Reforming the Politics of Sensibility: George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, Tim Dorsey & the Narrative of Social Inaction

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REFORMING THE POLITICS OF SENSIBILITY:
GEORGE ORWELL, KURT VONNEGUT, TIM DORSEY
& THE NARRATIVE OF SOCIAL INACTION

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ABSTRACT

Reforming the Politics of Sensibility: George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, Tim Dorsey & the Narrative of Social Inaction maintains that key narrative modes in Twentieth Century political fiction are indebted to earlier manifestations in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century modes of sensibility in British fiction, and are likewise confronted by the socio-historical politics of these modes. These novels, stretching across time and geographical space, illustrate the continued pervasiveness of these modes and their role in the narrative of socio-political reform. Each chapter addresses a changing narrative relationship with sentimental politics and the implications of this shift on the fictional project of reform.

Together, Orwell, Vonnegut, and Dorsey represent a trajectory of politically-oriented authors whose texts reflect the changing conflicts between reformative aims and sentimental modes. Each author’s relationship to the sentimental sets the tone for the socio-political work of his novel. Although this critical reading may seem eclectic in mingling of sensibility, melodrama, satire, and postmodernism, the use of this critical work illustrates the important relationships between them. This thesis a collection of critical discourse that attempts to address the socio-political work of popular novels, and the complicated interaction of sentimentality, satire, and narrative within them. By examining sentimental modes through this selection of novels, this thesis demonstrates the roll they continue to play in the political quietism so dissatisfying to critics of popular fiction.
INTRODUCTION

Keep it small and accomplishable – start somewhere, do something. I don’t know you, I can’t provide you with a prescription for change. Get off your butt and do something!

- Ward Churchill

In a 2005 talk about his recent book, On the Justice of Roosting Chickens, Dr. Ward Churchill of The University of Colorado turned the tables on those in the audience who presumed to ask, essentially, “What should individuals do about these problems?” As an author and academic whose writing strives for socio-political change, Churchill’s response illustrates a frustrated dissonance between the texts that seek to spur reform and the readers they hope will respond. I did not need to read Churchill’s book to see the significance of his Q&A. Reflected in this author-audience exchange is the two-part assumption that: a. this openly political text should, if composed to suit its cultural context, promote some level of positive reform, and b. its author should imbed an agenda for that reform within the text. In one way or other, much of our critical discourse on political fiction follows or responds to this assumption. And, behind it are larger ongoing questions about political agency, the efficacy of political literature, and the text’s role in constructing active or passive readers. Whatever political injustices On the Justice of Roosting Chickens exposed, the subject of Churchill’s talk hung ostensibly upon the problem of political inaction and (because an author stood at the receiving end of this issue) what books, their authors, and their readers should do about it.

Of most concern to Churchill, it seemed, is that the public consumes some of the most poignant social critiques – even popularizes them – only to pass them on to the next reader. His temperamental reply suggest a crucial truth: embracing one’s socio-political helplessness makes it easier to enjoy these texts without measurable response. It also implies, that texts capable of encouraging helplessness, or on the other side of the coin, contentment, are more likely to subvert measurable reform than to instigate it. Here, I believe, is room for exploration. Of interest are those features, or modes, within popular texts that may reinforce feelings socio-political helplessness and/or contentment, and how they operate within those texts.

This thesis takes the concern over political quietism in fiction as a nexus from which to suggest an avenue for pursuing questions of political efficacy: Revisiting the modes and politics of sensibility and bringing them to bare on a selection of openly, satirically, socio-political
novels from Twentieth Century. Through my examination, I argue that these texts – despite separation of time, subject, and style – all negotiate sentimental politics in their relationship with capitalist interests, and at the risk of political quietism. I choose fiction in particular, because it is a collective space of social imagination. We know that the novel is often a medium for important political debates. Satirizing socio-political practice and human misbehavior, the most overtly activist of these works have attracted the attention of popular audiences and scholars alike. Critics applaud such novels’ participation in contemporary politics, but often puzzle over their apparent lack of potency.

Contemporary arguments about the political efficacy of fiction suggests that texts have lost their ability to construct a coherent project for cultural criticism or reform to a sensationalist barrage of fractured images and ideas. Postmodern texts, Fredric Jameson might say, attack everything at once, and therefore nothing at all. Fragmented images juxtaposed one with the other, suggest potential objects of irony or critique, but lose potency for social comment by overwhelming us with stimuli, and drowning us in sensation. Audiences are denied a concrete sense of critique, pulled as they are between too many paradoxical ideas. Far from moving disrupting the audience’s sense of reality (and perhaps encouraging thoughtful reform, etc), Jameson believes we revel in the ‘intensities’ of sensation the experience provides, consuming the text for the sensation itself, rather than transferring the material outside the text, and into daily life.

Fragmentation and the emphasis on sensation is a marker of our time – reflecting and responding to a moment in history that is perhaps the height of pure, “multinational capitalism,” as Jameson puts it. Western societies must create and consume cultural artifacts that represent and relieve the paradoxical relationship between humanitarian ideologies and capital gains, because although we have a growing global community, we suffer from decreasing interpersonal connection. In other words, the more we strive for personal interest, the more we must reaffirm our ability to sacrifice personal interest. Or, the more we need relief from the sense that something is wrong. Yet the tropes of overstimulation, sensation, and satisfaction that Jameson suggests we have come to rely upon for relief are neither exclusive to our contemporary context, nor particular to our ‘intensity’-driven narratives of imagistic pastiche. While Jameson’s argument speaks convincingly for our century, how do we account for the novels of the past that criticize capitalist ideology while ultimately supporting its social systems?
A return to the nature and impact of sensibility can give us insight here. The politics of postmodern fiction is more indebted to the tropes of sensibility than critics like Jameson allow. Growing market capitalism as far back as the Eighteenth Century spurred the popularity of sentimental discourse in an attempt to reinvest cold capitalist zeal with humanitarian warmth. The resulting scholarly work on sentimental discourse (in novels, poems, essays, articles, tracts, histories) associates a group of rhetorical tactics with this movement. These tactics (or modes), scholars claim, both enhance the poignancy of critical debate within the text, and reinforce the audience’s sense of personal inculpability. For readers, these texts open a space through which to demonstrate sensitivity to disturbing social dilemmas, but the sentimental formulae for resolution typically abandons any push toward systemic political change. Through this lens, we begin to see these novels as cultivating a fictional space through which audiences exercise socio-political agency and/or work-through social frustrations. Capitalism’s debt to a politics of sensibility is a collection of tropes that can promote the isolative use of political fiction as a release from social disquiet, rather than a stimulant for active reform.

Too often, the fiction becomes the action for its audience. The texts I examine extend conversations about government, poverty, economics, corruption, and consumerism into a fictional space through which the socio-political ideas they address play out. Thus, the ideal reader participates not only in the intellectual activity of social critique, but also in an imagined resolution that is often as nebulous and extraordinary as it is satisfying. The narrative resolution, then, becomes its own means and end, establishing a space in which participants can assume agency without actual change, sacrifice, or social challenge. Inner conflicts the story may stimulate between the individual, his/her fortunes, and a society are thus reabsorbed. Quieted.

Churchill does have a point, readers must be responsible for their own change. Authors cannot control the uses their texts fulfill once released to the reading public. However, this real dependence on readers does not explain why so many poignant socio-political fictions, past and present, have made such slow progress on the level of social action. Many insist that literature is poised to shape cultural meanings, eventually producing socially significant change as we renegotiate those meanings. Yet in the attempt to negotiate a space for public awareness and motivation, these texts deploy a rhetoric of sensibility that seems to work against their hopes for imminent – not eventual – reform.
In studying the relationship between sentimental politics and the socio-political fiction of the present, I must work under the assumption that popular fiction still draws largely from the tradition of the sentimental novel in order to invest their readers with appropriate concern for the issues within. There is certainly support for this, if we pay attention to the overlapping characteristics between Twentieth Century fiction and its preceding eras – eras that experienced the first major encroachments of capitalism on political and social life. Such a ‘diachronic analysis’ of genre forms, Tony Bennett’s *Outside Literature* tells us, recognizes the mutability and hybridity of genre forms as they develop as vehicles for ‘social relations’ by influencing readers (79). More importantly, as new modes of writing draw from preexisting genres (such as sentimental), they draw with them vestiges of their original “framework of expectations” (102).

Understanding that original framework thus becomes important to understanding the ways in which sentimental modes may operate in later contexts. Janet Todd’s *Sensibility, an Introduction* describes the role of sentimental rhetoric and plot in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries as both engendering real sentiment in readers for social and political problems, and schooling them in the act of goodness. Not surprisingly, Todd’s closing chapter, “The Attack on Sensibility,” describes a growing “schizophrenia” in the Victorians regarding the ‘mode’ – they seemed to “rail” against it, while simultaneously employing it in their own rhetoric (143-4). Even as critics and writers deplored its inability to produce significant popular response to any political message, audiences continued to welcome sentimental tactics (140).

It is my contention that the modes of sensibility remain affectively useful in influencing reader sympathy, particularly in politics. The stigma against sentimental rhetoric, however, might account for a tendency to ignore it. Nevertheless, authors rarely drop a technique that engages readers so successfully. Perhaps for this reason, Elaine Hadley’s *Melodramatic Tactics* begins its defense of melodrama in the Victorian Era, when, she argues, its sentimentally-driven modes saturated key social debates. Negating charges that melodrama serves as mere wish fulfillment, Hadley insists that the “melodramatic mode” arose “as a polemical response to the social, economic, and epistemological changes that characterized the consolidation of market society in the 19th century” (3). Although she makes no mention of sensibility (melodrama’s predecessor), her description of ‘melodramatic modes’ coincides with Todd’s ‘sensibility’ in nearly every respect.
Though one refers to ‘sentimentalism’ and the other ‘melodrama,’ both of these critics articulate similar ‘tactics’ or ‘modes’ within them, which they argue have functioned for various purposes in a number of genres. The changeability of these characteristics makes them all the more fascinating in their application to contemporary texts. Sentimental and melodramatic modes served highly political purposes, influencing an array of discourse on the most important social topics of their day – and yet the greatest charge against them was their lack of activism. Apparently, to get off your butt and do something was as much an issue then as it is for Churchill today, making the role of sensibility in the political literature of the Twentieth Century and beyond worth a look. It seems foolish to restrict these tactics to the periods with which they are associated; clearly, these techniques and forms proved more capable of popular service than their political ambiguity could overcome.

Despite both critics’ insistence that these forms somehow came to an end after their own periods of study, Todd and Hadley link the use of these tactics with the rise of market capitalism. They agree that sentimental and melodramatic ‘calls to action’ often served the dispossessed, though unable to effect social change – at least in terms of activism and physical social resistance to capitalism’s devices. These theorists provide solid structural and modal characteristics that work to identify the sentimental and the melodramatic (though these in fact largely overlap) beyond the scope of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century study. Certain combinations of these features advertises a texts’ indebtedness to, or reliance upon, sentimental modes: highly-charged emotions, hyperbolic personas, insanity, contrived resolutions, fortuitous circumstances of agency, and good vs. evil binaries. The modal delineations that Todd and Hadley provide form a specific bases through which I can examine the socio-politically critical popular fictions of the recent past and present and their relationship to audience, affect, and social action.

Audience in particular is interesting in relation to these tactics. Since I cannot satisfactorily account for the uses and gratifications of contemporary fiction, I must rely on what is already known about sentimental gratification to form the basis of my (tentative) inferences. The crucial vein melodrama inherits from sensibility is the idea that its audience, through ‘witnessing’ the events of the plot, experiences a strong emotive response by which they are either improved as individuals, or affirmed as good and feeling persons. Knowing this, it seems premature to assume that sentimental tactics would diminish as capitalism, market culture, and population increased. The potential need for them is greater than ever before. More likely is the
notion that sentimental/melodramatic tactics simply readjust alongside the political agendas for which their texts are created. The express hope of social or political reform, of a ‘call to action,’ is still a driving force for many novels, and the inherent attraction of sentimental modes in political a mouthpiece is their ability to involve readers on a personal, emotional level.

The drawback, of course, is a tendency toward self-containment. The disquiet these modes arouse in readers is affectively neutralized in most traditional resolutions. These texts seek to elicit a powerful emotional response in readers, demanding attention for the socio-political topics at hand within their narratives. Yet the sentimental elements they employ complicate this agenda in many ways. Sentimentalism’s notorious ability to create a ‘false’ sense of goodness through shared fictional emotions and actions certainly complicates a reformative agenda. The growing popularity for these tactics in the Nineteenth Century revealed that people were more than willing to express common feeling and sympathy for the victims of social injustice, and more than content to do nothing for them. Audiences, it seemed, had come to associate feeling sympathy with acting sympathetically. The modes of sensibility, according to critics of the day, created social apathy instead of progressive action.

Nevertheless, I suggest that by merging typically incongruent narrative modes, novels continue to offer readers an ideal space for social critique and self-affirmation. Steven Weisenburger’s work in Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel strongly suggests that satire is one of these narrative modes. Weisenburger locates what he calls a “parasitic” relationship between satire and “narrative,” in which he argues that the politically effective energies of satire are diluted by combination with narrative elements. According to his thesis, the satirical mode is the essence of political activity in texts, with all the potential for social reform. What defeats that reformative project is the form with which satirical projects are interlaced. These claims strongly implicate sensibility and melodrama in their reference to ‘narrative.’ And, while I want to avoid repeating the argument that satire and sentiment are opposites and should not be mixed, I do suggest that there is much at stake in terms of how these two projects (satirical and sentimental) come together. By putting what is known about satire and sensibility in dialogue we can link these concepts in order to deepen our understanding of their role in reformative fiction.

For instance, even Hadley – whose arguments supported the fluidity of sensibility throughout genres – missed the opportunity to explore their potentially quieting impact on
reformative fiction. Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, she argues, is charged with the rhetoric of social action (79). Rereading *Oliver Twist* with the function of sensibility in mind, however, one finds a novel that, by its narrative tactics, assuages the very indignation it ignites—answering cultural anxieties about a growing population of London poor. *Oliver Twist*, then, becomes an affecting “tale of woe” from Old Poor Law practice through which readers can begin an education of the New Poor Law system and enjoy a privileged viewpoint of indubitable voracity. The narrator, in his self-styled position as “biographer,” has near-unlimited knowledge of both political and human elements (Dickens 46). His blend of ignorance and assurance is highly effective. Claiming not to know a few irrelevant details validates the ‘historic’ claims the narrator does most authoritatively present as truth. Yet, the ultimate result is still a “fairytales” requiring all of the machinations of a sentimental plot to create what Hadley calls a “viable, if ultimately unsuccessful, alternative” to the New Poor Law social system (79).

Though Hadley reminds us that there is real ‘work’ involved in acquainting readers with the gruesome realities of New Poor Law policy, Weisenburger shows us that sentimental narrative devices in the novel work to alleviate the novel’s politics. It seems that the “ultimately unsuccessful” elements of these novels are sentimental enough to engage reader emotion, real enough to offer readers an intimate knowledge of ‘the way it is,’ and fantastical enough to become a release from direct action. Hadley’s own research on the period seems to support this. She points out that individual character, one’s social identity, had become increasingly ‘mysterious’ in the Nineteenth Century (Hadley 82). As impoverished populations increased, this system of character-based assistance came under heavy suspicion. “Pretenders,” some claimed, traveled from parish to parish, weaving a false “tale of woe” to local overseers, ‘robbing’ each parish in turn of relief that ought to be given to ‘genuine’ resident poor (84–97).

Answering New Poor Laws reforms, however, struck the ‘middle ranks’ as harsh and uncharitable, but there few alternatives. Melodrama, with its charitable pathos, thus became a perfect space in which to resolve this moral tension. What Hadley terms ‘melodrama’ in *Oliver Twist* is a combination of acute sensibility, petty comedy, and sharp satire. Together, these tactics constructed a narrative experience through which readers could reclaim that sense of superior judgment and individual generosity that contemporary social life denied them. Dickens rewards the audience for siding against the cold-hearted characters of the New Poor Law system by hailing it as “intelligent reader;” and Twist’s “biography” privileges audiences with the power
of observation (Dickens 94). Those “great” minds that can detach themselves from society are
criticized for their lack of trust in good nature, and we exhaust in our superiority over skeptical
characters like Grimwig. Yet, as readers, we have entered an omniscient space through which
ture character is revealed to us alone. We are reassured that those individuals who appear
innocent, are innocent – and those who are ugly, are ugly to the bone. By replacing ‘novel’ with
‘biography,’ Dickens removes our doubt, representing Oliver’s ‘tale of woe’ such that we, as
‘overseers,’ can reward the plaintiff with the sympathy he deserves.

Oliver’s worthiness is demonstrated through a variety of tests – all of which we witness
in detail. He is noble from first to last, a ‘hero’ in appearance and personality, unlike Nancy –
whose inability to forgive herself for her transgressions circumvents the difficult negotiation of
ambiguous human character that so frustrated contemporaries (Hadley 93). Poverty and
homelessness are difficult stigmas to overcome, as Grimwig impresses upon his benevolent
friend, Brownlow. But they are hardly obstacles for readers who have seen that Oliver’s soul is
as angelic as his face. By risking his trust on Oliver, Brownlow makes gamble that is no gamble
– readers are never asked to share his uncertainty. Nor are they expected to admire Brownlow’s
generosity toward the parentless orphan boy; the narrator has hinted from the beginning that
Oliver is no stranger at all, but the rightful heir to Brownlow’s gift. Hence, any monetary
investment in Oliver remains within the family.

Critics have certainly faulted Dickens for this reliance on patrimony and blood as if to
account for Oliver’s good nature. They argue that this ‘undoes’ the critical force of the novel by
refusing common paupers noble character. Whether a nostalgic gesture or an ultimately
conservative one, Oliver’s fortuitous identity poses problems for Dickens’s reformatory project,
as does his reliance on the transparency of good and evil. Though clearly anxious to avoid
promoting what he calls “passive lookers-on” who are content to dismiss the socially critical
fictions they encounter as fantastical, Dickens nevertheless succumbs to a sentimental narrative
strategy that fosters inaction.

Dickens has given his audience precisely what they craved: a sympathetic character
whose situation they would never encounter in their own lives. This is not to say that Oliver
could never exist, but to argue that a narrative capable of alleviating the audience’s chief
anxieties against charitable trust satisfies rather than challenges the system in place. Readers can
affirm that, were they able to discern the true history of a vagabond, they should certainly assist
them. Our desire to demonstrate our sympathies for a worthy character are answered through active engagement with his ‘biography,’ and we may pass the text on with satisfaction, knowing that our emotional investments have been rewarded. Dickens rebalances the scales of justice and humanity for us with Oliver’s lucky blood. Brownlow has rescued him from the strictures of New Poor Law injustice, but the social problems Oliver’s narrative brought to light remain. We’ve simply persuaded ourselves to forget them.

As author, Dickens had the power to disturb our comfort, to deconstruct our relief. Instead, Oliver Twist succumbs to the sentimental temptation of resolution and catharsis through which the emotions it studies to engage are gratified. For me, Dickens sets the tone for political authors to follow, because his attacks against socio-political issues were as scathing as his texts were ultimately admired – even by those he attacked. Therefore, taking Dickens as a starting point, I have chosen to explore novels that seem in dialogue with this sentimentally satirical approach. My first chapter examines George Orwell’s 1984 (1949) as itself a response to the Dickensian model. In his essay, “Charles Dickens” (1946), Orwell expresses his own astonishment at Dickens’ ability to attack so fiercely, and yet please so thoroughly. It is Dickens’ reliance on feeling and kindness, Orwell concludes, rather than political change that prevents his otherwise stinging critiques from producing concrete reform.

Orwell’s comments pinpoint one of the deepest problems with sentimental tactics, and their impact on the reformative project. Equally important, they position Dickens and Orwell together in terms of their work as political authors – not necessarily in terms of their personal political goals, but certainly in their attitude toward writing as a challenge to established powers. In Chapter One, I reconnect Orwell’s style in opposition to the sentimental satisfaction that Dickens was unable to deny his readers. As an author who admired, yet criticized, his predecessor, Orwell identified and disrupted the conventions that he believed failed for Dickens. By doing so, he seems to join the group of satirists that Weisenburger terms “degenerative,” testing the validity of society’ accepted truths and denying audiences self-affirmation through narrative. To see Orwell’s conclusion in its relationship to Dickensian narrative, and sentimental tactics, is to reconsider what many critics have deemed a hopeless prediction for the future. Instead, 1984 becomes an attempt to produce change by reversing sentimental politics that insist the world would be perfect as it is, if people would just be kind.
Ironically, this same philosophy is precisely what Kurt Vonnegut would resurrect just a decade and a half later. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine*, Vonnegut re-envisions the Dickensian social project. But what may at first appear to be a ‘degenerative’ parody of *Twist*-like sensibility, ultimately resolves in like political quietism. My second chapter examines Vonnegut as a postmodern author whose avowed hopes for social change are eclipsed by *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*’s sentimental comforts. Although the strong, Dickensian narrator announces his tale to be about a fortune’s, rather than a ‘parish boy’s,’ ‘progress,’ the potential parody rewards its readers with the superiority of middleclass social judgment, and reassures them with the knowledge that measurable social change belongs to those with economic power. Vonnegut’s message and Dickens’s message are ultimately the same: “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (Vonnegut 95).

True as this philosophy may be, its potential influence is mitigated by the traditional undercurrent of the plot, which – despite its tendency toward blank irony – blurs our perception of the systems it attacks. Though Ward Churchill would certainly insist that our duty as readers is to author our own prescription for change, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*’s sentimental politics reabsorbs such reformative energies. We’re alleviating America’s capitalist fragmentation and insensitivity one rich eccentric philanthropist at a time. Eliot Rosewater’s story thus balances the disturbing subplots of disappointed dreams and economic betrayal. Through Rosewater, we learn that capitalism is a problem – that it kills human feeling and produces greedy lawyers – but also through him, our responsibility to retool capitalistic avarice is smoothed away. Vonnegut has created a contemporary sentimental hero whose goodness lies (gratefully) beyond our reach.

The novel thus mingles political awareness and discontent with human feeling and social connectivity. Jameson tells us that the postmodern text expresses and reflects the subject’s own confused fragmentation and political impotence. The narrative works to negotiate this de-centered existence, he argues, quieting his/her socio-political discomfort through emotional stimulation and gratification (“Postmodernism”). These experienced “intensities” belong to the postmodern text and subject, according to Jameson. And yet if we trace the modes of sensibility (the rise of sentimental novels, and the rage over sensational novels in the Nineteenth Century) we see a trajectory of novels toying with similar somatic relationships to fiction. In Chapter
Three, I examine Tim Dorsey’s *Florida Road Kill* (1999) and its role as both a reifying commodity and a vehicle for social modification.

In Chapter Three, I look at *Florida Roadkill* as a novel whose disruptive sentimental imbalances actually work toward progressive change, against a backdrop of commodification and consumer culture. Using Jameson’s notions of ‘cognitive mapping’ and ‘commodity reification,’ I suggest that *Roadkill* maps a new agenda for social change by converting the novel experience into an “A-tour of Florida.” Its disturbingly satisfying exploration of tourism and development both satisfies and alters the contemporary vacation/theme park mentality it targets. Instead of using sentimental tropes like nostalgia to resurrect an older, ‘better’ social balance to which Florida should return, *Roadkill* uses nostalgia to infect readers with a genuine (if imagined) sentimental awareness.

*Roadkill*’s success, I argue, is in its inversion sentimental binaries. Though it satisfies the desire for socio-political agencies through its characters, the novel complicates our sense of moral certainty. In the end, Dorsey’s text offers us Florida on its own terms, allowing – even encouraging – readers to enjoy the sights, sounds, and adventures we expect, while simultaneously imbedding those experiences with a notion of historic, or cultural, significance. Thus, what *Roadkill* produces is a new kind of tourist – one whose consumption of Florida will reflect the imaginary connections forged by his/her reading experience.

Together, Orwell, Vonnegut, and Dorsey represent a trajectory of politically-oriented authors whose texts reflect the changing conflicts I see between reformative aims and sentimental modes. Each author’s relationship to the sentimental sets the tone for the socio-political work of his novel. Although my critical reading may seem eclectic in mingling of sensibility, melodrama, satire, and postmodernism, my use of this critical work illustrates the important relationships between them. I have chosen a collection of critical discourse that attempts to address the socio-political work of popular novels, and the complicated interaction of sentimentality, satire, and narrative within them. By examining sentimental modes through this selection of novels, I demonstrate the roll they continue to play in the political quietism so dissatisfying to critics of popular fiction.
CHAPTER ONE

THE DEGENERATIVE GEORGE ORWELL:
A BATTLE OF SENTIMENT & SATIRE IN NINeteen Eighty-four

The great disadvantage, and advantage, of the small urban bourgeois is his limited outlook. [For] the non-criminal poor, the ordinary, decent, labouring poor […] He has the sincerest admiration […] But it is questionable whether he really regards them as equals. (Orwell “Charles Dickens” 24, 35)

[…] elimination of […] political action on the part of the proletariat also signals his final failure to get outside the ideological field of the ‘lower upper-middle class’ (Wegner 219)

It is the world of working people as seen by the prep-school boy (Williams 79)

There seems little argument between the criticisms above. The writer on whom they pronounce their judgment, in each circumstance, is – apparently – guilty of defeating the full constructive success of his satire with his own ideological limitations. Devaluing, even “insulting” the very population he champions (Williams 71). The interesting confusion between them, however, is to whom they refer. The first statement belongs to George Orwell from his 1939 essay on the work of Charles Dickens, in which he faults Dickens’s “snobbish” ignorance of the poor classes. The last two – the first by Phillip Wegner (2002), the second Raymond Williams (1971), refer, not to Dickens, but to Orwell himself. Both agree that in Orwell’s final novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four, awarding the capacity for political “struggle” to the intelligent few and depoliticizing the labor class “created the conditions for defeat and despair,” (Williams 80).

Essentially, they perceive the point as an accidental failure – that perhaps, if not for this shortcoming, the text might have achieved an even greater, lasting influence over the political ideologies of its time than it has already done. Both Williams and Wegner appear to hold Nineteen Eighty-Four to a standard of satire whose ‘target’ is outside the narrative itself, constructing by novel’s end an alternative moral solution – a fictitious standard that compromises our view (Weisenburger 17). The tradition of criticism regarding satire, according to Steven Weisenburger in Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel, 1930 – 1980, has long blinded theorists to the possibilities in what he terms “postmodern satire.” In these novels, the author does more than satirize a specific target, but “fiction-making itself” (19). Weisenburger sees a “diegesis: those strategies of discourse that encourage us to create, as well as to deform, a fiction,” in these narratives (17) – tactics for ideologically navigating the
impossible paradoxes within – rather than assuming that they must all be “moral therapy” (16). A narrative system of values will exist – it is impossible to avoid – but it will not be written in stone, or even readily apparent. This is a code readers will sort out for themselves, uncomfortable and confusing though the process may be.

Weisenburger calls this model “degenerative satire” in opposition to its “generative model” predecessor; and many satirists, he insists, swing between the two, despite the critical desire to construct formal polarities (27). Yet such formal views have fallen short when they attempt to explore satire’s ability to “work demonstrable change in the world” (16). This chapter seeks to explore Orwell’s own attempt to rework sentimental and satirical narrative conventions in order to answer that question. In fact, his complaint against Dickens, apart from Dickens’s inability to articulate social solutions, boils down to form. In his estimation, the “framework of melodrama” hampers the potentially serious work of character and cause through a dizzying series of plot ‘machinery’ and manipulation (47). Where Dickens lacks knowledge, Orwell claims, he applies satire and ‘burlesque’ to escape the task of real critique – mingling the severity of his textual situations with mocking humor, and trivializing them. Or, if not trivializing, then reducing the moment’s socio-political poignancy. For Orwell, something of the social significance is lost when satirical and sentimental tactics mingle, and in Nineteen Eighty-Four, I argue, the basic set of ‘generative’ problems he finds in Dickensian form are interrogated and upturned (63).

There is something to be said for the complete discomfort this situation seems to create in its readers – not only in the limited ideology of Nineteen Eighty-Four’s protagonist, but in the narrative’s ‘resolution.’ Openly, undeniably, it deflates the sentimental project of identification and satisfaction by inverting the dues ex machina, denying power to the agents of change and victory to the hero. Unlike the “completely fantastic and incredible” resolution of Dickens’s Oliver Twist, Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four refuses readers the option of contented pleasure through sentimental identification and sublimation (“Charles Dickens” 67). In fact, beneath his critique of political oligarchy and revolutionary idealism, Orwell interrogates Dickensian, sentimental satire as vehicle for social change.

Essentially, I consider Nineteen Eighty-Four, not according to its success as a topical satire against totalitarianism and mishandled Socialism, but as an examination, or experiment, in the form of political satire itself. Orwell’s lifelong struggle with form and the efficacy of
political novelists, not to mention his concern over the place and roles of intellectuals and writers in politics certainly makes such an approach interesting. In his last novel, it seems clear that a struggle is in place, not only within the intellectual subject, but between the conventions of narrative form that – in Orwell’s view – conflate the social impact of the satirical novel. By overturning those satisfying sentimental expectations, I would argue, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* succeeds in presenting a collection of socio-political anxieties that the reader alone can resolve. Thus, the novel challenges the narrative modes of the past, questioning the very potency and place of the novel itself in the poli-social realm. And, equally important, interrogating the nature of its failing.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith suffers from the Dickens’s inability to “regard [the non-criminal poor, the ordinary, decent, labouring poor] as equals.” Not only does Smith fail to imagine a future beyond his own cultural memory, he fails to respect the ‘proles’ – his ‘hope’ for the future of Airstrip One – as his equals. Raymond Williams is right to call this a ‘failing,’ indicative of “stale” and diminutive “revolutionary romanticism” (79). But, whose “revolutionary romanticism” is it, Orwell’s or Smith’s – or both? Patronizing the “underdog” is precisely the kind of trite condescension that Orwell long ago criticized in Dickens. Though it is certainly possible that Orwell fell victim to his own argument, I find it more useful to consider him a ‘degenerative’ satirist illustrating the failure of political dependence on sensibility. Smith, as protagonist, is the point of identification between novel and reader, and it is through Smith that we encounter this damning, ideological limitation – a limitation that ultimately defeats Smith’s agenda for social change. To follow Smith and his hopes, then, is also to experience his mistakes – and to share their consequences.

Therefore it is important that we examine reformative fiction’s narrative debt to sentimental politics. In *Sensibility, An Introduction*, Janet Todd studies and explains the rhetorical movement of ‘sentimentalism’ as it spread into poetry, drama, and the novel. More importantly, she describes the emotional significance for which such devices were deployed to great effect. If, according to sentimental philosophy, common humanity held a “natural goodness” that could and must champion the “unfortunate and helpless,” then this basic human trait could be shared and exemplified through emotional response to (in this case) narrated events (7). To this end, the diction and structure of such novels honed reader sympathy, all in the “belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one,” and that “literary
emotions herald active ones; a theatrical or fictional feeling creates greater virtue in the audience or reader” (4).

Naturally, authors with a desire for social change deployed such tactics to raise sympathy for the poor and disenfranchised by implying that lack of sympathy equaled lack of humanity. Elaine Hadley, in Melodramatic Tactics, insists that these “modes” became the champions of political unrest for social reformists, Charles Dickens among them. The difficulty with such fictions, however, is their tendency to inflame and assuage the sympathetic passions of their readers. Through commiseration with a novel’s character, the isolated reader could achieve a sense of personal goodness without making steps toward social action. The only action these plots tended to illicit was emotional – physical tears, rather than physical change. Readers may imagine that as the problems of the protagonists come to fortuitous resolution the real problem has subsided, as well.

The ‘fantasy’ of the happy, pastoral ending to real “humanitarian concerns” seemed to promote real social apathy and political quietism (Todd 45). According to Todd, imagining a “better society” rarely attempted “any political or economical progress,” and avoided the “economic needs of the emerging capitalist order” by reverting to ‘nostalgic’ tropes for resolution (96). For all its implied instructional value, she continues, “the emotion in the passage is contrived, fictive, in no way a pattern for life, and it feeds into, rather than out of, the book,” (93). In other words, the sentimental and/or melodramatic novel’s ability to quiet the passions it raises is problematic for any author hoping to innervate his audience in the socio-political sphere. The reader accepts passive credit for the general good of a novel’s characters via empathy, sympathy, and commiseration. Thus, the hero’s narrative success fulfills the need for real success in his audience, potentially sublimating socio-political angst through fiction. Orwell notes this in his critique of Dickens, insisting that the reader’s relationship with the texts is “emotional,” indicative of a collective desire for the cultural ideology of “equality and freedom” that the novel projects in the interests of its protagonists (74). Interestingly, through the character of Winston Smith, Orwell re-imagines many qualities that he once attributed to Dickens the author, as if using these models of social intervention to test and expose them.

In this way, Orwell, despite his admiration of Dickens, frustrates and challenges the position of a political writer through narrative. When Alex Zwerdling, in his book Orwell and the Left, asks why Orwell treated the novel form so ambiguously if he admired its practitioners
so well, he misses an important point. Orwell “saw a conflict between his aims as a writer and the demands of the genre,” that, in my view, coincides with his reworking of sentimental narrative modes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Zwerdling 146). I would argue, however, that it is not so much that fiction “dilutes the intensity” of a writer’s passions, as Zwerding suggests, but that its popular use of sentimental modes press for satisfyingly vague resolutions. If, as Todd and Hadley assert, sentimentalist novels had become the political writer’s mode of choice (as with Dickens), this must have established a precedent for Orwell. To break from it, Zwerdling hints, would have been revolutionary in and of itself (147).

Orwell’s “revolutionary” act, therefore, is to crush the sentimental agenda. Part of his argument against a sentimental politics is that by “fasten[ing] upon this or that minor abuse, expos[ing] it,” and bringing it to justice, “all will be well” (5). Such reductive solutions are deceptively reassuring, and Orwell’s own project seeks to invert them – for inversion, he believes, can be truly revolutionary. Perhaps this is why Raymond Williams notes that, “[b]y viewing the struggle as one between only a few people over the heads of an apathetic mass, Orwell created the conditions for defeat and despair,” (George Orwell 80). If the audience were denied fulfillment in their identification with, and discovery of, socio-political struggles, perhaps the problem of making them “care sufficiently about the abuses [the novels] exposed,” would be solved (Zwerdling 193). His novel deploys melodramatic ‘modes,’ in compliment to its satirical thrust, as a part of its form, yet frustrates its reader’s probable expectations by denying them even the creative agency of ‘melodramatic tactics’ (*dues ex machina*, ‘poetic justice,’ dumb luck, fortuitous friendship).

Throughout, however, the reader maintains the expectation of hope. Smith represents a western, democratic ideology: he believes in free speech, he longs for autonomy. He experiences empathy, regret, love, and nostalgia – all indicative of a sentimental “man of feeling.” As readers, we witness his life and share his emotional turmoil. Orwell’s third-person narrative is limited to Winston Smith’s consciousness, and as the single example of humanity in the novel, our emotional experiences are a function of his: detailed, prolonged, and moving. During the capture scene, we see evidence of the melodramatic working to promote empathy as Julia is struck violently while Smith must watch:

She was thrashing about on the floor, fighting for breath. Winston dared not turn his head even by a millimeter, but sometimes her livid, gasping face came within the angle of his vision. Even in his terror it was as though he could feel the pain in his own body… (emphasis mine 223)
The last line in particular invites a fellowship between hero, narrator, and authorial audience through commiseration. As Janet Todd argues, by demonstrating his ability to feel great joy and great pain, a character represents his/herself as an exemplary being to whom the audience should respond. According to this model, good characters feel strongly when faced with the suffering of others, while the villainous cannot or do not.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* models such a binary, since feeling is precisely what the Party hopes to eradicate: Smith and Julia can love and sympathize, and are likewise our protagonists; O’Brien, Mr. Charrington, and Syme have no known sympathies and are therefore either part of the system, or its most dangerous instruments. Syme, an orthodox Party member, advertises his pleasure in the suffering of others when we first meet him, correlating a passion for public executions with a passion for “the destruction of words.” His emotional response to a hanging is the polar opposite of Smith’s in the passage above; Syme enjoys the torture, rather than feels it (50). He lacks empathy, and forfeits the audience’s sympathy as a result. He is also associated with the Airstrip One metropolis and its nostalgic void.

The glimpse of ‘utopian’ nostalgia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* offers through Winston Smith, on the other hand, echoes Dickensian sentimentality. Indeed, as with *Oliver Twist*’s image of benevolent patronage, birthright, and pastoral life, the moments of idyllic society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are relics of the past. Winston Smith’s alternative to INGSOC is a cultural memory of Orwell’s youth. In his chapter, “Modernity, Nostalgia, and the Ends of Nations in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,” from *Imagined Communities*, Phillip Wegner notes that “the only place imagined to exist outside the world of Big Brother might be Orwell’s own immediate past or, at best, a future that looks very much like it,” (199). Moreover, it is “an authentically *English* past, while its negative other, *American* mass culture, represents those contemporary forces that have destroyed this idealized moment…” (212). And the invitation to indulge in such an idle fantasy is equally strong – particularly for those who share the cultural memories that Orwell reveres.

Nostalgia, however, has always been a favorite tool of melodrama, particularly for Dickens. In her reading of *Oliver Twist*, social and physical resuscitation can only occur by retreating to “a still rural hierarchal country,” thus presenting an unblemished glimpse of nostalgic escape (Hadley 130). In this way, an author can deploy the sentimental mode to compare the worst of the present or its near future to the best of a past shared by his/her ‘ideal’
readers. For Wegner, it appears that Orwell has chosen a moment at the height of Imperial
England:

> These self-contained material embodiments of the past serves as the irrefutable
> proof of the possibility of another, better, situation, and consequently provide the normative
> ground from which Winston Smith can critiques the horror, deprivation, and poverty of Oceanic
> life. (208)

Much as it did for Dickens, this cultural memory provides a standard against which readers (and
Smith) can judge the events of the novel. Nostalgia cements a relationship between narrator and
audience, audience and protagonist. But memory offers no solutions. Constructing resolution
for present anxieties from a remembered system is, in Orwell’s estimation, “reaching out for an
idealized version of an existing thing,” (43).

Nostalgia is not the only sentimental means by which Orwell constructs a connection
between his protagonist and his authorial audience, but it is certainly one of the most effective.
Through Winston, the ‘authorial’ or ‘ideal’ audience connects with the moments of his childhood
that the narrator details. The “Golden Country,” the song of the bells (“Oranges and lemons, say
the bells of St. Clement’s”), and the room over Mr. Charrington’s shop are artifacts of cultural
nostalgia – the material remnants of England’s past, restoring in miniature the society they still
signify through Smith’s and Charrington’s memories. They offer both hero and reader a haven
from the immediate social turbulence trapped within the novel. These remnants also,
significantly, remind us of a Dickens novel. It was a “sloppy love of the picturesque” that
Orwell found disappointingly fantastical in Dickens coupled with his comparatively thin
descriptions of working-class life (25).

> “The Golden Country,” for Smith, is a space of both psychological and physical freedom,
an escape from pressing social dilemmas. It is gloriously unpenetrated by the telescreens and
recording devices of The Ministry of Love, mysteriously free of INGSOC’s oligarchical
dominion. It is “an old, rabbit-bitten pasture, with a foot track wandering across it and a
molehole here and there,” a place where animals still live in harmony with the ‘countryside.’
Hedges and elms, even “a clear, slow-moving stream” rimmed with willows complete the scene
– a picaresque image (30-1). This neo-Hyde Park and its Serpentine stream protect Winston’s
fantasy from INGSOC and its polluted metropolis (“Map of Central London”). Here it is “as
though Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police could all be swept into nothingness,”
but even Smith is aware of his own poeticism. He thinks not of history, for he knows history to
be incomplete, but of “Shakespeare” – an old literary figure the English are proud to claim as cultural icon (31). In this way, the narrator invites readers to identify Smith, ‘The Last Man in Europe’ (Orwell’s original title), as a surrogate (Williams 96).

At first, Smith’s picturesque dream country is only a fantasy, but through the guidance of his would-be paramour, Julia, that dream becomes reality. Conquering his hesitance, he places himself in the hands of the “evidently experienced” young woman: “[S]he could be trusted to find a safe place” (117). That ‘safe place’ is Smith’s Golden Country. As in Winston’s dream, nature serves as haven from the eyes and ears of the Thought Police, reminiscent of the Maylie home for Oliver Twist. The protection of both such places are limited, beyond “the edge of the little wood […] [t]here might be someone watching,” (123). But, within them, man, woman, and nature coincide, while technology and surveillance are replaced by the “astonishing variations” of thrush song (124). The room over Mr. Charrigton’s shop is also a privately nostalgic selection of memory, a domestic parlour space reminiscent of Dickensian fiction (the Brownlow and Maylie homes, among others). For Wegner, Smith’s (and by extension, Orwell’s), reverence for that time and space suggests, “the ‘best,’ or more accurately, the least bad, imaginable arrangement of human affairs can be found only in the past.” It is, as Wegner points out in reference to Karl Mannheim’s Ideology and Utopia, a “conservative utopia” (197).

Jay Clayton’s recent work in “The Dickens Tape: Sound and Sight Before Recording Machines” reinforces such a connection between Dickensian cultural nostalgia and Nineteen Eighty-Four. In the “The Dickens Tape,” Clayton argues that repetitious sounds, predating recording technology, formed the basis for an array of personal and national cultural identities/subjectivities. Strongest among these sounds, he suggests, was the tolling of church bells – each belfry with its own distinctive ‘voice’ capable of stimulating shared and private cultural memories for those within earshot, speaking to listeners of “vanished days” (3). Clayton refers to Dickens’s novels in particular, because of their elaborate reliance upon various London bells for just this purpose. The bells, Clayton explains, serve as a medium through which national memory passes between characters in the novel, and between those characters and the audience. Their tolling connects, or invites connection, between reader and text:

…sound reproduction before recording functioned a bit like fairy tales, legends, and literary conventions. Each repetition of a fairy tale or rhyme is a new performance, but it draws upon the accumulated reservoir of associations created by prior performances. (5)
In short, the singing of the bell song is a sentimental device, that recalls a number fixed social meanings while “allow[ing] the imagination to run free” (6).

Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement’s  
You owe me three farthings, say the bells of St. Martin’s,  
When will you pay me? Say the bells of Old Bailey,  
When I grow rich, say the bells of Shoreditch. (Orwell Nineteen Eighty-Four 178)

As Smith regresses, so to speak, into latent cultural memory, more and more of the rhyme returns to him. In fact, he places trust in characters based upon their shared knowledge of the tune. Mr. Charrington teaches him a piece, which Julia completes (146), and later, O’Brien recites the whole after Julia and Smith’s induction into The Brotherhood (178). The fact that O’Brien “knew the last line!” reassures Smith; O’Brien can be trusted on the bases of shared cultural nostalgia. In fact, it is O’Brien’s ability to ignite cultural familiarity in Smith that makes him a figure of admiration from the beginning. Despite his “brutal face,” Smith notes, the “civilized” way in which he adjusts his glasses “recalled an eighteenth-century nobleman offering his snuffbox” (10-1). The observation is, arguably, the narrator’s own more than it is Smith’s, since it is prefaced with the remark, “if anyone still thought in such terms” (10). Yet it is precisely because Smith shares the narrator’s thinking, “in such terms,” that makes him susceptible to O’Brien’s manner – and instantly guilty of ‘thought crime.’ Thus, an ‘authorial’ audience’s trust builds through identification with Smith as a sentimental hero – a ‘man of feeling’ – through his (and Orwell’s) cultural associations. But our trust, like Smith’s, is misplaced.

The curious mingling of dream world and reality opens these spaces of freedom to question. In sentimental modes, the natural haven traditionally doubles as a site of fictional agency and freedom – a testing ground for the possibilities and limitations where imagined human agency is both opened and closed. Our expectations for the narrative have been set by a skillful application of melodramatic tactics. In the Golden Country, Smith’s romantic desires are fulfilled, “[a]nd, yes! It was almost as in his dream,” as she ‘annihilates’ “a whole civilization” with one act of disrobing (125). We might take his success in love as a marker of future heroic fulfillment. But, his reaction to Julia’s physical power attaches a metaphorical significance to the encounter that points us to the degenerative potential of the text. The sexual act, for Smith, epitomizes the work of the political writer:

Anything that hinted at corruption always filled him with a wild hope. Who knew? Perhaps the Party was rotten under the surface, its cult of strenuousness and self-denial simply a sham.
concealing iniquity. If he could have infected the whole of them with leprosy or syphilis, how gladly he would have done so! Anything to rot, to weaken, to undermine! (125)

In his book, *George Orwell*, Williams examines Orwell’s essay, “Why I Write” (1947), and the “four motives” he attributes to the writer as: “sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm, historical impulse, political purpose” – all of which Smith shares (*George Orwell* 29). It is interesting, then, that Smith’s desire here is a fantasy of bodily exposure – a way to force party members to physically satirize and reveal their own ideological corruption. He does not imagine writing the truth, but enacting *a* truth: corruption – likewise, his most poignant political resistance is the sexual act.

Such moments suggest a link between *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Weisenburger’s ‘degenerative model.’ He stresses that we should treat,

> narrative fictions as manifestations of intertextuality or ‘dialogism’ in the Bakhtinian sense, thus as counterpositionings not only of different voices in the narrative itself but also of anterior texts and the codified elements of language or culture in general. [...] degenerative satire as a form for interrogating and subverting codified knowledge and revealing it as a dissimulation of violence.

(11-2)

His approach casts an interesting light on the narrative upheavals we later experience in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. From sentimentally codified spaces of safety and freedom where the last humanitarian intellectual exercises his private revolt, achieves romantic fulfillment, and plots social change, we expect a certain continuing integrity or ultimate success from the hero whose experiences we share. Every process within the text implies it. Yet, success as popular fiction and success as a political text are essentially different achievements for Orwell, and these hopes must be raised and disappointed in order to satisfy his end.

In this way, Winston Smith himself is a burgeoning political writer. As we have already seen, Smith’s attitudes (his affection for the bells, his trust of “eighteenth-century nobleman” O’Brien, and his dismissal of prole intellect) reflect Orwell’s impressions of Dickens: an author whose dependence on sentimental politics got the better of his good intentions. According to Philip Wegner, Winston Smith finds himself negotiating a path between Orwell’s “passive” and “committed intellectuals.” Wegner explains that O’Brien is an exemplary “committed” intellectual who has sacrificed human feeling and curiosity for political dominance; and Syme as essentially “passive,” able to question the system, but content to follow it to the point of zealotry. Wegner cites Orwell’s own essay “Inside the Whale” to illustrate the “irresolvable bind” of the “contemporary writer-intellectual,” who like Smith, is “‘not only individualistic but completely
passive,’ adopting ‘the viewpoint of a man who believes the world-process to be outside his control and who in any case hardly wishes to control it.’” The key, according to Orwell, is to “record it” without deluding yourself that you can “control it” (223).

“The very act of writing itself,” Wegner concludes, “then comes to stand as a figure of resistance – if finally not opposition – to the new, mass-mediated present,” (225). In Nineteen Eighty-Four, a rebellious thought becomes a rebellious word, which inevitably leads to the rebellious act. This, I would argue, is a political writer’s fantasy: producing action through an idea. Janet Todd’s constructs the sentimental philosophy of reading in much the same way: “[the] belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one. […] literary emotions herald active ones” (4). But those “active experiences,” Orwell fears, are limited to mere sympathetic support for a freedom that they are unwilling to accomplish (“Charles Dickens” 73-4). Through Smith’s diary, then, Orwell toys with his own hopes that political writing can lead to political action – the logic that Orwell himself applied throughout his life (Williams). For Winston, the path to action begins on the page. The inner rebellion that is felt “[a]lways in your stomach and in your skin…a feeling that you had been cheated of something that you had a right to,” (59) leads invariably to “an overwhelming desire to posses” the means of expressing it (6). “To mark the paper,” the narrator tells us, “was the decisive act,” (7).

With these stages, Orwell metaphorically expresses the spectrum of difficulties in socio-political writing – or in the desire to express anything. The hero’s “complete helplessness” when confronted with the question of how to convey thoughts for an unknown audience, how to determine who that audience ought to be (“For the future, for the unborn?”), and “[h]ow could you communicate with the future?” It is the “power of expressing himself” that seems most crucial, and once gaining that, “actual writing would be easy” (7). Smith begins, as in Orwell’s own career, by retelling what he knows, what he has been ‘monologuing’ in his mind “for years” (8). Interestingly, the act of creating the diary spurs Smith’s thoughts of Julia, a girl working in the Fiction Department on “one of the novel-writing machines” (10). The link between his personal history, rebellious thoughts, and fiction seems clear, especially as his writing progresses. The bolder he becomes, the more his account begins to sound like a ‘confessional’ novel: “It was on a dark evening, in a narrow side street…She had a young face…”

The account is of an illicit sexual encounter between Smith and a prole prostitute recounted both by the narrator and Smith’s own writing (63-9). He begins the narrative, we are
meant to see, as a quieting measure against the urge to “shout a string of [profanity]” (63), but in the end, “[t]he therapy had not worked” – and only when he commits a political statement to the page, “If there is hope [wrote Winston] it lies in the proles;” does he apparently forget his urge (69). What is significant is the notion that writing does not necessarily substitute action for Winston Smith. The urge to shout compels him to write, but writing inevitably leads to politics, however personal and private it may begin. And yet, he records party propaganda and doctrine (72), and develops his own philosophy for social salvation, in order to prevent himself from committing an open act of defiance.

Orwell’s personal convictions as a writer was that one must be compelled to write for social and political change. In “Why I Write” (1947) he insists, “Every line of serious work that I have written…has been written…against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it,” (A Collection of Essays 318). In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Smith is more than just the ‘last man in Europe,’” he is the last intellectual writer. The only medium available with which to connect to his audience – and his source of political salvation and hope – is his ability to articulate that hope to the working-class: the ‘proles’.

Interestingly, the point at which Smith believes the proles can become ‘human’ and effective is at that pivotal level of awareness that writers seek to evoke: “Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious,” (70). It is a paradox, but one that articulates the author-activist’s desire to make readers conscious of a situation. Without critical thought, rebellious feelings are shiftless and ineffectual:

And even when [the proles] became discontented…their discontent led nowhere, because, being without general ideas, they could only focus it on petty specific grievances. The larger evils invariably escaped their notice. (71-2)

The responsibility for motivating this population falls on the shoulders of the writer, but Smith’s capabilities as such are doubtful from the beginning. Immediately following his recollections of the condemned satirist, Rutherford, Smith has the opportunity to “blow the Party to atoms” with a piece of contradictory evidence he discovers at the Ministry of Truth. Here is proof against the Party for the ‘unborn’ audience of his diary, yet Smith, in his indecision, destroys it.

His one social act is to test his own theory (“if there is hope, it lies in the proles”) and interview an older prole gentleman about the past. He hopes to expose the Party’s historical
propaganda by comparing it to the old prole’s memory. The plan has potential, until the gentleman’s apparent ignorance makes finding the truth impossible (88-92). “All the relevant facts,” the narrator notes of the proles, “were outside the range of their vision” (93). Williams and Wegner interpret this sentiment as Orwell’s own, but I suggest another possibility: that our limited-omniscient narrator is articulating Smith and not Orwell. If we consider the latter, we see that, like Dickens, Smith cannot see this prole as his “equal.” Unable to communicate with an individual outside his own class, he blames his failure to connect on the essential stupidity of his audience. But when Smith seeks out a member of his own class with to share political ideals, it leads him to disaster.

Though this may be, as Wegner and Williams argue, an inherent fault of Orwell’s own ideological framework, I see *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as pioneer text of the degenerative mode, exposing Smith’s ideological blind as a reoccurring difficulty in revolutionary reform. Smith wants change, but he has no framework upon which to conceptualize that change. Mistaking progressive reform for nostalgia, he blunders into the enemy. Mistaking poor communication for prole ignorance, he loses a potential ally. Julia, too, is an opportunity dismissed, because she fails to take interest in his reading of the Book. But in either case, has the audience failed to understand, or has the writer failed to communicate? Orwell himself never gave up the search for the right mode of communication: essay, novel, allegory, autobiography – he used them all. Smith, however, does not. As a writer he is defeated, not by the Thought Police or O’Brien, but by own his inability to reach the only audiences he ever attempts. He does not understand them, nor does he truly wish to – no more than he wishes to share any private part of himself with that old man in the pub. He never shares his diary, even with Julia.

If Smith has no true faith in the abilities of his one true hope, he cannot possibly find the words to reach them: He fails to connect with the old man in the pub, with the washing woman, with Julia. They are not his equals. Smith examines the woman at the clothesline as if she were a prize dray: “[she] had no mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart, and a fertile belly” (219). He may believe that “the future belonged to the proles,” but his own image of them precludes it (220). Smith’s sensibilities are humane, but his social prejudice is damning. To become a viable socialist, one must be able to “make political writing into an art,” Orwell writes in “Inside the Whale” (qtd. in Wegner 224). In other words, without navigating the transition between isolated reader/writer and writer for the greater community, Smith cannot succeed.
Orwell, however, is cannier than his hero. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents most readers with a feeling hero whose memories and desires reflect their own. If one submits to the influence of the novel’s sentimental tactics, s/he expects the Last Man in Europe to overcome Party and win his freedom. The narrator fosters this mistake, calling Smith’s progression a “process” as if his entire adventure, once set in motion, were bound to produce a satisfactory resolution. On the surface, Smith’s is a one-way track toward political action. After first meeting with O’Brien, and believing himself a part of the revolutionary Brotherhood, Smith considers his path:

> The first step had been a secret, involuntary thought; the second had been the opening of the diary. He had moved from thoughts to words, and now from words to actions. (159)

We assume that the Party, too, regards this process as inevitable – and dangerous – because of the pains they have taken to penetrate every aspect of Smith’s life. He is caught in an intricate web of intelligence, captured as if he were a highly dangerous agitator. Indeed, O’Brien refers to him as a special case whose potential contribution to a politically subversive “mental atmosphere” (the reader may assume) sins against the “special” state of ‘group-think’ the oligarchy works to “preserve” (199).

Despite the Party’s propaganda, Smith has been able to both recognize the superficiality of their politics, and resolve to investigate them. He is the last critical thinker in Airstrip One with the potential to create a literature of dissent. As he reads Goldstein’s revelatory text on the Party, Smith recognizes the key elements of important political writing to a politically aware individual:

> The book fascinated him, or more exactly it reassured him. In a sense it told him nothing that was new, but that was part of the attraction…The best books, he perceived, are those that tell you what you know already. (200)

With this insight, Orwell appears to foreshadow Smith’s success. He now knows the power of good writing to communicate. On the very next page, in fact, Smith moves from solitary, silent reading, to sharing the text with Julia by reading aloud. Her immediate disengagement, ought to warn us that our hopes of a movement spreading its “knowledge outwards from individual to individual, generation to generation,” are premature (176). But, limited to Smith’s perspective, our attention is focused on private discovery, forgetting that ideas are only as “indestructible” as they are accessible to others (177).
Wegner, too, reads this stage as a point of failure. He reminds us that Smith has already betrayed Orwell’s notion of political intellectual by zealously committing himself to the Brotherhood’s movement. His oath to commit murder and/or terrorism in the name of that organization separates him from the ‘proles’ and sets him on a path to reconstruct Airstrip One according to the Brotherhood’s philosophies. His is another Syme in the making. “Imagining a utopia is part of the work of the committed intellectual,” Wegner argues, “and in recoiling from such a commitment, Orwell rejects even the effort of envisioning a different kind of future,” (225). In this logic, Smith must now fail, because if he were to triumph it would be in the cast of an O’Brien, and not an Orwell. Wegner continues:

Orwell’s message, then, is that in a world where the strong form of ‘revolution’ has become an option to be avoided at all costs […] critical ‘rebellions,’ […] or ‘weak’ interventions, are the only form of political action left viable. (225)

Since Smith has already abandoned his attempts at such “weak interventions” as written communication once he joins the Brotherhood, he has now become that intellectual that Orwell most fears: a committed totalitarian. It should be no surprise to discover that this is also the action that delivers Smith irrevocably into the hands of the Thought Police and dictates the form of his eventual torture.

Blind obedience and zeal are anxieties that Orwell seems to have shared with Dickens, however. Even *Oliver Twist’s* depiction of ‘revolutionary’ mob violence is ultimately disturbing, and Orwell himself admires Dickens’s understanding that the, “central problem” of society and politics is abusing power. But the melodramatic tradition’s dependence on moral binaries prevents the kind of critical thinking that keeps tyrants out of power. Characters like Oliver Twist are incorruptibly noble to the heart, just as Sykes and Monks are irredeemably cruel. Oliver’s triumph, therefore, is no triumph at all – he was always-already good; nor has the reader grown wiser by trusting in a foregone conclusion. For Orwell, this is no path to reform. By systematically deploying and betraying the modes of sentiment and melodrama that invite our attachment and excite our expectations, the plot of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* exposes their resolutions as superficial and non-real, and subverts their quietism.

Smith’s imagined spaces of autonomy – his writing, the Golden Country, and the apartment above the curiosity shop – are false fronts and ultimately unproductive. Worse, their apparent safety serves the insidious hegemonic domination of The Party. Every step of the way, Smith is observed – not only by readers – but also by the Thought Police, who have encouraged
his transgressions in order to trap and neutralize his critical thought. What we perceived as positive ‘progress’ in joining the Brotherhood was in fact a path to zealotry and totalitarianism. And finally, those whose nostalgic familiarity he most trusted were his worst enemies. Winston Smith’s narrative systematically exposes sentimental markers as false – the comfort they offer, dangerous.

Wegner accounts for Orwell’s deflating conclusion as his unwillingness to imagine a political pogrom and thus risk becoming the ‘committed intellectual’ he despised. But in light of the sentimental politics the text challenges, there is another equally tactical possibility: Orwell validate sensibility as a means to an end. Or, put another way, the texts disappoints sentimental expectations for a ‘cathartic’ resolution to its political conflicts – and, in doing so, Orwell derails a conclusion that might strengthen the reader’s sense of self-affirmation and comfort. Orwell once charged Dickens’s fiction with providing more pleasures than solutions – that all readers had in the end was a sense that the current model of social structure would be well and good were everyone in it more kind. Such an assurance of an innate ‘common good’ is the conclusion of *Oliver Twist*, a situation in which those with money and power share their influence for the betterment of an unfortunate, but worthy, soul.

What Dickens calls for, Orwell writes, is a “change of spirit rather than a change of structure,” (22). But, this is not so much a failure as it is an insufficient answer to a complex paradox:

…two viewpoints [of socio-political progress] are always tenable. The one, how can you improve human nature until you have change the system? The other, what is the use of changing the system before you have improved human nature? […] The central problem – how to prevent power form being abused – remains unsolved [for most writers and critics]. (23)

If, as Orwell seems to think here, the “central problem” is an inseparable, unsolvable combination of feeling and structure, for which sentimental satire (like Dickens’s) is a slow, and politically unsatisfying balm, then *Nineteen Eighty-Four* certainly exposes this sensation rather than masks it. When at last Smith has betrayed his lover and his own ideals, he becomes an example – a warning to those who seek to make a change. Wegner suggests that by draining Smith’s consciousness – and thus his power – Smith is redeemed as a hero. He is now free of any ‘will-to-power’ (227). But, if this is redemption, then it comes with a heavy punishment. It is convincing to suppose that Smith is a marker for the reader’s (and the writer’s) righteous desires. But, justifying the ‘will-to-power’ is his ultimate failure – and that path is through the
self-assuaging trap of sensibility: righteous power belongs to the goodhearted, and good heart is a measure of human feeling and nostalgia. Seen this way, Smith is not redeemed, but punished with the loss of opportunity. Mistaken in his sensibilities, and condescending to his potential allies, he never attempted to move or empower anyone but than himself.

Orwell, on the other hand, did not suffer this fate. Though his novel may not have had precisely the effect he might have wished, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* did influence the climate of political thought more powerfully than most of his contemporary critics ever imagined. “*Doublethink*” entered the Western lexicon, and Western governments rushed “to rethink the whole role of the public intellectual,” (Wegner 227). Had he satisfied sentimental need for resolution, would this have occurred? Instead, Orwell created a ‘degenerative’ text that both touted and disappointed the philosophies and form of sentimentalism – finding, not a break from them, but a shift. The political resolution denied by the text is one readers must seek outside of the text. No novel can presume to control its readers’ response, but it can refuse to validate reader confidence in the system it reflects. By trading comfort for disquiet, Orwell can hope to dismantle (degenerate) his novel’s potential for political quietism, and leave the path open for social change.
God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Or Pearls Before Swine is (1965) – perhaps intentionally – an ambiguous novel. Like Nineteen Eighty-Four and Oliver Twist, it embarks on a reformative political project through which the characters appear to champion the poor or dispossessed. Yet, as I believe the critical disagreement over the novel implies, its inability to negotiate sentimental politics and satirical parody satisfyingly confused (or, put another way, perfectly content to be perplexed). Despite the texts many stinging critiques of the American, capitalist spirit, by novel’s end it has proven the near impossibility of its own happy solution. At the front, we are encouraged to mistrust sentimentality for allowing otherwise productive citizens to wallow in nostalgia, and ignore unpleasant realities – to avoid the disconnected euphoria that Fredric Jameson attributes to the postmodern condition. And yet, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater… relies upon a sentimental character, philosophy, and formulaic solution to complete its story. The modes of sensibility sap the life out of any political disquiet the text creates, losing its sense of urgency and offering no lasting possibility for changing the system.

In this chapter, I examine God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater… as a distinctly postmodern resurrection of the sentimental fiction. By considering Vonnegut’s novel as participating (if tangentially) in a traditional sentimental project, we can identify the ways in which that heritage influences and complicates the text. Examining the intertextual relationship between Vonnegut and traditional sentimental texts, like Oliver Twist and The History of Sir George Ellison, adds an important dimension to postmodern questions of parody and pastiche in contemporary fiction. Critics like Conrad Festa (“Vonnegut’s Satire”) point out that the novel “fails yield a comprehensive, unambiguous interpretation” (134), while others, like Todd F Davis (Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade), calls it a manifesto of “postmodern activism” (13). I suggest that positioning Vonnegut in the context of sentimental politics helps us to account for these divergent critical reactions God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater…, and their inability to agree on the novel as politically effective.

Ironically, Vonnegut’s own main character attacks the political efficacy of the modern novel. Meta-narrative throughout challenges the “use” of art, and highlights the failure of
political texts to affect change. By tracing the role of sentimental modes, however, we find that Vonnegut’s meta-narrative on political efficacy is ultimately reabsorbed by the characters themselves. What results is a web of socio-political critique and comforting human sensibility that, Davis admits, responds to the demands of its cultural moment – an audience whose need for social awareness is surpassed only by its need for reassurance (3). As we already know, modes of sensibility have long been implicated in this fashion of text-reader relationship; and though times certainly change, our reliance on sensibility persists.

Indeed, there is no doubt among Vonnegut critics that GBR is a “sentimental novel” (Allen qtd in Davis 72). But, they do not explore the ways in which GBR works as a “sentimental novel,” focusing on sentimentality as “refined sensibilities” at the cost of real interpersonal relationships, rather than exploring its political implications. There is more at work here than a positivist agenda promoted by a wayward character who follows his heart more than his head (72). Eliot Rosewater is a character whose philosophies can be traced to traditional sentimental texts whose purpose was to set an example for human behavior.

Not surprisingly, Davis suggests that GBR is a “sort of handbook for the rich,” and Eliot Rosewater its “model of philanthropy” motivating readers to love ‘people without a use’ (70). In other words, Davis assumes that the moral pronouncement made by Kilgore Trout (Eliot’s favorite science fiction author) at the end of the novel will “poison” readers, as Vonnegut puts it, with humanity and reform (qtd in Davis 5). Thus, constructing a socially accessible hero in a realistic setting, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater… appears to illustrate a contemporary model for human behavior. But, by investing his “everyday” hero with hyperbolic goodness and limitless financial power with which he carves his triumph, Vonnegut creates an loveable idol, not a model. Eliot Rosewater becomes the paragon readers can fantasize becoming (Eliot’s habits are certainly accessible: untidy, drinks too much, eats poorly, and neglects his deodorant), but never really be.

GBR’s “devotion to realism” (as Davis calls it) thus works to both mask and complicate its fantastical underpinning. Like the realism of sentimental fiction in the 18th Century, this is a reality that serves to show us a Utopia just beyond our reach. Even in that period, critics noticed the disturbing affect such exemplars could have on readers, in stark contrast to the novels’ political goals. Sarah Scott’s character, Sir George Ellison, was styled as a model for contemporary English gentleman and slave holders (Stoddard 381). The novel is constructed as
a “history,” yet its hero is a reformist’s fantasy. Ellison’s humanitarianism, critics explained, is too pure to be possible. They complained that such perfection discouraged – or threatened to discourage – the would-be humanists of England (and America – where the novel was pirated and republished under a different name), rather than motivate them to his lofty example. The Critical Review (a contemporary publication) had this to say of Ellison:

> We could wish there were many such characters in real life [but] the author has indulged his [sic] fancy, [not his] judgment […] Perfection is not the lot of humanity, and [common readers] can only contemplate, with astonishment, such ideal greatness, such imaginary goodness. (qtd. In Ellis 89)

Such heroes are persistent throughout fiction, however, and no disrespect for proper hygiene can mask the fact that Eliot Rosewater is one of them. Eliot’s zest for charity and reform casts the average philanthropist into shadow – let alone the average American, middle class reader. We meet Eliot on page four, from the perspective of his lawyers, who know him as: “‘The Nut,’ ‘The Saint,’ ‘The Holy Roller,’ John the Baptist,’” and finally, “Crazy as a loon” (4). These endearments hint playfully but accurately at Eliot’s form of humanitarianism: It cannot be understood in moderate terms. To live so selflessly, one imagines, would be the ultimate tribute to sensibility – to, like Sir George Ellison, follow a ‘moral sense philosophy’ whatever the personal cost (a course which, in sentimental fiction, always leads the hero right) (Burke). And, essentially, this is the plot of GBR: the wealthy, good-hearted, hero follows conscience and human feeling through personal trial and doubt, to an ultimately positive, rewarding conclusion.

“Postmodern Midwestern Moralist,” Davis calls Vonnegut, seeing GBR as a relatively straightforward “gospel” of Vonnegut’s social philosophy, while struggling with what he calls “the paradox of postmodern humanism, a position that affirms humanistic values while maintaining a postmodern perspective” – challenging the grand, social narratives that support us (29). A difficult position, indeed, since the postmodern project deconstructs “myths of essential truth,” revealing history as a fiction. But according to Vonnegut fictions are what we really need: “comforting lies.” Sentimentality. The trick, it seems, is to recognize it.

If, as Davis insists, Vonnegut’s writing has always been “a fight against our inaction,” and an attempt to “write toward some kind of action,” we should take particular note of the ways in which this postmodern novel wrestles with its own conventions – the inherited ‘truths’ of fiction – in order to tell its story. One such ‘truth’ that Davis directly attempts to modify is the text’s relationship to the sentimental. Critics like William Rodney Allen (Understanding Kurt
Vonnegut) notice that the novel’s sentimentalism opposes a “full intellectual” exploration of its subject. And though he, and others (Allen and Lundquist claim that Vonnegut’s sentimentality forfeit’s “intellectual control” over the text itself) may oversimplify the issue, the conventions of the novel pose a problem for their authors that is far more interesting than Davis is willing to explore in *GBR* (qtd. in Davis 72).

This an especially important omission, since “postmodernism,” Linda Hutcheon writes, “is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges,” (3). More specifically, the postmodern novel tends to be hyper-aware of its own constructed nature, becoming a “rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past [working] within conventions in order to subvert them” (5). Here, not only are the ideologies of the past inhabited and exposed by the text, but the ideological conventions of the *text itself*. In this way, Hutcheon explains, postmodern texts parody the “traditions and conventions of the genres” they embody, revealing the “ironic discontinuity […] at the heart of continuity” those preceding forms create (11). In terms of Vonnegut’s *GBR*, we find ourselves in a politically minded novel aimed at satirizing the comforting (yet often brutalizing) fictions of American capitalist society from *within* a conventionally reaffirming form: the sentimental novel itself. Imbedded in its structure are modes designed to encourage reader-response, sublimation, and ultimately, reification (Jameson). Thus the text flips between its philosophy and its form until we are not sure whether we’re encountering parody of an inadequate system, or pointless pastiche.

Critics have noticed such discordance in many satirical novels. In his 1995 study, *Fables of Subversion: Satire and the American Novel*, Steven Weisenburger uses Michael Seidel’s previous work (*The Satiric Inheritance* 1979) to address the uncomfortable relationship between narrative form and satirical agenda:

> conventional narrative serves as something like a parasitic host, because its abstracted plot, or metanarrative, is *generative*: the action of a conventional story concerns the lineal transmission of inheritance, in both the natural and institutional sense, and thus it is about the orderly dispensation and legitimation of power (*The Satiric Inheritance* 31). Like a parasite, however, satire ‘takes over the body or ‘corporation’ of that generative fiction and threatens to consume it (56). (Weisenburger 145)

In this way, Weisenburger contends, the satirical agenda of the text is dependant upon the “style or ‘technique’” through which it is conveyed – forms which authors must continuously manipulate and experiment with to avoid losing the reader’s motivating *discomfort* to the
narrative’s inherently ‘sentimental’ comfort (147-8). By ‘sentimental,’ here, I mean the modes through which narratives solicit reader identification with key characters (via emotional response, empathy, common-feeling), prod their sense of sympathy and humanity, and reward their essential humanity through positive resolution. George Orwell, I argued in chapter one, subverts the sentimental politics he believed were so problematic in Charles Dickens.

How was it, Orwell wondered, that so ferocious an attacker of “English institutions” could be so lovingly “swallowed” (“Charles Dickens” 3)? The answer, he decided, was that Dickens’s novels failed to present a viable image of reform and reabsorbed those reformative energies they awakened.

After all, Elaine Hadley points out that modes of melodrama and sensibility are as capable of serving the ‘left’ as they are the ‘right.’ Historically, they excited pity for the disenfranchised, and disgust for the systems of government that perpetuated suffering and poverty while at the same time feeding conservative nostalgia for a hierarchal system, through various conservative tracts. The need to reinforce a ‘moral sense philosophy’ was equally important to both political groups. After all, as capitalism evolved and gained industrial, then “multinational” strength (Jameson), the anxiety over unchecked self-interest fueled the need to demonstrate the essential goodness of all human beings. The idea that people are naturally good negates the Hobbsian fear that humans have no interest but self-interest, and that capitalism, in any form (market, industrial, or multinational), is a blank check for such indulgence. Janet Todd explains that,

[Sentimentalism] has come to denote the movement discerned in philosophy, politics and art, based on the belief in or hope of the natural goodness of humanity and manifested in a humanitarian concern for the unfortunate and helpless. (Sensibility, and Introduction 7)

Thus, beginning in the period of early market capital, the need to display one’s natural goodness manifested in a new literatures of sensibility, since – if access to active demonstrations of kindness was limited – one could achieve equal assurance of human goodness through the act of commiseration.

A Dickensian ‘tale of woe,’ I have suggested, could give readers a failsafe object upon which to award concern. And, readers like Orwell noticed the ways in which Dickens could be readily appropriated by conservatives and reformists alike. But, Orwell did not simply suspect Dickens’s sentimentalism he also suspected his philosophy. “[I]ndividual kindliness,” Orwell
writes of Dickens’s social solutions, “is the remedy for everything,” and such a philosophy rarely moves people to social action (8).

Vonnegut’s *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine*, despite its contemporary characters and experimental narrative, is an echo of Dickens’s philosophy. The novel tells the story of a family fortune in America. Along the way, poverty, philanthropy, and strapping capitalist zeal become characters in a critique of American priorities. In an age that Frederic Jameson (“Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”) believes may be a “purer stage of capitalism” than the market and industrial capitalist societies before it, a revival of Dickensian sensibility is not as surprising as one might think (55). “Multinational capitalism” forms an integral part of the postmodern era and its novels; especially, one imagines, in the years of Vietnam, the feminist movement, and civil rights. Surely, a social satire about charity and greed would strive for active social change?

In spirit, absolutely yes, but Jameson is quick to note that storytelling too often strips action of its immediacy, recreating it as a series of “so many finished, complete, and isolated…objects” (70) such that the sense of completion itself is capable of deemphasizing urgency. Thus, the realistic affect of a narrative ‘history,’ while strengthening a sense of truth on one level, on another level serves to reposition that truth away from the reader’s present action. Novels too easily become the “semi-autonomous space [of] utopian compensation” readers seek in order to alleviate their sense of political impotence (Jameson 58-9). In Vonnegut’s text, the tension lies between the basic human need for the “generative” nature of the sentimental novel, and the reformative call for action. The battle is a losing one.

By its own admission, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* becomes an experiment in the Dickensian notion of curing by kindness. “Neo-humanism,” Davis calls it, and on one level, *GBR* appears to be aware of its debt to sentimentalism and its paradoxical blend of accessible emotions, and inaccessible acts. At times, Eliot’s philanthropic quest and the plot’s focus on fortune seem to parody of sentimental modes. Vonnegut tells his story about money in America, of injustice, self-interest, and the lawyers who maintain it, as neither a Dickens nor an Orwell. He caricatures comforting modes of sentiment and melodrama, teases them, laughs at them, as if to expose their purpose. But, he does not ultimately disrupt or subvert them. We have no certain frame of reference for these moments, leaving us with what Jameson calls the ‘stable ironies’ of postmodern ‘pastiche,’ rather than parody.
may not be “amputated of the satiric impulse” or “devoid of laughter,” but it does fall victim to these troublesome ambiguities. His parodies, if they are so, are too easily contradicted within the text itself, or too quickly abandoned to impact readers who are not actively looking for them. The novel seems unable to decide when it wants to be taken at face value. In Vonnegut, we find both ends of the emotive spectrum: hope and hopelessness, love and indifference, the pessimist and the optimist. This, perhaps, is part of the critical confusion over Vonnegut. Many seem polarized in their readings of this text: Vonnegut has written a novel of social action; Vonnegut has undercut his own message, and left his readers with nothing; and so on (Mustazza). The debates continue because Vonnegut has marked his novel with so many tantalizingly satirical niches. The abundance of potentially ironic moments of intertextuality make difficult to admit that these opportunities might be wasted on the text as a whole. But in each case, GBR refuses to pursue a consistent critique, or even a revision, of sensibility, choosing instead to submit to sentimental politics.

The title, *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine* is one such marker, invoking sentimental satires such as *Oliver Twist, or The Parish Boy’s Progress*. Its conventional 19th century subheading (or alternate title) contextualizes the whole. Both Vonnegut and Dickens’ allude to well-known adages and allegories whose meanings help us interpret the events of the novel. And, for both, the object of reference can be unexpectedly flexible. For instance, it seems clear that “the parish boy” is Oliver Twist himself, the title character. Yet, Noah Claypole, the ne’er-do-well, is also a parish boy whose ‘progress’ is not unlike Oliver’s. Dickens offers a moralistic foil for Oliver in Noah, implying that one’s character determines the direction of ‘progress.’ We can choose to see the tale of a boy’s downfall through Noah – or we can choose to see the tale of social success by virtue through Oliver.

Similarly ambiguous are the referents of “pearls” and “swine” in Vonnegut’s title. In the King James Bible, the adage appears in Matthew 7:6: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.” In other words, do not waste things of value on those who cannot appreciate them – you’ll regret it in the end. In Vonnegut’s title, I perceive two possible readings: the first is to see the text as a revision of the adage itself – to show that casting ‘pearls’ before ‘swine’ is the mark of true, selfless generosity, and the cure for avarice in America. The second reading is
to question our notion of ‘swine.’ For Vonnegut, the true ‘swine’ are the wealthy themselves at which the ‘pearls’ of fortune, advantage, art, nature, even the poor themselves are cast – unappreciated, and ruthlessly “trampled.”

The Buntlines are one such piggish family in *G.B.R.* In a letter to her foster father (the priest in charge of the orphanage she grew up in), Selena, a young Buntline maid, writes satirically of her wealthy “benefactors.” At one point, she confusedly senses that Mrs. Buntline expects Selena to thank her for such natural wonders as the sunset. Selena’s description, however, aptly explains to us her own perplexed observation: “Maybe this is a case of pearls before swine, but I don’t see how,” (144). In her letter, she assumes that she, Selena, is the ‘swine’ of proverb – a poor, uncultured orphan bound for service in a ridiculously medieval servant-master construct. We learn, however, that the Buntlines work hard to preserve this illusion. The oath their servants must memorize resembles monarchical serfdom – and the orphanage in which Selena was raised is funded by generations of Buntlines for the sole purpose of bringing-up grateful household help. As we read Selena’s illustration of the Buntlines and their arrogant, ignorant, self-entitlement, it becomes clear that they are the swine. The pearls are Selena, the advantages of fortune, and the beauties of the natural world – all of which are taken for granted by the wealthy family.

What Vonnegut omits from the adage, “cast not” is significant, perhaps, in locating the sentiments of novel. Since Eliot Rosewater does indeed “cast pearls” before those whom every other character (even, at some moments, Eliot himself) considers “swine,” the message would appear to be: *Do cast* pearls before swine, it is the true nature of humanity – because, swine or not, “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind,” as Eliot would say (95). Yet, there are few moments in which readers are allowed to sympathize with the objects of Eliot’s generosity. In fact, the narrator’s perspective might be called pessimistic and unsympathetic. More often than not, Eliot’s acts of generosity follow the very pattern of the proverb – his clients are swine, and most are more than willing to turn on him. Others are simply hopeless. A description of his most emotionally (if not financially) needy client is an excellent example of our positioning within the text. Diana Moon Glampers, by name, is illustrated as:

…a sixty-eight-year-old virgin who, by almost anybody’s standards, was too dumb to live… No one had ever loved her. There was no reason why anyone should. She was ugly, stupid, and boring. (56)
The narrator is absolutely unforgiving – and one might say, unsentimental. Vonnegut gives us many brief glimpses of bathetic individuals such as these, almost daring readers to object to his caricatures. As Orwell once said of Dickens, these people are not treated as the narrator’s equals.

But, Eliot Rosewater, Vonnegut’s wealthy, but humanitarian hero loves them despite their lowliness – a fact that astounds everyone who knows him. What we seem to have in Eliot is an attempt to modernize the sentimental ‘man of feeling,’ the “sensitive, benevolent archetype whose feelings are too exquisite for the acquisitiveness, vulgarity and selfishness of his world” (Todd 4). Recall Sarah Scott’s Sir George Ellison, a man who gave magnanimously, reformed the practice of slavery in Jamaica, and made a fortune to boot. Vonnegut’s text seems to balance between a nostalgic longing for such a character – a hope that he could actually exist – and a glib, naturalistic stab at the impossibility. Elliot displays Christ-like, unconditional love for the “useless,” Diana Moon Glampers’s of the earth. But, from the beginning, his self-sacrificing nature is regarded by all as a form of insanity, drunkenness, or at best, idiocy.

In fact, Eliot’s former psychiatrist predicts that Eliot will suffer a massive, violent breakdown the moment surfaces from his state of sympathetic delusion. “As for [Eliot],” the psychoanalyst notes, “he is certainly sick” (43). A normal person, the doctor continues, “can hardly hear his conscience at all” – but Eliot’s is “overactive” (41). And, not just ‘overactive,’ Eliot’s conscience is off the charts. The reader-at-large is the conscience-deficient target of this satirical scenario, and yet we are allowed to view our ‘model citizen’ as equally foolish – whether or not we believe he is sane. Thus, the Ellisons and Eliot’s of fiction become just that, fiction. The text seems to deny that we can see ourselves as potential Eliot Rosewaters – such hyperbolic do-gooding is impractical. Unfortunately, this impractical hero is the only character with reformative agency in the text. Rather than compel readers to action, such a paradox may reaffirm our sense of impotency.

If, as Davis suggests, Eliot is an “instruction manual for the rich,” little seems accomplished by constructing him as ridiculous, no matter how good and essentially right (70). Although his righteousness certainly counts for something, it cannot make him real. Mr. Brownlow of Oliver Twist is a similar sentimental caricature. Brownlow’s companion, Mr. Grimwig, tries him continuously for his ‘foolish’ trust. Grimwig, we infer, represents the jaded pessimist who withholds generosity from the street urchin for fear of being deceived (Dickens 115). Senator Rosewater, Eliot’s father, serves a similar purpose in GBR, ridiculing his
idealistic son for misplaced kindness. In the end, however, both sentimental figures are vindicated. Dickens’ proves that generosity will be rewarded by revealing Oliver’s true identity (114). Likewise, Eliot triumphs over avarice and succeeds in continuing his humanitarian project by using the very attacks his enemies have made against him to secure his right to the Rosewater fortune. And, thanks to Kilgore Trout’s validating moral at novel’s end, Eliot too, is proved right. With everything solved so neatly, there is little room left for change.

Both Dickens and Vonnegut seem to be looking for the same answer to poverty (though Dickens’s is naturally a more conservative scenario). What we need, they imply, is a wealthy upper class whose attachment to their own fortune is unselfish – their means of using it, generous and kind. Vonnegut’s seeming flippancy does not undo his commitment, despite the novel’s hyperbolic, often ironic, treatment of sentimentality. It does, however, come ambiguously close. For one, the novel is a tale about, not a boy’s progress, but a fortune’s. The text may be preceded by a fictional quotation from Eliot Rosewater, but its narrative begins with numbers: “A sum of money is a leading character in this tale about people, just as a sum of honey might properly be a leading character in a tale about bees.” Eliot moves forward in the plot as a product/spender/dispenser/critic of his family’s fortune. Though critics like Davis gloss over this context, opening with “a tale about a fortune” is not ancillary to the text’s humanitarian objective, but an ironic narrative shift from the human object, making us question the text’s commitment in the power of sentiment to move readers into action. Capital, it suggests, not human interest, motivates people (1).

Unfortunately, the potential here for a lasting critique is wasted; readers are not forced to shoulder the blame for humanity’s twisted priorities. Though Vonnegut insists that he writes no villains, Mushari, the young lawyer, is certainly villainized enough for readers to recognize him as such, and blame him – with all the lawyers of the novel – for the capitalistic evils practiced upon the human psyche throughout. “Samaritrophia,” as the psychoanalyst calls it, has overtaken the minds of Americans – particularly those with money – thanks to the interested encouragement of lawyers like Mushari and McAllister: “Samaritrophia is only a disease, and a violent one, too, when it attacks those exceedingly rare individuals who reach maturity still loving and wanting to help their fellow man,” (41). To go through life feeling guiltless when those less fortune suffer for our success, Vonnegut implies, is an acquired, psychological condition. But, the important word to note in this definition is “still.” The implication is that
humans are essentially good after all, that we naturally love and pity one another. It is only through continuous failure of charitable efforts, and the comforting ‘literature’ of consumer capitalism, that we become more concerned with the progress of fortune than of people. At the bottom of it all are the lawyers, driving the current of the “money river.”

McAllister, lawyer to the wealthy, creates a capitalist convert of Stewart Buntline by responding to his youthful idealism with ridicule. The old lawyer thereafter continues to send pamphlets to that effect; “A Rift Between Friends in the War of Ideas” is one we are allowed to ‘read’ in excerpt. Following the logic of Matthew 7:6, it asks, “Have we really helped these people?”

Look at them well. Consider this specimen who is the end result of our pity!… They do not work and will not… ‘More. Give me more. I need more…They stand only as a monumental caricature of Homo sapiens…created by our misguided pity. (123-4)

Another reference to Oliver Twist here is possible here. Asking for more is impertinent – a default behavior learned for the purpose of avoiding honest work – not a desperate plea of need. But the source of this ideology, like Dickens’s Mr. Bumble the Beadle, is made ‘other’ – a greedy infestation of society, rather than a guilty part of us all. McAllister is responsible for the corruption of Stewart Buntline – not Stewart himself. The old soliciter has papered his client with the legitimating literature of capitalistic ideology. And, worse, he has broken his client’s original humanitarian zeal. As a young man, Stewart tries to donate much of his fortune to charity, but McAllister snuffs this idealistic spirit with a stream of derisive logic. McAllister’s stories have an immobilizing affect on Buntline – casting human sensibility has an insidious enemy that clouds good judgment.

According to Davis, Vonnegut believes “it is our insistence that all is well or, at the other end of the spectrum, our self-loathing and despair that too often leads to inaction and an acceptance of the status quo” (12). He is absolutely right. Stewart Buntline despairs under the pressure of guilt – he failed to fight the dominant ideology, but refuses to move beyond it. His disappointed sentiments led to inaction – for others, they can lead to self-destruction. Fred Rosewater’s (member of the forgotten, middle class branch of the family) desperate attempt at suicide becomes easier to understand when we remember that, in 1970, Vonnegut himself attempted suicide after a visit to war-ravaged Africa. Vonnegut was “too pissed off to live another minute (absolutely apeshit),” after the experience of witnessing what he had no direct
power to change (*Fates Worse Than Death* 183; in Davis 8). Like Fred Rosewater, Vonnegut had collapsed under the sentimental feeling of abject worthlessness.

But if Eliot, dashing to the aid of the volunteer fire department, is a foil for Stewart, lolling miserably on his sofa, his sensibility is an equally problematic example. Sentimental action has left Eliot devoid of any love for himself, his health, or his personal relationships. No one social connection is more dear to him than another – he loves everyone with equal fervency, a fact that tortures his father, the Senator. Unable to give as selflessly as her husband, Eliot’s wife, Sylvia, suffers a breakdown and abandons his cause. Eliot even neglects himself. He is overweight and alcoholic. Psychologically, he lives in a relentless state of selfless action from which the only escape is utter detachment and eventual breakdown. His human frailties make him accessible to ‘common’ readers, and his power and excess make such identification a fanciful substitute. Not only does he have the economic influence to accomplish the kind of generosity that our under-active consciences demand, but the neurotic compulsion to love those in need at the expense of every personal comfort. Clearly, only in fiction can Eliot withstand the strength of his own, overwhelming goodness.

Emotions, Janet Todd explains, are as much a main character of a sentimental plot than the characters or the action. Indeed, a character may often symbolically represent an emotion or sentiment. As a result, action often ceases while the emotion is described, the object being to “communicate common feeling from suffer or watcher to reader or audience,” rather than examine the “subtleties of a particular emotional state” (4). Such moments are often interrupted by a shift of events or moods, or by intrusive punctuation – all of which further prevent the reader from examining the situation more carefully. The audience’s mood is thus entirely under the influence of the narrative and whichever sentiments or judgments it seeks to elicit.

In *GBR*, goodness possesses Eliot Rosewater like a spirit (or demon). Using similar caricatures and emotive pauses, Vonnegut constructs a narrative that preferences emotional response in relation to its characters and events. A typographic floral shape (similar this one □, and resembling a double biohazard symbol upon close scrutiny) creates frequent textual breaks throughout. These breaks seem utterly arbitrary if we consider them in terms of plot development. They rarely, if ever, mark shifts in plot, or the pause of one storyline and the recommencement of another – and they almost as rarely indicate a shift in ideas or focus. Such
are the conventions we come to expect when we see textual icons and/or spaces – we are often typographically steered from one character-line, perspective, or chapter, to the next.

But, none of these functions coincide with the symbols in GBR. As sentimental tactics, however, they are clearly important. Those textual breaks, noticed by neither narrator nor characters, are a marker for emotional response. What these small, typed flowers communicate to the reader is this: Something was just said, done, or related, to which you must, as a humane individual, respond. The result is a novel that creates an emotionally, and (if we choose) intellectually, active readership whose reactions of sympathy, indignation, or even laughter reify its humanity. With each pause, we have time to consider what was read before, as if Vonnegut’s narrator were a comedian onstage, smiling behind a microphone as his audience enjoys each punch line. Or, a dramatic storyteller.

For Vonnegut, however, storytelling is always political – and his anxiety over the efficacy of political fiction is evident in GBR. Like George Orwell, he believes that it is the writer’s duty as a “good citizen” to speak socio-political truths through his writing – to “serve his society” (Klinkowitz 22) by “writ[ing] toward some kind of action” (Davis 13). Thus, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater… articulates Vonnegut’s fear that his story will fall on deaf ears. Openly hostile toward the arts for reinforcing our sense that “all is well,” Vonnegut wants to exempt science fiction (and perhaps himself) from that culpable group. These stories are ignored by society, and thus ineffectual for reasons beyond their power to change. The novel seems aware that stories can simply tell us what we want to hear, titillate our senses without interrogating our sense. Throughout the text, Vonnegut explores the relationship between writing and action. Frustrated, even angry at the impotence of the arts, God Bless You Mr. Rosewater… is a text about social action in which participate with the ‘actor.’

Ironically, the relationship between authors and activists it portrays casts doubt upon the effectiveness of ‘art’ in social change. Over Mushari’s snooping shoulders, we read a letter from Eliot intended for his unknown, future successor in The Rosewater Foundation and fortune. The letter continues the story of the Rosewater money, adopting mock-biblical tones and concluding with: “Be generous. Be kind. You can safely ignore the arts and sciences. They never helped anybody. Be a sincere, attentive friend to the poor,” (9). Eliot is pure action, the ‘work ‘in ‘good works,’ giving almost compulsively. Again, Eliot serves as a stand-in for reader-action. At one point, we are actually invited to see his activity as libidinal. “Eliot is bringing his sexual
energies to...Utopia,” his psychiatrist observes, suggesting that there is something as primal in
the desire for Utopia, as there is in sexual desire – maybe more so (73). Sex and pornography,
the statement implies, are easy ways to assuage the need for Utopia without having to sacrifice
something for it. Eliot’s sacrifice, on the other hand, is so complete that even the pleasures of his
own body are “irrelevant” (69). He does not stop at reading utopian pornography, he becomes it:
a physical exemplar of utopian fiction. He strokes our collective fantasies of social intercourse,
and political potency. Like Diana Moon-Glampers, he is a caricature of pure conscience and
feeling. Thus engaged, we reward ourselves for our response to him, and are rewarded by the
text with positive fulfillment.

Interestingly, the world of Eliot Rosewater is both intimate with, and quite separate from
the fictional or pornographic utopias we know. Eliot has little interest in pornography, but he is
an avid reader of science fiction. Crashing a science fiction writer’s convention, Eliot declares:

You’re all I read any more. You’re the only ones who’ll talk about the really terrific changes
going on, the only ones crazy enough to know...You’re the only ones with guts enough to really
care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do
to us, what big, simple ideas do to us,... (13)

Although he adds that science fiction authors “couldn’t write for sour apples,” Eliot has
no patience for “talented sparrowfarts” with sense for the “important changes” in the world (13). Incidentally, his most beloved author is also the least successful. Sold alongside cheap
pornography in seedy adult bookshops, the political science fiction of Kilgore Trout is grossly
ignored by society in general. But, society’s trash is Eliot’s porn. The narrator is even more
explicit: “what Trout had in common with pornography wasn’t sex but fantasies of an impossibly
hospitable world,” (15). Both are consigned to the ‘closets’ of society, both are at once fantasy
and truth; what Vonnegut suggests is that utopian fiction, like porn, is entirely masturbatory.

Significantly, Eliot is not a writer. Kilgore Trout, Vonnegut’s ‘Jeremiah in the
wilderness,’ whose satirical fictions are so keen, has no social accomplishment to his name.
Only Eliot seems to read and learn from his novels – and even he never openly attributes his
actions to Trout’s work. Apparently, the fiction writer writes to assuage his own impotence; his
social satires sew no seed. Perhaps this is why the one piece of fiction Eliot ever attempted is an
unfinished scrap at the back of his “Doomsday Book” – the log of charitable services his
foundation has provided for every person who has asked for his help, and some who never asked
at all. The excerpt we read is a blend of grotesque violence, dark humor, and ridicule –
strikingly different from Vonnegut’s novel, and much more in keeping with the degenerative mode of satire that Steven Weisenburger espouses in *Fables of Subversion* – in which he accused the later *Slaughterhouse Five* of falling short.

But, Eliot’s unfinished novel symbolically questions the efficacy of political satire. The single chapter ends with its narrator’s decision “to cease to be dead” and return to life on Earth – an experience she has avoided since her gruesome execution for witchcraft. If we see her as a kind of surrogate for Eliot himself (it is difficult not to, since the scrap is written in the first person), the implication is that life begins when the writing stops. In order to complete his novel, Eliot would have done a lot more writing, and a lot less for the people of Rosewater, Indiana. Such a mentality comes through in Eliot’s hatred for the arts, and Vonnegut gives us few opportunities to argue with his hero. On one occasion, Eliot donates a sum to a young writer who vows to write the truth about the world, only to have the young man ask Eliot what to write. Years later, after Eliot’s disgusted response shames and confuses the would-be-author, he finally produces the novel that he promised. Ironically, the ‘truth’ turns out to be pornography.

In the end, Eliot himself denies Trout, the only author who “had never tried to tell anything but the truth,” the opportunity to act for the good (198). Trout has the ability to explain Eliot’s ‘social project’ in Rosewater County for the rest of society to understand. Facing charges of insanity on the basis of his eccentric charity, Eliot must somehow defeat the lawsuit brought against him by his own long-lost relatives – the Fred Rosewaters. Ignited with greed by Mushari, they hope to disinherit Eliot by proving unfit as President of the Rosewater Foundation. Senator Rosewater hopes that Trout can conjure a rational explanation for the past few years of his son’s life – and he does. The story is so good, in fact, the Senator practically hires him to write political platforms for his party, calling him “the greatest idea man in the world,” (191). But Eliot’s hearing never actually happens.

For him, talk is cheap. A major factor in Mushari’s case involves bribing residents to slander Eliot. The result is an epidemic of local women claiming Eliot as the father of their children (56 in all). Learning this, Eliot takes matters into his own hands. The Fred Rosewater’s can only snag the fortune if Eliot is childless – so, he determines to “legally acknowledge” every one of the children, “regardless of blood type” (202). Trout’s interpretation of Eliot’s actions – and by extension, Vonnegut’s text – never makes it to court:

> It seems to me […] that the main lesson […] is that people can
use all the uncritical love they can get [...] If one man can do it, perhaps others can do it, too. It means that our hatred of useless human beings and the cruelties we inflict upon them for their own good need not be parts of human nature. Thanks to the example of Eliot Rosewater, millions upon millions of people may learn to love and help whomever they see. (199)

Trout’s ‘moral of the story’ is not even the last word of the novel. Eliot claims that privilege. Though he no longer even remembers what his benevolent ‘mission’ in Rosewater County was, he does know that “he could never stand to return [there] again” (199). On the last page of the novel, Eliot successfully ends the story of the Rosewater fortune as he “rais[es] his tennis racket as though it were a magic wand” and bids his ‘children’ to “be fruitful and multiply,” (203).

In Davis’s view, Eliot has embraced the “comforting lie” that he has 56 children in order to enact positive social change. But this is a comforting lie on more than one level. Eliot’s triumph mystifies its own paradox. The irony is, Eliot’s fortune is now split 56 ways, and will continue to split if his last command is met. Before the next generation, there will be no fortune at all – and with its dissipation, so goes the only power to make a real social impact that the novel has entreatied. Spreading the wealth seems like the right thing to do; and yet throughout the novel, no one but the volunteer fireman can produce social good without money. There is also little hope that Eliot’s gift will be spent as unselfishly as it was given. He is casting ‘pearls before swine,’ rather than giving to a cause. Such discomforts are swept aside by the sentimental fulfillment of Eliot’s act. Waving his tennis racket is a fortuitous defeat of attempts to steal a fortune from the deserving in the name of the self-serving. Just as Monks cannot be allowed to disinherit Oliver, Mushari cannot lock-up Eliot. Good has won out, and ‘all is well.’ The disturbing social dilemmas the text exposes are affectively laid to rest, leaving little impetus for change.

Just when the text seems to satirize the notion that “[p]eople get what they deserve [is] first law of life,” our narrator succumbs to the urge to reinforce it (133). Through the Fred Rosewater subplot, Vonnegut attempts to laugh at this maxim. When a pair of well-to-do bourgeois friends reiterate that very mantra, it seems to sing with irony. Amanita Buntline, one of the speakers, hardly deserves her fortune, and her friend Bunny Weeks is snobbish and shallow. Worse, they have just been discussing the inevitable bankruptcy of a quintessential, hard-working fisherman and his two equally rough and ready sons. We might also remember that Amanita’s other companion, Caroline, is married to Fred Rosewater, whose good-hearted
ancestor was cheated out of his birthright by his own, greedy brother. Even the city in which they live was bamboozled from the Indian chief for which it was named.

And yet, readers are not invited to sympathize with the unfortunate chief Pisquontuit, who “drank himself to death,” or Fred, or his wife Caroline. Though Fred’s attempt at hanging himself is certainly pathetic, he is a lazy, manipulative, unlikable individual. Besides a terrible housekeeper, his wife is materialistic, ignorant, and spendthrift. They long to discover some nobility in Fred’s ancestry, not to prove that Rosewaters were once good people, but to gain social leverage over the snobs of Pisquontuit, Rhode Island. Even Harry Pena, the doomed fisherman, is unlikable – difficult though it may seem to turn American readers against a self-made man. Arrogant, insensitive, and sexist, he has little to recommend him but his nostalgic profession – and even here he is maligned. Harry Pena was an insurance salesman, just like Fred. He quit because of stress.

It seems that in the frame of *GBR*, people *do* get what they deserve. Though Fred fails to force the entire fortune from his distant cousin, Eliot makes amends for their unfortunate family history by offering a settlement. When asked how much that should be, the Senator insists “a million dollars is much too much for the Rhode Island pig!” and readers ought to agree. Fred is no Saint Eliot. So, the amount is reduced to $100,000 (“a hundred thousand is plenty,” says the Senator.) (202). No more and no less than Fred deserves.

Only the reader of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater... Or, Pearls Before Swine* – so often implicated in its satire – does not ‘get what s/he deserves.’ It is more accurate to say that we get what we want. Though keenly aware of sentimental literature’s potential for political quietism, Vonnegut has created novel that both dramatizes and succumbs to that problem (Schriber 175). As a writer, Vonnegut’s “motives are political,” yet that political desire is conflated by his sense that the “sunny little dream” we all need to get by is also a part equally important (Irving 216, 217). The cathartic release of sentimentalism, then, becomes a fetish of Vonnegut’s writing. It allows the novel to criticize social callousness, economic greed, and political hypocrisy without becoming an incendiary text. Instead, its blatant social ironies massage the middle-class position of moral superiority. Readers participate in the narrator’s social judgment, relocate their guilt to characters like Mushari and McAllister, and enjoy Eliot’s triumph. As Irving explains it, “Of course, not many of us will feel compelled to action. Some of us might merely wish we were
better,” concluding that “[Vonnegut ] can fool you by how ‘easy’ he is to read – if you don’t think carefully,’” (223).

Perhaps what he means by this is that when taken as a whole, our ability to reconnect the events of the text to our own immediate present ebbs through character fulfillment and resolution. But open the volume to a random page, read – like a poem – a segment of text between one typed flower ( ) and the next, and something quite different occurs. Instead of a neat resolution, juxtaposition, irony, and disquiet retake the page. Freed from the formula – and even from the philosophy – Vonnegut’s narrator can stagger the reader with bluntness. There are no caricatures to project as stronger, kinder versions of ourselves, whose social mobility lays beyond our reach; and none to blame for it, either.

But, the truth is we enjoy the brief, illusionary exercise of benevolent power through the course of the novel; we can reify our own goodness by our reactions to the injustice, the hypocrisy, and the examples of genuine humanity at every type-flower ( ) pause in the text. GBR’s ‘comforting lie’ masks the reality it strove to expose, and most readers (if they “think carefully,”) admit that they are glad it does. The magic wand Eliot wields is a tennis racket – and we know it. Still, we are unshaken; God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or, Pearls Before Swine balances sentiment and politics, comfort and guilt. Like Dickens, Vonnegut criticizes a system he has no solution for correcting: You cannot change the system, so be kind.
Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place, and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble [...] which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories. (Jameson “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” 89)

In my introduction, I suggested that sentimental politics within Oliver Twist helped serve as counterbalance for a dehumanizing trend in socio-political policy in the period. Twist both moved and disturbed readers with its poignant, even grotesque, images of poverty and violence, and its scathing depictions of administrative figures. Yet, it offered the audience a space through which they could demonstrate charitable sympathy upon a worthy object without the risk of deception. Equally important, Twist actually validated social paranoia toward the poor by suggesting that only a boy who arrived at poverty by accident would demonstrate a character worthy of rescue from it.

Today, a level of social paranoia is prerequisite for daily city life; individuals are increasingly disconnected from their neighbors, their political surroundings (despite the bounty of information at our fingertips), and even their sense of geographical place. In his article, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” Fredric Jameson suggests that we examine popular texts as – not necessarily a “solution” to this kind of “cultural crisis” – but as a “reactive […] symptom and a result” of such situations (135). In this chapter, I explore Jameson’s notion of postmodern texts and their participation in cultural crises, testing it alongside sentimental politics in constructing the audience’s sense of place within social and physical place.

Tim Dorsey’s madcap fiction novel, Florida Roadkill (1999), is among a number of contemporary texts within a rising group that I like to refer to as ‘Florida Satire’: novels written by local authors (most of whom are, or have been, journalists) whose subject matter revolves humorously around Florida politics, people, and events. Yet surprisingly, these novels are vastly popular with audiences across the United States. Tim Dorsey’s readers are “a cross-section of America,” many of whom have never visited the Florida – even to see Disney World (Behe par.14). Roadkill has been through fifteen printings, and New Line Cinema recently renewed
screen rights to the story, and a number of its sequels (Dorsey Interview). As Dorsey puts it, “[this novel’s] not counterculture; it’s very much mainstream” (Behe par. 15).

What’s puzzling about Roadkill’s mass appeal, however, is the fact that it is not an easy novel to read. Some readers have expressed absolute disgust for the story, and nearly all responses to the text (positive or negative) experienced an overwhelming physical disturbance from Roadkill. The novel’s attraction is its ability to supply readers with an “abstract idea” of Florida, both dizzyingly real and temptingly sensational (“Reification” 132). The narrative itself becomes the consumable image of a Florida experience both geographically and somatically, by structuring that experience as an odyssey from the Panhandle to the Keys. Such a reader-text relationship, I suggest, is a form of “commodity reification” by which readers – not only consume the narrative image of Florida in the act of reading – but achieve a lingering sense of possession over it. What disturbs the consumer-reader of Florida Roadkill, however, is the novel’s inverted relationship to sentimental politics. Dorsey challenges the reader’s desire for both moral high ground and socio-political agency. The tropes of nostalgia are exposed as advertisements for a new generation of consumers thirsty for a sense of history; yet they are the only hope left for a disappearing ‘Old Florida.’ Roadkill is a novel of socio-political compromise; its readers can enjoy the social agency it offers them, only if they are willing to inhabit that compromise.

As I mentioned, Dorsey’s readers are wide-spread, but it is useful to consider what Florida in particular may represent for both natives and non-natives. The novel is set in 1997, roughly ten years ago, but it is safe to say that the Sunshine State has been a national commodity for a century. A variety of theme parks, Cape Canaveral, and year-round golfing secure Florida’s status as a retirement and vacation Mecca. In the past decade, real estate prices have sky-rocketed as more and more residents from the northern states are willing to pay inflated

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1 Reader responses and review come from the abundant online reviews of Florida Roadkill. Far from ethnographic evidence, or a study of fan following, internet book reviews do not clearly show us the breadth of a readership or its reaction to a text. However, the popularity of this activity itself seems to negate charges that these are ‘obsessed’ fans, or unrepresentative of the ‘average reader.’ The convenience of internet communication tempts readers to claim authority over a text and perhaps influence the reading habits of others. ‘Review this book’ options appear on both commercial sites (like Amazon.com), and general discussion sites (such as Epinions.com). This feedback is otherwise unsolicited; web users are either compelled to praise or condemn the novel by the intensity of their reaction to it, or (as is often the case) make a hobby of posting book reviews after reading, as if participating in a friendly reading circle of strangers.
prices for land. This, combined with rampant speculation development, has contributed to a housing crisis for locals, whose lower incomes make purchasing property increasingly difficult, if not impossible. The result is a cultural situation in which Florida, both real and abstract, is regarded as an increasingly difficult thing to possess — and therefore increasingly valuable.

Although this situation may not be unique to Florida, it certainly establishes the importance of a narrative like Florida Roadkill as responding to a crisis in commodity culture in which the text itself participates. The plot is essentially a travel itinerary: the “A-tour of Florida,” as one character puts it:

‘We drive over to Cape Canaveral for a space shuttle launch. The next day we head south along the coast to Palm Beach, and hang there for a day. Then the same thing the next day in Miami Beach…’

Sean finished the thought: ‘And finally we drive all the way to Key West and break some fishing records…’

‘Most Bait Wasted, Career,’ David said. (142)

And these characters are not the only pair on the road throughout the story, stopping along the way to experience Florida, avoid trouble, and start more trouble. Before long, Sean and David find themselves pursued by another pair of travelers, Serge A. Storms and Coleman. Their path is a whirlwind blend of typical vacation mishap and bizarre circumstance. But what makes these travelers even more interesting, perhaps, is that all of them are native tourists. Their trajectory is based upon an actual trip Dorsey and a friend took — covering most of Florida and ending in the Keys. Every location, down the last rest stop, is a carefully accurate picture of its real counterpart exactly as it was when Dorsey visited.

What the novel reconstructs is something like Jameson’s “cognitive map,” an ideological representation of the “properly unrepresentable totality” of an entire state, its culture, and its people. Unlike an actual cartography, however, Roadkill’s “itinerary,” or what Jameson describes as “diagrams organized around the still subject-centered or existential journey of the traveler, along which various significant key features are marked,” is far more detailed — providing not just a relative geographic location with which to orient oneself, but a history and a narrative image for every point of interest (90). Such texts, he argues, allow us to “cognitively map our individual social relationship to local, national and international class realities” (91). I suggest that Florida Roadkill offers a travel narrative that functions on this principle. Through narrative, we are ‘plotting’ Florida and our relationship to it.
The tactic is, not surprisingly, effective. Many seem to be proud that they have seen the same sites, taken part in the same events, walked the same streets. As de Certeau suggests in his essay “The Practice of Everyday Life,” readers can now imagine themselves within the structure of the novel, acting with Serge A. Storms in his madcap pursuits (491-2). Dayton Ward enthuses that, “[Dorsey’s] descriptions of Florida, especially Tampa (my hometown), are so dead on I thought I was reading a travel guide.” Darren Slater takes a moment in his review to point out that “[Dorsey’s] vast knowledge of Florida and it's history is educational” and one of the appeals of the text. Ward, no longer a Florida resident, appears to welcome the position of tourist in his former home, as if allowed within the brief space of the novel to revisit his “hometown” – completely comfortable with FR’s ‘wild’ representation of the city.

Even – and perhaps most importantly – those unfamiliar with Florida can “poach,” to use de Cereau’s expression, upon the textual experiences and lay claim to intimacy with them. Here we can see text’s role in commodity culture, for although his is a comically dark tale of drug cartels, drug addicts, extortionists, and murderers (most of which, he will tell you, is taken straight from local headlines) who defile Florida, Dorsey has build the novel equivalent of Busch Gardens: one rollercoaster after another. Of the many online reviews, few fail to mention the “dizzying” plot and twisted hit list of characters. “Florida even looks good collapsing,” the Prologue begins, and that is exactly what some readers do with Dorsey, dropping his book mid-read, “disappointed” with the confusing plot and cast (“Not Worth”). “You’ll either love these books or you’ll hate them,” one reviewer notes (Howell). Most, however, express an enjoyably uncomfortable relationship with the narrative ‘ride.’ In a cultural climate where The Tower of Terror at Universal Studios attracts thousands of park-goers every day, consumers are more than likely prepared – even hungry for – a high-traffic read.

In fact, much of the novel takes place on the road. Narrative and dialogue are interrupted periodically by lyrics from Rare Earth’s “I Just Want to Celebrate.” The narrator offers no explanation for this sometimes-maddening structure – and in reality, music and driving go hand-in-hand. Dorsey’s traffic sequences certainly demand one’s full attention as the narrative jumps from car A to car B, describing each from the other’s point of view without transition or explanation. In this way, parallel story-lines intersect, diverge, and reconvene. We first meet our main characters in just this way. Sean and David, two clean-cut friends on a road trip, pull over their vehicle to rescue a turtle as it attempts to cross traffic. The narrative leaves David waiting
for the next car to pass before he can run out to grab the tortoise, and cuts to the next sequence in which we find ourselves in yet another car. In it, Coleman drags on a joint as he weaves through traffic. His passenger, Serge, tunes in to Rare Earth and promptly talks over the lyrics. When Coleman spots a man attempting to retrieve something from the middle of the road, we realize that the object Coleman swerves to demolish is the turtle David is trying to save (11).

Expressway traffic, or a rollercoaster ride, are coherent metaphors for the reading experience, and most readers take notice. One reviewer writes “Dorsey can keep you interested, [but I have no] stomach [for the plot] twists and gratuitous violence” (Mitchell). On the other hand, another review applauds the fast pace and somatic activity of the text. But, his comments still acknowledge the same discomforts:

Reading Tim Dorsey's books [sic] is like a rush of epic proportions! After I finished this book I felt like I needed a vacation! ...I would highly recommend this series to anyone who enjoys satire and sarcastic writing styles combined with break neck speed. If you don't break a sweat reading these books, you are not truly enjoying them to the fullest. (Slater)

Clearly, Florida Roadkill is as much a physical experience as it is a reading experience. Dorsey has managed to create a text that encapsulates the structure and pace of Florida as he sees it: packed with anxiety, obsessed with tourism, teeming with tricksters, and frankly dangerous. But, Dorsey’s text is no terrifying thriller – in the logic of his novel, humor is more powerful than fear. His readers insist they want to brave the psychotic wilds of Florida after Florida Roadkill (Dorsey Interview). It seems that instead of a deterrent, the novel manages to titillate interest in the Florida experience it portrays. Roadkill makes a potentially frightening metropolitan experience into just another day in paradise: laughter at the edge of your seat, the modern adventure.

Dorsey is selling Florida – but not necessarily to exploit it. Jameson points out that “the reading process is itself restructured along a means/ends differentiation,” in which readers consume the story bit by bit, toward a ‘solution’ that we can in turn consume as a whole (132-3). While this is certainly true in so far as Roadkill is a novel that contains a series of challenges and resolutions that build toward a larger, climatic resolution at the end, Roadkill problematizes that process of consumption. This is not an example of commodity reification from which readers walk away completely unaffected. Indeed, Florida Roadkill’s carnivalesque play on sentimental politics serves as its most disturbing, and its most endearing feature. The novel does not aspire to the level of political reform or hope to change ‘the course of things,’ rather by revealing both
the importance and the relative nature of sentimental tropes, Dorsey portrays the desperate need for stories in preserving Florida – or at least, in selling Florida to the ‘right’ people. The only way to keep what is left of that past, is to invest it with historical value.

Many critics accuse sentimental authors, like Charles Dickens, of nursing an impractical nostalgia for a past that never existed. Instead of imagining a solution to current socio-political problems, they charge, such authors merely fantasize about an idyllic society that we should attempt to recapture. Similarly, Jameson suggest that a popular text, “strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can be laid to rest.” Texts thus serve to “express and recontain” our “social and historical anxieties” by transferring them to some textual entity that can be neutralized through narrative solution (“Reification” 141-2).

On the surface, Dorsey seems to share this tendency – both the narrator, and his sympathetic characters convey a sentimental nostalgia for natural and historic Florida. Moreover, Dorsey provides a vehicle through which corrupt despoilers of that space are (usually) terminated: Serge A. Storms, a human ‘natural disaster.’. Nor can we miss the tone of passages describing people like “Florida developer Fred McJagger,” whose sprawling real estate projects defraud their future elderly residents. McJagger’s Vista Isles is a speculation community amongst a grouping of “lakes” (read: polluted “retention ponds”) and “light-gray fill dirt” beaches masquerading as an up-scale retirement community (109). McJagger and his top employee, Max Minimum, are described in no uncertain terms as conscienceless parasites feedings on an older, better America:

The retiree was being cannibalized by the New American, an untested, ungrateful, wet-behind-the-ears, fast-buck shit-ass like Minimum, who didn’t know what had gone into the country under his feet and wouldn’t care if he found out. To Minimum, no sacrifice was too small to pass on to someone else. (111)

This is a generation of capitalists, the passage implies, without history, or a sense of their position relative to that history. If narratives must also contain the “utopian hope” of the collective community – the possible or desired solution to its “anxieties,” then Dorsey’s ‘solution’ is not so much recontained by the narrative, as the narrative itself is the solution (“Reification” 144). In other words, what “ungrateful” fraudsters like Minimum need is a new nostalgia – a history with which they can locate themselves in relation to the rest of society.
As readers, we are laying claim to Florida, as Dorsey wants us to see it: complete with nostalgic (and commercial) value, and Serge makes this possible. His violent passion for Florida makes him a more effective (if ambiguous) mouthpiece for the narrator’s most crucial critiques, than the archetypal Sean and David. Via Serge, we experience Florida History 101 – a history delivered from the roadsides, the rest stops, and even from the top of I-75’s Busch Gardens exit sign. This lecture, dubbed “I, Floridian,” in particular is worth quoting at length:

‘There was no Disney World then, just rows of orange trees. [...] And somewhere near the middle was the Citrus Tower, which the tourists climbed to see even more orange trees […]’

The Miami Seaquarium put in a monorail and rockets started going off at Cape Canaveral, making us feel like we were on the frontier of the future. Disney bought up everything north of Lake Okeechobee, preparing to shove the future down our throats sideways.’

‘Things evolved rapidly! [...] We atone for our sins against the Indians by playing bingo. Shark fetuses in formaldehyde jars, roadside gecko farms, tourists waddling around waffle houses like flocks of flightless birds. And before we know it, we have The New Florida, underplanned, overbuilt and ripe for a killer hurricane that’ll knock that giant dome at Epcot down the turnpike like a golf ball […]’

‘I am the native and this is my home. [...] And I’m lying in bed with a broken air conditioner, sweating...And I’m thinking, geez, this used to be a great state.’

There was a scattering of whistles and clapping [below].

‘You wanna come to Florida? You get a discount on theme-park tickets and find out you just bought a time share [...] And suddenly vacation is over, and you have to catch a plane [...] But you keep coming back, year after year…’ (81-3)

Serge’s is the contemporary history always already included tourist attractions, even if that meant a orange groves and fake giant conch shells. Yet, this narrative also links rapid, “underplanned” development to the corporatization of tourism, the theme park industry. The consequence of which is to validate a vanished breed of grass-roots tourist whose visit was a balance between consumption and cultural appreciation. Roadkill’s “utopic solution” is a concept of Florida before corporate consumerism robbed Florida of its own, unique narrative.

This uncomfortable compromise that Serge A. Storms represents. Vying for page time with characters we expect to become ‘heroes,’ but never do, Storms takes over the story before most readers know that he’s the protagonist. The confusion stems from our dependence on sentimental binaries between good and evil: heroes are good, and good to the bone; Serge just has good bones. Cold-blooded murder is one place most ‘good-guys’ don’t go. Menace, glee in the suffering of others, and disrespect for their property rubs against the grain of sentimental and melodramatic modes upon which popular novels typically rely. But Serge is quite literally a surge-of-storms – a hurricane of human nature. Good things can come from hurricanes; in ecological terms, they ‘clean house’ and return nutrients to the soil. But in populated Florida, housekeeping comes at a certain cost: no one would say that they like hurricanes.
Yet, this is exactly what *Roadkill* asks us to do. Using sentimental devices of fragmentation, “hiatuses, seeming closures and juxtapositions of conflicting points of view and contrary moods” to activate sympathetic responses from the audience as a barometer of a reader’s virtue – as *Roadkill* does – is bound to complicate the relationship between readers and characters in a novel that disrupts our existing binaries of heroism and villainy (Todd 6, 4). Still more confusing, David and Sean are archetypes of sentimental formula. They possess those characteristics that have been historically perceived as traits of ‘universal’ goodness, rather than ideologically or economically determined modes of behavior (Hadley 170). Experienced novel readers are likely to identify exemplars of *these* traits as the sympathetic heroes by sheer habit – and perhaps Dorsey himself, who admittedly “didn’t know what [he] was doing” when composing his first novel, had planned it so. But somehow, this course did not seem to fit the story, and the excitement of a social vehicle like Serge pushed him in another direction: the anti-hero (Dorsey Interview).

Serge A. Storms is a serial killer. His victims are always ‘scum,’ but they are often relatively harmless scum, or at least non-violent. In many cases, only the narrator and reader know what pathetic, selfish, or vicious human beings they really are – information Serge does not have. For all Serge knows, those victims could have been ‘us.’ Privately knowing that these people are duplicitous prevents readers from hating Serge, but also, I think, from loving him completely. The connection is ambiguous, like a part of ourselves we secretly nurse, but rarely admit to. If readers reaffirm their own goodness through shared emotion with the central characters, then sentimental moments of connection with Serge can easily tempt readers to share in activities they hesitate to perceive as ‘good.’ Thus, Dorsey’s inversion of sentimental expectations places many in an on-again-off-again dance of identification: Sean and David are ‘good,’ but have no agency; Serge has agency, but is he ‘good’?

One reviewer read *Roadkill* after reading another Dorsey novel also featuring Serge – albeit a more codified version of the character. He responded to *Roadkill*’s original Serge with surprise and discomfort:

My memory of Serge in *The Stingray Shuffle* is a guy way off his rocker who gets involved in a number of wacky situations but who is not particularly vicious. In *Roadkill*, Serge participates in a number of killings, some in gruesome manners. There are numerous deaths in *Shuffle* but Serge doesn’t participate in as many of them. I guess I just have a little problem with the main character being a homicidal maniac rather than just a plain maniac. (“The First” par 10)
This articulate self-analysis corresponds with the notion that readers seek self-affirmation through identification with characters (Todd 77). If this reader didn’t find himself drawn into sympathy with Serge, he would not feel divided about Serge’s “viciousness.” But through Storms, Dorsey taps a rising cultural ambivalence between good and evil, retribution and malice. Not everyone, however, is ready to drink it in; and those who can sip aren’t always comfortable with the flavor: “[Roadkill’s] wacky and a bit sick. It’s a matter of whether you will like it or hate it, your stomach will decide,” (Howell).

On the other hand, measures of Serge’s goodness reveal themselves slowly, as the plot twists and re-twists. One endearing element is his irrepressible knowledge of everything Florida - A “Floridaphile,” according to his author (Dorsey Interview), compulsively touring his birth state while spewing local historical facts in rapid fire – particularly when off his medication. This passionate spirit redeems Serge: He can love; he can be loyal; and he respects innocence. During a narrative flashback, we witness a boy (young Serge) risk his life to save a police officer. He’d learned the officer had a six-year-old daughter and refused to see him killed in cold blood (180). In this way, we see that Serge loves life, but he loves Florida even more. His victims are Florida’s victimizers: conmen, murderers, drug dealers, fraudsters. With an unwavering sense of personal direction, Storms systematically destroys them in comically sinister ways. This inner scum gauge seems to keep him killing the ‘truly’ bad, whether he knows it or not. In his quest for a case of thrice-stolen and lost cocaine/insurance money, many corrupted individuals find the tables turned in Serge’s clutches. But, Sean and David (who end up with the case by sheer accident) are never harmed. Through Serge’s hyperbolic example, Jameson might say, readers can find their own barometer for social justice, exercising the violent power of madness from the relative safety of a printed page:

a kind of homeopathic strategy whereby the scandalous and intolerable external irritant is drawn into the aesthetic process itself and thereby systematically worked over, ‘acted out’ and symbolically neutralized. (“Reification” 136)

When asked who Serge A. Storms is, Dorsey quickly insists, “He’s me. [Serge] does what I would never do, but his victims are the people who burn me up – maybe it’s a good vent.” Fiction, for Dorsey, is a place to tear up the system from the safety of a padded suit. Roadkill’s violence is intentionally over-the-top, expressly because fiction is not reality (Dorsey Interview) – but, through its eclectic mixture of truth, humor, and hyperbole, the reading experience approximates a real social balance for modern life. Thus, Serge exemplifies contemporary
experience: torn between madness and sanity, violence and tenderness, medication and
homeopathy, tourism and authenticity.

It shouldn’t surprise us that his readers felt the text pulling them into identification with
Serge, whether they liked it or not. But the suggestion that Serge A. Storms may not have the
moral compass readers imagine for themselves is likely to create anxiety, rather than “neutralize”
it. This is important in a character whose purpose within the text is to advertise and, in so doing,
reconstitute the image of Florida for the “ungrateful,” “New American” consumer. In the same
way that committing murder (i.e. capital punishment) in order to punish murder is problematic,
so is selling Florida to save it. The difference, someone like Serge might say, is in the packaging
– and that can make all the difference. Serge himself brings this issue to the fore. While in one
breath villainizing tourist commerce and its corruption, he admits to being a commercial junky in
the next: “‘I’m secretly a tourist, too,’ Serge confessed. ‘The native tourist. I love Florida
Cheese.’” The relationship is clearly a divided one for Serge. “We’ve got nobody to blame if
we prostitute ourselves,” he says of Floridians, ironically ‘blaming’ the real trouble on the
“untended mental health problems” of the “criminal element” (typically from Ohio), in the next
sentence (85). Of course, Serge is unwittingly describing himself. He is in denial, blaming
Florida’s native problems on the ‘snowbirds.’

As a character, Serge exposes the dual nature of narrative in its roll as ideology. Just as
Serge implicates himself in Florida’s troubles, we readers are as culpable in commodifying
Florida as we are capable of preserving it. By consuming Dorsey’s image of Florida through the
text, we too are potentially destructive visitors. “The American tourist,” Jameson writes,

 no longer lets the landscape ‘be in its being’ as Heidegger would have said, but takes a snapshot
of it, thereby graphically transforming space into its own material image. The concrete activity of
looking at a landscape – including no doubt, the disquieting bewilderment with the activity itself,
the anxiety that must arise when human beings, confronting the non-human, wonder what they are
doing there and what the point or purpose of such a confrontation might be in the first place – is
thus comfortably replaced by the act of taking possession of it and converting it into a form of
personal property. (“Reification” 131)

Traveling with Serge, we can see Jameson’s notion playing out in the novel. Serge’s need to
photographically ‘preserve’ each place and object as quickly as possible often borders on
desperation. In one scene, he nearly flips his vehicle attempting to turn back for a photo of some
roadside ‘shrine.’ Like a figure in a House of Mirrors, Serge demonstrates the extremes of
society’s cult of tourist consumption. If Debord is right, and the “image itself” has become as
“libidinal” as the object it represents (132), then Serge shows us exactly what Debord means by
Near Kennedy Space Center, Serge “took a picture of the picture,” hanging on the wall of a local restaurant. The image is of the Sea of Storms during Apollo 12 – a moonwalk (215). Yet, through it all, Serge rarely stops to enjoy what he is capturing with his camera – he has Attention Deficit Disorder, and rarely takes his medication. But he also operates with a sense of urgency, especially when he notices that something has changed, some structure disappeared. Before it’s too late, Serge is trying to educate his companions (and us) about each place.

Naturally, Serge’s companions in the novel have no interest in their surroundings. Absorbed in their own world of chemical highs and lows, their guide’s reverent lectures are utterly meaningless. But for readers, it is a different story. Dorsey forces us to reject identification with Coleman, a stupid, drug-obsessed youth; or Sharon, a murderous opportunist whose one love is heroin. In rejecting them, however, we also reject their cultural-historical apathy: “They went to Kennedy Space Center and Serge showed them spaces capsules,” the narrator informs us, adding that “Coleman wanted to buy a space helmet. Sharon tried to score dope in the rocket garden” (214). For Serge, each place has deep sentimental significance that Sharon and Coleman seem unable to grasp. At one point, the trio examines a rocket replica on an abandoned launch pad:

Sharon walked up to it, pulled a key chain out of her pocket, and gouged a line through the paint.

Serge screamed and grabbed her arm. ‘Our heritage!’

‘Your heritage, space boy, not mine!’ [Sharon] (217)

They represent, perhaps, exaggerations of a sad population of Americans whose interests are entirely self-centered and woefully disconnected from their geographical context.

Or, we might see them as fragmented subjects, victims of what Jameson calls “the breakdown of the signifying chain.” Jameson accounts for the ‘heaps and fragments’ of postmodern cultural forms by suggesting that the subject creating and consuming these pop images has “lost its capacity actively […] to organize its past and future into coherent experience” (“Postmodernism” 71). The effect, he concludes, is that our ability to establish our own “identity” within this “temporal” ‘chain’ suffers, resulting is a sort of schizophrenia (72). This is certainly applicable to Sharon and Coleman, whose own pasts are nothing more than a series of events in which they both found themselves searching for immediate gratification and turning up empty-handed. They follow Serge from place-to-place like spoiled children, begging
for potato chips, beer, and cocaine (the last of which Serge keeps in a sandwich bag for \textquotedblleft just such emergencies\textquotedblright). Serge, on the other hand, is \textquotedblleft high on Miami.\textquotedblright

\textquoteleft\textquoteleft[T]he positive terms of euphoria, the high, the intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity\textquoteright\textquoteright Jameson imagines, compliment, or counterpoint, the \textquoteleft\textquoteleftanxiety and loss of reality\textquoteright\textquoteright a subject experiences when unable to \textquoteleft\textquoteleftfocus\textquoteright\textquoteright on his/her own past, present, and future and act accordingly (\textquoteleft\textquoteleftPostmodernism\textquoteright\textquoteright 73). For Dorsey, Coleman and Sharon have done precisely this. Unlike Serge, neither Coleman nor Sharon bring their past experiences to bear upon their present situations; and it is hardly surprising that neither of them perceive the deadly consequences their futures will bring. Instead, they rely on a drug-induced \textquoteleft\textquoteleftschizophrenia\textquoteright\textquoteright through which they can escape such anxieties. Of course, Jameson might argue that Serge\textquoteleft\textquotelefts psychosis, too, is representative of his inability to truly recapture the history he cherishes. Through his ravenous consumption of images and historical simulacra, Serge is attempting to form a reality that is \textquoteleft\textquoteleftforever out of reach\textquoteright (71).

Perhaps this is true: Serge is certainly as much a child of the consumer age as his companions in that respect. He does not wax nostalgic over natural wonders as often as he does over those quaint bastions of initial Florida tourism or early Florida history. The Everglades, unsullied, vast, and uninhabited would hold little interest for Serge – there\textquoteleft s no story without a human element. A wall of autographed photos in the Key West Island Bookstore becomes \textquoteleft\textquoteleftThe Pantheon!\textquoteright\textquoteright meriting a series of snapshots and the purchase of a few postcards. The architectural history of the United States, even Europe, is captured in one tour of a Key West \textquoteleft\textquoteleftOld Town\textquoteright\textquoteright neighborhood, as Serge dictates: \textquoteleft\textquoteleftClassical revival…Victorian gothic…Creole…\textquoteright\textquoteright When it comes to Serge\textquoteleft\textquotelefts beverages, \textquoteleft\textquoteleftnative water\textquoteright\textquoteright is a bottle of Zephyrhills, a small retirement town in Central Florida known only for its bottling plant (312-3). Commerce in whatever form seems to be the only force with the power to produce local or visitor activity, and Dorsey\textquoteleft\textquotelefts answer is to use it. In this way, Serge leads readers through a roadmap history of Florida, snapping photos of \textquoteleft\textquoteleftFlorida cheese,\textquoteright\textquoteright and anointing it with importance in the process. He awakens the mystery, the curiosity, and the nostalgia within a seemingly doomed Florida past, angry at the modern attempts to replace such \textquoteleft\textquoteleftartifacts\textquoteright with common, unsentimental attractions. The story, after all, is what sells the sites – the island plane ride, the tour – and with a true Floridaphile at the microphone, no story goes untold.
Here, I think, is the important divergence between Dorsey’s use of sensibility and Dickens’s, Orwell’s, or Vonnegut’s. *Florida Roadkill* demonstrates a potential power in narrative to invest Florida’s remaining environmental and historical culture with nostalgic and sentimental importance. As Serge races from local dive to launch pad, his histories transfer value to those places – turning them into cultural commodities which must be consumed with respect and a certain level of preservation. His are performative speech acts, narrating a Florida culture into being within the audience’s imagination and shaping that perception as he does so. *Roadkill’s* socio-political philosophy is not that kindness can fix everything; it is that kindness doesn’t change much at all. For Dorsey, convincing America to stop ‘consuming’ his state is not an option – nor is it a goal. Of tourism, he says, “I can’t gripe it at all.” In fact, he continues, protecting the place you love can be hypocritical. Everyone has a right to enjoy, so long as they “leave it as they find it” (Dorsey Interview).

Unwilling to give social agency to characters who fit our traditional moral binaries, Dorsey is equally unwilling to offer readers a wholly satisfying resolution to the larger issues (development, exploitation, corruption, addiction) within the novel. The fact that *Florida Roadkill* paves the way for a sequel, *Hammerhead Ranch Motel*, does not explain away the novel’s uncomfortable sense that no one (Sean, David, or Serge) has ‘won.’ The only winner, perhaps, is Dorsey himself, whose own ‘Floridaphilia’ has found an outlet in thousands of readers. Through *Roadkill*, he has validated the consumer desires of the audience, simultaneously modifying them with a sentimental attachment to the places he recreates – and attachment, one hopes, will alter the way in which we tour them, purchase them, treat them.

Jameson writes that,

> [t]he only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system…and this [only when yet unpenetrated by market and commodity systems]. (140)

In other words, an “organic group” with its own, unique modes of socio-cultural articulation through which that group expresses, and ‘constitutes,’ itself. In such groups, he believes, lays the potential for change. In *Florida Roadkill* I suggest, we find an example of such a group, though not exactly as Jameson may have imagined it. Contrived for sequel publication, film adaptation forthcoming, and intended (Dorsey himself will tell you) as much for shear enjoyment as political force, *Roadkill* is inescapably a commodity. But it is a narrative that torments and
discomposes its readers, physically and psychologically, inverting sentimental binaries. We are unable to ally ourselves with both social agency and moral clarity, our sense of ideological gratification disrupted again and again. In consuming Dorsey’s image of Florida, we do so on his terms, at his narrative pace, such that our ‘uses and gratifications’ of his text must include a relationship with place as worth knowing as much for its historical and present culture, as for its theme parks and golf courses (Edwards).

Thus Roadkill’s role in political quietism is not to ignite or to reabsorb active, reformatory energies, but to refine the notion of “reform” itself. In the space of the novel, consumerism in its many forms is not the problem; it is consumerism without historical narrative or nostalgia that threatens to reduce our world to dollars and cents. As for authenticity, it does not exist: nostalgia is a narrative that the subject writes for his/herself, but it is powerful nonetheless. And as more and more Dorsey readers venture south, one hopes that their narrative of Florida is revised accordingly.
CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with an answer:

“Keep it small and accomplishable – start somewhere, do something. I don’t know you, I can’t provide you with a prescription for change. Get off your butt and do something!” (Churchill)

Churchill’s challenge reminds us that we depend upon authors like him for the guidance and direction in the face of confusing, even paradoxical, social controversy. His challenge also reminds us that the best answers come from within. But however ‘true,’ Churchill’s answer leads invariably to more questions. In one sense, he is throwing the baton in the sand at our feet, before we are ready for the relay.

In another sense, Churchill refuse us the illusion that the race has already been run – and won – just as he denies us the comfort of individual helplessness. Neither Dickens, Orwell, Vonnegut, nor Dorsey control what use their readers make of their texts. But, they do direct their hand-off. For me, “I don’t know you, I can’t provide you with a prescription for change” clearly exposes the importance we place on our socio-political narratives. Between author and text, text and reader, these narratives jockey for real influence within the realm of ideas against the soothing forces of political quietism. By tracing the history of political quietism in the novel through its relationship to sentimental politics and sentimental modes, we might analyze the process by which such pervasive illusions work.

This is not to say we can determine absolutely the manner in which novels are consumed, why they are consumed, or how readers are or are not changed by that experience. However, by continuing to ask how narrative modes can and have worked to aggravate and alleviate social disquiet, we enrich our sense of what is possible for socio-political novels to come. It was Said who wrote (“Overlapping Territories, Intertwined Histories”) that the “principle aim is not to separate, but to connect,” because “cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure,” and we should respect this flexibility in our explorations (14). This is no less true on the levels of genre and mode (as Tony Bennett’s Outside Literature demonstrates), and we miss something important by condemning the modes of sensibility, its politics, and its possibilities, to the centuries of its first popularity and ‘decline.’

Sensibility in its specific eighteenth and nineteenth century formulae is, perhaps, retired. We cannot reproduce – or re-experience – those sentimental texts as they may originally have
been received. That “structure of feeling,” Raymond Williams reminds us, surrounding the consumption and production of those novels can only be approximated. But, this is enough to suggest how popular modes and tropes grew, hybridized, and remain popular for new, but often corresponding reasons. The popularity of sensibility is so particularly vital to us because, as Todd points out, its very foundations responded to a collective social need for positive affirmation. Demonstrating and sharing empathy through narrative experience, exemplifying emotion through characters, reifying individual humanness through sympathetic exercise – these uses and gratifications account for a significant number of popular fictions whose attention to anxieties over capitalist economy and population growth contributed in no small part to their social importance.

Sentimental politics can also show us the ways in which authors themselves struggle for socio-political efficacy in the novel form. In Chapter One, reorienting George Orwell’s 1984 in terms of his critique of Charles Dickens, and the conservative consequences of sensibility, revealed a dialogue between the novel and Dickensian reform. Instead of giving readers a hopeless, even stunted, prognosis for the future, I suggested that Orwell’s novel degenerates and disappoints sentimental expectations in order to critique a narrative politics based upon sensibility as inadequate for progressive social change. Inverting sentimental modes through Winston Smith’s ‘progress’ exposes their fallacy, inviting the reader to share in the consequences of Smith’s failure, rather than glorify in the light of his success – a conclusion whose fulfilling resolution would only lead to political quietism, not change. Instead, Orwell’s conclusion positions its bid for change outside the text, within the reader his/herself: “start somewhere, do something.”

In Chapter Two, I illustrated the connection between Kurt Vonnegut’s God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater… and sentimental tropes as a way of sorting out the confused critical response to his postmodern ‘sentimental novel.’ Despite the narrative’s often unforgiving tone, Eliot Rosewater is a modern-day archetype of human sympathy, kindness, and generosity. Likewise, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater… concentrates on emotive reader response through abrupt shifts and over-wrought moments of tension and release – a sentimental vehicle moving inevitably toward redemptive resolution. Despite Vonnegut’s seemingly degenerative style, his novel subverts its own attempts to create viable social action by investing in “moral sense philosophy” – particularly ironic, since the text dramatizes both the value of social action over aesthetics, and
the doubtful political efficacy of literature. Yet, again and again, Vonnegut’s opportunity to overturn the system falls victim to his desire for the ‘comforting lies’ that, inadvertently or not, maintain the status quo.

Tim Dorsey, on the other hand, takes the essence of Vonnegut’s notion that authors must “poison” readers with kindness, and sells it back to his audience in the ultimate commodity. In Chapter Three, I argued that Florida Roadkill is an adventure park designed to turn tourism to Florida’s advantage, rather than its doom. By offering readers the pleasure of commodity reification and geographic connection within the space of Florida-as-novel, Dorsey temps readers into consuming Florida on his terms: as historically and culturally rich, and worth respecting. His text uses the reader’s dependence on sensibility to disturb and interrogate ‘moral sense,’ insisting that readers occupy a position of moral ambiguity in order to share in the novel’s social agency. This discomfort serves to reflect the paradoxes the novel explores: native home vs. native commodity, entertainment vs. consumption. In this way, Roadkill’s space offers fulfillment and resolution at a price, if it resolves at all. Nothing is free. Dorsey uses this space to instill nostalgia in his reader as a marker of social change – not to stop the commodification of Florida, but to soften its teeth: A “small” and “accomplishable” “prescription for change.”

Studying the influence of sentimental modes in fiction from Dickens to Dorsey suggests that on some level, no matter how unlikely it may seem, political and satirical novels depend upon the modes of sensibility to promote their agenda. A novel’s relationship with sentimental politics, delegates the range of affect with which its contemporary readers may respond. That is not to say that affect is predetermined by form, but to recognize the importance of form in the affect produced; and to propose that sentimental modes remain a vehicle for self-affirmation and identification through which reading subjects balance the status quo. For the socio-political novel, displacing the tropes of sensibility and disrupting that cycle of agitation and resolution is essential to promoting measurable social change – one reader at a time.
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