and bodies, at least one clad in a costume meant to denote animalistic and forceful brawniness, clamoring, chanting, climbing walls, fighting, vandalising, threatening, wreaking havoc: attempting, in essence, not so much to disrupt the normal proceedings of the electoral vote count (which was completed later that day), but rather to assert white masculinity's presence and power.

It is clear from this incident, as it was clear when Trump won the 2016 election due in large part to the high percentage of white men who voted for him, that we live in an era in which white masculinity feels sufficiently threatened by progressive politics that it needs to re-establish itself as a powerful social and political force. We are now part of a society in which the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements have laid bare and striven to obliterate the racial and gender injustices that are taking place, not only in the United States, but across the whole world. As Barbara Ransby has accurately pointed out, the name and message of Black Lives Matter "has penetrated our consciousness and our lexicon … and has resonated as a moral challenge, and a slap in the face, to the distorting and deceptive language of colorblindness and postracialism that gained traction in the United States after voters elected the country's first African American president in November 2008" (1-2). Similarly, as far as the #MeToo movement is concerned, Laurie Collier Hillstrom has observed that, "[b]y posting these two words on social media, millions of women established a community of survivors and launched a social change movement to end sexual harassment and assault" (1). As more and more people have become aware of, and sought to challenge, the systemic racism and sexism prevalent in US society, many white men feel a direct threat towards their identity. They believe that their white masculinity, responsible for the systems of oppression that engulf the United States as well as for the privileges it has accrued, is now under attack—or, at least, in crisis. It is this crisis that led to Trump's election five years ago, and to the reprehensible events that took place in the Capitol on the day of Joe Biden's presidential confirmation. And it is this crisis that has been the focus of this thesis, albeit in a

historical context so different, and yet so obviously similar, to our current cultural moment.

This is a cultural moment in which public awareness of and fight against racism and sexism has led many white men to seek not only to defend, but also to restore the power of, their white male identity. When, in the 1960s, the Civil Rights and Feminist movements sought to fight for equality among races and genders, there was a corresponding attempt to circumvent the challenge to white supremacism and patriarchy. While not the intention of this thesis to make sociological arguments or examine in depth how the social experience of Americans in the United States has been affected by such phenomena, I believe this historical background provides necessary context for the close-reading of literature running through this thesis. The relationship between the 2010s and the 1960s is not only that of historical and cultural parallel, but was the impetus to return to three canonical US writers and re-examine the cultural arenas of the past in order to better understand the present and continue the unfinished work of resisting white, masculine supremacism.

As cultural artefacts that both influence and are influenced by what goes on in any given society, novels have the power of reflecting, fictionally, social mores and anxieties. The 1960s was a decade in which much of what had been taken for granted in the United States, most of all the superior social position of white men, was vehemently challenged. Although the Civil Rights movement had begun the struggle to end racial discrimination in the 1950s, and the New Left had similarly sowed the seeds for “social protest” and “left-wing dissent” from the latter years of the 1950s (Geary 712), it was the much-mythologised decade of the Sixties that saw an unprecedented number of attempts to overthrow America’s white patriarchy and achieve equality. Many of the novels

written during that time, as well as in the decades that followed, bear the stamp of the cultural changes the aforementioned movements sought to effect. When it comes to the literary productions of the white male authors studied in this thesis, the pattern that emerges reveals the multifarious ways in which writers anxiously attempted to restore the past power of white masculinity. The novels of John Updike, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth present a white masculinity that is uncertain of its position in US society: Rabbit, Mr. Sammler, Herzog, the Swede, and Sabbath exist in a time and place in which their white (or aspirationally white) masculine subjectivity is not accorded the same privilege it once was. Since their privilege can no longer exist unchecked and invisible, these characters seek to regain their societal status through duplicitous means, by supposedly siding with those groups of people of whom they previously took advantage in order to preserve their high societal position: people of colour, notably African Americans, and women.

The portrayal of my chosen authors' white male characters is therefore inextricably linked to the anxieties permeating white masculinity in the second half of the twentieth century, anxieties which, while emerging as a result of the destabilisation of America's social hierarchies, also point towards an existential threat felt by those accustomed to enjoying an array of privileges. At this point in time, their identities become the focus of much of societal discourse, and white masculinity is no longer an identity that is invisible (and hence invincible), or unmarked. As Mary Bucholz has argued, "[t]he ideologically normative position of such identities frequently makes their construction difficult to pinpoint because they are not always explicitly named" (447). In the years prior to the 1950s, white masculinity in the United States essentially did not exist as such, or, more accurately, it was not something concrete, something seen, in the

same way that black bodies or female bodies were being observed and gazed at and made tangible precisely so that they could be controlled and taken advantage of. “However”, Bucholz continues, “unmarked categories become visible when they are juxtaposed with social categories that are marked as ‘other’ by cultural ideologies” (447). What the Civil Rights and Feminist movements attempted was to make white masculinity visible: to expose that particular identity as well as the ways in which it functioned to repress and suppress black and female identities by virtue of its being an omnipotent absence. By raising awareness of, and fighting against, the societal reins of white men at the expense of African Americans and women, these movements stymied the social system that allowed white masculinity to remain hidden and thus all-powerful. One of the consequences of this unveiling was that, as the privileges of white masculinity were shaken, many were forced to recognise their identity *as* white men and not some default, normative US subject position formally enunciated with the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

At the same time criticism of patriarchy and white supremacism was loudly voiced, the identities of African Americans and women moved closer to the centre of the national stage, often vigorously contesting the negative characteristics projected onto those identities by a US society organised around white masculinity. As I pointed out in the Introduction, in the postwar period and earlier, previously marginalised identities—African American culture especially—were revalued as desirable because they were considered to be hip; although there were many reasons why white American men tried to mimic fashionable identities beyond the pale of whiteness, such cultural acts often had the effect of resituating the centrality of white masculinity and the social power that white men enjoyed. It is for this reason that, in the novels examined in this

thesis, the white male characters are so eager to support African American and feminist causes. By showing themselves in favour of what the Civil Rights and Feminist movements were seeking to achieve, and further, by figuratively merging white masculinity with blackness, they would be able to restore both their power and position in the society of the United States.

What does this mean for the analysis of literature? I have tried, throughout this thesis, to focus on the novels as cultural artefacts rather than on the personal lives and opinions of their writers. Yet, as I showed in various places, the biographies of Updike, Bellow, and Roth have more than a passing relation to the characters and plots of these novels. All three were decidedly autobiographical authors, basing many of their characters on real-life people (including themselves), and as demonstrated by the biographical evidence I thought essential to include, all three have expressed racist and sexist sentiments in their personal lives. My aim in this thesis, however, is not to damn these authors' flaws as human beings but to look at the cultural productions of the past through the lens of the present, and to understand how literature is bound up with the social power relations that continue to marginalise the lives and experiences of African Americans and women. I hope that this thesis will join the various efforts to reevaluate past works of art that are still popular in the present despite their sometimes offensive characteristics. I firmly believe that such a critical practice is necessary in order to confront and eliminate racism and sexism.

Interestingly, the white male protagonists of the novels examined in this thesis have also been seen as examples of a masculinity that is ironised rather than lauded. Throughout much of the novels' narratives, the protagonists appear to be drained of all their virile energy, vulnerable and paralysed symbols

of a society that no longer deems the white male subject position automatically superior, that no longer grants this identity the power and privileges it once possessed. Yet as I have demonstrated in my literary analyses, the white male protagonists reclaim the centre ground by occupying the subject positions challenging their own. They may bear the marks of the 1960s, but even when the novels seek to espouse the cause of African Americans and women, the implicit critique of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements that exists within and between sentences allows white masculinity to emerge subtly triumphant. These are novels that are decidedly unapologetic with regard to many white men's actions against African Americans and women, no matter their attempts at portraying white masculinity as sympathetic to blackness and femininity, and they figure white men as beleaguered standard-bearers for religious morality. The fact that white masculinity is "wounded" instead of annihilated is evidence of its perceived permanence; once the wounds are healed, it will manage (as it did manage) to retain its former ignominious glory.

American literature written by white men in the 21st century perhaps holds the key to understanding the ways in which the ironising of white masculinity can be genuine rather than a ploy designed to re-establish its power. For this reason, I will turn, in these final pages of this thesis, to a white male American author who not only has unflinchingly dealt with white masculinity, but who has also offered a convincing model of critiquing white men and their position in contemporary society: Ben Lerner. Following the publication of Lerner's latest novel, *The Topeka School* (2019), reviews in the broadsheets and literary journals noted Lerner's attempt to seek the roots of toxic white masculinity. In academic analyses, too, the novel was hailed as a literary milestone displaying the harmful effects of white masculinity in twenty-

first-century America. David Bond, for instance, argued that America's "lurk into authoritarianism is best understood not as a tactical compromise made by conservative power brokers but as the pathology of white masculinity" (103) whereby "the Young White Man is at once insufferably entitled and unnervingly fragile" (101). Bond directly links white masculinity's paradoxical powerful/powerless dual state to Trump's populist ascent, and, even though both his article and Lerner's novel were written before the events at the Capitol, it is easy to see the potent connection with the photographic records of the January 2021 insurrection.

Nevertheless, if we look at a novel Lerner wrote before Trump was elected president, 2014's *10:04*, we glimpse not only the durability of white masculinity as a social phenomenon, but also how the ironisation and decentring of white masculinity *can* be an effective critique. So far, *10:04* has been examined in relation to its narrative techniques that both spring from (Gibbons 137) and eschew (Vermeulen 659) the personal category of the author, as a novel that deals with the Anthropocene and the environmental implications of our current way of life (Ivry 123; Malm 2), and as a literary indictment of neoliberal capitalism (Clare 1)—with all of these issues interconnected. Furthermore, embedded in the novel's various narrative and thematic strands is a critique of white masculinity that does not allow it, as Updike, Bellow, and Roth's novels did, to regain its previously powerful status.

One of the main plot points of the novel concerns the white male protagonist, Ben, donating sperm for his best friend, Alex, who does not want to have sex with him and thus get impregnated through natural insemination: Ben has to go to a hospital in order to produce and store his sperm in a cup. The beginning of the sperm-donating scene is laden with an anxiety that swiftly

makes the reader aware of the protagonist's attitude towards his masculinity: "I arrived at the New York-Presbyterian Hospital in a cold sweat, could actually feel the urea and salts emerging from my underarms and trickling down my ribs. I had been worrying about this appointment for well over a month—ever since it had been scheduled" (75). The principal reason why Ben is so anxious about this imminent procedure is because he is worried that he might not be able to perform as he normally would in a sexual encounter with another person. The normative, over-confident male sexual virility that so much of twentieth-century American literature written by white men professes is here reduced to a jittery, cold-sweat-inducing nervousness. Furthermore, while a sex scene between a man and a woman in a novel by Updike or Bellow or Roth would fixate on the woman's body parts, here, by removing the female presence from the copulatory equation and having the protagonist prepare to effectively have sex with himself, Lerner provides a focus on the male body that is almost absent in literary fiction written by men. And, of course, the male body is in this instance a skittish mess, letting Lerner lampoon male virility by displaying its fragile quality.

Lerner's critique of white masculinity continues when Ben comes in contact with the hospital's receptionist:

> The receptionist I handed my form to was a young woman … who could have been a swimsuit model or hired to dance in a club in the background of a music video. She was not unusually beautiful, but her proportions, visible through her black pantsuit even while she sat, were consistent with normative male fantasy. I thought it was inappropriate to cast her in this role, whoever in human resources was doing the casting, but then felt as awkward about that thought as I did about automatically taking in the dimensions of her body. I found it difficult to meet her eyes and I tried not to blush (76).

This incident is evidence of a masculinity that realises its behaviour and attitude towards women, and feels embarrassed by this very realisation. Initially, Ben does what any man brought up in a patriarchal culture objectifying women

would do: he takes in “the dimensions of her body” and proceeds to evaluate the receptionist based on those physical characteristics. But Lerner subverts the traditional male gaze by turning it towards the male gazer himself: Ben recognises his faulty way of thinking and is led to internally chastise himself for his (immediate, automatic) reaction to the sight of a woman. In contradistinction to the examples we saw in previous chapters, here the sexist, objectifying thoughts of the protagonist are interrupted by a potent critique.

The most evocative critique of masculinity comes when Ben is about to start masturbating in order to donate his sperm. Leading Ben to the room in which he will be able to complete the procedure, the receptionist cautions him, “Make sure your hands are very clean, or you’ll have to do it over” (76). This adds to Ben’s heightened anxiety, and leads to an absurdly comical scene in which Ben tries to keep his hands, and therefore his sperm, uncontaminated:

> I went to the sink and washed my hands, then washed them again. Then I walked to the chair, took the remote control from the armrest, and started looking at the menu on the screen … I looked down at the remote control to see how it worked, exactly, and then remembered: I’m not supposed to touch anything that could contaminate the sample. What could be more contaminating that this remote control, which had been in how many sullied hands? After a few seconds of panicky deliberation, I just pressed play … and put the remote control and the plastic container down and walked back to the sink and washed my hands. Then I returned to the screen and undid my jeans and was about to get the whole thing going when I realized my pants were even more potentially contaminating … I shuffled back to the sink with my pants and underwear around my ankles … I did the shuffle back to the screen and hurriedly donned the headphones, but then it occurred to me: contact with the headphones was no different than contact with the remote control. I thought about putting an end to this increasingly Beckettian drama and just trying to go on, but then I imagined getting the call that the sample wasn’t usable, and so again shuffled—now wearing the headphones, now hearing the shrieks and groans of the adventurers—back to the sink to wash my hands once more. Above the sink there was mercifully no mirror (76).

I have tried to condense the scene as much as possible in the interest of space while still showing how Lerner’s comical narration operates with regard to

masculinity: here is an identity that is powerless and laughable. Not only is traditional male virility absent, but the protagonist is unable to masturbate due to the various health considerations in place. Lerner likens this incident to a play by Beckett, but this scene is more reminiscent of a Luis Bunuel film, and the comic repetition of Ben's attempts to clean himself induces a laughter that is not aimed towards the protagonist but the social category he represents. Additionally, and crucially, white masculinity emerges here as vulnerable, open to contamination. In a very interesting essay on human beings' aversion to contamination, Margrit Shildrick has argued that "the human body, or at least the white male body" has traditionally been thought of as "invulnerable" since "the compromised body may invite the assumption of intellectual insufficiency" (217). The anxiety and fear permeating Ben at this moment has to do with his sperm being potentially contaminated, and Lerner's comical rendition of Ben's obsessive handwashing subverts the discourses on the invulnerability of the white male body to which Shildrick refers.

By portraying the sperm-donating scene in this excessively goofy way, Lerner reveals how vulnerable white masculinity really is, and demonstrates, too, how literature can condemn (genuinely, rather than as an alibi to recentre) the place of white men in social hierarchies. What happens afterwards in *10:04* does not re-establish the power of white masculinity, as the novels of Updike, Bellow, and Roth invariably do. White masculinity remains powerless, and when the test results come back stating that Ben's sperm are "a little abnormal", Ben tries to have sex with Alex in order to impregnate her physically: "When we got inside the apartment she asked me how the event was and, instead of answering, I wrapped my arms around her and drew her against me and kissed her on the mouth and tried to find her tongue" (111). This is a sexual violence

that, had it taken place in the kind of masculinist novels my chosen authors wrote, would have resulted in Ben having his way. Instead, Alex “pushed me away hard, laughing, coughing, wiping her mouth, and said: ‘What the fuck are you doing?’” And when Ben replies that he is “not going back there to jack off into a cup every month for two years”, displaying again his fear and anxiety regarding his masculine ability, Alex fiercely denies him the opportunity to have sex with her: “‘Go to sleep, you fucking idiot, we are not having sex’” (113). Lerner’s novel does not restore the power of white masculinity here, does not allow the protagonist to get what he wants, puts a stop to the long and hurting history of white male privilege. Lerner’s is a novel which paves the way for a (white male American) literature in which the female characters have meaningful agency rather than functioning as reflectors of the male protagonist’s anxiety and overconfidence.

Of course, it is not necessary for a novel to critique white masculinity in order to have literary value. All writing is in one way or another political, but novels can exist without having explicit political aims. Yet in a society increasingly divided, in a society where far-right individuals and groups seek to bring back attitudes and values that have been progressively challenged by part of the population, it is vital that we should do everything we can to counteract those efforts, to critique racism and sexism in all their guises, to create a culture that promotes equality and justice instead of subordination and suppression. Literary criticism can thus be a valuable tool, a method of critiquing the hurtful past in order to construct a better future. For, to slightly paraphrase Marx, what our society is vitally in need of right now is ruthless criticism of every inequality that exists. Only then will we be able to say that our lives on this planet have had any meaningful purpose.

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