

Suburban/Absurd: Subjects of Anxiety in the fiction of

John Cheever and Richard Ford.

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Abstract

One aspect of the common ground between the work of Richard Ford and John Cheever is their careful depiction of domestic life. It was this attention to the middle class suburbs of America that led some of Cheever's contemporary critics to dismiss his work, seeing his subject matter as inappropriate to serious critical enquiry. By altering the terms on which Cheever's work is approached, and reading Cheever's and Ford's suburban fiction in light of some of the tenets of existentialism, post-structuralism, and neo-pragmatism, it is possible to affirm their works as central to contemporary concerns surrounding subjectivity, identity, and agency.

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Introduction

At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspects of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. (Camus 15)

Proposing that there are inescapable limits to the human capacity to know and to understand is perhaps not the simplest, best or most convincing way to begin an argument. Admitting these limits from the outset is a concession that demands an essentially perplexing question: why go on? This apparently senseless need to continue in the face of irrelevance is part of the sensation Albert Camus terms “absurdity” – a near ineffable state of self-awareness brought about by intense levels of self-reflection and provoked by an admission of subjectivity. Absurdity can generate a perspective on the world that makes it seem unfamiliar, arbitrary, and peopled by bodies divested of value.

Camus' "dumb show" and "mechanical pantomime" (15) might evoke the characterisation of figures from the work of both John Cheever and Richard Ford, writers for whom subjective anxiety surfaces in variously depicted scenes of alienation, desperation, or comic displays of futility. Some of the most evocative moments in their fictions turn on this anxiety and draw their tone from a sense of individual aimlessness. But when Camus asks the question: "is an absurd work of art possible?" (96) his discussion of absurdity necessarily extends outward. He invites an assessment of the subject-positions of readers and critics who, in perceiving absurdity, must bring a certain amount of their own worldview to bear on the text.

Camus argues that many philosophers have arrived at the point of absurdity: a point where logic finds its limits, where knowledge can extend no further and where an assertion cannot be justified without recourse to something unverifiable (9). "The real effort," writes Camus "is to stay there, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions" (10). "Staying there" is for Camus a suspension of hyper-consciousness that claims only an awareness of how little able humans are to extend this state of consciousness any further than their own subjectivity can allow. Camus presents absurdity as a mental state difficult to maintain because of its instability and its own internal contradiction: it paradoxically makes a claim to know, and to pronounce as fact, the position that we do not have the ability to know.

For Camus, literature is the place in which our "temptation to explain remains the greatest" (99) and therefore the art form in which the capacity to maintain absurdity struggles hardest against the desire for reason. The order and logic provided

by our linguistic habits and our most reassuring narratives appear to contest the illogical impetus of absurd awareness. In the years following Camus's essay, post-structuralism has assumed a central role in furthering this understanding of language; language and discourse are argued to be the central orders by which meanings, values and cultural and socio-political identifications are constructed, perpetuated, grounded, or reformed. The order of language envelops, inscribes or subsumes utterances into its pre-determined system and the logic that underpins it. In this light the notion that something as *illogical* as absurdity could be conveyed through forms of story-telling appears increasingly unsound, while desires to conform to the conventions of closure, continuity or morality tales further complicate absurdity's portrayal.

Suburban fiction initially presents itself as the last potential field in which to locate an example of Camus' absurd text. For some the traditional image of the suburb suggests rigidity, conformity and a lack of socio-political awareness. The suburb seems to generate an immediate association with order, or with the temptation to explain, to fulfil, to make meaningful, to attain and to satisfy. The contemporary currency of this image in popular novels and films relies in part on the subversion of just such an original stereotype wherein the suburb's supposed conformity in turn masks and oppresses a seemingly sinister or variously opposed undercurrent. This presumption positions itself according to a long-standing binary perpetuated by critics, readers, and social and cultural commentary: the distinction between the idealised suburb and the 'real thing' lying somewhere beneath or behind an inflexible false image of a physically and psychologically ordered landscape.

In the search for the authentic reality supposedly veiled by suburban conformity, some critics have denied the complexity of suburban identification and rigidly demarcated a potentially unrewarding evaluative model. The critical assumption that the suburb represented a state of conformity and a lack of self-awareness led some to reductively confine their readings of John Cheever's fiction. These critics, while appreciating his style, approached him as a writer who, in concentrating so thoroughly on suburban settings, lacked a certain level of serious or political content and consequently lacked literary gravity. The assessment of this gravity centred on the nexus of authenticity and agency, where authenticity was figured as the attainment of a political and social consciousness, and in turn, as the necessary constituent of individual agency. While on this reading the suburb represents the unconscious and inauthentic setting of subjectivity and conformity, its opposing place – the place figured as outside of the conditions and limitations of suburbia – is offered as an authentic, politicised and agential terrain. It is a place represented as symbolically urban, as variously cultured, and as refusing the supposed simplicities of the middle-class family unit, the house, the gendered roles of husband, of wife, of child; the place outside the suburb richly engages the social realities and identity issues surrounding class, race, and gender inequality; it assumes the place of the desired real, the natural, and the authentic.

An alternative model, structured in light of some of the primary tenets of existential and post-structural theory, disposes of the desire for essences and the pursuit of the real and instead prioritises the question of subjective anxiety and identification. Liberating suburban fictions from the confines of a restricted dialogue

is partly the task of the critic. It demands, among other things, a rejection of the idea that suburban fiction is necessarily all about the suburbs. In fiction by John Cheever and Richard Ford, although the setting is suburban, the central suburbanites and their identifications and subjectivities are of primary concern. When considering the types of reading advocated by existentialists such as Camus, and reading from the perspective of post-structuralism, the subjectivity and angst apparent in the works of Cheever and Ford assume vital importance. Read from an angle that refuses the binary of authentic/inauthentic their fictions emerge as explorations of a subjective unease and an individual will to permanently situate identity. Such a reading sheds light on the indeterminacy of the suburban image as well as on the limitations sustained by any suggestion that these texts are ‘merely’ suburban. The texts emerge as acutely concerned with the processes of self-criticism, self exploration and subjectivised agency. Their works can thus be used to demonstrate the potential for the suburban setting to be read as complementary to a psychological terrain of uncertainty and awareness as opposed to conformity and false consciousness.

Richard Ford has explicitly identified Cheever as a significant antecedent: “the people who really affected me – let me think about this so I say it truly. Cheever. A big influence.” (O’Rourke 191). But while Ford and Cheever share common styles and subject matter their career-spans fall some fifty years apart. Ford can be considered a descendent of Cheever’s style, but to speak of a ‘development’ from Cheever’s work to Ford’s is not to imply that Ford’s work is somehow ‘more progressive’ or ‘better than’ Cheever’s simply because it follows after his in a linear, historical sense. Rather, the differences in the way that Ford and Cheever have been

received by their contemporaries might suggest that critical expectations have changed or that Richard Ford finds himself writing in an age in which the presumptions that characterised critical approaches to Cheever no longer stand.

However, what is seen as a progression in the reading and critical acceptance of the style and subject matter of these texts cannot be considered an attempt to offer one perspective on them as more correct than another. It cannot be assumed that to approach either Ford's or Cheever's work from a Marxist perspective on consciousness rather than a post-structural or existentialist perspective is in any way to present those standpoints as either correct or incorrect ideologies, or as the most politically successful models for political engagement or social change. Essentially, whether one school of thought offers a greater or more empowering vision of political agency than another is not a question that this thesis intends (or has the capacity) to answer, and is certainly best left to discussion in wider fields of critical debate. In considering the various approaches to Cheever's suburban short stories and Ford's *Sportswriter* trilogy my primary intention is simply to refuse a single critical perspective on their work. My aim is to propose and perform textual analyses that will not grant the presumption that these texts, due to their supposedly limited subject matter, are inadequate or uninteresting as objects of critical or political enquiry. The method of reading generated by the assumptions that underpin pragmatic, existentialist and post-structural concessions to contingency is simply one method of establishing and arguing for this textual potential.

For existentialists, pragmatists and post-structuralists, one of the key concerns raised by the rejection of foundational or essentialists assumptions is how to

formulate a sense of agency or how to identify, signify, or communicate while continually placing agency, liberty, meaning, or any assumption of value into question. While it is important not to overstate allegiances among these critical fields, they do share common ground. As one example, their commonality can be demonstrated by tracing the impact that existentialist thought had on the work of Judith Butler. In turn, Butler's insistence on a shift away from an interest in essences and toward an understanding of inter-subjectivity, performance, process and signification, marks out a significant method to approach not only the frustrated needs of characters within the texts at hand, but also, the issues faced by critics and readers.

In fact the major concern motivating my readings of Ford's and Cheever's work is an interrogation of the kinds of critical and subjective desires that preoccupy both the subjects of the fictions at hand, and the critics who have examined them; desire is thus positioned as something occurring both inside and outside the text. This thesis is as much about the desire to make sense of a text as it is about the characters who, within Ford's and Cheever's stories, seek to make sense of their own lives and situations. The question of how individuals (characters, writers, critics) go on narrating, writing, and reading without postulating any claim to a static objective truth is the single fault-line along which all my inquiries align. More precisely, the critical attention this thesis pays to post-structuralism, existentialism, and neo-pragmatism engages contemporary debate by demonstrating the apparent overlaps of these fields, especially with regard to questions of individual subjectivity and political agency. Camus's question about whether a text can sustain absurdity

underlies the textual inquiry and emerges finally as a question that cannot escape itself; it is surrendered on the possibility that readings are never objectively verifiable, textual interpretation is itself indeterminate, and the modern critic might themselves occupy and generate an absurd position.

Chapter One: John Cheever

i. *Unnecessary Fiction: John Cheever's Critics*

In 1971, seven years before the publication of John Cheever's *Collected Stories*, *Time* magazine commissioned a study on suburbia that aimed to assess its trends and the opinions of its occupants. The results of the survey ran in an article entitled: "Suburbia: The New American Plurality" and they suggest that the real suburbia of those years was more diverse than may have been imagined. The article also includes this telling sentence:

"Many people really enjoy living in the community" is a statement that 74% agree with; 67% also feel that there is a strong sense of neighbourliness. There is always a possibility that such a satisfaction may be feigned, a defense against the anxiety-ridden image of the suburbanite in contemporary fiction. ("Suburbia: The New American Plurality").

This comment is indicative of the blurred distinction between the idea of suburbia, the life of the suburbanite, and the internal awareness suburbanites might have about their image. The writer presumes that any attempt to feign satisfaction would be the result of an attempt to improve the image of suburbia, rather than the reality of life there. The quote acknowledges that much of the contested ground over dissatisfaction in suburbia is one that, at the time, was already occurring in the realm of image, representation and discourse.

John Cheever's short stories are regularly considered to epitomise the genre of American suburban fiction both because of his choice of material and because the development of his writing, in its shifting focus from urban to suburban domesticity, mirrored the migration of the American population as it was happening. Cheever himself was literally part of this migration; he and his family moved from New York to Scarborough in 1951 (Donaldson, *Biography* 121) and later to Westchester. The fictional landscape Cheever created is populated by white American families generally living in the commuter areas on the outskirts of New York City. But it is not merely Cheever's subject matter that might be considered to class him as a suburban writer. The majority of his stories are narrated by or focalised through a white male protagonist who maintains a voice regularly marked by the attitudes and tones of someone who sympathises with, understands or even embodies certain suburban values.

Cheever is often quoted as having once said, in an interview for the *Saturday Review*, that he never intended for his work to be considered social commentary: "There's been too much criticism of the middle-class way of life. Life can be as good and rich there as anyplace else. I am not out to be a social critic, however, nor a defender of suburbia. It goes without saying that people in my stories and the things that happen to them could take place anywhere" (Donaldson, *Suburban Myth* 204). Donaldson, Cheever's biographer and also the author of a much earlier sociological work, *Suburban Myth* – about popular negative misconceptions and portrayals of suburbia in politics, journalism, film and fiction – notes that critics specifically

ignored Cheever's statements about his own work and went on to misread it by seeking precisely those features his comments had specifically negated (207).

Some novelists at that time did intend to address the rapid growth of suburbia, and the mindsets of the individuals who chose to live in the expanding suburbs. Richard Yates' 1962 *Revolutionary Road* details the lives of two suburbanites who make a plan to relocate to Paris and escape the American middle class. Yates himself has said he saw his novel as "as an indictment of American life in the nineteen-fifties. Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity over this country, by no means only in the suburbs – a kind of bland, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price" (De Witt). Novels such as *Revolutionary Road* and Sloane Wilson's 1955 *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* epitomised an emerging genre of suburban fiction in which individuals struggled to negotiate what was depicted as the overwhelming power and drudgery of social conformity.

Many critics, including Catherine Jurca, Mark Clapson and Robert Bueka cite David Riesman's influential 1950 text *The Lonely Crowd* as a primary academic example of the fears that supposedly struck suburbanites and anti-suburbanites during the golden era of ex-urbanisation: that the artificiality and the suppression of difference in patterned lifestyles facilitated a social practice that limited the personal choices of individuals; that people were losing their individuality due to increasingly ordered, limited sources of socialisation. Riesman asks: "Is it conceivable that these economically privileged Americans will some day wake up to the fact that they over-conform? Wake up to the discovery that a host of behavioural rituals are the result, not of an inescapable social imperative but of an image of society that though false,

provides certain “secondary gains” for the people who believe it?” (306). He immediately answers this question: “Since character structure is, if anything, even more tenacious than social structure, such an awakening is exceedingly unlikely” (306).

Riesman’s answer is far from clear. He refers to an “awakening”, which might allow the reader to presume that the Americans he writes of are asleep and thereby neither conscious nor in control of their lives. Yet Riesman suggests a distinction between character and society and thus preserves the idea that the individual is able to reflect on their own position. More importantly, Riesman weighs “character structure” as the more powerful of the two. What does Riesman mean by “character structure”? Does he mean a character as determined by the individual himself or does he imply (perhaps by an inherent sense of ‘constructedness’ in the term ‘structure’) that character is formulated by some external force acting on the individual? He refers to the “economic privilege” and “secondary gains” of the subjects in his discussion, which can be taken to suggest that the convenience of their situation influences the choice they make. In short Riesman’s text does not propose to establish the argument that suburbanites are mindlessly conforming, rather it establishes the possibility that they choose to conform.

Much has been made of the fact that early criticisms of Cheever were dismissive. He was perceived as a writer of the *New Yorker* style. His work was considered trivial because it concerned material that lacked the gravity or scope necessary to be considered literary. In Francis Bosha’s introduction to a collection of

reviews and essays on Cheever he notes that of the nearly 200 stories John Cheever published, 121 appeared in the *New Yorker* (xxi). Bosha sees this as “one of the factors that seems to have delayed early serious critical response to Cheever” (xxi). Cheever was seen, from the date of his earliest reviews in 1943, as bathing “in that same municipal pool where all the *New Yorker* short story-writers swim and sink...their characters live in an identical and tidy world which the magazine’s editors have laboriously created by a set tone and by an elaborate hierarchy of taboos” (Kees 7).

Cheever was described as a “short story manufacturer” (Mizener 11) and a man who utilised “slick professionalism somewhat at the expense of sincerity and psychological interest” (Crews 83). His stories were said to “belong where they are usually found, in a thin column in the *New Yorker*; they comment on the advertisements on either side for solid gold taxi whistles...” (Segal 84). Cheever’s method of producing stories, and the marketing and publication of those stories was incorporated into the assessment of his literary ‘quality’. In effect his dismissals sometimes had as much to do with his work as with the presentation of that work to an audience. The suspicion directed toward marketing, mass appeal, and post-industrial ‘manufacture’ in this sense fed into concomitant suspicions about his stories having an inauthentic quality about them; figured as written in order to conform to a marketing standard and appeal to an audience the stories are positioned as functioning inside rather than outside of a social machine. They are seen as contributing to reassuring social mechanisms of perpetuation, rather than working against this order, or performing serious critiques of social (and market) forces.

Nevertheless Cheever's early reception was not entirely as negative as some critical essays purport. While Scott Donaldson refers in a critical essay to *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill* as a collection that "generated some of the worst reviews of [Cheever's] life" (Donaldson "Suburban Sequence") it is also true that it was in a review of *Housebreaker* that Richard Gilman coined the famous reference to Cheever as the "Dante of Suburbia" (Gilman 31). John Aldridge, in a 1964 review, termed Cheever's stories "grievously underdiscussed" (77), but while Gilman comments on Cheever's "craftsmanship and uncommon satirical gifts" (29) he also dismisses Cheever in the familiar anti-suburban judgement that underpins many reviews:

What Cheever's well-heeled admirers want is what, by an ultimate failure of sensibility, he receded into giving them: an exercise in sophisticated self-criticism, together with a way back into the situation as before.

... Cheever is portraying a world of adolescent values. In the end he shares them. At least he shares them enough so that in these stories sadness never mounts to tragedy or feeling to passion. (30)

Gilman makes an assumption that a text of reasonable merit would rely on particular values – a morality not defined in the review, but that can be assumed to exclude the "adolescent" values of the suburbia that Cheever's texts are presumed to "recede" to; Gilman's "way back into" appears to stand opposed to an apparent desire for the divergent 'way out'. On Gilman's reading the acknowledged self-criticism in Cheever's work arrives at a certain point and goes no further, acting to reassure the suburban reader of their self-awareness even as they fail to change their situation. It

is characteristic of all of Cheever's negative reviewers to begin from the expectation that real gravity would be realised if Cheever would only provide censure of or escape from the suburbia he positions his characters in. Even John Aldridge's essentially positive essay on Cheever, which allows for the peculiarly patronising judgement that Cheever's texts are "more serious than his middlebrow admirers would be able to recognise" (Aldridge *Brigadier* 78) faults Cheever because the negative aspects of suburban life that Cheever touches on are "neutralized by some last minute withdrawal from the full implications of their meaning, some abrupt whimsical detour into palliating fantasy" (80).

If Cheever's texts have, as Aldridge asserts, a palliating effect they alleviate the symptoms of a problem while failing to provide a cure. For Aldridge the texts approach some great assertion of value or meaning and then retreat from it; for Gilman they allow for an audience of suburban fish to be "let off the hook" (30). Aldridge argues that Cheever fails to adequately confront the implications of suburban self awareness:

[Cheever] needs to break out of his present mode and rearrange or retool his imaginative responses, not only so that he will be able to confront squarely the full implications of his vision, but so that his vision can become in fact a vision and not simply a congeries of shyness and whimsical glances through a glass darkened by a pessimism not quite his own, not quite earned by his imagination. (81)

Aldridge's bias toward a "vision" – some clear meaning or design for change – is clear in this review. Because of his assumptions about what makes a text

successful Aldridge fails to read for the possibility that Cheever's voice intentionally abstains from the loaded "full implication of vision" and "square" confrontations Aldridge admires. Aldridge's review is from 1964. His partiality for texts heavy with social commentary is evident in this review as well as in his more recent critical work. In his 1990 essay "The New Assembly Line Fiction" (which led to the publication of a similarly titled book) Aldridge continues to evaluate literature from a similar perspective, dismissing many writers who might be considered the stylistic and thematic descendants of John Cheever's short fiction: "Almost everything that occurs on television is instantly forgettable, and so are most of the stories of, among others, Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Jayne Anne Phillips, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Amy Hempel" (35). Aldridge declares the works of these writers "bare minimalist reproductions of a reality so mundane and so completely unilluminated by language or theme that they never become attractive subjects for fiction but remain the raw materials for a fiction that is yet to be written" (36).

At heart Aldridge expects literature to alter and illuminate perspective by applying language to the "raw material" (36) of "mundane reality". Like the Marxist critic György Lukács, Aldridge's taste is for texts that choose to portray objects and events in such a way that they specifically engage with social and ideological debate. In his essay "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?" Lukács considers the relationship between ideology and literary style, analysing the difference between social realism and modernism. Lukács asserts that the attitude taken by a writer in choosing which objects and events to include and exclude in their work reflects their attitude to the social realities of their lives (Lukács 51). If the material a writer deals with "is

handled uncritically, the result may be an arbitrary naturalism, since the writer will not be able to distinguish between significant and irrelevant detail” (51).

Aldridge’s 1990 essay dismisses writers whose work might be considered to fit Lukács’s term “arbitrary naturalism” in that they are writers who (in Aldridge’s view) do no more than arbitrarily reflect reality. According to Lukács “the selection and subtraction [the writer] undertakes in response to the teleological pattern of his own life constitutes the most intimate link between a writer’s subjectivity and the outside world” (55). But for Aldridge the selection and subtraction made by the writers he analyses is not satisfactory or appears to deliberately refuse selection and subtraction. This deliberate refusal has the potential to be read as an intentional reflection of a social reality in which the very idea of valuing some experiences or objects as more worthy of literature than others seems tenuous. But Aldridge, like Lukács, is intent on the importance of value and vision.

For Lukács a text always represents a reflection of the subjectivity a writer experiences, and the difference between the “bourgeois modernism” Lukács questions, and the “bourgeois critical realism” (60) he favours, is that critically realist texts at least attempt to offer some form of objective perspective on the world they describe.

Objective reality, we found, in the modernist writing we examined, is subjectivised and robbed of its historicity, Yet, while chaos and *angst* are the inevitable consequences of such subjectivisation, their specific content, mood and ideological basis are determined by the social conditions in which the intellectual finds himself. (69)

The above paragraph summarises two of the steps that Lukács's reasoning makes in "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?" Firstly, in his definition of modernism, modernist texts condemn their characters to a perpetual existential angst because they offer nothing other than a subjective perspective. Secondly, this failure to offer any objective perspective is not the result of a default existential human condition in which people (and writers) are perpetually unable to attain (or illustrate) any objective perspective. Instead (true to his Marxist perspective) Lukács sees this angst as the result of social forces. Lukács asserts that angst is the result of social conditions under capitalism. "We are entitled" Lukács argues, "to guess at a rejection of socialism behind the fashionable condition of *angst*" (64).

From this basis Lukács concludes that a crucial role of the critic of modern literature is to "establish by examination of the work whether a writer's view of the world is based on the acceptance or rejection of *angst*" (83). The issue lies in Lukács's definition of angst as a social rather than metaphysical product: his assumption is first that angst can be rejected, and second, that angst and socialism are mutually exclusive terms. For existentialist philosophers rejecting angst is tantamount to what Albert Camus terms "philosophical suicide" (Camus 28). Lukács is concerned that angst represents the unavailability of an objective perspective. For Albert Camus this unavailability is an inevitable universal condition which gives rise to a sense of what he terms absurdity:

I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me to know it....these two certainties – my

appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle – I also know I cannot reconcile them. (51)

Camus, articulating an antithetical approach to that of Lukács, asks not whether a text can reject angst but whether a text can adequately convey the sensation of absurdity and address angst. Absurdity might here be defined as a state of mind where objectivity and order are constantly desired, but acknowledged as essentially unrealisable; absurdity arises from the plainly illogical persistence of the desire to attain objectivity, order, or irrefutable ‘meaning’ in the face of the knowledge that this desire is directed toward the impossible.

As a result of Camus’s analysis of man’s existence, he poses the question “is an absurd work of art possible?” (96). Returning to John Cheever’s negative reviews, the criticisms directed at his work by Gilman and Aldridge seem to frame the question on Lukács’s social terms (does this accept or reject angst?) rather than Camus’s existential terms (is this absurd?). Aldridge and Gilman expect social judgement; they expect escape from suburban social roles; they expect Cheever’s suburbanites to realise, as David Riesman would have it, that they are engaged in an elaborate scheme of false socialisation that they ought to “wake up from” (Riesman 306). Cheever’s texts, however, can be read as deliberately avoiding such conclusions, instead utilising forms of narration that resist objective or evaluative conclusions and resist the claim that he might be expected to offer any sense of escape from the binary of the unconscious suburb/the conscious elsewhere.

In his 1964 review John Aldridge briefly alludes to Cheever’s “The Swimmer”. He suggests that the story contributes to an understanding of the whole

suburban experience as one that is detached from an authentic existence, creating a link between the protagonist's act of swimming and what he sees as the illusion of the real constituted by the suburban ideal:

... they have all along been swimming from some crazy illusion of the real into some horrible hallucination which just happens to *be* the real, and in which the reassuring image of the four beautiful daughters safely at home playing tennis, the popularity enjoyed in the community, the affluence and the martini parties, are all revealed to be a lie, part of some fantastic and unnameable hoax perpetrated, oddly enough, on themselves, by themselves. (79)

In "The Swimmer" (*Stories* 603-612) the central character Ned decides to swim home via the swimming pools of various neighbours, constructing, as he does so, a "quasi-subterranean stream" (603) which he names after his wife, Lucinda (603). During the story the seasons and weather appear to change over the course of the day, so although the story begins on "one of those midsummer Sundays" (603) by the middle of the story Ned begins to notice leaves falling and the autumnal smell of wood smoke (609). The weather can be read as a subjective projection of the physical and psychological deterioration Ned undergoes as he begins to tire and as he and the reader gradually confront the loss of the suburban happiness he thought he had. On arriving at his house Ned finds his family gone, and his house locked and barred. The story closes with the line "the place was empty" (612).

Because the reader is not part of the story-world they might take an external perspective on Ned's swimming of the Lucinda – able to perceive the discrepancy between his evaluation of the task as an heroic river adventure, a "discovery" (603) a

“contribution to modern geography” (603) and the relatively safe, limited scope of the tame suburban swimming pool. But like Ned, the reader does not begin the story with a privileged level of knowledge about the state of his domestic life. The reader shares Ned’s limited subjective perspective and is asked initially to ‘believe’ along with Ned that his daughters and wife are at home playing tennis and that he is a popular neighbour and a financial success. Ned’s swim models a gradual approach to self-awareness. If a reader sees Ned’s swim as patently absurd, comical, or strange it is because they accept that the swim is an imaginative act of ordering and conquering the landscape that might seem impossible, laughable, or pointless. However the reader might entirely fail to question the ordering Ned does in imagining that his wife and daughter are at home and that he has a nice house and a life that seems to fulfil the requirements for suburban content. If in this act of ordering the suburban ideal is not questioned it is because it is not seen as absurd or objectively pointless in the same way that swimming the Lucinda might be.

Cheever’s text, as Aldridge suggests, conflates the imaginative passage along the Lucinda River with Ned’s pursuit of the image of suburbia, establishing both as examples of the subjective evaluation and construction humans engage in. But the text does more than allow for the reader to perceive the constructed and imagined elements of the suburban image. The text implicates the reader in the subjective evaluations Ned makes – forcing them to share in his image of himself. If the reader can sympathise with Ned’s loss of the ideal wife, family and home, they might just as well applaud the achievement he makes in swimming the Lucinda – acknowledging that one act of imagining is as worthy (and as absurd) as the other. In this sense the

text might be seen as functioning on more levels than Aldridge acknowledges: it plays with the reader's evaluative judgements of Ned's position and it confronts issues not merely of suburban image and discourse, but of all of the discourses and images used by individuals in shaping their lives or establishing themselves as, in Ned's desire, "legendary figures" (603) within their own discourse.

This shaping is both subjective, and potentially significant to questions of agency and politics. When Lukács assumes an entitlement to "guess at a rejection of socialism behind the fashionable condition of angst" (64) he fails to extend Camus's existentialist position to questions of culture, society, and ideology by presuming that socialism and angst are mutually exclusive positions that cannot logically be reconciled. In doing so Lukács perpetuates a dichotomy that insists upon the logical priority of one claim (the socialist imperative to challenge class structures) over another (the assertion of absurdity; the rejection of finality); Lukács retains his claims to an objective social critique and neglects his earlier acknowledgement of subjectivity as an inevitable position for all authors. When he asserts that writers always reflect the social realities of the world they experience (64) Lukács in fact signals a possible point of agreement between Camus and himself: in "The Myth of Sisyphus" Camus rejects the "contradiction of the philosopher enclosed *within* his system and the artist placed *before* his work" (96) and states that "the idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded, it is false" (96).

For Camus the writer or artist cannot be severed from the world they depict and cannot stand outside of it in order to obtain an objective perspective from which to create. Nor can the critic. Lukács insistence on the severing of socialism from

angst is problematic because, even at his own admission, subjectivity is always positioned as logically prior to any claims to the objective value of socialism: how can anyone offer a justifiable political assertion when they acknowledge that subjectivity limits their ability to establish perspective? Existentialism acknowledges this limitation as it confronts and admits the absurdity of any claims to objective value, yet it does not immediately reject the validity of political action. It simply acknowledges the sense of perpetual discomfort and insistence on self-critique that might come with all claims to the merit of a particular ideology. If socialism and angst are conflated, read as able to function mutually, they might reveal texts that demonstrate a form of social absurdity. In the passage from existentialism to post-structuralism, absurdity – the logical impasse that gives rise to sensations of angst – assumes a central position in critiques of social practice and discourse, and it is in this understanding that Cheever's work might be reconsidered as material that rehearses the difficulties of establishing identity and of associating that identity with a sense of social or political agency.

ii. *Necessary Fiction: Suburban Subjects*

The model of suburbia as an order that positions its subjects and limits their consciousness corresponds with an Althusserian model of subject formation. Following the theory of Marxist critic Louis Althusser, cultural and social practices can be seen to 'interpellate' or 'hail' individuals to the law, holding them to their social roles and giving them a constructed sense of identity (Eagleton 142). This

culturally constructed identity is one that might be construed as inauthentic and unconscious. One of the problems arising from this conception of subject-positioning and identification is the issue of agency and the extent to which individuals might choose to resist interpellation. Terry Eagleton discusses what he calls the “imaginary relationship” of individuals to the “real conditions of their existence” (142) in light of Althusser’s theory of interpellation. He draws attention to the fact that humans might have more choice than this model initially seems to allow, in terms of whether they respond to social pressures:

What if we fail to recognise and respond to the call of the Subject? What if we return the reply: ‘Sorry, you’ve got the wrong person?’ That we have to [in Althusser’s view] be interpellated as *some* kind of subject is clear...But there is no reason why we should always accept society’s identification of us as this *particular* sort of subject. (145)

It is in this distance between material existence and the cultural approach to it that the role of discourse and a potential ‘suburban discourse’ emerges as, in theory, either the ordering or ordered force of the subject. Catherine Jurca’s recent study on suburban fiction concerns precisely this discourse. In *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* she uses the term Diaspora to suggest “a spatial disparity between the place one inhabits and the place somewhere else where one imagines one’s real home or homeland to be” (8). In the imagined relationship of the suburbanite to their suburb Jurca argues for a form of displacement; the term “Diaspora” (8) deliberately refuses to construct the suburban subject as identified by their suburb, but sees their identification as a perpetual elsewhere. Jurca’s argument

alerts readers to the reversal of assumptions about the suburb: where the suburb itself might once have been seen as geographically artificial, conformist, and ordered, cultural and theoretical debate wrests the critique of the suburb away from its material reality – the houses and streets that constitute actual suburbs – and toward an interest in the discursive space around the suburb: the language used to describe its inhabitants, its portrayal in popular culture, and the impact of individuals as they negotiate the extent of their identification with (or against) what has become a discursive, psychological territory of supposed artificiality and conformity.

Cheever's early critics saw the suburb as a place where consciousness was threatened by levels of hyper-conformity, by interpellation into a system of class and into capitalist measures of success. The opposition proposed by this critique was one between subjective suburban limitation and authentic self-awareness or freedom of consciousness – where logically any critique of the 'mindlessness' or 'inauthenticity' of the suburb had to propose an alternative to the suburb – a superior elsewhere, or an outside where individuals had the ability to 'be' their true, authentic and conscious selves. Some critics presumed that the ability for a text to offer a legitimate social or political message depended on the text's ability to expose suburbia for all of its wrongful suppressions of individual thought, and to propose a 'real' alternative to the false values of suburbia. But if the dichotomy between conscious and unconscious behaviour is sustained how might any individual make the leap from the inauthentic, conformist, subjective state of mind, to the free, conscious, authentic state? In light of theories of interpellation the problem of consciousness becomes a problem of agency and insists on the question of what precisely allows for

the ‘awakening’ of the individual, or for their escape from interpellation? Where does the ability to resist the hail of the law reside? How might an individual arrive at a level of consciousness that would allow them to offer Terry Eagleton’s “Sorry, you’ve got the wrong person?” (145) and how might anyone bridge the gap between the conscious and the unconscious, the agential, and the automaton?

What critics really sought in Cheever was a voice that claimed superiority to subjective limitations on perspective. What they found was a voice that refused such objectivity and in fact rehearsed the anxiety of subjectivity itself. Rather than reducing suburbia to a simple model of conformity that could be either resisted or rejected, Cheever often created stories that treated the problem of subjectivity and identification as one that generated a flux between understanding identity as contingent, and sympathising with the angst-heavy desire to discount the implications of that contingency. In light of this, any question of the political merits of Cheever’s texts might be better understood in terms of post-structuralist theory – where the presumption of individual agency being dependant on objectivity is undone by the proposition that such a form of agency is inaccessible – if not impossible. The idea that leaving, resisting or rejecting the suburb forms a way out of subjectivity is negated. On this understanding the suburb provides only one microcosmic example of an individual struggle to both resist and rely on the subject positions assumed by individuals within the society they inhabit.

In “The Myth of Sisyphus” Albert Camus acknowledges that the narrating and ordering of experience through language functions partially to relieve the sensation of angst. Rather than confronting social issues and narrating methods of escape from

interpellation, fiction has the potential to subscribe to false objectivity and sustain rather than challenge bad faith. Camus sought texts that resisted any such assumptions of objective value, arguing that the truly absurd text “will not yield to the temptation of adding to what is described, a deeper meaning that it knows to be illegitimate” (97). “The absurd work”, he writes “illustrates thought’s renouncing of its prestige and its resignation to being no more than the intelligence that works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason” (98). In literature Camus sees the greatest challenge in maintaining a portrayal of the tension between human freedom and the assumption that existence has no objectively verifiable purpose: “I should like to speak here of a work in which the temptation to explain remains the greatest, in which illusion offers itself automatically, in which conclusion is almost inevitable. I mean fictional creation” (99). By depicting the absurd writers apply the systematising and reductive order of temporal narration and of language itself. In doing so they might be considered to risk reducing absurdity – a thought process that resists objective ordering – to the order of language or the reasoned parameters of the text.

In Cheever’s texts the order provided by language (as I will discuss in my reading of “The Geometry of Love”) is positioned alongside other variations on such an ordering. The temptation to make sense of the world, and the individual’s experience of it, is something exhibited by the writer as they organise their narrative. As Cheever allows for his characters to fall from the order provided by suburbia (the force that might be considered as the stabiliser of their social roles and related identifications) he often repositions them within new imaginary orders, such as the

imagined success or failure of swimming the Lucinda river or (as in the “The Geometry of Love”) the sense of order provided by Euclidean geometry. Multiple levels of order arise both inside and outside the texts as characters, narrators, and the implied author offer or refuse explanations. As stories like Cheever’s “The Geometry of Love” and “Goodbye My Brother” draw attention to the desire to stabilise identity within an order, they maintain a self-reflective and ambiguous quality and draw attention to the processing done by reader and author as they interpret or manipulate language.

Camus’ insistence on preserving absurdity originates in the existentialist definition of consciousness, where consciousness is defined as dependant on a kind of perpetual self-negation and self-interrogation. Sartre’s seminal work, *Being and Nothingness* grappled with the definition of individual consciousness – considering consciousness to centre on the relation between the human mind and its experience of the material world. For Sartre human anguish and angst are the inevitable result of a necessarily subjective consciousness. In his formulation of consciousness Sartre divided the world into two forms of being: the in-itself and the for-itself (22) (derived from terms used by Hegel (Solomon 269)). A being-in-itself has no possibilities and is complete: “Being is. Being is in itself. Being is what it is” (22). A table is a being in itself, as is a door, an orange, or any object that is unable to alter its own state, or understand the potential to change or to differ in the future. It is necessary, Sartre argues, “to oppose this formula – being in itself *is* what it is – to that which designates the being of consciousness” (21). In contrast to a being-in-itself a being-for-itself is has the potential to reflect, to change, to alter its position or orientation –

and is thus conscious. Sartre defines being-for-itself, somewhat obscurely, as “being what it is not and not being what it is” (21), a definition that has at its heart, the notion of displacement. Consciousness, in Sartre’s formulation, relies on absence: “Nothingness is the putting into question of being by being – that is, precisely consciousness or for-itself” (103).

For Sartre it is nothingness, the absence of something expected or possible, which allows for human consciousness. To know that you could own a house, or speak French, or be married tomorrow, is to understand that those things are absent today. Nothingness projects a possibility that is not realised. But in order to be always conscious, an individual must maintain a perpetual sense of longing for that which they are not; in order to sustain the nothingness that confers consciousness an individual must be able to perceive a space between what they have and what they desire for the future – the distinction between being-for-themselves and beings-in-themselves: “Nothingness is always an *elsewhere*. It is the obligation for the for-itself never to exist except in the form of elsewhere in relation to itself, to exist as a being which perpetually effects in itself a weakness of being” (102).

The human anguish and angst popularly regarded as the defining characteristic of French existentialism stems from the friction between what Sartre saw as the conflicting desire that resulted from his metaphysical understanding of consciousness – the desire to be both a being-for-itself and a being-in-itself. In Robert Solomon’s paraphrasing, “in his search to escape frustration and nothingness in general, man seeks to be in-itself, complete and determined so that his future is not an open question...yet man also wishes to remain free, to continue to hope for the

future” (Solomon 269). Any attempts to resolve anguish by entirely accepting a determined future or stasis, by committing either literal or (Camus’ term) “philosophical suicide” (Camus 28) are what Sartre would term “bad faith” (Solomon 271).

The insistence on ‘nothingness’ figures instability and indeterminacy as the necessary characteristics of consciousness and agency; this is a position markedly distinct from the insistence made by Marxist critics that political agency depends on the stable acquisition of an external ‘consciousness’. Nevertheless existentialism acknowledges, in angst and absurdity, that the maintenance of indeterminacy is both the necessary source of agency and the cause of a subjective anxiety. Such a subjective anxiety is construed as necessary but it exists in competition with the subjective desire for satisfaction. In Cheever’s fiction, the desire to replace one collapsed order with another can be read in term of Sartre’s conception of desire: order and stasis are at once longed for and resisted. Camus’s interest in the apparent conflict between absurdity and literature arises because of the ordering performed both in the act of attempting to ‘tell a meaningful story’ (with a beginning, a middle and – perhaps most significantly – an end) and in the audience’s will to find the right ‘meaning’ as they interpret the fiction.

In the manner of telling stories or in narrating history any failure in logic, causality, or objective valuation might affect the historian or story-teller. They might seek to reaffirm legitimacy and stability by manufacturing other sources of verifiability. When the emerging school of American pragmatist philosophy began to assert the limitations of historical study the American historian Henry Adams

confronted precisely this problem. In writing *The History of the United States of America During the Administration of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* Adams sought to establish causal trends and threads that could adequately serve to explain the past, but Patrick Diggins notes that Adams eventually came to realise the impossibility of the coherence he sought (70). In response, Adams attempted to apply the laws of physics to history in order to find a set of constants that could be applied to politics and societal progression in order to better understand the causality and process of time as it unfolded: “It is commonly assumed,” writes Diggins, “that Adams went off the deep end when he turned to the second law of thermodynamics to chart the dissipation of energy and the emerging spectre of entropy.” (Diggins 36). While his actions seem desperate, even comical, Adam’s motivation is more understandable: he wanted to assert that history could correspond to the kinds of truths and knowledge being offered by scientific investigations into the material universe.

Cheever’s “The Geometry of Love” (*Stories* 594-602) explores a similar sentiment on a smaller scale. After learning that his wife has taken a “phantom lover” (596) the story’s central character, Charlie Mallory, begins to apply Euclidian geometry to help stabilise his relationship to the world. His wife’s lover is a phantom in the sense that although she dresses up and takes herself out to restaurants and matinees, Charlie believes that she merely engages in behaviours that might give her an air of mystery or suggest she *might* have taken a lover (596). Unhappy, Charlie speculates that “if he could make a geometric analysis of his problems, mightn’t he solve them, or at least create an atmosphere of solution?” (595). He begins to draw

triangles, with lines representing his wife and children, and in calculating the angles between them he feels “much less bewildered, happier, more hopeful and magnanimous” (596). Mallory’s need for geometry starts to correlate with experiences of order and disorder in his life. When he and the family holiday in Italy Mallory needs “no Euclid for ten days” (599) whereas when he visits a friend on a business trip and is confronted with scenes of domestic difficulty he thinks “Oh Euclid, be with me now” (599). He takes out his slide rule on the ride home in the hopes of using “the relation between the volume of a cone and that of its circumscribed prism” (599) to put his friends’ behaviours into “linear terms” (599).

But like the progress of Ned in “The Swimmer”, Charlie’s efforts are undermined by the logical failures of the system he designs. In calculating a theorem for the relation between himself and the landscape of Gary, Indiana (600) Charlie suddenly loses perspective: “He went back to his bedroom, a lonely and a frightened man. He buried his face in his hands, and, when he raised it, he could clearly see the lights of the grade crossings and the little towns, but he had never applied his geometry to these” (601). Charlie’s geometry becomes an outrageous and hyperbolic analogy for all attempts to maintain order in the face of chaos. Eventually he turns to larger and more ambitious equations. Ill in hospital, and following a visit from his wife Mathilda, he works out “a simple geometrical analogy between his love for Mathilda and his fear of death” (602). Finally, confronting the image of himself in the mirror, Charlie uses geometry for a last time:

He tried to equate the veracity of his appetite, the boundlessness of his hopes, and the frailty of his carcass. He reasoned carefully. He knew that a miscalculation, such as he had made for

Gary, would end those events that had begun when Euclid's Dry Cleaning and Dyeing truck had passed under his window. Mathilda went from the hospital to a restaurant and then a movie, and it was the cleaning woman who told her, when she got home, that he had passed away. (602)

The final paragraph recalls, in the mention of the laundry van, the randomness of Charlie's decision to employ the Euclid. The combination of the abstract nouns of "hope" and "love" in his calculations, his desire to turn his calculations on himself (a practice he earlier acknowledges as "most prone to miscalculations (596)) and the "boundlessness" and "veracity" exhaust the capacities of Charlie's mathematics. Finally the story uncharacteristically distances its perspective from Charlie's and the revelation that he is dead is delivered via the story of his wife spending the day with her "phantom lover" and learning the news of her husband's death (602).

On Charlie's understanding he dies due to a miscalculation. What is not clear, for the reader, is whether it is by coincidence that his death follows his mathematical error or whether his geometric system becomes a form of self-fulfilling prophecy – a system he so whole-heartedly embraces that the level of its illusion actually begins to limit his existence, and assume a kind of factic inevitability. Either way, the collapse of his math resonates as an inability to encompass or overcome that which cannot be logically assessed. Earlier in the story the close third person narrator notes of Charlie that "Geometry served him beautifully for the metaphysics of understood pain" (597) – a sentence that makes little sense. What are the metaphysics of pain? In what sense is this pain 'understood'? The narrator, like Charlie, begins to employ the kind of language that, although compliant with certain laws (the rules of grammar) and

sentimentally, aesthetically pleasing, has no specific control over what it computes, considers or presents; “understood pain” is markedly imprecise, conferring an ambiguous sense of dissatisfaction, but never specifying who owns the ‘understanding’, and who shares in it.

And yet it is clear that the reliance Charlie forms on his Euclid is one based on his faith and understanding of his own system. Although “the metaphysics of understood pain” seems an imprecise term it clearly functions within Charlie’s understanding of his logic. In fact, he contemplates publishing a book entitled *Euclidean Emotion: The Geometry of Sentiment* so as to share his solutions with others. While Charlie employs Euclidean terms he re-deploys the significations of those terms so that the correspondence of the words, though altered, is not entirely made meaningless or incommunicable. Geometric terms, as with words, become the signs employed by Charlie to negotiate objects’ (abstract or otherwise) significations. The absurdity of Charlie’s usage does not reside in the use of the terms themselves, or his redeployment of them, but in the assumption that they might compute in order to reveal some truth, or manage their ‘real-world’ referents. Read as an allegory of language-use or the act of narration, Charlie’s Euclidean endeavour reveals language to be just as spurious in its failure to compute or govern reality – and also, in sympathy with Charlie’s convictions, an order which might be understood as ‘serving beautifully’ in curbing metaphysical, existential angst or understood pain.

Camus hazarded that literature is a field in which the desire to explain always competes with the existential resistance to illusions (99). As Charlie assumes the language of mathematics he exposes its dependence on a self-generated logic, a logic

that might serve the subject who applies it, but is an illusion that fails to add up to any specifically objective truths. The final paragraph marks a subtle shift in narration. In relinquishing the close third person voice the story has utilised throughout, the final sentence suggests that the narrator cannot follow Charlie beyond death; the capacity to narrate only extends to a certain limit and no further and language, like geometry, is revealed to have its own limit for referential capacity. Charlie's behaviour is absurd in that the reader can clearly follow how his mathematical logic is not essentially grounded in any objectively verifiable truths; his equations don't 'add up' to anything except in a purely subjective sense.

If the reader grasps that Charlie's use of math mirrors the use of other orders, such as language, the story allows for a potential level of absurdity. In pushing this reading to its most extreme limits it can even be argued that the whole process of reading the story, and any willingness to either sympathise with or laugh at Charlie's use of Euclid, is in itself an exercise in the "metaphysics of understood pain". It is possible to position the "understood" of this sentence as belonging to an implied reader. The reader who has a sense of the pain referred to engages in a moment of inter-subjective association with John Cheever's system of language. The placement of this sensation even into the most arbitrary and non-specific linguistic terms serves to communicate while simultaneously this communication does nothing, it computes nothing, it offers no objectively sustainable evaluations or truths, it makes no claim to the superiority or authenticity of its terms. This approach to texts will re-emerge in my reading of Richard Ford's work, where I argue that the desire for objective value

is replaced by an emphasis on the importance of inter-subjectivity and where communicative capacity assumes a significant potential.

As in many of Cheever's stories the impetus for drama in this story is created by a form of domestic distress. In "The Geometry of Love" Charlie's confidence in his position as husband falters as he learns of his wife's phantom lover; in "The Chimera" (*Stories* 473-481) the narrator creates an imaginary woman to relieve the dissatisfaction of his marriage; in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" (253-269) Johnny Hake burgles his neighbours' houses because he can no longer provide financially for his family; in "The Country Husband" (325-346) Francis falls helplessly in love with the babysitter, and then curbs his desperate love by taking up woodwork, and in "The Swimmer" Ned is gradually revealed to have lost his family and financial security. In each of these stories, in response to a lapse in their ability to conform to the suburban order that defines their roles as husband or father the characters respond by attempting to relocate themselves in the system; they attempt to re-establish their positions and restore a reassuring sense of themselves as contingently significant. Often the absurdity of their responses is comic but also reveals forms of desperation and comments on the arbitrary nature of evaluative models. The characters' behaviours can be read as absurd because they refuse to accept their subject-positions as fundamentally tenuous relations to a system already demonstrated to be unstable and uncertain.

In "The Geometry of Love", "The Swimmer" and "The Chimera" the new orders the central characters create for themselves (the Euclid, the imaginary Lucinda River, and the imaginary mistress) eventually escape the control of the central

characters so that despite the fact that they are imagined measures, the characters still fail to achieve success against them. Some of Cheever's characters die (as in "The Geometry of Love" or "Oh Youth and Beauty!") or resolve to re-establish themselves in their suburban role (as in "The Country Husband" where Francis takes up therapeutic woodwork or "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" where Johnny Hake returns what he has stolen). Sometimes as in "The Chimera" or "Goodbye My Brother" they choose to perpetuate illusions that function as coping mechanisms for a lingering dissatisfaction or doubt. They exhibit a sustained desire to station themselves in a system and attain what is inevitably made unavailable to them: stasis, or being-in-itself.

The longing for and displacement of satisfaction and stability that underpins existentialist notions of angst and absurdity is primarily a derivative of the existentialist conception of consciousness. While in one sense, absurdity and angst are an essential aspect of existentialism, consciousness and self awareness are equally vital. Relinquishing the assumption that an objective, more 'real' or more 'true', or 'liberated' level of understanding exists does not by implication necessitate a rejection (as Lukács might argue) of agency. However this relinquishment does foreground the issue of subjectivity as a seemingly inevitable restraint on human agency, and offer resultant anxieties about precisely how to conceptualise freedom of consciousness. The existentialist insistence on subjective self-awareness (rather than objectivity) has connections to questions of agency, interpellation, the supposed instability of the post-modern subject, and the progression of theories of discourse through to post-structuralism.

The passage from existentialism to post-structuralism and the adaptation of existentialist ideas into the field of literary and cultural theory can be traced through Judith Butler's work. For Butler the act of subscribing to a particular determinism or of embodying a particular and fixed social essence (specifically, in her example, gender) is in many ways reliant on the language used to structure and contextualise that role. Existentialism's insistence on resisting determinism (or resisting the drive to become a being-in-itself) formed a critical position from which Butler worked toward her post-structural theory of performativity. But criticisms of Butler's work have centred on the supposed limitations of agency offered by her theoretical model (Benhabib 20; Magnus 81; Vasterling 17) and the question of agency continues, in her field, to drive the formulation of arguments about identity politics. Most importantly, Butler's attempt to *reject* the notion of an authentic pre-determined self (a self which can somehow be attained but which exists outside of culture and discourse) has led to some of the most problematic interpretations and implications of her work: while some Marxist critics insist that agency depends on *escaping* the false materiality of capitalist culture and establishing the authentic, Butler seeks to affirm individual agency from *within* the rejection of a pre-discursive and authentic 'I'.

In 1986 Butler published an essay in *Yale French Studies* that focussed on Simone de Beauvoir's statement "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman"¹ ("Sex and Gender" 35) and began to examine the way Beauvoir severs the factic limitations of biological sex from the culturally negotiable category of gender. Butler's essay turns to the work of Sartre in order to consider Beauvoir's use of the word "become" (36). Butler questions Beauvoir's verb usage in terms of agency; if

gender is constructed independently of biological sex, Beauvoir might be considered to offer a controversial position in which gender is voluntarily selected by a “choosing agent prior to its chosen gender” (37). This contradicts any assertion that conceives of gender as “passively determined, constructed by a personified system of patriarchy or phallogocentric language which precedes and determines the subject itself” (36). In Beauvoir’s work Butler meets an impasse when confronted by the question of subject-formation and the challenge of agency; how can Butler offer Beauvoir’s severing of sex from gender while continuing to disavow the existence of a pre-discursive subject and continuing to emphasise the power of normalised and discursive gendered roles in the construction of subjects?

In *Epistemology of the Closet* Eve Sedgwick (who widely employs and expands on Butler’s theory of performativity) interrogates the implications of the sex/gender binary by arguing that some feminist theory seems to rely on the assumption that “the more fully gender inequality can be shown to inhere in human culture rather than in biological nature, the more amenable it must be to alteration and form” (41). The problem with this assumption, argues Sedgwick, is that it assumes that it would be easier to alter the norms if gender is “only” cultural (41) – an optimistic assumption given the stringency and pervasiveness of certain cultural imperatives. What Sedgwick acknowledges is that by conceding the facticity of biological sex, we are not by implication free to assume that cultured gender is voluntary. In *Gender Trouble* Butler also argues that “on some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings... bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law...in such a

case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (12). The supposed cultural destiny of gender is what Butler is interested in untangling, but she is insistent that challenging such a destiny is not dependant on positing an ‘escape from culture’, an ‘outside’ or an ‘authentic’ and ‘pre-discursive’ self.

In her early essay on Beauvoir, Butler attempts to read her work as denying the possibility of a pre-discursive self, arguing that Beauvoir took Sartre at his “non-Cartesian best” (38) and that in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir sought to collapse the oppositional relationship between “choice and acculturation” and present gendering the self as a choice only made among variable options within a given set of available cultural norms. In this reading of Beauvoir Butler begins to argue that there is no ideal person who exists independently of culture, but neither is culture a set structure under which the subject is a passive and disempowered recipient of a static identity. She makes the assertion, later in the essay, that the work of Monique Wittig and Michel Foucault offer a “radicalisation” of Beauvoir’s views (46). In her subsequent work Butler would go on to pursue the post-structuralist approaches of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida and to reject many of her earlier existentialist sources. By the publication of *Gender Trouble* she had clarified her position on the subject: “Despite my previous efforts to argue the contrary, it appears that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body [essence/appearance] dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms. The preservation of that very distinction can be read as symptomatic of the very phallogocentrism that Beauvoir underestimates.” (17).

Recently Alan Schrift has reconsidered the debt owed by Butler to existentialism and asserts that Butler misread Sartre’s conception of the self as

allowing for a “doer behind the deed”. Schrift argues that Sartre’s position that people construct their identity within the given limits of facticity “is precisely the position with which *Bodies That Matter* begins, as Butler tries to avoid the pitfalls of either a humanistic voluntarism or a deterministic constructionism. In a sense, avoiding either of these alternatives is what motivated her move from a Foucauldian account of discursive practice, to a Derridean account of iterability” (20). Schrift’s argument is that Butler need not have abandoned existentialism in her attempt to resolve the issue of agency; neither Sartre nor Butler are ever able to “account for” the “who” and “why” that motivate individual choices on how to respond to cultural imperatives (19) because neither of them posit a self that exists outside or apart from lived experience.²

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre begins with a dismissal of “dualisms that have embarrassed philosophy” (1) – for example the dualism central to a discussion of subjectivity: the dualism of appearance and essence. Appearance might be likened to the self figured and interpreted through inauthentic society, while essence is considered the true and authentic self. He argues that in eliminating any belief in the “being-behind-the-appearance... appearance becomes full positivity; its essence is no longer opposed to being but on the contrary is the essence of it” (2). This is partly how Butler was able to interpret Beauvoir as advocating a perpetual kind of appearance which *is* essence: “Lived or experienced sex is already gendered. We become our genders, but we become them from a place which cannot be found and which, strictly speaking, cannot be said to exist” (39). Butler sees the body as perpetually involved in expression *as gender* so there is no ‘original’ quality of

‘biological’ sex which can be said to predetermine the cultural performance of gender. There is in this sense only the existence of an ever-changing, culturally gendered body as dependant on a series of available gender roles and potential significations which are offered within a framework established *in relation to* assumptions about biological gender. “The Body” writes Butler “is an *occasion* for meaning, a constant and significant *absence* which is only known through its significations” (46). In Cheever’s fiction the implications of Butler’s rejection of an authentic self are traced in my reading of “Goodbye My Brother”, a story that pays considerable attention to identification and to the potential privileges and limitations of prioritising authentic forms of social and historical identification over the supposedly inauthentic.

Gender Trouble is the work in which Butler most clearly elaborates the theory that has its roots in her early essay on Sartre and Beauvoir. In *Gender Trouble* Butler writes: “my argument is that there need not be a “doer behind the deed,” but that the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed” (143). Butler then explicitly notes that this is “not a return to an existentialist theory of the self as constituted through its acts, for the existential theory maintains a pre-discursive structure for both the self and its acts” (142). What Butler found in the work of Jaques Derrida was the capacity to argue for the reliance of gendered identity on culture and context rather than individual choice and will. In this sense Butler suggests that what individuals ‘mean’ or communicate with their bodies relies not on the reality of their physicality but on their capability to perform, reiterate, and signify as gendered within a discourse that uses comparative and contextualised terms of reference:

According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation, however, it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealised, and that his idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (173)

In this passage the convergence of Butler's existentialist beginnings and her subsequent use of theories of discourse is clear: she begins with the assertion of a desire for cohesive identity, and an understanding of that cohesion as imagined, and responds to the established issue of subjective identification with a Derridan discussion of signification and performativity.

In reading suburban fiction through Butler's lens suburban subjectivity assumes a level of inevitability while performativity and the renegotiation of subject roles is figured as an element of agency. The desire to be *made stable* reflects an early existential sense that subjectivity is the stage of both agency and angst. In fictions by both Ford and Cheever the desires Butler speaks of form an essential aspect of the tension and conflict I discuss as pertinent to both writers' fictional portrayals of suburban existence. But Butler's formulations are also closely tied to the post-structuralist perspectives on language that further aid in my analysis of the narrative styles of both Cheever and Ford. The suburbs are, in these stories, constructed entirely through language, and the relations between characters are created through dialogue. The instability of language assumes a vital significance in

Ford's work, where the indeterminacy of language, self-identity, and the structure of the suburb mirror one another. But even in Cheever's work some of his more imprecise terms, his lack of specificity (particularly with abstract nouns) and the ambivalence of some of his phrases form a noticeable stylistic feature.

In *On Deconstruction* Jonathan Culler describes how Derrida's work builds on and challenges the work of J.L. Austin. "Austin," writes Culler, "refuses to explain meaning in terms of a state of mind and proposes, rather, an analysis of the conventions of discourse" (115). In this sense meaning is seen to reside not in the state of mind of an individual, but in how an utterance signifies within a given discourse. Derrida goes on to argue that the success of conveying meaning is dependant not merely on context, but on the ability of an utterance to conform with standards or to be "recognisable as the repetition of a conventional procedure" (Culler 119). The potential emptiness of the phrase "the metaphysics of understood pain" (597) from "The Geometry of Love" provides one example of communicative capacity being contingent on a shared or assumed discourse. The factor that makes a given instance of language able to communicate something is not the intention motivating its utterance or its relation to the referent (a relation which cannot be fixed), but rather, its iterability – its ability to function within a discourse, and to go on functioning as it repeated and reiterated. The principle underpinning the work of both Austin and Derrida is that "illocutionary force is determined by context rather than by intention" (Culler 123); in this sense signs act to communicate by relating not directly to their referents, but by relating to other signs within a chain of grammar – within a functioning discourse.

The step Derrida takes in furthering this proposition is his argument that it is impossible to entirely govern context: “meaning is context bound, but context is boundless” (Culler 123). Accordingly, grounding the context of a given utterance is impossible, and any attempt to fix meaning by specifying a ‘true’ definition of a signifier will always end in the perpetual chasing of the signified through various unfolding contexts which in turn will lead to an eternal attempt to contextualise context (Culler 96). Consider the idea of a given word immediately correlating to the object it describes; it would be difficult for meaning to be conveyed unless that word’s signification relied on a series of previously acknowledged given attributes for the term, rather than on the specific characteristics of the object at hand. The term cannot be fixed to include at once all of the possible versions of the object that might exist in the world without artificially suppressing possible differences. Thus according to Derrida it would be impossible to fix the meaning of a single sign within a discourse, given that context is always changing, never stable.

For Butler, the body can never occupy a static place of correspondence to a normal or natural ‘meaning’ of gender; the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ can never apply to every example of a gendered or sexed individual without suppressing their differences. The Judith Butler of *Gender Trouble* concludes that “the ‘real’ and the ‘sexually factic’ are phantasmic constructions – illusions of substance – that bodies are compelled to approximate but never can” (186). This compulsion to approximate is again the result of a desire to affirm a static identity. She goes on to ask “Does this offer the possibility for a repetition that is not fully constrained by the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities? Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* the natural,

so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalised performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (186). Every instance in which an individual fails to correspond to the stereotypical assumption of what ‘male’ or ‘female’ designates, is also a demonstration of the intangibility of the ‘real’ or authentic male or female gender. A consideration of gender which situates it as a performance not reliant on or corresponding to a static notion of “male” or “female” challenges supposed truths and falsities, and challenges the binaries of authentic/unreal and original/copy.

If the question of gender becomes a question of how to resignify, undermine, interrogate and displace the notion of a true gender, Butler allows that the “question of agency is reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work” (184). It is no longer a question of escaping or resisting the hail to the law from outside the law, but rather, of acknowledging that there is no opportunity to be outside of social imperatives. Even if there is an ontologically superior reality, there is no way to access that reality. There is only the perpetually limited access granted through the subjective lens of discourse. Agency in terms of the argument in *Gender Trouble* is located in Butler’s assertion that it is false to assume that “to be *constituted* by discourse is to be *determined* by discourse” and in her attempt to collapse the free-will/determinism binary by asserting that “construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency” (187).

But (and Butler introduces this as a somewhat under-explored theme in *Gender Trouble*) how might a subject identify if they remain perpetually aware of the relative and impossible stability of their identity? The idea of identity assumes a kind

of absurdity in that identity would necessarily always be unstable; identity would be constantly acknowledged as manufactured rather than reflecting a grounded, authentic self. Here the anxieties of Cheever's text, which I discuss in the levels of uncertainty and textual conflict that manifest in "Goodbye my Brother" and "The Worm in the Apple" are shown to be logical concomitants of the acknowledged limitations on both agency and the notion of essential 'authentic' and 'outside'. Early on in *Gender Trouble* Butler suggests that interrogating subjective identifications in terms of sex and sexual identity might support the inference that "gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of 'the original' ... reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (41). Later, Butler briefly refers to Frederic Jameson's essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Culture" as she reconsiders this concept of parody, and the assertion that repeated performances, caricatures, or copies of a gender role draw attention to the possibility that all such roles are equally a matter of performance rather than of 'original' or 'authentic' being.

Frederic Jameson has argued that one of the distinctions between the modernist and the post-modern aesthetic lies in the issue of authenticity and can be seen in the distinction between modernist parody and post-modern pastiche (Jameson 114). Parody suggests there is always some "linguistic norm in contrast to which the styles of great modernists can be mocked" (114). When the idea of a linguistic norm, some pre-figured natural, authentic language is distrusted, there is no norm against which to compare and pastiche arises (114). Pastiche is mimicry that mimics past styles without comparison to any (now unavailable) ideals; it is parody "without the

satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic” (114).

Today, Jameson argues, there is no longer an assertion of an authentic individual (115). For Jameson two positions arise in relation to this assertion – one is that individual, personal identity once existed (before the onset of capitalism and its apparently dehumanising forces) but that it has been gradually masked and obscured. The other, “the more radical of the two, what one might call the post-structuralist position...adds: not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past; it never really existed in the first place” (115). In an effort to re-capture the notion of the personal, static individual Jameson suggests that today cultural approaches to existence locate that stasis in the past. Jameson identifies pastiche in nostalgic films in which the past is reified as a place of stability; John Cheever’s nostalgic impulses can be read as aligned with Jameson’s formulation of just such a desire.

Baudrillard somewhat similarly sees nostalgia as the cultural act which masks absence or emptiness, the failure of the authentic, the real or the truth (12). For Baudrillard, “when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity...there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential” (12). In this desire for the stability of a known ‘authentic’ or true place of identity the re-emergence of an existential approach might be seen. The desire to become a “being-in-itself,” to locate oneself in a particular and stable role can be seen in this looking back – in the nostalgic desire for an imagined past which nevertheless, and somewhat paradoxically or absurdly arises out of the

acknowledgement that being is contingent on the way it is performed, signified or communicated, rather than on some objective and attainable ‘real’ existence.

“If there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false” (*Gender Trouble* 180) writes Butler, “the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction” (180).

In *Eros the Bittersweet* Ann Carson writes:

We think by projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinction between them...In any act of thinking the mind must reach across this distinction between the known and unknown, linking one to another but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space...The same subterfuge which we have called an “erotic ruse” in novels and poems now appears to constitute the very structure of human thinking. Where the mind reaches out to know, the space of desire opens and a necessary fiction transpires. (171)

Here the crucial terms “necessary” and “fiction” bridge Carson’s spatially rendered gap between the known and unknown, and – in conceding the contemporary (post-structuralist) approach to knowledge as one that sees knowledge as limited, unverifiable, contingent – she renders this gap in terms of the imagined rather than the real or verifiable – and locates desire in this imagining.

iii. *Pornographic Suburb*

Just as Butler argues that there is no authentic gender outside of its iteration, so Cheever's texts refuse the possibility that his suburban characters might escape to some authentic 'outside' of suburbia. And just as Butler began to understand identification as an ever-changing engagement with discursive practice, Cheever depicts individuals who attempt to establish and function within new or imagined discourses. Finally, Butler's intimation (followed by the work of Baudrillard and Jameson) that the displacement of identity might lead to a desire for stasis and a nostalgic longing for the simplicity of static selves is exhibited in the nostalgic tone of John Cheever's work. It is a tone Elizabeth Hardwick has identified as peculiar to Cheever for its conflicting impulses: "The nostalgia is curiously, and with great originality, combined with a contemporary and rootless compulsion to destroy, even to crash by repetition, the essence of nostalgia..."(102). In Hardwick's formulation Cheever's nostalgia bears an inherent futility. Nostalgia has itself, without this "crashing by repetition", a negative implication in that it might signify a loss or even a past that cannot be restored. Perhaps what Hardwick terms the "essence of nostalgia", that thing Cheever supposedly destroys, is the notion that *anything other than longing* ever existed. On this understanding nostalgia is the sentiment of impossible desire, rather than loss. Whatever is lost to the past, as Jameson might say, never existed in the first place.

If nostalgia gestures to the essentially unattainable then Cheever's repetitions draw attention to its aimlessness, its lack of sense, its absurdity. The repetition evokes Butler's suggestion in *Gender Trouble* that "the parodic repetition of "the original" ...reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (41). In this sense there can be no resurrected originals, only copies, and the futile desire to find originals that never existed. Through repetitions of longing for the lost and unattainable Cheever's nostalgic tone is, as Hardwick puts it, combined "with a contemporary and rootless compulsion to destroy" (102) and sets about undoing the notion that whatever his characters mourn could ever be retrieved. Cheever's complex treatment of the nostalgic impulse is revealed in one of his earliest published stories: "Goodbye My Brother" (*Stories* 3-21).

The story focuses primarily on two brothers: the narrator and Lawrence. Lawrence, an estranged brother, returns after a four year absence to holiday with the family at the coastal family home, Laud's Head, in which each of the members of the family have equity. It is eventually revealed that Lawrence intends to sell his share in the house and "say goodbye" to the family (18). The conflict between Lawrence and the narrator centres on the perspectives they take on life, where Lawrence is generally pessimistic, and the narrator is optimistic. This conflict escalates until the brothers get into a fight on the beach and the narrator hits Lawrence over the back of the head with a root (19). Although Lawrence is not killed the narrator, on seeing the blood rush from his brother's head, does momentarily wish Lawrence were dead (19).

In a biographical reading Scott Donaldson analyses the story as one of Cheever's treatments of his own fratricidal impulses toward his older brother Fred

(*Biography* 138). Donaldson argues that the narrator is the person who (perhaps unreliably) attributes all of the gloominess to Lawrence (139). Donaldson also notes that the character Lawrence was written into the story after a number of earlier drafts in which there was no brother (140). Alongside the fratricidal impulse Donaldson thus sees the story as one in which the rebuke against pessimism is directed “not only at a second party, but at a portion of himself [the narrator] – and the narrator, almost surely, spoke of the author” (140).

Donaldson’s “almost certainly” is viable if read within the context of his much wider argument, in which Donaldson’s careful portrayal of Cheever’s personal life is what motivates his readings of Cheever’s texts. But outside of the biographical stance the tension Donaldson identifies between the pessimism of Lawrence’s character and the narrator’s desire to excise this negativity is apparent within the text. While the narrator likes the house at Laud’s Head, Lawrence identifies its faults. He reminds the narrator that the house’s shingles were sourced second-hand from nearby farms because their father, on building the house, wanted it to look “venerable” (9). The doors and window frames of the house have been intentionally scored and treated to look old (9). “Imagine spending thousands of dollars to make a sound house look wrecked” (9) says Lawrence. In an attempt to make the house feel more authentic the family has intentionally re-created those things that supposedly lend it venerability: old shingles, doors and window frames are added to the house. But in their re-contextualised state these items signify (at least for Lawrence) a lack of authenticity. They represent the desperate desire to make the house authentic, inevitably testifying to what it lacks, rather than what it is.

The narrator recalls:

I had heard [Lawrence] say, years ago, that we and our friends and our part of the nation, finding ourselves unable to cope with the problems of the present, had, like a wretched adult, turned back to what we supposed was a happier and a simpler time, and that our taste for reconstruction and candlelight was a measure of this irremediable failure. (9)

Later the family in the story attend a costume party at the local boat club. The theme is “come as you wish you were” (14). The narrator dresses in his old football uniform and his wife wears her wedding dress (14). When they arrive at the dance they find that many of the other couples have done exactly the same thing and there are “ten brides on the floor” (15). The traditional, gendered, Americana roles communally recognised as images of success are presented as nostalgic identity-roles from the past. “The coincidence,” notes the narrator, “this funny coincidence, kept everybody laughing, and made this one of the most lighthearted parties we’d ever attended” (15).

But the narrator is annoyed that Lawrence and his wife fail to participate. Lawrence’s wife wears a red dress and is pronounced to be “all wrong” (16) and “not in the spirit of the party at all” (16) and Lawrence refuses to wear a costume. The final paragraph in the story sounds a note of resignation on the part of the narrator: “But what can you do with a man like that? What can you do? How can you dissuade his eye in a crowd from seeking out the cheek with the acne, the infirm hand; how can you teach him to respond to the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life; how can you put his finger on the obdurate truths before which

fear and horror are powerless? (21). The excess and hyperbole of the narrator's phrasing in this final paragraph can be read multiply, as either a straight appreciation of the atmosphere and beauty of the world of the story (and a reprimand against Lawrence's pessimistic resignation) or as a misplaced and wilful ignorance of life's darker undercurrents. In one sense the narrator has already answered the question of 'what to do' with a man like Lawrence in his earlier frustrated desire to see Lawrence dead.

Even in the atmosphere of the costume party it is Lawrence's mere presence that casts a shadow over the narrator's enjoyment of the scene. Lawrence only gestures at the party and says "Look at that..." (16). The narrator supplies Lawrence's thoughts: "I knew that Lawrence was looking bleakly at our party as he had looked at the weather-beaten shingles of our house, as if he saw here an abuse and a distortion of time; as if in wanting to be brides and football players we exposed the fact that we had been unable to find other lights to go by and, destitute of faith and principal, had become foolish and sad" (16). In this sentiment Cheever's narration foreshadows the critical terms by which Baudrillard would address nostalgia in 1983 when he wrote that "when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning...there is a panic stricken production of the real and the referential" (12). While Lawrence (and to an extent Baudrillard) potentially share the same reservations about the impetus of nostalgia, the narrator appears to reject or deny concerns about failure or in-authenticity. For the narrator, the costume party is funny because so many people have reproduced a particular standard image. For Lawrence the repetition of that image seems a desperate state of conformity and

an attempt to re-create lost essences and identities. For the narrator the repetition exposes the commonalities amongst the crowd and the crowd understands the repetitions to expose their common fantasies and desires, rather than understanding the ideals as lost standards they attempt to conform to. In the narrator's terms the repetitions are instances of connection, assurance, and agreement rather than moments of desperation.

The narrator's desire to see Lawrence dead is in part a desire to remove the self-aware perspective from which the narrator's perception of his situation acknowledges Lawrence's criticisms. Lawrence is not killed. He survives in this story perhaps by necessity, as the distant but eternally accessible vessel of the narrator's displaced dissatisfactions. The narrator's capacity to critique his (and the crowd's) actions functions only as long as he is able to attribute this perspective to Lawrence. The displaced dissatisfactions mark and undercut the enthusiasm of the language used in the final paragraph, enabling the reader to see the paragraph as one that envelops the perspectives of both brothers in a simultaneous voicing of their opposing standpoints. In one sense, the narrator is ridiculous and Lawrence's criticism offer a fair analysis, while on the opposite understanding Lawrence's criticisms cling to a particular notion of what is true and what is not, and in doing so, fail to register the striking and most enjoyable aspects of life.

The optimistic narrator, by contrast, praises these things, and the beauty of his wife and her sister taking a swim forms the story's closing image: "I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched them walk out of the sea" (21). While the narrator's optimism persists, the story places this contentment in

competition with Lawrence's critical scepticism and what is ultimately an ambiguous, equivocal paragraph characterised by self-contradictory statements like "the sea that morning was iridescent and dark" (21). The narrator's elaborate convictions about the contradictorily "harsh surface beauty of life" (21) remain haunted by the continuing presence of Lawrence and the knowledge and perspective he has brought to the narrator's telling of the story.

It could be argued that the story is not ambiguous, that it marks a clear disavowal of the narrator's point of view and that the final paragraph is delivered entirely at the ironic expense of the self-deceiving narrator. But this reading ignores Cheever's own appraisal (specifically in his *Saturday Review* interview) of nostalgia and his own dismissal of those who saw the suburban lifestyle as no more than a subject worthy of criticism and castigation. In his preface to *The Stories of John Cheever* he assumes the same tone of nostalgic admiration as that seen in the closing of "Goodbye My Brother" and many of his other stories:

These stories seem at times to be stories of a long lost world where the city of New York was still filled with a river light...when almost everyone wore a hat. Here is the last of that generation of chain smokers who woke the world in the morning with their coughing, who used to get stoned at cocktail parties and perform obsolete dance steps like "the Cleveland Chicken"...who were truly nostalgic for love and happiness...the constants that I look for in this sometimes dated paraphernalia are a love of light and a determination to trace some moral chain of being. (vii)

The preface, I have suggested, supports the argument that Cheever himself assumed a positive stance toward nostalgia, connecting it to a "light" and a "moral

chain of being” (vii) which he claimed as deliberate motivations for his work. And yet there remains within the preface itself – in Cheever’s use of the comically unromantic and unsophisticated ‘Cleveland Chicken’ and coughing chain smokers – a characteristic undercutting of the inflated and romantic images and language he employs.

The voice of the narrator of “Goodbye my Brother,” and Cheever’s own words, might recall the stance of that iconic figure of American fiction, Jay Gatsby, who insists: “Can’t repeat the past?”... “Why of course you can.” (Fitzgerald 88). In a review of Cheever’s most recent biography, John Updike writes about Cheever’s peculiar sadness, and of the way Cheever’s characters “move, in their fragile suburban simulacra of paradise, from one island of momentary happiness to the imperilled next” (3). He begins this paragraph with a quote from Cheever’s story “The Leaves, the Lion-fish and the Bear”:

“How lonely and unnatural man is and how deep and well-concealed are his confusions”—no wonder Cheever’s fiction is slighted in academia while Fitzgerald’s collegiate romanticism is assigned. Cheever’s characters are adult, full of adult darkness, corruption, and confusion. They are desirous, conflicted, alone, adrift. They do not achieve the crystalline stoicism, the defiant willed courage, of Hemingway’s. (3)

Whether Fitzgerald’s texts are any more or less romantic than Cheever’s might be a matter for debate, yet it is interesting to note John Updike’s argument that what he perceives as an academic preference for Fitzgerald and Hemingway is the result of what he identifies in Cheever: an unrelenting refusal to ultimately embrace

the romanticised visions he aspires to, or a kind of incessant resignation to defeat and a partial decimation of, or distancing from, any surfacing romantic threads.

The multiply available interpretations of the final passage of “Goodbye my Brother” exemplify a common trait in Cheever’s work: his employment of an irony that fails to specifically posit a comparative norm or ‘truth’ in relation to what is being undercut. The irony undercuts some aspect of suburban life but never offers any deliberately and specifically superior alternative to it. The incident at the costume party in “Goodbye My Brother” forms a kind of parallel to this approach: the narrator’s discovery that *everyone* has chosen to come as a bride or football player might lead him to feel depressed about an obvious lack of individuality among the guests. The communally acknowledged notion of what people wish they were is so common that it suggests a lack of independent thought, as well as a reliance on broadly clichéd gendered stereotypes and a longing for the unattainable past – suggesting that the commonly idealised selves are hopelessly inauthentic and inaccessible. But the narrator’s response is to find the incident amusing and rather than taking it as any kind of serious critique of their culture, he chooses to laugh about it instead – aware, but amused rather than concerned by the situation’s possible implications.

Donaldson notes that originally the story “Goodbye My Brother” had only one brother, the narrator (140), and Lawrence’s character was only introduced subsequently. “The Worm in the Apple” (which appears in the middle of Cheever’s collection *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill*) can be read as an attempt to deliver the negativity of Lawrence’s approach to life from *within* the voice of the narrator.

Instead of narrating a confrontation between two brothers each of whom embodies a particular point of view, Cheever attempts, in this story, to manufacture the sensation of that divide within a single narrative voice – within the potential range of signification available in language itself. Instead of exporting the criticisms of the narrator out to another character, the story relies entirely on irony and interpretation to convey the tension between cynicism and satisfaction.

“The Worm in the Apple” is a brief story about a couple who seem to be entirely satisfied. The real subject of this story is the narrator – a voice incessantly attempting to find the “worm” of discontent in the Crutchmans’ supposed façade: “Their house, for instance, on Hill Street with all those big glass windows? Who but someone suffering from a guilt complex would want so much light to pour into their room?” (*Stories* 285). The story’s tone is overtly, anxiously interrogative. The narrator poses questions and then attempts to answer them: “Why did they only have two children? Why not three or four? Was there perhaps some break down in their relationship after the birth of Tom?” (286).

A sense of irony arises from the discrepancy between the narrator’s understanding of the Crutchmans’ situation and a potential alternative interpretation on the part of the reader – an alternative allowed for specifically by the excesses of language and inference employed in the narration. The final line of the story reads “[The Crutchmans] got richer and richer and richer and lived happily, happily, happily, happily” (288). The excessiveness of the word “happily” in this closing line alerts the reader to a potential insincerity or frustration on the part of the narrator. In context the sign communicates something other than happiness. It might be read as

ironic in the sense that the narrator means, in saying that the Crutchmans are happy, that they are not, and that they are over-stating their happiness in order to mask a deeper discontent. But Scott Donaldson argues that the “Crutchmans *are* happy, and the irony of repetition is directed at the end...against those Shady Hill observers who will not credit the Crutchmans’ contentment” (Donaldson “Suburban Sequence”).

The story, like “Goodbye My Brother” supports at least two opinions (Aubry 76): one is that of the narrator who believes that the Crutchmans’ satisfaction is unwarranted or feigned, the other resides in the language itself, which by hyperbole, suggests that the narrator’s voice is in fact being parodied and undercut by Cheever, who here offers a response to the critics who constantly sought to find, in Cheever’s stories, a display of disdain for suburban conformity and content. Cheever’s irony allows him to assume and ventriloquise the voice of his own critics. In doing so he exhibits an ability to alter the significations of the words he utilises; in reshaping the relation between the signs he employs and what they signify he demonstrates a self-aware acknowledgement of the criticism, and an ability to co-opt and redeploy the linguistic turns of the critics. Cheever further demonstrates that inasmuch as his critics argue that his voice fails to be critical enough of suburbia, their arguments fail, like the narrator of “The Worm in the Apple”, to conceive of their own illusions, subjectivities, and assumptions.

It is not the fact that the Crutchmans have an amazing life that bothers the narrator of the story. They have their faults: their son fails a year at school (287), Mr Crutchman had a potentially traumatising experience during the war (285) and their daughter smokes and drinks (287). In fact it seems the narrator must be frustrated by

their approach to life. The narrator is not searching for real physical failures, but for a failure of enthusiasm – a worry, anxiety, or negative psychological response to their situation. The narrator of “The Worm in the Apple” retains a presumption about the Crutchmans that relies on a stereotypical suburban motif – an assumption that the Crutchmans even desire to present themselves as entirely satisfied. The presumption centres on the binary division between the self-aware figure someplace outside of suburbia, and the unconscious automaton who subscribes entirely to the suburban way of life by both living in suburbia and by refusing any form of conscious self criticism. To be ‘inside suburbia’ is, for the narrator, to present a façade of contentment that can be stripped away to reveal the ‘reality’ behind suburbia.

In this sense it is the narrator who perpetuates assumptions about suburbia. The narrator polices the ideal model of suburbia by asking how the Crutchmans do and do not conform to its supposed boundaries and standards. While what Cheever’s texts have always maintained is that the suburb is both fulfilling and unfulfilling – that it has, just as any other geographic space, a population that is satisfied in some ways and not in others – his critics preserve the illusion of the suburb as a static, idealised place that, in its stasis, threatens consciousness. In a 1995 essay on hate speech and its performative qualities Judith Butler assesses the assertion made by Catherine Mackinnon that pornography “constructs the social reality of what woman *is*” (“Burning Acts” 221). Butler suggests that the use of “*is*” in this context might be debateable. She proposes the possibility that pornography “neither represents nor constitutes what woman are” (222). Instead it is possible that pornography rehearses the “*unrealizability*” of a certain idealised notion of gender relations (222).

“Pornography,” she writes, “is the text of gender’s unreality, the impossible norms by which it is compelled, and in the face of which it perpetually fails.” (223). In fact it is this very failure of pornographic relations to be constituted in reality that gives pornography its “phantasmic power” (223).

Butler asserts that pornography is in itself dependant on its failure to correspond to the actual gender relations in social reality – its appeal is constituted by this very lack. Suburbia as Cheever’s early critics saw it did not constitute what suburban individuals were but rather, sustained a ‘pornographic’ ideal of the suburb as a place of perfection and eternal fulfilment – an ideal in turn criticised for the differences it necessarily suppressed in order to preserve this image. Butler’s countering of Mackinnon has a very specific and subtle effect³: by casting pornography as the unrealizable projection of gender, Butler in fact enables a potentially wider scope for agency than does Mackinnon. On Mackinnon’s reading a woman either does or does not choose to be constituted by the idealised pornographic figure; she either does or does not submit to the identity presented to her as the ‘being’ of woman by the pornographic image she confronts; she either ‘is’ constituted by it, or she is not. Mackinnon thus begs for an alternative manner by which to conceive of what women ‘is’ by establishing some other model by which ‘woman’ is constituted as a gender role. Mackinnon’s perspective is limited because it feeds back into the same logical system she claims to be undoing. As long as Mackinnon continues to propose an ‘authentic’ woman who existed before or outside the role proposed by pornography she instigates a valorised gender role to which women must both aspire and comply.

On Butler's reading the impossibility of attaining the phantasmal gender norm demonstrated by pornography undermines the notion of any gender to aspire to and entirely liberates the conception 'being women' from the models presented by pornography – or indeed by any *alternative* to the pornographic as might be posited by Mackinnon. "My call as it were," notes Butler, "is for a feminist reading of pornography that resists the literalization of this imaginary scene, one which reads it instead for the incommensurabilities between gender norms and practices" (223). Here Butler demonstrates the logic of her theory of performativity and again locates gender in its practices, in how people live their gender rather than how they do or do not conform to an idealised 'gender' that is elsewhere. This in turn allows for a wider production of possible means of identification – it allows for a process of identification that is not limited by the either/or binary of either 'being' or 'not being' a certain role.

The binary assumed by Cheever's critics as they approached his work was the 'being' or 'not being' of suburban individuals. But Cheever's work resists this binary and the conformity/non-conformity model is replaced by a refusal to engage with its simplicities. Cheever's texts do not depict a resistance to interpellation by narrating the 'escape' or the 'awakening' of characters from their suburban roles (as previous critics might have it). There is no notion in Cheever's work of an authentic self who resides outside the parameters of an indoctrinated suburban self, nor is there a perfect and contented suburban self who lacks a conscious or self-reflective character. In positing suburban discourse as a non-specific fantasy circulating around what 'could be' rather than what 'is' there might be a recognisable relation to Derrida's notion of

infinitely impossible attempts to fix a signifier within a context: in as much as it is never possible to govern context and fix signification it is always impossible to specifically define the exact attributes of the suburban life or to realise the suppression of difference necessary to do so. This is comically exemplified in the joke about the suburban family with the statistical average of an impossible 2.5 children – where the physical impossibility of having half a child unmasks the phantasmal and unrealisable quality of such a place of stasis.

Similarly this impossibility is comically put to use in Cheever's "The Worm in the Apple". The narrator's frustration stems partly from his inability to place the Crutchmans into his model of either the perfect and content suburban family, or the angst ridden and dissatisfied individuals who attempt (but fail) to subscribe to an impossible suburban norm. As the Crutchmans evade simplistic construction, the supposedly external narrator becomes the victim of a desire for stasis. Pornography is erotic. It appeals to desires and provides imaginary ideals. To view the suburb as the place of the inauthentic, and outside of the suburb as the opposite, is to desire the simplicity offered by ideals. The appeal of such a binary has an overwhelming and recurrent lure in its simplicity, in its promise of satisfaction, of truth, of political legitimacy, of objectively verifiable solutions to human angst. It mirrors the existential longing to become a being-in-itself. Many textual analyses aim to close off, as much as possible, the multiplicities and the variances of a text's interpretations; to hunt out, get at, unravel the text's real meaning, the real author, the textual intent. Conversely to attempt to establish the failures of the text, to show where it does not meet expectations or where the author fails to present meaning, is to measure the text

against an ideal. Doing away with these ideals – rejecting the “lateralisation of the imaginary scene” (Butler 223) – requires an acceptance of ambiguity. To go on reading and participating in criticism even as ambiguity and indeterminacy are accepted, is to assume a potentially absurd practice. In the variously available interpretations of the ending of “Goodbye My Brother” or in the irony of “The Worm in the Apple” Cheever’s texts maintain certain ambiguities, while the suburb itself is presented as an indistinct place, neither entirely perfect, nor patently sinister and conformist. In fact the longing for suburban perfection manifests in a nostalgic turn to an impossible, avowedly imaginary past. This move at once acknowledges a desire for the simplicity of the ideal, and an insistence that the simplistic ideal is not being offered as available in the present.

John Cheever was himself an ambiguous man. Critic Daniel O’Hara has argued that Cheever spent much of his life constructing “an elaborate edifice” (208) called “John Cheever” and thereby engaging in “a process of fiction making as inventive as the creation of his many memorable characters and narrative personas” (208). O’Hara asserts that many of the passages from Cheever’s journals demonstrate Cheever’s continual awareness of his own identity, and O’Hara sees this as functioning partly to mask the alcoholism and bisexuality that Cheever struggled to keep apart from his public image (207-208).

As Cheever’s journal entries testify and his stories and novels dramatise, this apparent freedom of self-fashioning cannot lead to personal or professional security...what it most often leads to in Cheever are self-destructive gestures of apocalyptic disillusionment, from a

throwing away of everything from one's last identity to a final carnival of possible identities
all of which are discarded(215)

Other critics have noted Cheever's constant and self-aware presentation of his own identity and his evasiveness – particularly regarding his family history. Elizabeth Hardwick notes that he would often refer to the arrival of the Cheever family to America “by way of the passage of Ezekial Cheever on the *Arabella* in 1630” (104) as if lending posterity to their name by intimating old, moneyed family roots.

In a 1977 *Newsweek* Interview Cheever's daughter (then editor at *Newsweek*) asked him: “Did you ever fall in love with another man? I mean, because of the homosexuality in *Falconer*, people are certainly going to ask you that?” (Bailey; *Letters* 326). Cheever's response to the question was characteristically evasive, admitting at once his potential to fall in love with another man and denying his comments any level of seriousness. He joked that he had had many homosexual experiences, “all of them tremendously gratifying, and all between the ages of 9 and 11” (Bailey; *Letters* 326). In Cheever's collected letters, his son Benjamin Cheever remarks on the interview in his editorial comments:

I still don't quite understand what was going on here, but I think it would be wrong to judge it as dishonesty. Literally it was a lie, of course, but in some figurative sense it was true. He never considered himself to be a homosexual...it was a word he did not apply to himself, and words were frightfully important to him. (326)

Inherent in Benjamin Cheever's comment is the notion that his father evaded labels, choosing instead to operate in what Benjamin calls a “figurative” sense. The

distinction here between the literal and figurative functions like a distinction between ‘reality’ and some ‘imagined’ identity. But underlying Benjamin Cheever’s comment is his awareness of his father’s rejection of the simplicity of terms – where although Cheever’s joke might be construed as a ‘masking’ of his real identity, it might also be considered to in fact embody the very narrative style Cheever so often employed himself; the language, the joke, the story inherent in his comment, constitute all of the present content of it and there is no absent ‘real’ lurking behind it which Cheever intended to mask as the truthful alternative.

In a wider context O’Hara’s analysis of Cheever’s “mask-play” is used as an example, in his book *Radical Parody: American Culture and Critical Agency after Foucault*, of the limitations of contingency theory. For O’Hara contingency theorists “condemn themselves to an ever-changing spectacle of cultural conventions” (210). He defines contingency theory as:

The position claiming that since the advanced study of language and culture has finally disabused us of the notion of universals such as humanity or nature as having anything but an imaginary or rhetorical existence, we now know for sure that there are no real unchanging essences at the basis of the world we see and act in. (209)

O’Hara’s analysis of Cheever raises the spectre of a “carnival of possible identities” (215) all of which seem unstable and cannot be taken to offer any form of decisive agency. In doing so O’Hara reflects the pervasive desire to re-imagine a stable critical perspective, to re-build the binary of objectively true/subjectively uncertain. For critics such as Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard it is an absence

of stability that gives rise to the nostalgic impulse earlier discussed as apparent in Cheever's work, and for post-structuralists like Judith Butler, this so called "apocalyptic disillusionment," this "throwing away of everything" (O'Hara 215) is the very locale of agency, and the necessary acknowledgement of the possibility that there are no alternatives to such mask play – that there is no 'real' or 'authentic' John Cheever to be discovered and resurrected as doer behind his deeds.

Chapter Two: Richard Ford

i. *Perpetual Becoming: The Evolution of Frank Bascombe*

“Athletes,” notes Frank Bascombe in *The Sportswriter*, “by and large, are people who are happy to let their actions speak for them, happy to be what they do” (59). For Bascombe athletes are admirably able to shake off “existential dread” (60):

In fact athletes at the height of their powers make literalness into a mystery all its own simply by becoming absorbed in what they are doing. Years of athletic training teach this; the necessity of relinquishing doubt and ambiguity and self enquiry in favour of a pleasant, self-championing one dimensionality which has instant rewards in sports. (60)

Frank describes how in his previous career as a fiction writer his failure to complete a novel was the result of his inability to establish the stable voice that might allow him to “merge into the *oneness of the writer’s vision*” (61). Frank admires athletes because they approach life in a way that guarantees more satisfaction and stability than his own vision allows. They are willing to define themselves, rejecting doubt in favour of stability and happiness (61). “You can even ruin everything with athletes” says Frank, “simply by speaking to them in your own voice, a voice possibly full of contingency and speculation” (60).

The tension between the writer’s singularity of vision or the athlete’s one dimensional perspective on life, and Bascombe’s own possible “contingency and

speculation” of voice offers one example of a conflict that recurs throughout Richard Ford’s *Sportswriter* trilogy. Frank’s first-person narration and characterisation are framed by the resistant forces of permanence and indeterminacy. The resistance resonates throughout the novel’s treatment of time, space, history and national identity. Establishing where and to what extent the kind of self-assurance of the athlete might translate into a form of self assurance or even happiness for Frank Bascombe, is one of Ford’s stated interests. In a *New York Times Magazine* profile piece by Bruce Weber (a former student of Ford) Weber describes part of the origin of Ford’s *The Sportswriter*: “It was Kristina who suggested that he write a book about a happy man. ‘Jesus, I hadn’t done that up to then,’ he says. ‘And I thought, “What would a man do if he were living a happy life? What job would he have? Hell, he’d be a sportswriter! What else?”’ ”.

In an interview with Gail Caldwell in 1987 Ford says that he and fellow writers of his generation such as Raymond Carver and Geoffrey Wolff were “living through some kind of existential short hand; darkness for its own sake was the source of adequate drama” (42). He goes on to discuss his desire to offer something other than darkness: “I just wrote out of that as far as I could write, until it became obligatory that I find some next step. And the next step was to find some consolation, which I think fuelled *The Sportswriter* and fuels all the stories in *Rock Springs*”(42).

Yet in a more recent interview Ford mentions that while writing the novels he grappled with his own difficulties surrounding the idea of a fixed character. He claims this difficulty was something he “just externalised and gave to Frank” (Duffy 338). Ford says he began to suspect “that the whole notion of character *per se* was a

dubious notion, and maybe even in fact a made up notion, that it was a convenient notion that our ancestors gave to themselves in an attempt to make them seem reliable to themselves and to others” (338). In explaining how he involved this concern in his construction of the fictional Frank Bascombe, Ford says he wanted to set this concern “into Frank’s life and vocabulary to see what it occasioned me to say” and subsequently decided: “one of the things it occasioned me to say was ‘Yes, we all experience this lack of moral identity, we all experience this failure of being plausible to oneself, and even to others, and that possibility puts us in a position to rectify that. As though we *could* rectify that’ ” (339). The lingering doubt expressed in Ford’s “as though we *could*” apparently rejects the possibility of establishing a character that has any form of durable, persistent essence. When asked, in response, what *does* hold individuals together as moral beings and as identities Ford says it has to do with a temporal sense of self: “your past, your present, and what you hold as possible for your future...we have present awareness, we have a sense of the future. That’s what character is to me. As much as anything else character is an awareness of this self” (339).

While Ford’s characterisation of Frank Bascombe demonstrates a primary tension between stasis and indeterminacy, the shifting temporal and physical suburban locations Ford depicts, the structure of his trilogy, and the language he employs all rehearse this form of resistance. The tension between the competing forces of indeterminacy and the will for stasis are relevant to issues of collective and individual identification, and to the political and social implications and aspirations of Ford’s novels. The second part of this chapter concerns the extension of Frank’s

personal indeterminate identity to a larger modelling of American nationalism and toward a politicised reading of his texts. Frank's story takes place against the backdrop of sprawling New Jersey suburbs, but it is possible to argue that this suburban setting functions less as subject matter, and more as an allegorical landscape that reflects rather than circumscribes his experiences.

In the previous chapter I argued that John Cheever's work could be re-read in resistance to his earlier critics and re-interpreted in light of post-structuralism's approaches to the issue of subjectivity. I argued that the reductive approach of some of his earlier critics exemplified a stereotypical reading of the suburb as the place of overt satisfaction and conversely, as the locale of unconscious and automated behaviour. In refusing to employ a simplistic discourse based around the idea of a 'subjective suburb' and an 'elsewhere' I sought to defend Cheever's work from the claim that he refused his characters any capacity to demonstrate agency, self awareness, or self-criticism. I further sought to expand the scope for reading Cheever by paying attention to the ambiguities that he deploys in terms of his characters' desires and voices. My focus on his work turned to the question of subject-positioning and order, asserting that Cheever's characters rehearse the process of ordering and its significance in terms of individual desires for simplistic, standing measures of satisfaction.

While Cheever's characters and narrators attempt to establish bases for self-valuation, often the progression of their stories works against their ordering; his characters frequently fail to convincingly re-establish themselves in orders already demonstrated to be unstable, unverifiable or unsustainable. But these failures or

perceived failures have as much to do with the texts themselves as they have to do with critical interpretation and the position of the reader. The critical desire for Cheever to offer texts that dramatise an escape from the interpellating force of suburban socialisation must always be met by disappointment largely because such an imaginary figuration of ideal agency is, at the very least in terms of Cheever's fictional worlds, never made available. Readers who willingly extend this unavailability beyond the confines of the text and assume an existentialist or post-structural denial of the possibility of objective, foundational truth might have an alternative and less frustrated response to his work than those who demand suburban escapism. These terms inform my readings of Cheever's stories, gesturing to readers who might willingly share in an assumption of certain subjective or positional constraints and sympathise with the apparently absurd behaviours of Cheever's characters. The angst and nostalgic longings for stability that haunt so many of Cheever's fictional suburbanites are not seen, on this reading, as the result of their suburban existence, but instead as a model of the existentially conceived human condition where stasis is acknowledged to be something both longed for and inevitably denied.

Cheever's texts can be read against the background of the post-structural or existentialist position that indeterminacy, inter-subjectivity and the unavailability of static essences represent all of the available potential for any definition of human agency. In this chapter I will extend these presuppositions, arguing that in the new suburb of Ford's fiction, suburban identity is no longer assumed to be conformist and essentially unconscious; instead the suburb is read as a place like any other, where

agency only extends as far as a process of gradual re-signification. Acknowledged as constructed through cultural acts, identity in Ford's landscape is unhinged, refuses stasis, and also potentially suffers from the same effects of instability that Cheever's texts raise. If Cheever's characters and stories exhibit a flux between the desire to (and for) order and the realisation that such ordering has its own limitations, Ford's texts assume and extend this quality of unrest, positioning flux itself as a central thematic concern. On one level this flux is part of the continual attempt by Ford's narrator to either resist or embrace his sense of identity, and to unite his sense of self with the perspective others have of him. Frank's evolution is an act not of escape, or the attainment of a fixed ideal, but rather a matter of attention to process. On another level, the flux is potentially political: the very source of agency and re-signification introduced by Butler's post-structuralist approach to feminism can be identified in a political reading of Ford's treatment of nationhood.

Judith Butler's use of certain aspects of existentialist philosophy follows her refutation of a fixed essence, or doer standing behind an individual's actions and deeds. The ideal Butler rejects is the notion of a determinate female sexual identity. Practically, the application of this theory aims to alter the position of women in society by allowing for the assumption that women are not fundamentally destined to identify with a pre-conceived ideal model of what it means to be a woman. Extended alternatively, if suburban roles, gender roles, or national identities are conceived of as culturally constructed, indeterminate, and not corresponding to authentic ideals, the practical implications potentially follow those modeled by Butler: agency is figured as the result of a perpetual refusal to permanently situate identity, and also as limited

by the often pervasive constraints of discursive availability. In discussions of contemporary politics, employing a perpetual inter-subjective re-negotiation of statehood reflects the ideals of the American schools of pragmatism and neo-pragmatism – critical fields that will re-surface throughout this chapter as important to my discussion of Richard Ford and his work. One of the central assumptions anchoring any claims to the importance of renegotiation is that individuals and communities engage in processes that alter and adjust given norms; thinking of this process as a form of ‘evolution’ is one method of arguing for its vitality.

In Louis Menand’s history of American pragmatist philosophers, *The Metaphysical Club*, he discusses how the subjects of his biography (Holmes, Pierce, James and Dewey) abandoned, in their theory, the idea of a fixed, essential, objective truth. He briefly discusses the reception of Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species*, published in 1859, and suggests that the theory of evolution came to coincide with the philosophical shifts motivated by pragmatists. He argues that Charles Darwin’s theories were controversial at the time not because of the assertion that species evolved and changed over time, but because of the assertion *that these changes occurred by chance* (Menand 123). Darwin’s work on the evolution of the species might seem distant from the field of literature and literary theory but the point Menand makes is that Darwin’s theory demanded a paradigm shift in acknowledging the absence of an ideal and constant form – a form which might be likened to the ‘truth’ or ‘the actual’ or ‘the real’.

“A general type”, writes Menand, “is fixed, determinate, and uniform; the world Darwin described is characterised by chance, change, and difference – all the

attributes general types are designed to leave out” (123). Menand uses the example of a finch to describe this aspect of Darwin’s theory of natural selection, and if his example is read with an awareness of Derrida’s interest in context and signification, Menand’s descriptions take on an interesting parallel to the concept of indeterminacy. In applying the word ‘finch’ in language, the word is taken to mean a collection of general criteria which are seen as comprising the ideal finch, and the word comes to exclude the variables and differences (such as the weight, size or colour of each bird) that individual finches might present. The inversion of popular logic that Darwin’s theory required was an understanding of the inconstant nature of the generalised term ‘finch’ and the importance of the differences between individual birds as opposed to the similarities. According to Menand the most difficult aspect of this theory, for Darwin’s contemporaries at least, was an assertion that “No intelligence, divine or otherwise, determines in advance the relative value of individual variations, and there is no ideal “finch” or essence of “finchness” toward which adaptive changes are leading” (122).

Menand alerts readers to the fact that the word “finch” suppresses the differences that might be exhibited by actual birds in the material world. Darwin challenged his contemporaries by showing that the term “finch” was contingent on an ideal notion of a finch. This term was designated as fixed or pre-ordained despite the fact that individual finches themselves continued to demonstrate variability, to change and to fail to conform to the ideal. In what might retrospectively be read as a deconstructionist move of inverting a hierarchy Darwin showed that it was precisely

these differences, changes, and alterations from the norm that allowed for the successful survival of various animals.

Dismissing the ideal form of animals (a form other biologists, generally relying on theological imperatives, saw as animals evolving *toward*) subverted the ideal(perfect)/individual(differentiated) hierarchy. Darwin's argument proposed that differences among varied species enhanced survivability. Most importantly, Darwin shifted the focus of 'evolving' from a belief in change *toward* an achievable fixed or given ideal to a focus on the importance of the *process* of the evolution itself over time; this inversion is made clearer by a statement Menand makes: "organisms don't struggle because they must evolve; they evolve because they must struggle" (123). Here "struggling" is prioritised over evolution – and the whole ordered notion of a fixed destination, a body to aspire to, or a pure form to attain is replaced by the notion of *process*, a perpetual struggle of which evolution is (in a reversal of the presumed order) a by-product rather than a purpose. With this metaphor in mind, it is easier to understand how a shift in thought away from ideals and truths, toward the vitality of process and re-signification, is a viable method of thinking about the vitality of languages, cultures, and national identities.

In the same way that Derrida, Darwin and the pragmatists demand a shift in the projected goals of any discipline, such a demand might also be made of readers as they meet the narrator of Ford's trilogy. The presumption that the text will rehearse a full arc for Frank Bascombe toward self-actualisation, maturity, and closure, is perhaps best abandoned in light of the various comments Ford has made about his character and in light of Bascombe's narration. In one explicit discussion in *The Lay*

of the Land, Frank draws particular attention to the way his story is told. He is awake in his house while his girlfriend Sally has gone to sleep, and he remarks:

These are the very moments, of course, when large decisions get decided. Great literature routinely skips them in favour of seismic shifts, hysterical laughter and worlds cracking open, and in that way does us all a grave disservice.

What I did while Sally slept in the guest room was make myself a fresh Salty Dog, open a can of cocktail peanuts and eat half of them, since a bluefish from Neptune's Daily Catch had become a dead letter. I switched off the lights, sat a while in my leather director's chair, hunkered forward over the knees in the chilly living room and watched the phosphorescent water lap the moonlit alabaster beach till way past high tide. Then I went upstairs and read the *Asbury Press*... (339)

Frank goes on to explain precisely what he reads about in the paper, and then to read and discuss the Real Estate news. The passage specifically rebuffs any move to ignore the minutiae of life in favour of great and seemingly significant pivotal moments of transition or epiphany. Frank relates seemingly irrelevant events with a compulsive attention to detail while reminding the reader that often these moments are as significant as any other.

The process of character development Frank undergoes equally denies what might be thought of as the traditional pattern of novelistic character development. Instead of explicitly maturing and finding closure Frank endeavours throughout the novels to unite his sense of himself with the perspectives others have of him, or alternatively to evade the truths about himself that he is forced to confront. Even as

he envelops the opinions of others into his own sense of self, and goes on narrating, Frank continues to chase a perpetually externalised vision of what he might be.

If Cheever's texts displayed a marked desire to re-invent the static reassurance of an imagined past, Ford's Frank Bascombe, it has been argued, exhibits a reverse tendency to resist the past and instead construct an imagined and contingent present. The critic Brian Duffy sees Frank as spending most of the trilogy avoiding and evading his past, preferring instead to attempt living in a limited present. The past, writes Duffy, is "the very temporal dimension which Frank's adult life has been dedicated to avoiding. In straining to live in the present he has been running away from his past" (158). Duffy's central argument – an argument that corresponds neatly with Richard Ford's own comments – is that the novels trace Frank's attempt to establish a sense of character:

Franks' great error has been to seek to conjure up a self within the present alone, a strategy that produced only a "series of lives", a succession of disconnected self-imaginings that cut him off from the defining moment of his adult life, the death of his son. Ultimately, Frank oscillated in his life between sheer difference (in *The Sportswriter*) and contrived permanence (the Permanent Period), but never found a balance between the two, never understood personal identity as a necessary exchange between permanence and change and between past, present, and future. (162)

Perhaps this "necessary exchange" Duffy formulates as the goal of characterisation is less a matter of achievable balance than of anxious fluctuation and internal debate. It is the notion of *oscillation*, rather than balance that better expresses the absurdity any desire for stasis entails. It is possible to re-position the subject

matter of Ford's novel: the material concern of his fiction may not be the end-goal of establishing identity, but a dramatisation of the troubled process itself.

One of the climactic moments in *The Lay of the Land* centres on Frank finally confronting the death of his son Ralph, the possibility of his own death due to cancer, and his ultimate failure to develop a philosophy that might overcome the incomprehensibility of mortality. Frank finds himself sheltering in a bar while his broken car window is fixed. He gradually realises the bar "has become a watering hole for late-middle-passage dykes" (491). He tries to demonstrate how comfortable he is, and to show a lack of bias and judgment. He even contemplates telling the patrons "My own daughter used to be one of their number" (491) and he claims that he "couldn't be happier than to be here amidst these fellow refugees" (491). On leaving the bar and being told not to drive drunk by the bartender, and on finding that his car window has not been fixed, and that the shop he has taken it to is closed, Frank loses his façade of liberal, congenial inclusiveness. He imagines that if the man hired to fix his car had done the job correctly he would have "bought him a shore dinner and told him about the things in life he needs to beware of – starting with lesbian bars and the false bonhomie of treacherous little coon-arse bartenders" (517).

Frank, sitting alone in his car, admits: "I am, in fact, not drunk. Though what I am is a different matter" (515). Finally relinquishing his carefully constructed acceptance of his son's death and his own illness, Frank meets a sober crisis-point: "Tears and more tears come fairly flooding. Rage, frustration, sorrow, remorse, fatigue, self reproach...". Frank assesses the things he needs to accept as true to himself: that his wife has left him, that he has cancer, that his son has died, that he is

not a good father, that he has a small life, that he is “an asshole” (521). He concludes by identifying what is hardest to accept:

And of course the answer is plain...: that your life is founded on a lie, and you know what that lie is and won't admit it, maybe can't. Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Deep in my heart space a breaking is. And as in our private moments of sexual longing, when the touch we want is far away, a groan comes out of me. “Oh-uhh.” The sour tidal whoosh the dead man exhales. “Oh-uhhh. Oh-uhhh.” So long have I *not* accepted, by practicing the quaintness of acceptance...Yes, yes and yes. No more no's. No more no's. No more no's. (522)

Although he has a sense of himself and his identity, that identity falters when confronted. The process of bridging the gap between how the world perceives him and how he perceives himself, and of accepting those aspects of his selfhood he has previously avoided, requires that Frank constantly pull apart, re-build, and readjust of his self-awareness.

Frank's progress is similar to Ned's passage in Cheever's “The Swimmer”, where both Ned and the reader trace a course toward Ned's self-awareness. At the end of that story Ned's identity and characterisation have to be adjusted in light of the new knowledge that he has lost his wife, wealth and home. The story essentially demonstrates a gradual process during which the reader and Ned realise that Ned's sense of self contradicts the actuality of his situation. One of the marked differences between Ned's process and Frank's is that Frank meets a point of emptiness, envisions himself as founded “on a lie” (522) and then continues his story. Ford, as noted earlier, said he wanted to write a novel that resisted the kinds of darkness

depicted by his fellow contemporary writers, Carver and Wolff (Caldwell 42). The Critic Miriam Clark once said of Raymond Carver that it seemed possible that his style could never sustain a novel and that his narratives seemed “bound to be short stories” because his characters were “choked off by the fear, the impossibility of communication”. Part of Richard Ford’s ambition to “write out of that” (Caldwell 42) is reflected simply by the continuation of Frank’s story and by the fact that his narration continues to overcome the moments of uncertainty, despair and silence that Frank frequently encounters.

Frank confronts things that contradict his perspective of himself, and also absorbs those contradictions back into his self-image. As the novels play out Frank does not simply trace an arc from ‘asshole’ to ‘nice-guy’, or from unaware to self-aware. Nor do the novels depict Frank as ultimately seeking out and embracing a final, durable core identity. Instead Frank constantly engages in exchanges with other individuals, constantly re-evaluates himself, and constantly has to confront his own errors of judgement. In the above passage the collapse of Frank’s sense of self is mirrored by a failure in syntax. With the assertion “deep in my heart space a breaking is” Frank parallels the failure of his comforting sense of himself with disarrayed grammar. Frank only exists in language, and for him to continue to exist in his story he has to reclaim the grammar, put the words back into order, and go on narrating and communicating.

Going on narrating is one of Frank’s most noticeable traits. The text closely follows the internal musings of Frank’s character while each sentence carefully explains his mental relationship with the world around him. In contrast to Cheever’s

reception, the rare negative criticisms Ford has received tend to focus on his style rather than on his suburban subject matter; a *Wall Street Journal* review criticised Ford for being part of a so-called “Ruminative School” in which “Such traditional forms of literary excitement as plot and character development are presumably beneath the dignity of those who have Deep Thoughts to think and fine writing to write” (Bowman). Alternatively the absence of plot in Ford’s Bascombe novels might be considered an apt representation of the life Bascombe leads, in which causality, closure and overt ‘plotting’ read as unrealistic and unfaithful to his first-person, generally present-tense depiction of his surroundings.

When commenting on crafting the crucial moment Frank has sitting in his car, when he confronts the death of his son, and the realisation that his life is “founded on a lie” (522), Richard Ford said he found the scene problematic. Although he claims it as the passage in the book he is “most pleased by” (342) he also has the following exchange with the interviewer Brian Duffy, in which he expresses his doubts about its quality:

Ford: It took me a while to make it seem permanent in the book because I knew it was one of those moments in the book where I was really manipulating the intelligence of the book in a way I thought didn’t even *seem* organic. It was really me pounding down on something that I had elected to pound down on...

Duffy: I see...how would Frank deal with this moment of epiphany, which is one of the literary conceits that he sneers at ...

Ford: That’s right.

Duffy: This *is* an epiphany.

Ford: That's right. It is an epiphany, but it is, it seems to me, an epiphany of his own imagining.

Ford resists the temptation to artificially plot scenes that do not *seem* to correspond to his sense of how Bascombe experiences the world. Even when he admits that this moment is one that feels particularly manipulated he strangely suggests that the manipulation can be read as something attributable to Frank's character and not Ford's writing; Frank *wants* to envision himself as having a moment of epiphany and imbue the moment with an imagined importance; on Ford's account imputing value and importance to the scene is a matter of Frank's desire – a desire that makes sense within the scope of Frank's characterisation. Ford is arguing he chose to depict Frank as subjectively orchestrating or attempting to orchestrate the importance of his own vital narrative climaxes.

Immediately following this comment Ford apologises for “violating my most fundamentally held premise about my characters – that I make everything happen” (344). As much as Ford might attribute imagination to Frank, Frank is always the product of a text orchestrated by Richard Ford, the writer. In this particular novel Ford's comments suggest that his orchestration is paradoxically intended to give the impression of a lack of ordering force and to promote the impression that the text does not offer the kinds of simplistic and determinate models that other novels might be presumed to offer. Ford's comments support an argument that his texts render orchestration as an essential element of his subject matter.

Part of Frank's characterisation is his desire to offer a narrative that makes some kind of cohesive sense. And yet the structure of the novels can be read as

working against or resisting Frank's attempts to iterate and establish closure. Ford's work flouts traditional narrative expectations by refusing to offer definitive ends; each sequel necessitates a reassessment of the closure implied by the endings of previous instalments and any forms of resolution that might be offered by one text must be accepted as contingent, unstable, and indefinite because of an established pattern of re-negotiability. Formally, by providing two sequels, the reader has the option to interpret the texts as stories where the markers of 'beginning' and 'ending' are presented as the artificial impositions of a traditional notion of plot. Any closure offered at the end of *The Sportswriter* is undone or undermined by the resumption and reassignment of Frank's character to the stories that take place in the novels following. As Frank resumes his narration, and fills in the gaps in time (say, in the five years lost between *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*) he engages in a process of realignment, disturbing the 'ending' of a prior text by recounting how his story continued beyond its former limits and progressed to the point of present-tense.

In each instance of Frank's 'filling in' or accounting for gaps in time he proposes an orchestration or ordering of his own story. In some ways this ordering (and re-ordering) demonstrates the necessity to continually re-structure his story in order to incorporate and re-incorporate various story 'events' back into a consistent discourse. And yet the frequent failures Bascombe makes in connecting one event to another or in cohesively explaining the causal relations of events in his life are failures created by Ford himself. What Ford acknowledges in his "fundamentally held premise" (Duffy 344) is his responsibility for constructing Frank. Any mistakes, misreadings, errors of judgement or limitations on perspective imposed on Bascombe

must be acknowledged as devices that reflect Richard Ford's refusal to depict Bascombe as having the ability to understand or cohesively map the larger causal links of his experience. These causal links are something Frank grapples with and attempts to identify even as they elude him.

Lukács, in his essay on realism, argues that all reflections of the world are marked by the social realities of the world experienced by the writer (64). Lukács's argument is that the depiction of a figure who is unable to assume an objective perspective on the story-world is no less dependant on the writer's social reality – the writer's belief about his position in relation to the world around him – than a depiction that offers numerous cohesive values or standards by which characters are judged to have either succeeded or failed. On this understanding, Richard Ford's portrayal of Frank as relatively unable to piece together the events and experiences of his life into a consistent and 'meaningful' moral arc – without that arc moving, changing, and eluding finality – is not an affliction on the part of the character, but rather a manifestation or depiction, by Ford, of his own ability to understand or depict the world. Whether this portrayal of perspective proposes a more realistic depiction of the 'real' world is less important, in the context of this discussion, than the question of whether it might model a method of self-awareness or self reflection for the reader.

As noted earlier, Camus and Lukács might be taken to agree on this point in Camus' rejection of the "contradiction of the philosopher enclosed *within* his system and the artist placed *before* his work" (96) and Camus' assertion that "the idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded, it is false" (96). For both critics

the limitations of a writer's perspective on life always affect his or her ability to offer answers within art. In this sense, no text is more 'realistic'. No text is more authentic, or any less limited by the failure of writers to escape their social or philosophical subjectivity. No writer is able to more closely depict an objective 'reality' by escaping or transcending the limitations of their subjectively constructed discourse. Camus' collapse of the distinction between the artist *before* his work and the artist *within* his work importantly resists the artificial ontological superiority between text and author, text and reader, and text and critic. The hermetic seal of the text, the divide between the fictional landscape and the real world of the reader, assumes less gravity on the presumption that reader, text and author are united by their inability to attain, depict, or explain any 'essential' truths without having to fashion those claims through some engagement with an exiting discourse.

If the 'authenticity' or 'truthfulness' of a text does not rely on the ability of the text to more closely resemble the world it depicts, or to transcend the limitations of a discourse and establish only the 'true' facts of a story, then the possible field of difference among texts might lie, instead, in the extent to which texts are willing to expose or reject devices that sustain their internal logic. Accordingly, a realist text proposes a greater 'truthfulness' not because of its direct relation to the objects of the world it describes, but because of an implicit rejection of certain devices such as overt plotting. In this rejection realist texts rely on exposing, by contrast, the reliance of other narratives on certain assumptions or on certain characteristic methods of story-telling. Butler proposes that although there is no accessible 'authentic' real-world gender to which the signs male/female refer, there are practices that displace,

adjust, and critique the discursive practice in which gender norms are created. Writers have the potential to employ styles that function critically by making the issue of perspective central to the text, or by exposing the devices that perspective relies on. In this sense Ford's decision to utilise Bascombe's first person narration might be considered a forgone acknowledgement of the limited perspective that prefigures the positions offered by the text.

But the first person narration allows Ford both to assume subjective constraints, and to reveal the malleability of perspective. Frank Bascombe meets challenges to his point of view and subsequently widens the capabilities of his perspective and adjusts his views in order to incorporate and overcome these challenges. To assume the voice of a first person narrator is not, at once, to assume a voice of defeat or a total failure of agency. Frank's subject position is not static; it is not an identity that fails to stand up to the model of what his identity ought to be. Instead Frank is a character continually reconstituted by his ever-changing relation to the past and to a future projection of himself. When the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity is taken to be false, and the concomitant value-judgements associated with these alternatives are undermined, the orientation of inquiry changes (as demonstrated by Butler, Derrida, or Menand's discussion of Darwin). The question turns to the freedoms and agency presented as available *within* an inevitably subjective relation to the world and others.

The fact that Frank can never entirely incorporate all the world into his own point of view – the fact that he can never overcome the gaps in perspective that give rise to so much of the novel's subject matter – is at once a source of anguish and of

motivation. In trying to unite his vision of himself with all other perspectives Frank exhibits an existential longing to find closure, to become a 'being-in-itself'. As existentialism and post-structuralism refuse the postulation of objective truths they also set anguish and angst as the inevitable by-products of consciousness. The following two parts of this chapter address the variously identifiable refusals of determinacy in Ford's work, and argue that a primary theme in Ford's trilogy is the tension between indeterminacy and the desire for forms of stability. The insistence on indeterminacy is read largely in political terms, aligning Frank's effort to gain stasis in time, space, and identification with wider questions about American identity. In contrast, death is briefly considered as a further force central to the novel, to Frank's dissatisfactions, and to the themes of agency, voice, and resistance.

In identifying a confrontation with (and potential acceptance of) contingency this reading aims to incorporate and mirror some of the concerns confronted by the reader of the text, and to incorporate the position of critics. How to continue to engage in criticism and debate without retreating to foundational presumptions and without resurrecting the old scaffolding of objective truths is the primary question confronting individuals and theorists who have made concessions to the contingencies of their subjective perspective. Demonstrating how Frank persistently adjusts and reframes his narrative models the 'narrative' structuring and restructuring process of reading texts, performing analysis, and engaging in critical debate. An attention to Frank's persistence as a narrator provides an assessment not simply of the discomforts, difficulties and conflicts caused by contingency, inter-subjectivity, re-

negotiation, and irony, but also, of what these frequently unstable features might offer given a more optimistic assessment of their potential to promote forms of agency.

ii. *Laying the Land: Frank Bascombe in Time and Space.*

In his interview with Anthony Byrt Richard Ford declares that the final instalment in the trilogy, *The Lay of the Land*, is designedly political: “I wanted to take advantage of the peculiar goodwill I had from the other two books and put it in the service of writing a political novel. I looked around myself in America, some things seemed worth writing about: the election, the aging population. I felt that Thanksgiving weekend after the election of 2000, before the presidency was stolen away, to be a time when Americans were literally not paying attention”. While the *Sportswriter* trilogy may have had its beginnings as a character-driven story about individual identity, by *The Lay of the Land* Ford had clearly and deliberately turned his eye toward politics. Bascombe is, as Ford states, “put to use” (Byrt) in posing questions about American identity and self awareness. The novels filter the contemporary American landscape through Frank Bascombe’s point of view and as point of view becomes a central element of concern, the wider issues of identity and subjectivity play out through Ford’s careful manipulation of perspective.

Richard Ford, like Cheever, primarily uses the voice of a white male protagonist as narrator. *The Sportswriter* and its sequels *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land* are narrated in first person. Like many of Cheever’s works these novels concern the life of a suburban middle class male. As with Cheever, questions

of family and lifestyle are central to the work, and the drama is generally personal and domestic. Yet Ford's critics have not approached his work with any expectation of a negative stance toward suburban sensibility. Instead his reviews commonly present him as a writer whose voice captures something of an American condition. Gordon Burn of the *Times Literary Supplement* titled his review of *Independence Day* "In Arch Ordinary America" and claimed Ford's achievement was to "reclaim the strangeness of a country which he knows is at least as beguiling as it is wretched". Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review ran under the title "Afloat in the Turbulence of the American Dream" and Anthony Byrt of the *New Statesman*, in an interview on publication of *The Lay of the Land* called Ford "the dazzling chronicler of the real America".

In fact the character Frank Bacombe joins the ranks of white American male narrators such as Harry Angstrom of Updike's *Rabbit* series, and Phillip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman that have been heralded (though not without the potential for debate) as representative, politicised voices of contemporary American literature. Reviewers frequently draw such comparisons (reviews of *The Lay of the Land* from the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Independent* provide just two examples (Campbell; Kennedy)). The acceptance of Ford as a social novelist has to be considered in conjunction with the apparent acceptance of the indeterminacy he employs, his suburban setting, and the character he places as the central subject-matter of his texts.

Establishing a social and political avenue for reading Ford relies on a theoretical backdrop that positions indeterminacy as political. In my earlier

discussion of Judith Butler and Albert Camus I introduced the concept of agency as not preconditioned by objective or foundational truths, arguing that post-structural and existential theoretical perspectives widen the interpretive possibilities Cheever's texts present. Part of the theoretical undertow affecting Ford's positive reception might stem from the growing acceptance of, or familiarity with post-structural and neo-pragmatist perspectives on politics and political agency. In a culture increasingly aware of the difficulty of positing a singular and objective political or social standard, the kinds of critical expectations for cogent dismissals of the conformist suburban perspective appear less sustainable. But contingency theory allows for the possible importation of politics and social criticism into dialogues that have already surrendered their own claims to an objective verifiability. Of particular interest to any discussions of Richard Ford's social novel is the emphasis these theoretical fields place on the vitality of conflict and irresolution, as well as on the negotiation of the relationship between state and individual. Largely the flexibility of this relationship, and the agency attributed to the individual is conceived of as a democratic process that emphasises the acceptance of competing individualisms, and evolving nation-states.

Pragmatism, neo-pragmatism, existentialism, and post-structuralism have their disagreements and cataloguing them extends beyond the scope of this brief discussion. Though at once aware of the risk of over-stating their allegiances, or artificially grafting one field onto another, I also do not wish to isolate theories that clearly share common threads and make similar theoretical demands. These critical fields align in terms of their emphasis on change and contingency. Contemporary

discussions regarding the differences between neo-pragmatism and post-structuralism (particularly deconstruction) have accentuated the particular vulnerabilities of neo-pragmatist philosophy. Though still acknowledging the important progress pragmatists (particularly Richard Rorty) have made in incorporating some aspects of post-structuralism into their neo-pragmatic conception of language and culture, some critics contest the apparently optimistic slant of the field.

Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* proposes a rejection of claims to objective truth while also arguing that this rejection is practiced by an interrogation, exploration or persistent rejection of the linguistic terms used to describe selves and ideologies. In Rorty's usage irony operates as a perpetual suspicion toward the adequacy or status of language, and in turn, toward assertions of objective truth – specifically truths asserted from within the subjective limitations of language itself. “Ironists,” writes Rorty, “are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up” (80). As a result, Rorty's ironists consistently undercut and adjust their vocabularies and resist any static significations. For Rorty, vocabulary is in a process of constant evolution and this evolution affords changes in the structures and assumptions that found social norms.

Despite the despair that a rejection of objective truth might appear to entail, Rorty insists on a form of optimism that he claims separates his criticism from those of deconstructionists: “One difference between Derrideans like [Simon] Critchley and Deweyans like myself is that Derrida likes to put things in question, whereas Dewey insisted on asking ‘What’s the problem?’ Our attitude is: if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it” (Critchley et al, 44). This is an attitude Rorty has been criticised for. His

inattention to what is seen by others as the inevitability – even the necessity – of persistent conflict appears to deny the essential indeterminacy that underpins any notion of the democratic values his pragmatism seeks to establish. Chantal Mouffe summarises this point in arguing that “the specificity of liberal democracy as a new political form of society consists in the legitimation of conflict and the refusal to eliminate it through the imposition of an authoritarian order” (8). Where Rorty persists with his claim that Derrida’s private irony has little political effect, and that the (uncertainly defined) practice of deconstruction is “not a very efficient way” of going about doing something political (44), other critics see Derrida’s insistence on indeterminacy as an insistence on the very values that underpin their definition of democracy (even if democracy is thus accepted as ‘not a very efficient’ method of governance).

“Chaos,” writes Derrida in his specific response to Richard Rorty, “is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other” (Critchley et al 84). For Mouffe, Derrida, and Laclau, Rorty mistakenly presumes that the negotiations and compromises reached through a process of anti-foundationalist, neo-pragmatic politics would manifest through peaceful process. In stating that “in the most reassuring and disarming discussion and persuasion, force and violence are present” (83) Derrida preserves a deconstructionist insistence that consensus often masks oppression, and that language can suppresses difference and delimit the scope of both consciousness and agency. Chantalle Mouffe considers Laclau and Derrida’s response to Rorty in her introduction to their combined work,

Deconstruction and Pragmatism. She gives an interesting explanation of the theoretical impact that Deconstruction might have on his work:

To believe in the possibility of [consensus] even when it is conceived of as an 'infinite task', is to postulate that harmony and reconciliation should be the goal of a democratic society. In other words, it is to transform the pluralist democratic ideal into a 'self-refuting ideal' since the very moment of its realization would coincide with its destruction. As conditions of possibility for the existence of a pluralist democracy, conflicts and antagonisms constitute at the same time the condition of the impossibility of its final achievement. (Critchley 11)

Derrida argues that a lack of appetite for conflict, indeterminacy, chaos, and violence limit the potential for Rorty's definition of liberal democracy. Rorty's work assumes that a liberal utopia can be postulated as a place where individuals pragmatically negotiate ideologies while keeping in mind the primary goal: to reduce human suffering through solidarity. Mouffe alerts us to reductive potential of this vision. A deconstructionist approach to democracy attempts to show that indeterminacy, lack of agreement, and conflict are both democracy's essence, and the criteria that necessitate its unavailability. As with the inability to fix the attachments of signifiers to what they signify, assuming democracy as an unattainable projection – a practice and performance rather than a definitive descriptive term – allows for both chaos, and the essence of democracy: the freedom to differ. The bind that Mouffe elaborates parallels the existential absurd, where an underlying ideology can extend to a point and no further without defeating its own criteria. When Mouffe specifies the importance of conflict and antagonism, she aligns herself with Camus' aversion to the

strategy of philosophical suicide – definable as the act of lapsing into the postulation of a static objective goal.

The image of the determinate suburb, that ideal posited as frighteningly artificial and conformist, is a place without conflict. This lack of conflict and differentiation grounded the (frequently Marxist) criticism that the suburb is really an edifice masking and suppressing individual difference, and a place from which to figure escape as the only method of free thought. In my chapter on Cheever I argued that the postulation of a real place outside of, underneath, or behind suburbia might be considered equally reductive. Both the ideal suburb and its opposite posit some objective ideal to surrender to. Mouffe and Derrida mirror this concern as they criticize Rorty's ideal, where conflict is replaced by a democratic process of negotiation. However, in sustaining the notion of a perpetually unattainable ideal, Rorty importantly acknowledges that human desires and motivations inevitably propose goals, even if those goals are acknowledged as contingent. It is this desire that makes Rorty's perspective pertinent to my discussion.

In conjunction these two critical perspectives – Rorty's neo-pragmatism and Derrida's deconstruction – permit a reading of Ford that emphasises indeterminacy, and the apparent (if insatiable) desire to end such indeterminacy, to close gaps and to unite the image individuals have of themselves with any potential external perspectives. Though small, often underplayed and comic, conflicts are characteristic of all the novels that make up Richard Ford's *Sportswriter* trilogy. The presence of violence in his texts has not gone unnoticed by critics; in book reviews violence is frequently mentioned in passing (Kennedy; Campbell; Byrt). Brian Duffy

conscientiously lists all the incidences of violence that occur in Ford's work and remarks that the "Thanksgiving celebration ... has inescapable violent associations. Frank's Thanksgiving Day ends in violence and murder..." (168). But more subtle instances of conflict or disagreement can be cited as part of the text's refusal to simplistically value one position over another, or to simplistically construct a utopian or idealistic vision of either the determinate position of Frank in the world, or the position of American as a nation-state.

Ford's novels are all set on public holidays. These markers draw attention to Ford's political inquiry into American nationalism, drawing analogies between the indeterminate identifications of his central character Frank, and questions of national identity. Frank Bascombe filters what Independence Day and Thanksgiving mean to Americans through his experiences and perspective. In this filtering Ford demonstrates the potential discrepancies and variations in the signification of the terms 'Independence' and 'Thanksgiving', showing that the historical weight of these terms can be construed variously. Despite the apparent particularity of the dates, their specific temporal location, or the supposed unity of the nation-state in experiencing them, the days are exposed as sometimes indeterminate, flexible, individually imbued and inevitably unsuited to bearing the weight and suppressing the variances of a multitude of alternatively identified citizens. Nevertheless, Bascombe insists on observing the holiday. His desire to participate exposes a continuing will to engage with the predominant sense of national identity, even as that identity is simultaneously critiqued.

Bascombe draws attention to the possibility that the national holidays are celebrated not for their particular, accurate, historical occurrence – the death and resurrection of Christ, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, or the first Thanksgiving – but for the meaning invested in them at any given moment and in accordance with context. The very act of investing meaning in the days, of communicating with, reading, and rewriting the narratives surrounding them, assumes greater importance than the events the calendar-dates might originally have corresponded to; the collective investment in the national occasion is made in light of what that occasion has come to signify in present discourse. The holidays realise their significance not in terms of an historical event itself, but in the resonance of an event in a contemporary (and ever-changing) context. One of Bascombe's endeavours is to find his and his family's particular relation to a national mythology that becomes most potent on these holidays – as though by positioning his family in accordance with the stationing that takes place on national holidays he might be able to alleviate some sense of personal unpredictability or instability.

The holidays, like Frank's own quest to negotiate the pitfalls of his life, represent a far larger attempt to fortify US national identity through a narrativising, rehearsing, and re-telling of stories about US nationhood. In his introduction to a history of Fourth of July celebrations Len Travers argues that the intense, ritualised behaviour and myth formulation that accompanies the development of national holidays is partly a process of encouraging political agreement, a sanctioning of the legitimacy of government and power through the employment and strengthening of various symbols. These symbols must constantly be re-negotiated and adjusted in

order to appeal to a majority and foster a sense of accord by what they envelop (Travers 4-5). In one sense the powerful appeal of these symbols and what they include or exclude might be seen to dominate or even dictate the subject positioning that individuals negotiate as they identify as Americans. The celebrations might be read as part of a national agenda or state agenda aimed at masking individualism, circumscribing behaviours, or encouraging compliance with a state regime.

And yet Travers's statement also allows for an alternative interpretation: if the rituals and behaviours that accompany the 'myth formulation' require the re-negotiation and re-deployment of signs that envelop wider practices, the exercise of celebrating national holidays might also be seen as, alternatively, democratic. As 'being an American' is expanded to include individual outliers – identities on the outskirts of the term 'American' – 'America' changes its signification and constitution. In as much as the performances fortify a national identity they also respond to demands for inclusion. Inherent in Travers's description is the possibility that a failure to encourage this sanctioning and fortification might de-legitimise the government; where the individuals that comprise America no longer agree with the signification of the term 'America', the power of the signs the regime relies on would no longer have effect. If the term 'Thanksgiving' operated as the sign of some rigid and fixed referent, the capacity for the term to continue to appeal to a changing demographic might gradually diminish, and in turn gradually decrease the power of that sign's appeal.

In foregrounding the holidays as the subject matter of his novels Ford connects Bascombe's personal ambiguities of identity with his sense of American

community. In *The Lay of the Land* Frank offers this cynical perspective on Thanksgiving:

As everyone knows, the Thanksgiving “concept” was originally strong-armed onto poor war-worn President Lincoln by an early-prototype forceful-woman editor of a nineteenth-century equivalent of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, with a view to upping subscriptions. And while you can argue that the holiday commemorates ancient rites of fecundity and Great-Mother-Who-Is-Earth, it’s in fact always honored storewide clearances and stacking ‘em deep ‘n selling ‘em cheap – unless you’re a Wampanoag Indian, in which case it celebrates deceit, genocide and man’s indifference to who owns what. (*Lay of the Land* 33-34)

The description follows Frank’s statement that although Thanksgiving “*ought* to be the versatile, easy-to-like holiday, suitable to the secular and religious,” it rarely is (33). In beginning with “as everyone knows” (33) Frank offers his opinion as the normative and collectivised opinion of “everyone” and yet in the following remarks Frank raises history, agricultural and harvest celebration, consumerism, and the indigenous North American Indian perspective. His “while you can argue” (33) appears to concede that other opinions are possible, and yet he rapidly undercuts any optimistic commemoration of “fecundity and Great-Mother-Who-Is-Earth” (34) by raising the overshadowing historical weight of genocide and the theft of Indian land.

In his cynicism Frank also mimics various voices: the abbreviated salesman-speak of “stacking ‘em up n’s selling ‘em cheap,” or the reverential “ancient rites of fecundity” (34), employing all of them as if to show that whatever people are celebrating Thanksgiving for, that celebration has a reliance on an employed discourse, and is marked by a kind of linguistic identification with a certain group.

Frank's stylistic parody has the potential to expose the voices (and the individual approaches to Thanksgiving that the voices represent) as imitated, contingent and constructed. But perhaps Frank's mash of voices is more pastiche than parody (Jameson 114); his own subsequent concession that Thanksgiving is "strangely enough, a great time to sell houses" (34) suggests that Frank concedes to being just as self-interested in the particular value Thanksgiving has from his particular perspective as a real-estate agent. "Our national spirit," concludes Frank, "thrives on invented gratitude" (35).

Frank proposes that Thanksgiving be taken for the invented celebration that it is, and then gradually reduces the importance of the holiday down to the specific, individualistic level: "Contrive, invent, engage – take the chance to be cheerful...Get plenty of sleep. Leave the TV on (the Lions and Pats are playing at noon). Take B vitamins and multiple walks on the beach" (35). Frank's employment of various voices associated with the celebration of Thanksgiving represents less a parody than an articulation of the new contingency of the national holiday's spirit. The notion of an 'authentic' sentiment is replaced by the suggestions that no 'authentic' holiday spirit exists, and that in fact one celebration of the holiday is as valuable, as legitimate, as the next.

The idea that Thanksgiving is a kind of national and individual performance that rehearses an indeterminate national identity is raised again in Frank's description of the Pilgrim Village Interpretive Center's restaging of the first Thanksgiving:

Inside the village they've installed a collection of young Pilgrims – a Negro Pilgrim, a Jewish female Pilgrim, a wheelchair-bound Pilgrim, a Japanese Pilgrim with a learning disability,

plus two or three ordinary white kids – all of whom spend their days doing tiresome Pilgrim chores in drab, ill fitting garments, chattering to themselves about rock videos...Every night the young pilgrims disappear to a motel out on route 1, fill their bellies with Pizza and smoke dope till their heads explode. (*Lay of the Land* 69)

The inaccuracy of the historical re-staging is the result of a desire to reflect a contemporary and politically correct image of America, complete with a series of minority pilgrims. These minority pilgrims, while intended to show that America embraces distinct individuals, ultimately defeat the purported authenticity of the village, effecting a comical undercutting of the project itself. The restaging rejects the importance of any attempt at authenticity, instead embracing a new goal: manufacturing an inclusive narrative. The contrast between the historical village and the Pilgrims' retreat to a motel to "smoke dope" also functions to undermine the accuracy of the historical re-enactment. While the project endeavours to show the importance of history to the identity of today's America, the contrast between the pilgrims' off and on-duty behaviour in fact exposes the differences between today's reality and the potentially disputable distant past, as does the need to artificially import into the staging a series of individuals who were probably not part of the 'original' Thanksgiving.

The historical accuracy and validity of the village is again challenged by Frank's humorous speculation that various other groups might attempt to stage their own competing rendition of history:

There's even talk that a group representing the Lenape Band – New jersey's own redskins, who believe *they* own Haddam and always have – is setting up to picket the Pilgrims on

Thursday, wearing their own period outfits and carrying placards that say THANKS FOR NOTHING and THE TERRIBLE LIE OF THANKSGIVING...There's likewise a rumour that a group of [Revolutionary war battle] re-enactors will go AWOL, march to the Pilgrim's defence and re-enact a tidy massacre in the front steps of the Post Office. (71)

Despite the politically correct endeavours of the Interpretive Centre to embrace all of contemporary America, their display is reductive; while the celebration of early settler survival and struggle venerates one version of history, it obscures another, so that the redskins have to perform their own contestation of the Pilgrim display. Frank offers the humorous possibility of an unplanned re-enactment of a "tidy massacre" (71) which, although it would not be appropriate to a national day of celebration and consolidation, would offer a valuable history lesson by exemplifying the very contestability of historical truths. In the unplanned battles Frank jokes about, the historical players might more accurately reflect how the conflicts of the past manifest again in the contemporary conflict over how that past is discursively re-packaged – demonstrating that American history is far from univocal, and that national holidays might as much allow for the exposure of these myriad competing, conflicted voices as they encourage the suppression of it.

In "Nostalgia Isn't What it Used to Be: Isolation and Alienation in the Frank Bascombe Novels" William Cherneky considers Ford's depiction of Bascombe's identity in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* and the significance of Independence Day to that identity. He argues that "the 4th of July is perhaps the nation's only holiday that commingles the historical concept of national binding unity with personal freedoms" (167). Cherneky reveals Independence Day as, at least in

Ford's depiction, conceptually oxymoronic – a collectivised celebration of individualism. In *Independence Day* Frank's son Paul, aged 15, has recently been arrested for "shoplifting three boxes of 4X condoms ("Magnums") from a display dispenser" (11), assaulting a Vietnamese security officer and calling her "a goddamened spick asshole" (11). He has also taken to barking and "making soft but audible *eeck-eecking* sounds" (13). Bascombe's response is to take Paul on a road trip. His aim is to assist Paul in establishing his independence as an individual, even as the two connect by considering versions of what it means to be an American. For Frank this involves sporting halls of fame that celebrate national idols and pastimes, Emerson's "Self Reliance" and a copy of *The Declaration of Independence*. Frank's intention is to share his sense of how he identifies as an individual, and test the extent to which his son is willing to assume the same kinds of identifications. He hopes that during the trip he will be able to point out

...that the holiday isn't just a moth-bit old relic-joke with men dressed up like Uncle Sam and harem guards on hogs doing circles within circles on shopping mall lots; but in fact it's an observance of human possibility, which applies uncanny pressure on each of us to contemplate what we're dependant on...and after that to consider in what ways we're independent or might be; and finally how we might decide – for the general good – not to worry about it all that much. (289)

In contrast to his portrayal of Thanksgiving, the Frank Bascombe of *Independence Day* is reluctant to allow that the holiday can be reduced to pre-packaged symbols and consumerist agendas. There is a marked optimism in his belief

that Independence Day provides, behind some of its more banal versions of celebration, some model of identity that he can pass on to his son as they connect. But the words Frank offers as his particular impression of Independence Day's significance are undercut by the events of the novel (most notably his failure to achieve the envisioned connection with Paul) so that by the novel's conclusion, when the national day arrives, Frank is willing to concede an ultimate contradiction: that "real independence must sometimes be shoved down your throat" (423). In this comment, and in Frank's belief in a need to "contemplate what we're dependant on" (289) Ford exposes the internal conflict discussed by Chernecky, namely the tension between an idealised collective – a national identity – and an ideal that celebrates individual endeavour. Both national holidays are shown to be part of a national story-telling that prioritises identity and, in reflexively looking to the past, perform identity in a suitable contemporary restaging of history's most acceptable elements.

The national holidays that each of Ford's three novels are set on draw attention to the indeterminacy of the days' significations, while spatially the same theme is developed in Frank's movement through suburbia. In his essay on Ford's short fiction collection, *Rock Springs*, the short-fiction theorist Michael Trussler refers to the constant mapping Ford's characters tend to undertake, both geographically and temporally as they describe who and where they are (36). In *Rock Springs* Trussler finds a series of "discordant voices" (39) emerging through the collection as a whole, and as these voices are located in wider contexts and begin to compete with one another or encroach on the stories of others, Trussler sees a tension that demonstrates the characters' disparities rather than their connections. "Ford's

narrators and characters,” concludes Trussler, “also find temporality to be a force which disperses whatever frail sense of meaning they can create; to exist in time, for Ford, is to be severed from both self and community” (39).

In a footnote, Trussler remarks vaguely that “what is especially intriguing about *The Sportswriter* is that it is a novel that constantly debates with the short story as a form” (51) and briefly notes Frank’s previous work as a writer of neo-realist short fiction. The same attentions to geographic and temporal location that Trussler notes in *Rock Springs* are present in Ford’s novels. The markers of each of the holidays are significant features but Bascombe also constantly relates which highways he is driving on, the names of streets and suburbs, the names of the schools his acquaintances attended or where they grew up. In the later two novels location assumes a central role in Bascombe’s new career as a residential real-estate agent, functioning to mark out the identifications of various minor characters, and also as an allegorical tool in Bascombe’s philosophising and again in the friction between indeterminacy and stability. Whether to “exist in time...is to be severed from both self and community” (Trussler 39) is a statement true of the novels depends on how Frank envisions his own personality and his ability to communicate with those around him. Certainly Trussler’s formulation appears at first to disagree markedly with Brian Duffy’s argument that Frank’s sense of self can only be established by an acceptance of his own past (Duffy 158). Yet the arguments of both Trussler and Duffy can function alongside one another if, as I have argued, Frank’s identity is understood as an unstable process of re-negotiation: he connects with the community

as he endeavours to alter his sense of self to better suit its views, and his selfhood regards his past, but also attempts to envelop an ever-changing present and future.

As the instability of Frank's subject position is painted as an allegory of the instability of how history is re-told, or in his movement through the suburbs and his sale of houses, his communications with others become instances of inter-subjective negotiation where language and mis-communication again displace and undercut his self-conception, and where failures of communication require that he recast his perception of himself.

As Frank works at buying and selling houses he demonstrates the indeterminacy of the suburban landscape, where houses are continually being relocated, where individuals are moving in and out of homes, and where foundations and locations are regularly under examination. Yet he also demonstrates how the settling of houses into the landscape, and people into those houses, is a process of stationing. In *The Lay of the Land* Frank Bascombe climbs into a house that has been lifted five feet off the ground and set on girders, ready to be moved to a new location (604). It is the final scene in which Frank does any real estate business, and the trilogy's final description of a house. "From here the community is briefly re-visioned" (614) Frank says of the view from the elevated house. He notes that "the view stresses the good uniformity of the houses" (614) and then goes on to describe those things that differentiate the properties, such as boats or statues in yards (614); he concludes that "No house has nothing [ie: no individual distinguishing objects], though the effect is to reinforce sameness" (615). Frank stresses sameness and

difference, noting that the desire to appear mildly differentiated has the effect again of creating similarity.⁴

Inside the house Frank begins to understand why his co-realtor did not want to show the house to the buyer: “But if it is a good thing to see the familiar world from a sudden and new elevation, it may not be to see inside a house on girders, detached from the sacred ground that makes it what it is – a place of safety and assurance” (616). Removed from its context, and from its position on the landscape, the house loses its definition as a home. The house’s safety is contingent on its relationship to the houses around it, and taken away from its position within that structure the house loses some of its ability to signify those homely things the buyer is looking for. Frank describes the inside of the house as “still and dank as a coal scuttle and echoey and eerily lit” (617). Inside what would be a living room “picture-frame ghosts make it feel not like a room but a shell waiting for a tornado to sweep it into the past” (616). Just as Frank and the buyer are about to leave the house a fox appears, after a brief skirmish the fox runs past Frank and “out into the clean cold air of Timbuktu where, for all I know, Mike may believe the fox is me, translated by this house of spirits into my next incarnation on this earth. Frank Fox” (620). The episode is strange and unfamiliar, leaving Frank to conclude that the place is a “house of spirits” (620) – somewhere that escapes reality or rationality.

In existentialist philosophy moments of angst and absurd awareness are often brought on by a heightened level of awareness or by some alteration of perspective. Albert Camus describes the moment at which familiar objects become unfamiliar due to a heightened state of awareness as a symptom of absurdity. It is a sensation where

the understanding of objects or situations is undercut by a realisation of the contingency of the orders that have given those objects or situations value:

The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia. For a second we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. (14)

An extreme example of this sensation occurs in Jean Paul Sartre's novel *La Nausea* (translated into English as *The Diary of Antoine Roquentin*) in which the novel's narrator Roquentin, in contemplating the root of chestnut tree, comes to realise that the application of the word 'root' to the root in front of him does nothing to further his understanding of the root's existence: "Oh, how can I put it in words? Absurd: in relation to the stones, the tufts of yellow grass, the dry mud, the tree, the sky, the green branches, Absurd, irreducible; nothing – not even a profound, secret upheaval of nature – could explain it. Evidently I did not know everything" (174). The "image and design" (Camus 14) of language is the order by which Roquentin has appropriated the root's existence into his understanding of the world. When he becomes aware of the severing between this system and the objects he has applied it to Roquentin realises that "faced with this great wrinkled paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of experience" (174).

Unfamiliarity is presented as the symptom of absurd awareness – where, as the assumed objective order (for example, the stable relation of signs to their

referents in language) is undercut, the ability to make sense of and negotiate familiar objects falters and blind subjectivity takes the form of upheaval, confusion and an inability to locate one object in relation to another, or to invest those objects with their familiar meanings. Sartre's treatment of absurdity in *La Nausea* is more taxing in its examination of the ordering system of language itself, where the ability to understand an object is demonstrated to be contingent on its reduction to the order of language. Part of the issue of nausea is that it presents the extremity of absurdity as unbearable and potentially unsustainable.

Earlier on in *The Lay of the Land*, Frank loses the sale of a seaside property to his client Clare because the property's foundations are cracked. Clare asks Frank if he can ask a "quasi-philosophical question" (420) that "pertains to real-estate" (420) and then goes on to draw an explicit analogy between the crumbling house and his fears about the instability of America itself (420):

We've all of us manufactured reality so well, we're so solid in our views, that nothing can really change. You know? ... and don't you think they're not sitting over there in those other countries that hate us licking their chops at what they see us doing over here, fucking around trying to decide which of these dopes to make president ... You think these people here...have foundation problems? *We've* got foundation problems. It's not that we can't see the woods for the trees, we can't see the woods *or* the fuckin' trees. (421)

Clare's character proposes that the reality he lives in, as a middle class American, is a manufactured structure. He feels, in considering America's position in relation to the rest of the world, that the structure is under threat because of the way it has been

constructed and he draws a direct link between the house and his own philosophical quandary.

Clare cannot make sense of anything, and in his version of the woods/trees saying he claims not just a loss of perspective, but a loss of value, meaning, and the very point of perspective. In examining the house from the outside, standing back to observe its foundations, and evaluating it in terms of its relationship to the land, Clare begins to worry about its structure and he fathoms a sense of absurdity that permeates his understanding of the structure of his community against the rest of the world. In a political sense Clare's problem is that America's self-image seems false, and yet as he begins to consider the problem of this image, and to attempt to perceive America from the perspective of other countries, he asserts that America has lost any sense of identity or value, that he can see neither woods nor trees, and that there is no alternative to America's 'false' image other than confusion.

Frank's response to Clare is to humorously perpetuate the real-estate analogy:

Clare's problem is not really a philosophical problem. It just makes him feel better to think that it is. His problem with circumstances is itself circumstantial. He's suffered normal human setbacks...it's standard, a form of buyer's remorse. If Clare would just take the plunge (always the realtor's warmest wish for mankind), banish fear...then he'd be fine. In other words accept the Permanent Period as your personal saviour and act not as though you're going to die tomorrow but – much scarier – that you might live. (423)

Frank is less interested in the question of shaky foundations and more interested in how Clare might attempt to "take the plunge" – to decide to accept the ambiguity of his position and live on *despite* shaky foundations. His response reiterates the

allegorical relationship between selling real estate and establishing less literal forms of stability.

In *Independence Day* Frank Bascombe's main clients are the Markhams, a couple whom he is having trouble selling a house to. His discussion of their position reveals Frank's awareness of the pervasive cultural fear that somehow moving to suburbia equates with the suppression of individual identity, yet it also demonstrates Frank's awareness of the safety of positioning:

My own view is that the realty dreads (which is what the Markhams have, pure and simple) originate not in actual house-buying...but in the cold, unwelcome, built-in-America realization that we're just like the other schmo, wishing his wishes, lusting his stunted lusts...And as we come near the moment of closing ...what we sense is that we're being tucked even deeper, more anonymously, into the weave of culture...(Independence Day 57).

He complicates the mental relationship the Markhams have to home-buying by suggesting that the Markhams feel like "pioneers" reclaiming the suburbs "from people (like me) who have taken them for granted all these years and given them a bad name" (58). He then suggests the Markham's have the usual "pioneer conservatism about not venturing too far – in this case a glut of too many cinemas, too-safe streets, too much garbage pickup, too-clean water" (58). On the issues of conformity presented by the idea of moving to the suburbs, Frank's narration takes the tone of an ironic self-awareness. While joking that the Markhams hyperbolically figure themselves as "pioneers" but have a "pioneer conservatism" Frank again suggests that buying a house requires both a happy assumption of conformity and residual claim to individualism; he sees it as his job to reduce the anxieties the

Markhams have by stressing the “happy but crucial ways they’re not” like their neighbours (58).

Frank presents himself as having both a sympathy for and detachment from his conception of the suburban attitude. He sees the process of finding a house to be as much about situating oneself in a particular geographic space as it is a process of defining and even limiting one’s identity; his awareness extends both to the discomfort of purchasing a house and being “tucked even deeper, more anonymously, into the weave of culture” (57) and to the admission that the weave of culture allows for a form of subject-positioning that stabilises identity. Finding the Markhams a home is an act of placing them in the landscape and simultaneously reassuring them that their position remains a choice; their position has to be confirmed as a malleable contingency, not a finality.

Ford’s text utilises the metaphor of housing to demonstrate the contingencies of signification upon positionality and upon the relations between, in this case, houses. Yet the uncertainty of language also comes to represent a significant concern for Frank Bascombe both in how he uses terms to describe himself, and in how the order of his personal language comes into conflict with the language and communicative acts of the characters around him. In his relationship with Paul, Frank extends the structure of language as metaphor for the ordered relation he has to his son and illustrates how communicative and reciprocal value is lost when the bases from which people communicate are not shared. In *The Lay of the Land*, after an argument with Paul, Frank realises that the “fatherly syntax” – the way he has assumed his father-son relationship works – is not a structure or ‘syntax’ his son

shares. The breakdown of his relationship with his son is figured as a disjunction between systems, where his son has “placed himself outside” (592) of the order Frank has assumed:

I have nothing available to say to him. He has placed himself outside my language base, to the side of my smothering fatherly syntax and diction, complimentary closes, humorous restrictive clauses and subordinating conjunctions. We have our cocked up coded lingo – winks, brow-archings, sly-boots double, triple, quadruple entendres that work for us, but that is all. And now they’re gone, lost to silence and anger, into the hole that is our “relationship.”

I bless you. I bless you. I bless you. In spite of all. (592)

The final repetition of “I bless you” in this paragraph rings with a futility given its context. The preceding statements suggest that Frank’s extension of sentiment cannot be received by his son; the words fall without the reassuring meaning they might usually be expected to have. Like the gutted and unfamiliar house at #118, the words fail to produce their conventional significations of safety and security because the foundation on which they build definition has been placed into question.

In the above passage Frank refers to the language games he and his son share – games frequently mentioned in *Independence Day* while Frank and his son travel the sporting halls of fame: “ ‘I’m all leers,’ I say, which makes him give me an arch look; one more of our jokes from the trunk of lost childhood, *Take it for granite. A new leash on life. Put your monkey where your mouth is.* He, like me, is drawn to the fissures between the literal and the imagined” (*Independence Day* 343). The personal jokes between Frank and Paul are dependant on their shared understanding of skewed

language. The fissure Frank refers to provides a source of pleasure where incongruent and misplaced uses of language sweep referential capacity into an imaginary territory where language shapes conceptions, rather than merely referring to objects. Here the possibility for pleasure relies on gaps between words and their possible connotations, words and their regular meanings, and familiar words made unfamiliar.

But as much as the pleasure of linguistic games springs from the malleability of signs, the difficulty of communication can also be figured as a disconnection fuelled by failures in the communicative capacity of language. Frank describes his relationship with his son by utilising the metaphor of language: either you are inside or outside the syntax of another. In doing so he conflates connection and mutual understanding with a shared understanding of language and depicts his own character as partially dependant on the capacity to communicate. While language, or the connotations of a national holiday, or the resonance of a home are painted by Ford as unstable and negotiable categories, Ford also examines the implications of these instabilities. In one sense malleability offers a sense of pleasure and allows for intimate and private inter-subjectivity and negotiation, while on the other, such indeterminacy is accommodated at the expense of stability.

iii. Inter-subjectivity or Death?

In discussing John Cheever's "The Worm in the Apple" I presented his use of irony as ambiguously reliant on the approach of the reader. It is possible to argue that the narrator's frustrated repetition of "happily" in the sentence "The Crutchman's got

richer and richer and richer and lived happily, happily, happily, happily” (288) alters what is signified, forms a new sign, and raises the possibility of an alternative and entirely oppositional referent: unhappy. But in fact the communicability of the sentence is vastly complex: while it appears to imply ‘unhappy’ the reader might assume a deeply imbedded case of irony firing in fact, at the expense of the frustrated narrator himself (Donaldson “Suburban Sequence”). On this understanding the connotations of frustration and unhappiness depend on the reader’s understanding of what is being signified.

The reader’s decision to interpret the phrase as ironic, and to define the repetition of the words “happily, happily, happily, happily,” (228) as meaning to communicate something *more than* simply that the Crutchman’s are happy, relies on certain presuppositions about what John Cheever might mean, or about what the story *ought* to mean, and potentially on an array of cultural knowledge concerning both real suburban norms and features of suburban fiction. Indeed Timothy Aubry has argued that the “The Worm in the Apple” has the potential to draw the reader’s attention to their *own* unhappiness; he argues that if the reader shares the narrator’s assumptions and is skeptical about how the Cruthchman’s could ever be happy, the reader must *themselves* be unhappy (76).

A reader’s ability to justify their assumption that irony is at work in Cheever’s stories depends, like any other criticism, on their ability to legitimise a reading-position that accommodates their interpretation. Richard Ford’s texts, infinitely layered with discrepancies in voice, supply a similarly complex task. Frequently critics avoid any discussion of the potential levels of irony present in Richard Ford’s

writing and this may be due to the difficulty of interpreting and attributing irony. Or perhaps avoiding the question of irony corresponds to a reluctance to read Ford's text as unsympathetic toward his narrator; because irony is so often executed at the expense of the status of someone's knowledge, to read for irony is to risk characterising Ford's trilogy as an unsympathetic parody of Frank Bascombe (and, by extension, others like him). In Brian Duffy's comprehensive study of Ford's work his discussion of irony occupies less than a page, and offers the following conclusion:

Ford almost unfailingly, simply gives full expression to his creation and allows his character to narrate his life and proclaim the pleasures of the suburban existence without directing the reader to the fault-lines in that ideology, while nonetheless exposing the values and meanings of that world to the harsh examination of experience. In this sense Ford is more disinterested scientist than ruthless ironist. (19)

But asking how Ford manages to write "without directing the reader" is similar to asking how the reader identifies the potential discrepancies between the intended messages of a narrator, the position of an implied author, and indeed the reader's own position.

While Duffy proclaims a lack of "ruthless irony" (19) he ascribes a certain quality to the text that other readers might readily disagree with; the extent to which readers do or do not classify Ford's work as an ironic parody of Frank Bascombe, suburbanite, depends on their own subject-position and the values that underpin how they read. Although there is no simple way to define how the comic gaps between Frank's understanding of a situation, and a reader's understanding might arise (firstly,

and most obviously because no two readers can be assumed to read identically) it is possible to reframe irony as not essentially dependant on a level of superior knowledge or on an 'objective' perspective of someone else's 'subjective' experience, but rather, as contingent on a set of shared inter-subjective assumptions pre-conditioned by social norms or expectations (for instance, what might reasonably be *expected* of a reader given certain presumptions about the social norms affirmed and assumed in contemporary American or Western liberal democracies).

This reframing of irony's effects reflects the wider model of reading presented by the work of this thesis: the replacement of an objective goal with an emphasis on understanding the effect and importance of inter-subjectivity, re-negotiation, and the vagaries of signification. The communicative effect of irony, much like the language games engaged in by Frank and his son, can be read as a skewing of signification that relies ultimately on shared understandings and an acute awareness of context. Irony is thus acknowledged as contingent, and also afforded the agency affiliated with that contingency: if existentialism and post-structuralism promote an understanding of identity (both collective and individual) as discursively framed, then points of slippage, mistaken significations, and adjustments in the relation between signs and referents become shorthand instances of 'mutation' in which signification has the potential to change. In this light, irony's potential lies in its ability to displace a linguistic norm, or alter the signification of a sign in order to re-define its referent and potentially distort, adjust, redefine or expand discursive availability. The success or (to employ the metaphor of evolution) 'survivability' of this new signification relies eventually on whether it persists under interrogation – or on whether others agree

with and accept its communicative capacity. But arguments about irony's capacity are by no means simple.

Søren Kierkegaard wrote of irony: "if what is said is not my meaning or is the opposite of my meaning, then I am free both in relation to others and in relation to myself" (Kierkegaard 209). Because the speaker takes no ownership of the potential significations of their utterance, the onus for interpretation relies, Kierkegaard suggests, on others, and the speaker abdicates responsibility for their communicative act and its implications. In *Irony's Edge* Linda Hutcheon discusses what she terms the "transideological" quality of irony (29) and demonstrates how the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian position "on irony as negation" anchors one side of a longstanding debate over irony's effects (28). Hutcheon surveys the vast history of claims about irony's impact; on some accounts irony is said to function only within the establishment to bolster the superiority of one group over another; on others irony is "subversive and oppositional" and full of the "power that lies in the potential to destabilise" (29).

In light of this transideological quality, Hutcheon seeks instead to approach irony from a more specific, contextual perspective. She asks what it is that irony relies on in order to succeed and how the firing or misfiring of an ironic statement is context-dependant (3). She ultimately argues that irony, rather than having a specific power, rather than being offered at the expense of some or other lack, and rather than being "consensus making" is in fact the "effect of consensus" (92):

In ironic discourse, the whole communicative process is not only 'altered and distorted' but also *made possible by* those different worlds to which each of us differently belongs and

which form the basis of the expectations, assumptions and preconceptions that we bring to the complex process of discourse, or language *in use*. (89)

The vital relationship between a potentially ironic statement and an audience is positioned, within Hutcheon's formulation, as dependant on a kind of inter-subjectivity: shared assumptions and sets of cultural knowledge pre-determine whether the audience will interpret the utterance or performance on the same basis, and share a common understanding or interpretation of it. At one level, the linguistic jokes shared by Frank Bascombe and his son are marks of an intimate relationship where their mutual understandings of discourse is reflected in their ability to 'get' one another's jokes. In fact, at its most extreme their 'getting' of one another's jokes and implied shared history constitute all of the communicative value of phrases that might otherwise be empty.

By feeding the necessity of a shared subject position into the discussion of irony it is possible to muddy the hierarchical distinction between the reader outside of, or 'above' the text, and the character inside it. This model embraces the kinds of rejections of objectivity orienting my readings of both John Cheever and Richard Ford. While to 'get' irony might in some cases be assumed to rely on superiority of either knowledge or perspective, Hutcheon's work suggests that it is possible that 'getting' irony depends on a shared discourse, a kind of horizontal exchange or a set of pre-determined cultural norms and suppositions about discourse, or a process of 'reading sideways'.

Reading sideways represents a marked refusal to presume that readers are always ontologically superior to the subjective limitations and discursive frameworks

of the characters they read about. In my earlier reading of Cheever's "The Swimmer" a form of reading sideways revealed itself in the argument that the reader is complicit in the suburban ordering – the evaluative assumptions – that underpin Ned's formulations of his success, as well as the disappointment he finds on coming to learn that he has not met the standards this order requires. Reading from within certain discursive assumptions, and refusing the possibility of escaping them perhaps fuels the kinds of critical frustrations expressed by readers who find Cheever and Ford's work dissatisfying. To read sideways is not to assume that the text has no valid point to make, or that there is no relevant distance between reader and text. Rather it is to propose that neither readers nor writers can assume a straightforward ontological superiority to the views of the fictional characters, or to the limitations of the fictional world. Conceived of spatially, the relevant gap between reader, text, author and critic exists *beside* or *alongside* rather than above or below.

Repositioning the reader in this way is not a relativist gesture of defeat; it does not claim that any and all readings of a text are as legitimate as the next. Instead it forces a perpetual self-aware interrogation of the position of the reader and insists that all claims made by a reader about the 'meaning' of a text are also attentive to the very scaffolds that inform those readings. The illusion of an objective distance can be just as detrimental to the process of criticism as the acknowledgement of a total inability to access objective essences. This point is precisely elaborated in the disagreement between Butler and McKinnon on the constitution of the female subject in pornography; it also reflects the concerns that underpin debates about the worth of Rortian irony.

Richard Rorty's conflation of irony with a philosophical rejection of claims to objective truth prioritises the role of language in figuring discussions about subjective agency and contingency. However, Rorty's specific use of the term 'irony' is, as he himself has admitted, potentially misleading:

As for 'irony', Laclau is certainly right that this term is not a suitable description of moral courage. Yet it seemed a reasonable choice for describing what I called, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* an appreciation of the contingency of final vocabularies. I admit, however, that the word does have overtones of what Laclau calls 'offhandish detachment', so perhaps it was a bad choice. Still, now I'm stuck with it. (Critchley 74)

Rorty seeks to demarcate his advocacy of irony (and his use of the term) from the apparently flippant quality often attributed to it. Partly this connotation is the result of claims (for example in Kierkegaard's statement "I am free both in relation to others and in relation to myself" (209)) that irony posits an ability to escape a situation, or to position oneself as superior to the confines of discourse. Linda Hutcheon writes that "irony is seen by some to have become a cliché of contemporary culture...this position is usually articulated in terms of contrast: the 'authentic' or 'sincere past' versus the ironic present of the 'total ironist'"(28).

To be a total ironist under this negative conception is presumably to refuse to postulate ideals that challenge social norms or promise to rectify social injustices; to be a total ironist is to reject the concept of truth altogether, and to reject the responsibility for and ownership one's vocabulary. Rorty's concerns about the connotations of his use of the term probably feed from his resistance to any perception that irony reflects an abdication of responsibility for one's vocabulary.

The potential to criticise both white American male neo-pragmatists and American 'mainstream' (ie: non-'minority') writers such as Ford for a certain quality of political detachment reflects a formulation of irony as flippant, morally ambiguous, detached, self-preserving, relativist or apologetically, politically quietist. If it is difficult to claim either that Ford is being ironic at the expense of suburbia, or that he is sympathetically treating his character, then one of the implications might be an argument that Ford refuses any responsibility for his voice or for either a critique or defence of suburban mores.

If values are acknowledged to be subjective and negotiable, one implication is that those already in possession of the most powerful or privileged positions in society perpetuate the 'vocabularies' most beneficial to them even while displaying an ironic detachment that allows them to offer no specific endorsements or criticisms of a culture and ideology from which they benefit (Fesenstein 3,6). While it seems radical to suggest that the transformation of vocabularies could revolutionise cultural norms, Rorty can be accused of generally maintaining a status-quo where Western liberal Christian or Eurocentric values pretend malleability or refuse responsibility even as they perpetuate their dominance and even as they form communities that alienate or ignore the needs of non-conformists and minorities. Such oppression is seen to re-inscribe precisely the authoritarian, racist, sexist, colonialist or hegemonic regimes supposedly rejected by liberal democracies.

And yet this field of debate again rehearses the familiar arguments about the implications of rejecting objectivity or static notions of 'truth'. In confronting Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Camus, Sartre and Rorty, essentialists fearfully and

anxiously repeat the question of how such a rejection allows for any form of agency, and ask how it avoids a collapse into moral relativism or the absolute rejection of social and political accountability. It is the same anxious question that underpinned the demands made of John Cheever to offer a specific moral position regarding suburbia. Cheever's critics suggested that his stories re-affirmed suburban values even as they pretended at an ironic critique of suburbanites; while Richard Gilman and John Aldridge provide for early examples of this concern, Lars Andersson's more recent "The Politics of Conformity in White and Cheever" also concludes that while "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" "resembles in some respects the form of realist fiction so popular in American literature, it ultimately endorses an affirmative view of suburbia that lacks the subversive analysis of society common to many forms of realism" and argues that Patrick White's "The Night the Prowler" provides a more radical example of suburban fiction that "fails to affirm the status quo in the manner that Cheever's story does" (440).

Timothy Aubry (whom Andersson draws on to support his argument) also explores the concern that "Cheever's fiction does not merely describe a crisis of masculinity; it also functions to alleviate anxiety about masculinity" (72) and argues that Cheever's stories functioned, on their earliest publication, as forms of 'self-help literature' for suburban fiction readers who were themselves anxious about their suburban existences (77). Yet Aubry further extrapolates on the importance of reading Cheever's work without assuming that an alleviating or sympathetic treatment of suburbia must necessarily be approached negatively: "Cheever is sympathetic to the rituals suburban men employ to affirm their sense of self; he does

not believe such measures to be mere evasions, but recognizes them as important and complicated strategies for sustaining identity in an increasingly bewildering social world” (71).

One potential response to essentialist concerns about agency is to admit the absurd without assuming defeat. In “Restaging the Universal”, her contribution to the collection *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Judith Butler continues to pursue the question of political intention. The question continues to preoccupy those asking how to formulate a conception of agency from within a post-structuralist, post-modern, or existential concession to contingent and subjective limits. For Rorty the pragmatic answer is that ‘irony’ provides a moderate amount of (sideways) distance or dis-identification from normalised significations (both of vocabulary and self). For Slavoj Žižek the whole process of identification is in fact mandated by a lack, an ultimate “failure of fully recognising oneself in one’s socio-ideological identity” (103). The whole notion of a universal, all encompassing ideal is made impossible by the quality of being-for-itself necessitated by the very definitions of democracy, universality, and subject-positioning:

Universality becomes ‘actual’ precisely and only by rendering thematic the exclusions on which it is grounded, by continuously questioning, re-negotiating, dis-placing them, that is, by assuming the gap between its own form and content, by conceiving itself as unaccomplished in its very notion (102).

Similarly, “not only does the subject never fully recognise itself in the interpellative call: its resistance to interpellation (to the symbolic identity provided by interpellation)

is the subject. In psychoanalytic terms, this failure of interpellation is what *hysteria* is about” (115). It might be added that *in existentialist terms* this refusal of the static, this failure to identify, this displacement and ambiguity of signification, this ever-present gap between how society is envisioned (being-in-itself) and its living, constantly changing actuality (for-itself) is what *absurdity* is about. While for Žižek the “reference to universality can serve precisely as a tool that stimulates questions and renegotiations” (102), for existentialists it is equally and precisely the absence, the distinct space between being-for-itself and being-in-itself, that provides both angst and the motivation to go on in pursuit of the necessary and the necessarily unattainable.

Ford’s novels provide various instances of disjuncture or collision between the perspective of his character and the point of view of an implied reader. One of the great features of Ford’s writing is his exploitation of these gaps to build comic effect and establish ironic potential; while the gaps function as devices they also form some of the very subject matter of his novels, recalling again Ann Carson’s statement, “where the mind reaches out to know, the space of desire opens and a necessary fiction transpires” (171); as discussed earlier the ‘necessary fiction’ of Frank Bascombe’s gap is a kind of perpetual desire to narrate his way through the gaps. Frank attempts to explain and overcome his gaps by uniting the depiction of himself with potential perceptions of himself, even as he appears to acknowledge the contingency of his strategies to do so. Frank’s failure to gain perspective on his own situation is something that he frequently draws attention to in his narration and in his awareness of the potential space between his self-image and the perception others

have of him. At one point in *The Lay of the Land* he admits that his desire to find his sense of self ultimately “portended an end to perpetual becoming” (76). The desire to station his sense of identity as one solid thing exists in the face of his fear that his sense of himself might be fundamentally at odds with the world’s view of him:

...it portended that I say to myself and meant it, even if I thought I said it every day and already really meant it: “This is how the shit I *am*! My life is *this* way” – recognising, as I did, what an embarrassment and a disaster it would be if, once you were dust, the world and yourself were in a basic disagreement on this subject. (76)

Frank fears the gap between his self-perception and the perception the rest of the world has of him. But the statement’s use of the pronoun ‘you’ directs Frank’s fear outward. The mistakes Frank makes in analysing himself are mistakes the reader is equally capable of making. Hutcheon might argue that for the audience to understand Frank’s fear of an ironic deficiency in his own self-knowledge, they must also understand how anyone might become the victim the same form of irony.

In *The Lay of the Land* Frank tells the reader that his daughter Clarissa is worried her life is becoming “*undifferentiated*” (176) and quotes Clarissa, who has said that she feels she is living in boxes or “in linked worlds inside a big world” (176). Frank offers a sceptical evaluation of his daughter’s desire to get outside of the boxes or move “around the boxes, or over them, or some goddamn thing like that” (177) and undercuts her theory by using a casual and dismissive tone:

“Pre-visioning,” she calls this brand of self-involved thinking, something apparently hard to do in a boxed-linked world where you’re having a helluva good time and anybody’d happily

trade you out of it, since one interesting box connects so fluidly to another you hardly notice it's happening because you're so happy – except you're not ... possibly you had to go to Harvard in order to understand this. I went to Michigan. (178)

Frank consistently uses inverted commas in discussing Clarissa's terms for her project, as if making it clear that the terms are not ones he would use; he uses words like "apparently" and "Clarissa seems to think" to establish a tone of suspicion; he terms her theory "self involved thinking"; he reduces the idea to a contradiction by noting that "you" might be *too* happy to have a perspective on yourself, and so be unhappy.

Finally Frank suggests that perhaps he is not qualified to understand Clarissa's theory because he only "went to Michigan" (178). Because this line follows his largely negative description of her "pre-visioning", it seems supportable to infer a tone of insincerity or sarcasm: while Frank, if taken literally, might appear to mean that he is not smart enough to understand his daughter's ideas, it is possible that he actually means the line to be delivered ironically, at the snide expense of his daughter's intellectualising, rather than at the expense of his own ignorance. Frank's audience shares in the ironic connotations of his statement if they make these assumptions about how his statement is structured, contextualised, and delivered. Or, as Linda Hutcheon might argue, Frank's audience must have a shared understanding of the 'rules' of his discourse – those punctuating markers of derision or of not meaning what he is saying – in order to be able to share in or support any claims about the statement's ironic implications.

But the reader has to further contextualise Frank's discussion against what they already know about Frank's own philosophising. A moment later Frank positions his own perspective as seemingly clearer than Clarissa's: "I don't, in fact, think I am [surviving difficulties] too successfully, though the Permanent Period is a help" (178). Frank, like his daughter, has his own philosophical and intellectual approach to life in which he figures the periods of his life as having a certain pattern. In *Independence Day* he discusses life during what he calls the "Existence Period" (*Independence* 94) while the older Frank who narrates *The Lay of the Land* believes he has reached the "Permanent Period". These are categories he uses to define his experience of the world, and in doing so he propounds an intellectualised life philosophy, just as Clarissa does. This opens the potential for a reader to take a differing perspective on Frank than the picture he presents of himself, and introduces a further possible level of irony to his discussion of Clarissa.

And yet to understand *this* level of irony is also to mirror and pattern the irony Frank implies at the expense of Clarissa's boxed-life philosophy. When Frank dismisses his client Clare's "pseudo-philosophical question" about America's foundations (*Lay of the Land* 420) as "not really a philosophical problem" (423) or when he casually and dismissively describes Clarissa's boxed-life philosophy he pretends a superiority to these perspectives; the superiority is then undercut by the revelation of his own philosophical approach. If the reader infers, by implication, an apparent ironic jibe at Frank, they might also be argued to assume the same form of presumed superiority that Frank assumes in relation to Clarissa and Clare. In this way the text builds a self-reflective mirror between Frank's assumptions and the reader's,

and the irony in fact exposes a level of shared subjectivity, rather than a level of superiority in knowledge.

Nevertheless, Frank's willingness to present his own life-philosophy suggests his potential to be sympathetic to the desire Clarissa has to gain a less subjective perspective on her own life. In fact a paragraph after his dismissal of Clarissa's "pre-visioning" he considers, "the way illness focuses life and clarifies it, brings all down to one good issue you can't quibble with. You could call it the one big box, outside which there isn't another box" (179). Here Frank appears to have sincerely applied Clarissa's metaphor, and he demonstrates his understanding of the idea that a person might desire a change in their perspective. A box with no boxes outside of or behind it suggests that there is some more 'authentic' or 'real' or 'less subjective' perspective to desire.

Illness and the prospect of death threaten the ultimate limit for Frank – a box beyond which there are no other boxes – where stasis assumes its import as the point at which the potential to change apparently ceases. What permeates Frank's story, and ultimately competes with all of his subjective-renegotiations and acts of communication is the spectre of death. In *The Sportswriter* Ford confronts the suicide of an acquaintance, throughout the trilogy he continues to be haunted by the death of his son Ralph and in the final novel he faces the possibility of his own death due to prostate cancer. *The Lay of the Land* begins with a short prologue entitled "Are You Ready to Meet Your Maker" in which Frank Bascombe asks himself this question. He describes a newspaper article about a professor who is shot while administering a test. The professor, when asked "Are you ready to meet your maker?" answers "Yes.

Yes, I think I am” (2) before a student shoots her, and then himself. Frank’s answer to this question, he suspects, would have been “You know, not really, I guess not. Not quite yet” (4). In light of the story Frank claims to have begun trying to remind himself of “the most sensate ways that I was alive” (5).

When Frank asserts that the scariest prospect Clare has to confront is the prospect that “you might live” (423) he confronts the very same problem that Albert Camus presents, in “The Myth of Sisyphus” as the ultimate source of absurdity:

A world that can be explained even with bad reason is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and light, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity... it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death. (6)

Without the nostalgic presumption of a reified past in which the world is made stable (here Cheever’s narrator from “Goodbye My Brother” resurfaces) and without the pursuit of a stable goal projected as an achievable future state, the prospect of existence seems futile. Yet Camus’ point is that the decision to go on living and to maintain a state of constant self-awareness is itself a purpose: “people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgements” (8).

To posit only the limited alternatives of either angst or death is to impose a sham form of choice. In the same sense, to propose, as Lukács does, an entitlement to “guess at a rejection of socialism behind the fashionable condition of angst” (64) falsely presumes that angst is synonymous with a rejection of responsibility or agency. As Slavoj Žižek writes in “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!” individuals have the capacity to refuse the “false alternative today’s critical theory seems to impose on us: either class struggle (the outdated problematic of class antagonism, commodity production, etc.) or ‘postmodernism’ (the new world of dispersed multiple identities, of radical contingency, of an irreducible ludic plurality of struggles)” (91). By the end of *The Sportswriter* trilogy Frank’s own proximity to death, rather than creating apathy, is united with his decision to choose to make a political statement.

Throughout *The Lay of the Land* he has faced the prospect of death from cancer, but he confronts death more immediately when, toward the end of the book, he is shot: “...the boy shoots me. In the chest. And that, of course, is the truest beginning to the next level of life”. Frank then describes his recollection of his journey to the hospital in an ambulance. During the trip he decides “when I am turned loose from this current challenge, I am going to sit down and write another letter to the president” (697). The letter will not be a self-interested and particular letter about gun control (697). Instead it will contain advice for the President and his potential successor:

I’ll say that it’s one thing for me, Frank Bascombe, to give up on the Forever Concept and take on myself the responsibilities of the Next Level – that life can’t be escaped and must be

faced entire. But it's quite another thing for him to, or his successor...insofar as they have our interests at heart they must graduate to the Next Level but never give up the Forever Concept. I have lately, in fact, seen some troubling signs, to that I will say there is an important difference worth considering between the life span of an individual and the life span of a whole republic, and that....(698)

At this point Frank's train of thought is interrupted by a paramedic and he never completes his statement about the difference between individuals and republics. Nor does he precisely define the Next Level and The Forever Concept. It is possible that by Next Level Frank is referring to his daughter Clarissa's box metaphor, and a new ability to climb outside his personal box – a new perspective. But later in the chapter he mentions Clarissa again, relates how she has returned to her old life and old relationship and says “she may have decided that “the big swim,” the “out in the all of it” were just mirages to keep her from accepting who she is, and that the smooth, gliding life of linked boxes may not be the avoidance of pain, but just a way of accepting what you can't really change” (719).

The Next Level appears to contain the sense of a change in perspective, as well as the threat of some relinquishment or sacrifice of the Forever Concept. To “graduate to the Next Level but never give up on the Forever Concept” (698) is to assume a place of paradox. The imprecise Next Level accepts the limitations, the realities, the strange inconsistencies and unpredictable qualities of life and insists that “life cannot be escaped” (698) while the Forever Concept echoes the notion of some perpetually unattainable goal, as well as the sense that life is worth pursuing, or that it goes on indefinitely, or that there is some right and true value that unites and

motivates actions even as it seems adjustable, or even as it continuously eludes human conception.

The final image of *The Lay of the Land* is one of Frank on a plane to the Mayo clinic, where he will be receiving a further course of treatment for his cancer. He looks down on the land. “It is nearly four. We pass, lowering, lowering over farms and farmettes and farm-equipment corrals, single stores with gas pumps along Route 14 where Clarissa and I walked and talked and sweated last August” (724). He continues to describe the land, his attempt to “establish the land on a more human scale” (724) and remarks that “It is, of course, only on the human scale, with the great world laid flat about you, that the Next Level of life offers its rewards and good considerations” (724).

The plane lands, providing the final moment of action in the novel, and the novel’s concluding sentence “A bump, a roar, a heavy thrust forward into life again, and we resume our human scale upon the land” (726). To be part of the land, to lay the land flat, and to experience life as context dependant, subjective, limited, is the inevitable quality of existence. Even as Frank goes from being positioned above the land, over and outside of its setting, to being back on it, the indeterminacy of his position is not something that ends. The reader is still unsure, as is Frank, of whether he will survive, or of what will happen to Frank or the members of his family in the years following. The land is of a human scale, but it is by no means static. The sense of Frank being lowered back into its formation, and back into a shared subjectivity with others echoes too the sense in the final sentence of *Independence Day*: “I feel

the push, pull, the weave and sway of others” (451); it is a sentence conveying at once motion and interrelation, indeterminacy and inter-subjectivity.

In Frank’s letter to the president he plans to catalogue all of his characteristics:

I am a citizen of New Jersey, in middle age, with wives and children to my credit, a non-drug user, a non jogger ... a citizen with a niche, who has his own context, who does not fear permanence and is not in despair, who is in fact a realtor and a pilgrim as much as any...I’ll write that these demographics confer on me not one shred of wisdom but still a strong personal sense of having both less to lose and curiously more at stake. (698)

Frank’s listing of his particular demographic allegiances, as a person from New Jersey, as a husband, a father, a non-drug user, a non-Christian (697) are all specific marks of identity that he acknowledges have no impact on his ability to have a voice about America – there is no inherent wisdom associated with any of these traits. His characteristics, he suggests, both are and are not important; the conflicting sense that he has at once something and nothing to lose echoes a fundamentally existentialist approach to selfhood.

In existentialist terms, as he makes himself in the world, Bascombe chooses his values and aspirations. He simultaneously acknowledges that these choices are at any point changeable, disposable, and negotiable. Bascombe accepts those aspects of himself that are inevitable – that he is middle aged, that he has already made the choice to marry and have children – while asserting that these facts are not important except in that they offer “something to lose”. In fact they comprise a sense of what he values about himself. Bascombe’s position is one both of freedom in his potential to

alter who he is, and subjective restraint in terms of the facticity that limits his available choices. Frank ultimately confronts the existentialist position that man must “always make his less-than-absolute choices within the limited perspective and the prejudicial atmosphere of his situation” (Solomon 317)⁵. Frank’s voice, and his right to offer his comments directly to the president, is something that stems purely from his being. He is “A pilgrim as much as any” (697) continually re-creating the moment of America’s beginning and existence, continually resituating himself on the landscape and participating in its history.

Conclusion

Writing about the suburb as a fictional space extends beyond the literal consideration of ‘fictions about suburbia’. Stories about the suburbs are also intimately connected with the way the suburb has been discursively constructed. A small part of the intention of this thesis has been to examine how conceptions about the suburb have affected how critics read Cheever’s suburban stories. But the suburban model raises a much wider critical concern about subjectivity and identity itself; it traces out and restages the divergence of the desire for satisfaction, and the resistant fear that such satisfaction must be accompanied by conformity, inauthenticity, disempowerment and stasis. In existentialist terms, the will to both refuse and conform to a suburban ideal is a microcosmic expression of the inevitable angst-filled desire to become (and to resist becoming) a being-in-itself. Richard Ford’s work aptly demonstrates how this conflict can manifest as a fundamental indeterminacy. It can be argued that his texts rehearse a desire to maintain identity, and a further self-awareness problematically predicated on a constant *interrogation* of that identity.

Refusing to postulate suburban identification as total, and as opposed to authenticity and consciousness, necessitates an inquiry into the potential malleability of the relationship between the individual and the patterns from which they draw their sense of self. Finding some measure by which to identify and to create value (even if

that measure is contingent) is a central motivation at the heart of Ford's work. Before Ford, this form of desire lent John Cheever's stories part of their peculiarly nostalgic and ambiguous tone. Those critics who essentialise their own measures of what literature ought to do lament that Cheever's stories fail to meet *their* terms for what makes a text an appropriately worthy piece of social inquiry. Cheever's texts fail to conform to their standards in the same way that Cheever's suburban characters fail to conform to certain suburban measures of success. Frequently the response of Cheever's characters is to attempt to find new orders, new measures and new standards from which to derive value and meaning – even if those measures seem arbitrary, collapse under scrutiny, or ultimately become self-defeating.

Critics are engaged in an analogous process: both characters and readers try to stabilise or prioritise identity, ideology, vocabulary, meaning, or interpretation. A further endeavour of this thesis has therefore been to build new models by which to read Cheever and to apply those models to Ford; I aimed to disengage the texts from readings that demanded a suburban critique, and to demonstrate how their subject matters can be read in less reductive terms. In Ford's case the concessions to contingency, the limitation of perspective, and the refusal of traditional forms of closure, never prevent Frank Bascombe from offering his voice. Ford's novels explicitly engage issues surrounding American politics, nationhood, and the relationship between state and individual. Like his own character Frank, who chooses to write a letter to the president, Ford commands the right to a voice that does not defeated by (and does not depend on) any assumed identification he might have with a white, heterosexual, American male demographic. Any criticisms that Ford is not

radical enough, or that he does not speak for a real America, or that his voice has fled to a kind of self-apologetic safety by light of its contingency, only rehearse the same forms of criticism once directed toward Cheever. The identifiable fault in the practice of Cheever's earliest critics was not their willingness to posit an ideal to aspire to, but rather, their failure to admit the contingency of their own ideals. One of those ideals proposed a place figured as free from conformist constraint and free from the suburbs; the other, the ideal social text, constrained their own conception of what makes for adequate social critique.

Jonathan Franzen's somewhat infamous *Harper's* essay "Perchance to Dream" (Later re-written and published as "Why Bother" in his collection *How to be Alone*) considers among other things, the purported death of the social novel. He even refers nostalgically to the days when people like John Cheever and James Baldwin graced the covers of *Time Magazine*, were read by his father, and were considered important. One of the great ironies of Franzen's essay is that he was at the time of its publication writing his own social novel, *The Corrections* which would go on to be a best-seller. Perhaps more interesting is Franzen's use of the familiar suburban/urban metaphor to articulate his argument about the state of the white American male novelist:

Much of contemporary fiction's vitality now resides in the black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, and women's communities, which have moved into the structures left behind by the departing straight white male. The depressed literary inner city also remains home to solitary artists who are attracted to the adversity and grittiness that only a city can offer, and to a few still-vital cultural monuments (the opera of Toni Morrison, the orchestra

of John Updike, the museum of Edith Wharton) to which suburban readers continue to pay polite Sunday visits. ("Perchance to Dream")

Here culture, ethnicity and sexuality are identity issues figured as urban and gritty and as the "literary inner city". Supposedly the "departing straight white male" novelist has fled to the relative safety of the suburbs in a pattern that mirrors 1950s ex-urbanisation. Franzen co-opts the familiar signification of the suburbs as a place without real weight. The suburbs are the cleaned out and irrelevant space of (obsolete, culturally irrelevant bourgeois) white male novelists; they continue to signal debilitating places of safety, stagnation, and unconscious silence. Yet his very own novel *The Corrections* and the stories of writers like Cheever and Ford testify to the alternative claim that the suburb is a setting like any other, where identity is still at issue, and where novelists can write from.

In the work of both Cheever and Ford the suburban setting assumes a metaphorical association with the patterning issues surrounding identity and subject positioning. The simplicity of positing a suburban image as purely inauthentic is undone by both authors as they demonstrate that human angst and anguish – qualities of consciousness and self awareness – are qualities exhibited in the kinds of longings, desperations and dissatisfactions that motivate their characters. In Cheever these motivations lead to various substitutions of one order for another, one act of narration or explanation or imagination for another. In Ford these motivations lead Frank Bascombe to go on narrating, to go on seeking that sense of his meaning in life, his identity, the unification of his perspective of himself with the perspective others have of him. Both writers have a careful and deliberate concern for tone, and a specific

awareness of language as a source of pleasure and comfort, as well as an apparent awareness of the gaps of language – the potential for irony, for multiple meanings and connotations. Essentially the quality of self-awareness underpins all of their work as the texts not only make demands of their characters to meet the sources of their identification, but also potentially necessitate a cautious awareness among readers of how their own reader-positions, ideological assumptions, or desires affect their understanding of irony and their appreciation of the literature at hand.

Although Richard Ford frequently gives interviews and frequently comments on where his writerly instincts and interests lie, he refuses to deny the infinite complexity of narratives. In an interview he refers to an essay by Richard Blackmur:

[Blackmur] makes the argument – lost now among critics – that critical categories, critical exclusivities – are really only provisionally useful, and that eventually after you've used one (Freudianism, for example) and ruled a book off with its strictures and looked at things closely, you must put the book back together again, restore it to its great complexity, because that's how it truly exists. It's possible to delude oneself into thinking that the book anatomized is the book put into its truest light. Well, it's not. (Walker 140)

Does Ford by implication then suggest that literary criticism is futile, or that attempting to explain a text or its significance and meaning is aimless?

To posit a single reading of a text as 'the authentic' reading, or 'correct' interpretation is to commit a kind of Camusian philosophical suicide and to act in bad faith. Equally, to surrender in light of the sheer volume of a text's interpretive capacities and refuse to read at all is to approach another form of theoretical and

arguably unhelpful ‘suicide’; while one reading may not exhaust all possible interpretations, it can make certain claims to validity by logically justifying and defending its position in relation to given, if subjective, understandings and assumptions about context, discourse, and signification. To accept the weakness of critical perspective, and the constant and unbridgeable gaps between reader, text, author, and fictional world, and then to go on reading despite this, is to assume a relatively absurd yet arguably vital, inevitable, inescapable practice. Absurdity, as David Galloway says, requires “a shift in emphasis from attainment to performance” (10). Frank Bascombe is a character constantly maintaining the act of narration, engaged in a performance, evolving and struggling with no obvious objective goal in sight other than perhaps the struggle for existence itself. In response to his work, Richard Ford’s readers perform acts of reading, of criticism, of interpretation and of reinterpretation. Each reading of a text – a claim about its ironic capacity, about its political worth, its voice – is not a relativistic and worthless act but rather, something contingent on the ability of a reader to take what is available to them, analyse it, and at once assess precisely what aspects of their own reader-position influence, orient, scaffold, and sustain what might always be a sideways approach to the literature.

For those (often Marxists-oriented) critics who demanded a social critique or escape from the values popularly associated with suburbia (conformity, materialism, in-authenticity) understanding the benefits of such an approach demands a different ideological perspective. Disposing of the premise that there is some authentic, essential, more real, more stable and less-subjectively, socially constrained ideal is one of the efforts made by critics like Judith Butler. In an attempt both to concede to

what is perceived as the unavailability of essences, and also to liberate subjects from the reductive binaries of either/or (free will/determinacy, un-conscious/conscious) critics have to surrender certain measures; the measure of a text's worth by the extent to which it dramatises suburban escape provides just one such unsustainable measure.

By reading these authors for what they offer, and the uses they make of the suburb as a setting, rather than by reading them against a certain pre-determined conception of the suburb, or against what the form of a novel ought to be, or of how characterisation ought to work, the interest both authors have in the anxiety of subjectivity is evident. This anxiety can be positioned as one of the very 'subject' matters of their texts. Where the texts prioritise self-awareness in the use of nostalgia, conflict, competing voices, irony, or plays on perspective they reveal themselves as relevant to the kinds of socio-political and cultural concerns that shape contemporary trends in current debate about the nature of agency. The suburb can, on this reading, be understood as a particularly apt physical and geographical metaphor for what is seen as a vital human struggle between the desire for the safety of stasis, and the understanding of this stasis as untenable.

And yet to simplistically conclude that Richard Ford's trilogy is an absurd work of art remains as problematic as it does for all of John Cheever's stories. Part of the source of absurdity is distance, unfamiliarity, and a failure to engage in the system from which objects derive value. Cheever's heroes can only be classed as absurdist if the reader themselves refuses to grant any value to the systems the characters create; the reader's position in relation to the text – their wilful rejection of an invitation to engage in an inter-subjective extension of sympathy – must be what

determines whether or not the text can be termed absurd. Frequently fiction allows the reader to maintain a distance between themselves and the world, a kind of objective gaze on the fictional landscape; a reader who admits that the sensation of objectivity is an illusion, or who engages with the subjective limitations experienced by characters in the text, might understand the absurdity of the reading process itself. And yet, despite absurdity, the reader might choose to go on. A reader who undoes and refuses initial readings, or who demonstrates that there can be no one true reading of the text (though there may be some basis for evaluating one reading against another) admits to the contingencies of their critical position and pragmatically perseveres.

In “The Myth of Sisyphus” Camus never identifies a specific example of an absurd work of art. He considers Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and concludes that it is not “an absurd novelist addressing us, but an existential novelist” (111). Franz Kafka’s work is also considered existential but not absurd. Of Kafka, Camus concludes: “his work is universal (a really absurd work is not universal)” (136). On Camus’s terms the fact that Ford and Cheever both end their stories, or that the characters appear to continue to hope for goals, or to turn (particularly in Cheever’s case) nostalgically to a lost or unreal past, gives rise to the argument that within the hermetically sealed confines of the text, absurdity is not sustained.

Perhaps Camus’ difficulty in identifying an absurd work lay precisely in the problem of the relation between reader and text; to say that a text ‘is’ absurd is illogical; absurdity can only reside in the reader’s interpretation and never as a set quality of the text. It cannot depend on the stable, unchanging and finite marks of ink

on a page, and must instead form somewhere in the discursive space surrounding the printed object – in the gaps formed between reader, text, and author.

In Cheever's story "The Fourth Alarm" (*Stories* 645-649) a man attends a theatre production in which his wife strips naked, simulates copulation with other cast members, and asks the audience to join in forming a naked "love pile" on stage (646). The man happily removes his clothes, but he cannot bring himself to leave his car keys and wallet unattended. The rest of the audience begins to chant "put down your lendings. Lendings are impure" (648) but the man cannot do it: "I held my valuables in my right hand, my literal identification. None of it was irreplaceable, but to cast it off would be to threaten my essence" (649). He gets dressed, goes outside into a blizzard, and remembers with relief that he has snow-tires. In this moment of practicality he concludes: "I seemed not to have exposed my inhibitions but to have hit on some marvellously practical and obdurate part of myself. The wind flung the snow in my face and so, singing and jingling the keys, I walked to the train" (649).

At this moment the man makes a choice. On some readings his decision to cling to his material possessions and "literal identity" could be criticised as materialist, conformist, or a rejection of an opportunity for liberation. Alternatively, the story provides for a more optimistic reading. While the man realises that his valuables are "not irreplaceable" and while he realises the insignificance of them as materials, he also proclaims a practical dependence on them, suggesting his own pragmatic acceptance of a need to yield to practical demands. The final paragraph is potentially a triumphant declaration of identity, safety, and a choice to acknowledge what is important to him. While the "love heap" makes light of man's dependence on

his belongings, his practical success in having snow tyres equally makes light of the impractical love-heap of people who might, thrust into the blizzard, have no way to get home.

Preserving a distance or dis-identification from the narrator might provoke a sense of absurdity on the part of the reader. His “dumb show” (Camus 15) seems like an absurd or helpless display. Alleviating this sense of absurdity depends on removing the comparative distance, the sense of being ‘above’ the text, and engaging or sympathising with the character’s motivations; it requires an admission that his limitations are not radically distant from our own. This is not equal to a complete assumption of the subjective limitations and the subject-position of the character in the text; it is not a ‘choice’ to ignore the issues surrounding identification and interpellation, or a choice to wilfully conform; rather it is a case of inter-subjectivity: it assumes the ability to engage, participate, exchange – from only a relative distance. The practical snow-tyre, that thing that serves to alleviate but never *defeat* absurdity is a rejection of the debilitating nausea of any absolute concession to angst. As is Frank Bascombe’s decision to write a letter to the president. As is the choice to engage in, and expand the scope of, the critical dialogues established through all acts of interpretation.

Notes

¹ Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is largely motivated by the idea of resisting the assumed facticity of gender; of showing that while biological gender may be a mark of facticity it is only a limitation in so far as people accept socially and culturally constructed relation between gender and sex – or in a Sartrean sense, in so far as they resist the compulsion to occupy the being-in-itself/object-position of being gendered 'female'.

² Schrift argues that the real gain made in Butler's move toward post-structuralism was distancing herself not from the existentialist account of consciousness, but from the "constraining existentialist understanding of difference as essentially hierarchical" (22). I feel this claim is supported by the reference Butler makes to Sartre in the opening preface to the first edition of *Gender Trouble*. Sartre, says Butler, maintains the "radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female 'Other'" (GT vii) and Butler seeks to undo this masculine/feminine binary and therefore sets out to reject Sartre.

³ Mackinnon deliberately stresses the point that the 'real' relations between genders are constituted by pornography. She does so as part of a discussion (in reliance on Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography*) on the social construction of sexual and gender relations by pornography (Mackinnon 198), in which she writes "Pornography is not imagery in some relation to a reality elsewhere constructed. It is not distortion, reflection, progression, rejection, fantasy, representation or symbol either. It is sexual reality" (198). Mackinnon goes on to argue that pornography has had to become increasingly desensitising and increasingly violent in order to perpetuate its appeal: "Making sex with the powerless 'not allowed' is a way of keeping 'getting it' defined as an act of power, an assertion of hierarchy, which keeps it sexy in a social system in which hierarchy is sexy" (201). The distinction between an insistence that pornography is not 'some elsewhere', and the insistence that pornography keeps having to reconceptualise itself in order to maintain its appeal as an elsewhere (a fantasy of violent dominance) reveals part of the inconsistency of Mackinnon's argument; an inconsistency that Butler's argument helps to reveal and adjust.

⁴ This comment might be aligned with a larger argument surrounding signification: any attempt to escape the ordered system of subject-position – to act alternatively – only successfully draws such an alternative action back into the logical system the individual attempts to resist. On one understanding this inability to escape the order suggests that no "original" or "authentic" alternatives to the system are available, while on the other, the fact that the actions can be made to signify suggests in fact, an ability to alter the terms and logic of the system itself, that is, to exercise agency.

⁵ The position is one held by the French existentialist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Robert Solomon notes that Merleau-Ponty had a significant influence on Sartre's work, and that in his later career Sartre came more fully to accept the impact that facticity has on the radical freedom of choice that Sartre envisioned. Solomon quotes Sartre on the topic: "In a recent interview Sartre has said of his earlier ideas, 'little by little, I found that the world was more complicated than that.' In 1970 he finds it 'absolutely incredible' that he believed that 'whatever the circumstances, and whatever the site, a man is always free to choose to be a traitor or not...'" (317). Merleau-Ponty's position (and Sartre's later revision of his own) can more clearly be aligned with subsequent developments in French post-structuralism, and more particularly to Judith Butler's assertion that gender is a choice made within the given limits of discourse.

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