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# “THE GAME IS THE GAME”: TAUTOLOGY AND ALLEGORY IN *THE WIRE*

Paul Allen Anderson

Omar Little (Michael K. Williams) waits to testify for the prosecution at a murder trial. He is not at all nervous. The sheriff guarding him works on a crossword puzzle but is now stumped by the name for the Greek god of war. His best guess—Mars—doesn't fit. “Ares,” Omar announces breezily. “Greeks called him Ares. Same dude, different name is all.” Surprised that a black thief from Baltimore's West Side would have such knowledge, the white sheriff tries out the word and then thanks Omar. “It's all good,” the thief purrs. “See, back in middle school and all, I used to love the myths. Stuff was deep. Truly” (2.6).<sup>1</sup> Omar is open about all his loves and as fearless as the Malcolm who shares his surname. His comment on Greek and Roman mythology hints further at an unusually high awareness of alternative codes of behavior in battle.

The gods of classical Greek and Roman mythology toyed with mortals while the latter flailed—whether desperately, humorously, or honorably—against fate's constrictions and mysteries. *The Wire* brings Ares and the other gods and their powers down from Mount Olympus to the faceless modern institutions towering over the series' characters. The series, according to creator David Simon, “is a Greek tragedy in which the post-modern institutions are the Olympian forces.”<sup>2</sup> Many of the characters understand well enough the grim machinery of the institutions they work in, though such knowledge hardly promises satisfying results. A parade of battered idealists and would-be heroes—among them Jimmy McNulty, Cedric Daniels, D'Angelo Barksdale, Frank Sobotka, Howard Colvin, and Gus Haynes—flail dramatically against their fates. Meanwhile, the deputy police commissioner barks to a room of nervous police commanders, “The gods are fucking you; you find a way to fuck them back. It's Baltimore, gentlemen. The gods will not save you” (3.3).

The series' would-be heroes repeatedly chafe at the frustrating institutional logics defining the works and days of Baltimore life, whether the

underground drug economy, local law enforcement, organized labor, urban politics, public education, or the local media. The assorted institutional layers are hardly disconnected; the show's slow-moving storytelling weaves them together into a dense fabric of ambition and wreckage. In the second season, for example, the real estate developer Andy Krawczyk lays out a plan for a waterfront condominium redevelopment. Public money will partly fund the construction, and the coffers of city and state politicians will need to be lined throughout the process. Krawczyk's redevelopment plan, however, comes at the cost of local dockworkers whose livelihood and very workplace face obsolescence. While Frank Sobotka, their union leader, turns in desperation to illicit enterprises to fund a political lobbying effort to defend their jobs, a few chronically underemployed dockworkers, including Frank's own son, move further still into the world of drug dealers introduced in the first season. The harder Frank tries to save his union and his family, the more certain is his murder by the ruthless "Greeks" (organized crime figures who only pretend to be Greek).

The gods do not save Frank Sobotka. His efforts to actively improve a bad fate only worsen the situation. Here as elsewhere, "all the pieces matter" (as Lester Freamon would say) in a jigsaw-puzzle narrative whose figures and shapes can be made out only from above, if not from a perch on Mount Olympus. The relative sociological precision of *The Wire* suggests that the series is not only about how Omar Little, Frank Sobotka, and many other imagined members of contrasting social groups make a living in a particular mid-Atlantic port city. The second-tier metropolis also stands as a template for many similar urban centers in the United States. Praise for the show's novelistic storytelling, snippets of highly quotable dialogue, air of social realism, and vast ensemble of finely drawn characters became commonplace during its original airing. Pushing back against the problem of a consistently small viewing audience during its original airing, the effusive compliments became so predictable that the series writers ultimately twisted the celebrated "Dickensian aspect" into a bitter punch line during the final season.<sup>3</sup>

As another punch line, Omar Little regularly announces "It's all in the game" with a sly chuckle after robbing the holders of a drug stash at gunpoint. He means the phrase as a taunt. It reminds his victims that even he—an openly gay thug unaligned with any gang or network—must count as a player in the game. Insiders who strongly question the working rules of the game typically suffer grim consequences. Only a lucky few escape. Late in the series, we find one of D'Angelo's former crew members working at a nearby Sports Locker store. Malik "Poot" Carr now wears a referee's jersey as his work uniform. The striped shirt figuratively an-

nounces his neutrality as he outfits current players of the game in the latest apparel. Duquan “Dukie” Weems, eager for an alternative to a game for which he is ill-equipped, inquires desperately about job prospects at the store. Homeless but still too young to work legally, he must instead fend for himself on the streets. In the series’ distressing closing montage, viewers peer at Duquan shooting heroin in an alley alongside an older garbage picker. While the game of drug trafficking is central to the world of *The Wire*, many other figurative and literal games appear over the series’ five seasons. In addition to an abundance of literal competitive sports and games on display (from boxing to dogfighting to dice), institutions and workplaces often function like games where implicit rules are as important as explicit ones. Learning, accepting, or rejecting the rules of a workplace’s game is of major consequence on both sides of the law, in local politics, and beyond.

Early in the first season, D’Angelo Barksdale teaches several members of his crew a lesson about the game by talking about chess. Thinking through this allegorical game nudges his employees toward an expanded perspective on their roles in the game. Certain other characters like D’Angelo’s uncle, Avon Barksdale, work hard to stay ahead in the game by asserting interpretive authority over it. As part of that effort, Avon returns again and again to a signature tautological proverb—*the game is the game*. Most simply, he means the phrase to reinforce his authority. These two examples, D’Angelo’s chess allegory and Avon’s signature proverb, reveal how alternating moments of allegorical and tautological interpretation are put to work in *The Wire*. They exemplify the everyday tools of critical analysis immanent to that world but also point to that which appears beyond the characters’ horizons of understanding.

Tautological phrases like Avon’s *the game is the game* function as conservative proverbs or short-hand renderings of an epic worldview defined by necessity and institutional consistency rather than turbulent change and randomness. Allegorical thinking like D’Angelo’s, by contrast, promises the beginning of an alternative perspective. Looking beyond the confines of a fate-bound world identical to itself makes possible a vision at once imaginative and historical where *what is* also includes the thought of that *which is not*—and even that *which should be*. It would be mistaken, however, to read the pairing of tautology and allegory in *The Wire* as strictly opposed. Allegorical understanding within the drama can provide moments of insight and even a semblance of critical distance, but it cannot overcome the constraints of institutional inertia and broader structural determinations. At least for D’Angelo and his young crew members, an enlightening allegory about how pawns can become queens offers only a

distant and ultimately disillusioning glimmer of hope beyond the tautologies ruling their lives. Even Omar, the charismatic student of ancient mythology, cannot imagine rising above the game even as he dances around its rules. Instead of finding liberation from existing institutional games, disillusioned characters must find other ways to manage their position or, like the gifted detective and artisan of dollhouse furniture Lester Freamon, they must retire to games of the imagination that rest on far more private terms.

### THE PAWNS OF ALLEGORY

A traditional allegory is a narrative with two distinct levels of signification. An allegorical narrative, in other words, is *what it is* and also *what it is not*. The manifest and exoteric narrative (*what it is*) references and presumably runs parallel to an absent but implied prior narrative (*what it is not*). Since the latter narrative remains latent, perceiving and understanding it may require esoteric knowledge or hermeneutic excavation.<sup>4</sup> Along with the series writers and most critics, some of the characters of *The Wire* warm to the opportunities of allegorical interpretation. The allegorical imagination offers a kind of environmental adaptation with which low-power characters can map their relative powerlessness amidst the institutions towering over their lives.<sup>5</sup> Members of disenfranchised groups and other social outsiders commonly develop interpretive habits and strategies for reading the dominant culture and its ideological supplements skeptically. Such skepticism can fuel bleakly resonant humor, as with Richard Pryor's observation about African American men and the criminal justice system: "They give niggers time like it's lunch, down there. You go down there looking for justice; that's what you find: just us."<sup>6</sup>

Pryor's comment differentiates official narratives and street-level social narratives at the site of homophonous pronunciation ("just us" sounds like "justice") to set an observation about widespread bias in penal sentencing (giving time) alongside an official ideological narrative of justice's color blindness and impartiality. In the case of *The Wire*, the institutions under scrutiny include the public schools, the criminal justice system, the political system, and America's postindustrial urban economy. As a critical allegory, the series reads nearly every narrative meant to legitimate official institutional authority as a thin ideological veneer covering a latent reality of dysfunction, corruption, and failure. Such critiques may not yield blueprints for social transformation, but they can assist local tactics for personal and small-network survival and negotiation.

As previously noted, allegory appears early in *The Wire* when the young boss of the low-rises near Franklin Terrace introduces the game of chess to two of his crew members. D’Angelo Barksdale (Larry Gilliard Jr.) finds Bodie Broadus (J. D. Williams) and Wallace (Michael B. Jordan) playing a game of checkers with chess pieces. He ridicules their childish substitution and urges that they learn chess: “Chess is a better game, yo.” The formal simplicity of checkers makes it less challenging and less true to life: all the checker pieces begin with equal value and equal power. The game evokes a social fantasy about the equality of opportunity as an achieved original position from which all players on the board begin their working lives. By contrast, an explicit and hierarchical division of labor defines the war game of chess. Half of a player’s pieces are interchangeable soldiers (the pawns), whereas the remaining ones start as specialized pairs with distinctive skills (rooks, knights, and bishops) or have singular importance (the irreplaceable king and his great protector, the queen). D’Angelo holds up a few different pieces one at a time and explains their roles. He demystifies the intimidating game by leaning on Bodie and Wallace’s prior understandings of the Barksdale operation. In turn, the world of formal rules and roles in chess provides a more abstract perspective on their everyday lives in the mercurial game. Unlike checkers, chess is far more than a game of strategy and luck among equals. Instead, as Benjamin Franklin once commented, “[V]erily the game is an image of human life.”<sup>7</sup> Chess miniaturizes a picture of life within and combat between stratified societies defined by extremely limited personal opportunities for advancement beyond one’s original status. D’Angelo’s allegorization of the local drug institution sketches a small corner (cf. David Simon and Edward Burns’s 1997 book and 2000 HBO miniseries, both titled *The Corner*) of the kind of cognitive map that might “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.”<sup>8</sup> Mapping the Barksdale operation allegorically also speaks to the series writers’ efforts to track some of the victims of “untethered capitalism run amok” across five seasons. Simon and company want to pursue “how power and money actually route themselves in a postmodern American city” in order to illustrate “why we as an urban people are no longer able to solve our problems or heal our wounds.”<sup>9</sup> Although the writers uncover far more routing and wiring of what Fredric Jameson dubs “the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” than D’Angelo’s very local allegory, both mapping efforts ultimately lead to aggrieved and pessimistic conclusions.

“The king stays the king,” D’Angelo teaches Wallace and Bodie (1.3). Alluding to a different sporting game (bowling) to explain the literal and

figurative meanings of chess, D'Angelo adds that the king in chess is "the kingpin. . . . Now he the man." Left to himself, the king as father figure is nearly as vulnerable as a pawn because "he ain't got no hustle." Unlike the other nonpawns, he can only move only one square at a time. "But the rest of these motherfuckers on the team, they got his back. And they run so deep, he really ain't gotta do shit." "Like your uncle," Bodie correctly observes. D'Angelo silently agrees. He then holds up the piece that starts the game at the king's side: "Now this the queen. . . . Now she the go-get-shit-done piece." "Remind me of Stringer," Wallace contributes. The pawns, D'Angelo continues, are the foot soldiers; they are also the figurative children in a kind of family ruled by the sentimental, yet hard, authoritarianism of a charismatic king (Avon Barksdale) and a more rationalistic and even more lethal queen (Russell "Stringer" Bell). The pairing of Avon and Stringer on the chessboard transposes gender roles in that here the king stands for the romantic communal values of *Gemeinschaft* (which the writers sometimes sentimentalize) while the queen stands for the economic abstractness and atomistic individualism of *Gesellschaft* (which the writers always disparage). Under either dispensation, however, chess pawns still move "one space forward only, except when they fight," as D'Angelo notes. The king may have the queen and a whole team watching his back, but the pawns (like D'Angelo, Wallace, and Bodie) have no one shielding them from the game's brutality. Instead, they must shield more powerful pieces. "Everything stay who he is," D'Angelo clarifies, "except for the pawns. . . . Make it all the way down to the other dude's side, he get to be a queen." Pawns may enjoy the unique opportunity of social advancement in chess, but they begin with far greater vulnerabilities: "Pawns, man, in the game they get capped quick. They be out the game early." "Unless they some smart-ass pawns," Bodie notes, imagining himself rising in the drug business through hard work. Expecting major opportunities built on Avon's nepotistic favor, D'Angelo does not explicitly present the game as unfair in the chess allegory, though its lethality distresses him. He protests "the game ain't got to be played like that" when crew members senselessly beat down some of the clientele (1.3). The moments of regret and protest foreshadow D'Angelo's eventual rejection of the game and the accompanying rhetoric of Barksdale family loyalty.

D'Angelo teaches Bodie and Wallace to think of themselves as pawns. As the front line of drug sales, they are at the highest risk because they (and the even younger children working for them) distribute the illicit product to street consumers and are most exposed to arrest by the police. They are low-power figures who need to learn the explicit and implicit rules of the local game well if they are to survive, much less move on to

positions of higher responsibility and power. Put otherwise, D’Angelo wants his crew to start thinking more abstractly about their lives in the game.<sup>10</sup> His chess allegory is involuted, however, because he introduces chess (itself already a political allegory) as repeating the figures and moves of a social institution that he and others constantly refer to as “the game.” The very notion of the (drug) game needs to be read as an additional allegorical sign: it narrativizes (games are typically played over time according to rules) yet another prior sign (the illegal drug economy). For D’Angelo, the game as narrative sign allegorizes Baltimore’s drug economy as not merely an illegal capitalist enterprise based on criminals’ competition for markets, product, and profit, but also a whole ensemble of rules, neighborhood loyalties, and traditions (such as the Sunday truce) followed by a set of local Baltimore players. The first season of *The Wire* highlights the self-consciously sporting elements and localism of “the game” through the annual East Side–West Side basketball game. Suggesting the stability of their operations as social institutions worthy of neighborhood support, Joseph “Proposition Joe” Stewart (Robert Chew) and Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris) coach their teams and agree to bet a “clean six figures” on a nonviolent game played in public before a cross-neighborhood group of fans (1.9). Alongside their other less public activities, these prominent men are de facto community leaders who command local respect and even affection.

Like a king on a chessboard protected by his subordinates, Avon Barksdale directs his organization but is rarely seen acting in public. He does not personally handle any drugs or participate in gang *hits* (murders). His pawns (juveniles mostly immune to adult prosecution) handle the product at the level of street sales. The rooks on a chessboard are here “stash houses,” and they move regularly to evade detection or theft. Similarly, cell phones with prepaid minutes are dumped before they can be traced. Drug earnings are laundered through legal investments and enterprises while a downtown attorney is retained to deal with police interviews, arrests, court cases, and legal contracts. If a criminal organization’s leaders hold onto power by intimidating those inside and outside the group with the threat of violence, the illegal conspiracy evades law enforcement through coded interactions and limited access points to valuable information and contraband.

The ever-vigilant Stringer Bell educates members of the Barksdale crew about thwarting police surveillance by using code words and numbers for criminal activities. “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean there’s no one out to get you, right?” Lester Freamon’s rhetorical question is a detective’s note of professional admiration for Stringer Bell’s discipline

and creativity at avoiding detecting (3.8). Lieutenant Cedric Daniels's Major Crimes Unit cannot even identify Avon Barksdale's face until Lester Freamon leaves his desk and uses his neighborhood contacts to obtain an old boxing poster featuring Avon's image as a teenager. Ever the sportsman, Avon moved from the literal sport of boxing and its physical dangers to the figurative sport of the game and its even greater dangers and rewards. Several members of the Major Crimes Unit happen upon the cross-town basketball challenge by luck. At that point, they enjoy a long look at Barksdale and Bell acting peaceably in the sporting company of other known felons. Most of the time, however, the police unit works to intercept the organization's criminal activities via wiretapping and decoding a web of esoteric jargon through inference and deduction.

Even with such specialized training, low-level employees in a drug conspiracy like Barksdale's generally make little money—less than the minimum wage. They gain social capital of local value but are in a game where the chance of institutional advancement is low. An economics best seller turned to game language to discuss workplace motivation amidst low compensation in the drug business and elsewhere. “An editorial assistant earning \$22,000 at a Manhattan publishing house, an unpaid high-school quarterback, and a teenage crack dealer earning \$3.30 an hour are all playing the same game,” Levitt and Dubner wrote, “a game that is best viewed as a tournament.” “In order to advance in the tournament,” they continued, “you must prove yourself not merely above average but spectacular.”<sup>11</sup> When the threats of violent self-endangerment and arrest increase, many teenaged drug dealers leave “the tournament” because they see their economic opportunities as low and the potential personal costs as very high. In the world of *The Wire*, by contrast, leaving the game is less abstractly rational and individualistic because of family and peer pressure, employers' suspicion about snitches, and the simple difficulty of finding any other paying work. The pathos of the pawn's situation is that increased self-awareness and knowledge about the game and its terms only increase recognition of one's limited agency and constraint.

Imagined otherwise, a pawn's function in a chess game also resembles that of a musical detail in a scored composition. Both are small constituents of a larger whole that takes time to play or follow (hence the priority of allegorical over atemporal symbolic interpretation). The pawn progresses in chess by literally moving forward; most likely it will be lost during play. A musical detail can be repeated and kept in play during a composition or transformed into something greater (like a motif or theme); most likely it, too, will fall away in silence. The composer stands above the musical narrative or composition orchestrating the details of a scored

whole much as the chess player knowingly sacrifices pawns and other pieces for the sake of a possible checkmate against the rival king. “The musical whole is essentially a whole composed of parts that follow each other for a reason,” Theodor Adorno observed. “The whole,” he continued, “is articulated by relations that extend forward and backward, by anticipation and recollection, contrast and proximity.”<sup>12</sup> In some of his best-known music writings, Adorno interpreted classical and popular compositions allegorically in terms of manifest narrative structures about parts and wholes and latent narratives about the movements of individual monads amidst a social totality. “Without forcing the interpretation too far,” he wrote, “the detail can be understood as the representative of the individual, and the whole as that of the universal.”<sup>13</sup> Adorno’s allegorization of manifest musical details and structures as latent narratives of social life prefigures Jameson’s later call for “cognitive mapping” as the more challenging effort of situating the individual subject’s movements through social life amidst “that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole.” Imagining compositions as social allegories can encourage identification with the individual musical detail as representative of the monadic individual presumably longing for (and very rarely finding) development, integration with the whole, and relative autonomy. The individual detail in this picture, however, is hardly the sole author of its movement. If the theorist can interpret the narrative of a scored composition only by viewing it from the bird’s-eye view needed to map allegorical structures, how are allegorized individuals or details to map their own possible relationships of “contrast and proximity” in real time? We can perceive the aporetic character of D’Angelo’s allegorical chess pedagogy only by “forcing the interpretation too far.”

D’Angelo’s pedagogical moment encourages Wallace and Bodie to recognize themselves as pawns on a chessboard and also to imagine the perspective of the unnamed player who uses them and the other pieces in the game against another player. The two kings may be the alter egos of the two players in everyday chess, but in the game it is not the case that “the king stays the king,” despite D’Angelo’s insistence. Someone has to wear the crown, but it can circulate in the game even as pawns and other pieces remain on the board. Here the allegorical parallelism between chess pieces and their representatives in the game falters and raises new questions. In the case of the game as an economic and social predicament, one might follow Marx and contend that there is an “*alien* social power standing above them.” Standing above the game, this impersonal power emerges from the high and low pieces’ “mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them.”<sup>14</sup> Transcending any given king, this independent

power keeps the game in play with a fresh supply of laborers and managers to play the roles of kings, pawns, and others. The rare pawn who rises to become a queen underscores an ideology of equal opportunity among those with minimal social power. For D'Angelo, Wallace, and Bodie, the dawning of a divided perspective encourages questioning their relative institutional powerlessness amidst an endless supply of new pawns. To think allegorically about their predicament means temporarily detaching themselves from their everyday perceptions of personal autonomy in order to map their typical work activities amidst the broader gamelike structures that constrict their agency. For each of the three characters in the scene of chess pedagogy, the imaginative leap to allegory and partial cognitive mapping will prove not only disillusioning but fatal.

When hopeful, D'Angelo and Bodie sit outdoors on their crushed velvet sofa and consider themselves "smart-ass pawns" who might reach the other end of the board. The unusually empathic Wallace badly needs the income that dealing makes possible but is temperamentally unsuited to the brutal gang life. He contemplates a different life outside the game and confides to D'Angelo, "I just don't want to play no more. I was thinking of going to school" (1.9). D'Angelo enthuses that Wallace has the potential to end up at Harvard—an even less probable a path than a pawn becoming a queen in chess. After Wallace is seen speaking with a detective, Bodie and Poot murder the sixteen-year-old in the abandoned apartment where he looks after (in effect, parents) five younger children. "Soft link break the chain," Bodie clarifies (1.12). Wallace's horrific murder is a turning point for the sensitive and insecure D'Angelo and for the series. A pawn can imagine itself in the role of a more powerful chess piece like a king or queen, but without extraordinary luck it cannot force actual conditions to accommodate its imagining of a new life beyond the game. D'Angelo's disillusioning interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* in a prison reading group (led by real-life novelist and *Wire* writer Richard Price) marries his taste for allegorical interpretation to a newfound fatalism. He is speaking of Jay Gatsby but thinking of himself:

[Fitzgerald is] saying that the past is always with us. Where we come from. . . . All this shit matters. . . . Like at the end of the book: boats and tides and all. You can change up. . . . But what came first is what you really are and what happened before is what really happened. . . . like all them books in his library. He fronting with all those books. . . . He ain't read near one of them. . . . [and] that shit caught up to him. (2.6)

The scholarship on class mobility in contemporary America shows that the literal facts of “where we come from” determine our fates more powerfully than does one’s idealized imaginings or efforts to reinvent oneself beyond the situation and the family one was born into. “What came first,” D’Angelo concludes, “is what you really are.” The utopian projection of an alternative self-fashioned identity in the present (*Gatsby*) or in the future (D’Angelo) is, finally, *not what is*. Shortly after agreeing with Fitzgerald’s claim that there are no second acts in American life, D’Angelo is strangled in the prison library; his body is repositioned to indicate a suicide. Whether the increasingly independent-minded character read many of the books held in that library, or only Fitzgerald’s, is irrelevant. Stringer Bell secretly ordered the murder, again guided by a businessperson’s abundance of caution about possible leaks in the criminal conspiracy. The trajectory of the novel-reading allegorist D’Angelo is also that of the “problematic individual’s journeying toward himself, the road from dull captivity within a merely present reality . . . towards clear self-recognition.” As the young Georg Lukács famously sketched the arc of utopian pessimism in the bourgeois novel, “[A]fter such self-recognition has been attained, the ideal thus formed irradiates the individual’s life as its immanent meaning; but the conflict between what is and what should be has not been abolished and cannot be abolished in the sphere wherein these events take place.”<sup>15</sup> As D’Angelo remarks about the conflicted distance between Jay Gatsby’s lowborn past and self-fashioned present, “That shit caught up to him.” When he is murdered, the frustrating conflict between D’Angelo’s ideal of *what should be and what is* catches up to him as well.

The murder of Bodie follows those of D’Angelo and Wallace. Bodie refers back to the lessons of the chess scene as late as the fourth season: “I feel old. I been out there since I was thirteen. I ain’t never fucked up a count. Never stole off a package. Never did some shit that I wasn’t told to do. I’ve been straight up. But what come back? . . . This game is rigged, man.” “We like the little bitches on the chessboard,” he admits to Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West). “Pawns,” the detective adds in a moment of solidarity (4.13). Bodie is also echoing a naïve comment Marla Daniels made to Cedric Daniels in the series’ second episode: “The game is rigged. But you cannot lose if you do not play” (1.2). McNulty repeats the phrase yet again when he protests about the suspension of the investigation of Marlo Stanfield that the “fucking game’s rigged” (5.2). The detective and Bodie reach a kind of agreement about the game when they eat lunch together in the Cylburn Arboretum, a public garden so peaceful that Bodie cannot believe they are still in Baltimore. Not much older than twenty, he has come to see the game as unfair to players like himself. As an em-

ployee, he has “been not merely above average but spectacular,” and still he does not advance in the tournament. His loyalty and perseverance have not been rewarded over the years, and he is only losing position in the unprecedentedly brutal reign of Marlo Stanfield. Ruthless and quick-witted, Bodie proves himself the quintessential “smart-ass pawn” and a deserving contender in the tournament. Instead, he remains an isolated pawn bereft of orderly advancement on a chessboard. Interpreting the game as a rigged match where he sees himself as one of the “little bitches on the chessboard” fuels Bodie’s disillusionment rather than expanded agency.<sup>16</sup> Once again, as with the romantic (because idealistic) pessimism of D’Angelo before him or Lukács’s generic protagonist, “the conflict between what is and what should be has not been abolished and cannot be abolished in the sphere wherein these events take place.”<sup>17</sup> The garden conversation with McNulty seals Bodie’s fate. Unlike Poot, he will enjoy no safe retreat from the game. One of Marlo’s soldiers spots him leaving the detective’s car at the police station. Though Bodie told the detective nothing of investigative value, he is shot down in a blaze of gunfire at his corner. At that point, all three characters from the first season’s chess scene have been murdered by members of their own team.

If the chessboard flickers with the radiant ideal of upward mobility for a “smart-ass pawn,” the thoughtful pawns of *The Wire* find all paths to that ideal blocked. Chess’s crystalline allegory of work and institutional life stands in stark contrast to the less rule-abiding dynamism of “un-tethered capitalism run amok” in the game and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Bodie is not rewarded because the figures of authority are not stable enough to accommodate his patient project of advancement. No steady invisible hand exists to move Bodie and other “straight up” pawns toward their fair rewards in an efficient self-regulating market. Instead, he experiences the shocks of a crisis-prone system in microcosm. While Bodie toils at his small, literal corner in the retail drug trade, his original king and queen end up in jail or dead within a few years, and his last king (Marlo) has him murdered without any hesitation. The matter of rulelike stability in the literal chess game and its absence in the game turns our reading to its second aspect: Avon Barksdale’s regular utterance of the phrase “the game is the game” as a kind of authoritative proverb befitting a lawmaking king. Avon’s practice of speaking in authoritative-sounding tautologies amounts to a holding strategy to keep present conditions in place. Beneath such formulas of tautological constancy, however, the institutional structures of *The Wire* are hardly stable. As the seasons unfold, the narrative leaves behind the relative consistency and localism of the East Side—West Side

rivalry (symbolized by the annual crosstown basketball game, as noted earlier). Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) emerges as a monstrous and competing avatar of Stringer’s ruthless business logic; unrestrained by old relationships and traditions, Marlo admits that he “ain’t much for sentiment” (4.4). He would be pleased to finish off the romantic communalism and community leadership of old-school gangsters like Avon Barksdale and Joe Stewart. The death-dealing new king encapsulates his reading of the changing situation in a signature comment: “You want it to be one way, but it’s the other way” (4.4).<sup>19</sup>

### THE KINGS OF TAUTOLOGY

Several important characters repeat a particular tautology across the five seasons of *The Wire*: “the game is the game.” As a magnet attracts iron filings, each utterance of the proverb draws toward it various considerations of work and its institutional settings. Tautological proverbs—such as *it is what it is*; *business is business*; *you gotta do what you gotta do*; and *boys will be boys*—appear to repeat the basic logical principle of identity: *A equals A*.<sup>20</sup> At least as logical statements, tautologies make no formal claim to represent anything about the empirical world.<sup>21</sup> Wittgenstein once likened the logical tautology “to a wheel running idly in a mechanism of cog-wheels.”<sup>22</sup> While many statements moving through language’s “mechanism of cog-wheels” in everyday discourse make claims and designate or express attitudes, tautological proverbs appear to work like their logical counterparts in running idly. Unconditionally true as logical claims, tautological proverbs like *it is what it is* make no obvious empirical claims about the world, and yet they are common in everyday conversation. The two facts are related and hint at why everyday tautologies are more than linguistic wheels spinning idly “in a mechanism of cog-wheels.”

The productiveness of everyday tautologies emerges not at the site of logical abstraction but with the pragmatic work of proverbs and clichés. “A cliché is not to be despised,” Denise Riley urges. The “automatic comfort” of a well-received cliché “is the happy exteriority of a shared language which knows itself perfectly well to be a contentless but sociable turning outward toward the world.”<sup>23</sup> The work of clichés in everyday conversation extends beyond the relatively contentless talk necessary to lubricate sociability or collegiality among those with little else to say to one another. Tautological proverbs, Roland Barthes observed, can come calling when other rhetorical tools seem to break down. Absent a supply of

useful reasoned arguments, “one takes refuge in tautology.”<sup>24</sup> Tautological proverbs and clichés become blunt rhetorical weapons for underwriting power:

Since it is magical, it can of course only take refuge behind the argument of authority: thus do parents at the end of their tether reply to the child who keeps on asking for explanations: “*because that’s how it is*”, or even better: “*just because, that’s all*”—a magical act ashamed of itself, which verbally makes the gesture of rationality, but immediately abandons the latter, and believes itself to be even with causality because it has uttered the word which introduces it. Tautology testifies to a profound distrust of language, which is rejected because it has failed. Now any refusal of language is a death. Tautology creates a dead, a motionless world.<sup>25</sup>

Barthes here focuses on everyday tautologies and near tautologies as tools that authority figures use when “at the end of their tether” with subordinates.<sup>26</sup> Reason’s failure incites a turn to *because that’s how it is*, a phrase masquerading as a “gesture of rationality.” In this dramatic vignette, contentless wheels spin idly in the authoritarian tautologist’s “dead, motionless world.” By contrast, Avon Barksdale wields tautologies with conviction: in his hands, a cliché does not sound like a “magical act ashamed of itself.” He means for assent to reinforce his mastery of the game. During his turf war with Marlo (which he accepts as part of the game), Avon thunders to his enforcers, “See how that shit got to be handled. The game is the fucking game, period!” (3.6). When his institutional authority slips during Marlo’s reign, Avon nevertheless continues to wield the phrase to signal his interpretive authority from prison. “The game is the game,” he insists, before sometimes adding “always.” “Always” is a way to hammer the phrase into place as noncontingent and nonnegotiable. “By eliminating all linguistic traces of the will of the superior,” Adorno writes about similar utterances, “that which is intended is given greater emphasis.” To wield tautologies and “old school–like phrases” along the lines of “that’s the way it’s done here,” he continues, is to create the impression “that it is necessary to obey, since what is demanded already occurs factually.”<sup>27</sup> Avon’s signature phrase carries with it the impression of causal necessity. Things happen to be the way they are not because of “the will of the superior” but because *that is the way they must be*. Avon’s impersonal utterance works as an indirect speech act: it implicitly reiterates aspects of a shared background and established rules in the relevant local speech community.

He leans on that background as an external supplement to his individual authority.<sup>28</sup> Avon’s vast local knowledge buttresses his authority, but his reliance on it reduces his awareness of how the rules of the drug business are changing. A master of the local scene, he cannot map the larger context in which the game takes place.

Avon’s signature tautology also belongs to that class of clichés that readily links up with a high-power figure’s opportunistic language of fatalistic realism. For the low-power players to whom Avon usually addresses his proverb, “possible resistance” is at least rhetorically “eliminated simply in terms of logical form.”<sup>29</sup> A grim acceptance of the game’s rules as immutable accompanies proverbs like *business is business* or *it is what it is*. In order to reduce exposure “by eliminating all linguistic traces of the will of the superior,” a high-power figure might say *business is business* to displace responsibility for an unpopular decision onto the abstract and non-moral rules of the relevant institution or practice. In order to make sense of disjunctions between *what is* and *what ought to be* (between actual behaviors and one’s disappointed hopes for alternative outcomes or actions), low-power speakers can insulate themselves from the pain of disillusionment by nodding fatalistically to one another that *it is what it is*. Speaking his signature phrase to fellow gangsters reinforces Avon’s interpretive authority locally, but it can hardly render that social world motionless. His injunction “always!” hints at some defensiveness: the crime world of West Baltimore is not a fully contained epic cosmos, despite Avon’s desires for interpretive and institutional stability in a “totality of life that is rounded from within.”<sup>30</sup> He wants things to be one way, but things are the other way.

The statement *the game is the game* is not so commonplace as the proverbs *business is business* and *it is what it is*. When Avon utters his signature proverb, its function is closest to *business is business* in terms of displacing moral responsibility (in this case, for murder). He may prefer *the game is the game* because he presents himself as an old-school gangster committed to the sporting life rather than a businessman concerned primarily with the bottom line. (As we shall see, the distinction pries apart Avon’s lifelong friendship with Stringer Bell.) Avon’s proverb blends tautological simplicity with the obliquity of an allegory. At least formally, the generic allegory and the everyday tautology appear utterly unlike each other. If the garden-variety allegory reveals that *A is not only A* (because the manifest narrative references a latent prior narrative, albeit with discrepancies), a logical tautology explicitly claims that *A equals A*. Meanwhile tautological proverbs like *everything is everything* and *it is what it is* rely on hermeneutic assumptions about esoteric or second-order meanings. The tautological

proverb's apparently "contentless but sociable turning outward toward the world" assumes a shared understanding between a speaker and designated listeners.

When familiarity with an implicit level of signification is needed to understand an otherwise insignificant or nonsignifying tautological proverb, we find a structure similar to that of a generic allegory. The esotericism of tautological proverbs in everyday discourse resonates with a framing of allegory in terms of the "impossibility of reading."<sup>31</sup> If a listener does not already know the esoteric meaning beneath or behind a speaker's particular tautological proverb, the exoteric phrase is unreadable: it falls flat or merely displays language running idly as an inexplicable logical tautology, a phrase that gains no conversational traction. Allegorical depth marks the distance, then, between tautologies as matters of logical form and as convenient ciphers of esoteric knowledge. If one already knows the hidden esoteric meaning, then one does not need to hear the everyday tautology; passing around a tautology is a performance of assent.

Assent to Avon's tautology seals acceptance of, or resignation to, the game's existential realities: the local drug economy and its adjacent criminal conspiracies are enduring across time with a violent cycle of gangland consolidation, expansion, retreat, defeat, and regrouping alongside the constant threat of arrest, conviction, and incarceration. Typically, games are fictional, rule bound, and separated from the rest of life. The game about which Avon speaks, however, is not separate from reality (it is only separate from the mainstream economy and the formal rule of law), nor is it the kind of make-believe or masquerade where one can slip in and out of one's game role by a simple change of clothing or adoption of a digital avatar. Obliquity enters through the notion of gaming: Which qualities and which other games does Avon's game resemble? We have already noted Levitt and Dubner's picture of drug dealing (as a kind of tournament where very few players advance) alongside the excessively hopeful pedagogy of D'Angelo's early chess lesson. Wittgenstein famously observed that the meaning of *game* as a noun is difficult to delineate because "similarities crop up and disappear" between games whenever one tries to clarify what unites all known instances of games. No single definition can cover all the examples: some games have long-established rules (as with some games in the Olympics), others have no set rules whatsoever (as with many improvised children's games), others allow established rules to be adjusted for particular game instances (as with Scrabble or other board games among friends), while others are recognized as "games" in only a figurative sense (as when Deputy Commissioner Rawls unhappily admits that "Lester's got a hell of a game" as a police investigator [4.2]). Instead of a unifying definition to capture all instances, "we see a complicated net-

work of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.”<sup>32</sup>

Avon’s signature phrase and Wittgenstein’s observation remind us that games and talk about various activities as games are everywhere in *The Wire*. Some of these games are short and rule bound, as with a traditional sport or game played between individuals or uniformed teams. We might refer to these traditional games (where explicit rules dominate) as *micro-games*. Other gamelike activities are more enduring and less tightly rule bound: we might refer to these activities (where implicit rules dominate) as *macrogames*. The games or sporting activities in *The Wire* that operate as microgames include at least the following: dice (the first scene of the series’ first episode concerns a West Baltimore murder over a dice game; later, schoolchildren learn mathematical probabilities through learning how to play dice well); boxing (Avon’s sport as a teenager; Dennis “Cutty” Wise’s gym is featured heavily in season 4 as a nonlethal space of masculine play for teenage boys in the neighborhood—a nonlethal space that might even serve as an alternative to the game); gambling, pool, and dog-fighting; poker (especially played as a form of fund-raising for politicians where contributors intentionally lose); checkers and chess (detailed earlier); the crossword puzzle (noted earlier); golf (the preferred daytime sport of figures in the political establishment, like Ervin Burrell and Clay Davis); basketball (noted earlier); football (watched on television by Roland “Prez” Pryzbylewski, who tells his wife that “no one wins. One side just loses more slowly” [4.4]); and baseball (Avon’s fellow prisoners are seen playing it).

The activities that operate as macrogames include at least the following: the politician Clay Davis and others play make-believe with the novice real estate developer Stringer Bell; the detectives Jimmy McNulty and Lester Freamon play make-believe with the concocted story of a serial killer in order to continue the Marlo Stanfield inquiry (to which William “Bunk” Moreland tartly responds, “I’m a murder police. . . . I don’t fuck with no make-believe. I don’t jerk shit around. I catch a murder, and I work it” [5.6]); the police play “joking the stats” to demonstrate a reduction in major crimes by conveniently redefining what counts as such a crime; teachers juke the stats by teaching students test answers in order to increase standardized scores rather than increase knowledge (an exasperated Colvin declares, “We pretended to teach them, they pretended to learn, and where—where’d they end up? Same damn corners” [4.10]); one might continue with this crisscrossing network of similarities. As David Simon put it, “the same game is played everywhere.”<sup>33</sup>

Avon Barksdale is hardly the only character to utter “the game is the game.” The freelance enforcer Brother Mouzone (Michael Potts) says it

when he expects to die after Omar has shot him twice in the chest. Mouzone will not beg for his life, but will slowly pronounce the monosyllabic phrase “the game is the game” one word at a time, as though writing his own epitaph. He then adds that he is at peace with his God. The second statement has the practical impact of rephrasing the tautology.<sup>34</sup> Mouzone accepts his possible death stoically even as he informs Omar that “you’ve got some wrong information” (2.11). Mouzone did not murder Omar’s boyfriend Brandon. Still, he accepts that the rules of the game include his being shot out of mistaken vengeance. The African American mercenary’s Arabic name, ostentatiously conservative dress (old-fashioned glasses and a suit complete with Farrakhan-style bow tie), ascetic lifestyle, rigid posture, reading tastes, and clipped diction work together to suggest an earlier association with the Nation of Islam (NOI) or perhaps the Fruit of Islam (the Nation’s security arm). According to Proposition Joe, “That brother got more bodies on him than a Chinese cemetery” (2.9). Mouzone’s past, however, remains a source of fear and speculation. The contrast between this unusual out-of-towner and the homegrown Baltimore enforcers of *The Wire* (with such innocuous-seeming nicknames as Wee-Bey, Little Man, Stinkum, Cheese, and Snoop) widens when he directs his young partner Lamar to fetch him the current issues of *Harper’s* and the *Nation*. Lamar (DeAndre McCullough), a young man of the streets, does not recognize these titles. Mouzone taunts his incurious bodyguard with a classic NOI-style riposte: “You know what the most dangerous thing in America is? A nigger with a library card” (2.10).

Omar may answer “indeed” to Mouzone’s statement that “the game is the game,” but he is hardly a routine or predictable player. Omar fearlessly tells a Baltimore courtroom that he “robs drug dealers” for a living. His “crimes” against drug dealers—precisely the kind of crimes that would never be prosecutable in the criminal justice system—are both a trickster’s sport and a precarious strategy for funding an early Caribbean retirement. Importantly, he never utters the phrase “the game is the game.” Omar instead prefers to upset the expectations of gang leaders like Avon, Stringer, and Marlo even at the level of rhetoric. His occasional statement “it’s all in the game” mocks the predictable rules of the game on Baltimore’s West Side. A fearsome legend of the streets while alive, Omar’s trickster brilliance, daring insouciance, ethical code, and perhaps even his principled rejection of profanity as ugly will render him a folk hero in death. True to form, he calls for an ambulance rather than let Mouzone die.

The most ruthless king, Marlo Stanfield, utters Avon’s favored proverb—but only once. He asks the imprisoned Avon to facilitate a meeting with Sergei so that Marlo can access Spiros Vandas’s heroin supply. When

the sociable Avon asks how things are, Marlo answers indifferently: “the game is the game.” Avon responds with passionate assent: “Always!” Marlo mouths the tautology to curry favor with the old-school gangster and show a semblance of respect for an elder. The simple exchange underscores how different the two kingpins are: the older one (only in his thirties) was raised in the local family trade, while the young rising force is a social loner with no ties to an established community and no store of local traditions. Marlo later roars an altogether self-concerned tautology that only rhymes with Avon’s proverb—“My name is my name!”—when he is jailed with Chris Partlow and Monk and concerned about rumors (5.9). When they meet, Avon is lucky to be a “figure of authority” in prison (as he puts it to Marlo) since his institutional position makes it more difficult for Marlo to enjoy the sight of watching him die. Marlo’s disrespect and impatience with established authority figures coalesce in his signature statement: “You want it to be one way, but it’s the other way” (4.4). The obscure axiom shares an abstract flavor with Avon’s signature tautology but with a twist, as though to say *you would like A to be A, but A is actually B*. Marlo quietly speaks the phrase to a convenience store security guard who has caught him brazenly shoplifting a few lollipops. The young kingpin taunts the guard, who admits that he is in no position to “step to” Marlo. The gangster later orders the harmless man’s murder. The verbal exchange between the shoplifter and the guard resonates with the young gangster’s challenge to Prop Joe’s authority and the peaceable structure of the purchasing “co-op” set up by Stringer Bell.

“The street is the street. Always” (2.12), Avon Barksdale’s tertiary tautology, reinforces his primary one. His mode of authoritative speech via tautological proverbs about the game and the street as sites of permanence, traditionalism, and rule-boundedness illuminates his growing alienation from Stringer Bell. In the first two seasons, Avon and Stringer’s joint venture B&B Enterprises suggests the reassuring circularity of a logical tautology: in the world of B&B Enterprises, *B will always equal B*. These two Bs are hardly identical, however, as Barksdale and Bell are increasingly divergent partners. B&B Enterprises has a public paper trail, deftly followed by detectives Freamon, Pryzbylewski, and Sydnor. When undetected, the business allows Stringer to park his and Avon’s drug gains into potentially profitable legal businesses, most notably Baltimore real estate development. Thinking beyond the constrictions of Avon’s relatively static world of local tautologies, Stringer reimagines Baltimore’s game according to the abstract principles of textbook macroeconomics. While Avon is in prison, Stringer starts to run meetings according to Roberts’s Rules of Order (though he forbids note taking). “We gonna handle this shit like business-

men,” he clarifies at one point: “Later for that gangster shit” (3.1). An economics class at Baltimore City Community College further inspires him to break from tradition and share some Barksdale territory with Proposition Joe in order to overcome a market problem by gaining access to the latter’s superior product. Stringer also organizes a new informal cartel of local drug gangs so as to increase their wholesale purchasing power and reduce the cost of doing business.

Avon rejects his partner’s innovations as anathema to how the game is played. When Stringer defends the innovations and related matters in the abstract language of management-speak to deflect responsibility (“Every market-based business runs in cycles, and we’re going through a down cycle right now”), Avon responds with an old-school gangster’s proverb: “This ain’t about your muthafuckin’ business class. It ain’t that part of it. It’s that other thing. The street is the street. Always” (2.12). Avon’s tautological reasoning is a way of reinforcing his claim to the king’s crown via interpretive authority even though he is in prison. As he later notes to Stringer in a talk that intimates the dissolution of B&B Enterprises into its divided halves, “I guess I’m just a gangster, that’s all” (3.6). Stringer admits that the game is not the only one he wants to play: “You know, Avon, you got to think about what we got in this game for, man. . . . Was it so our names could ring out on some ghetto street corner? No, man, there’s games beyond the fucking game. Avon, look, you and me, we brothers, B” (3.10). Having a strong reputation on “some ghetto street corner,” however, is of abiding interest to Avon as a local business and community leader at home in West Baltimore. His partner no longer lives in the neighborhood and has peered at a broader panorama where success in the local drug trade could lead toward broader economic opportunities un tethered to the old neighborhood. When Stringer offers to betray Avon and his secrets to the police, Major Colvin presumes a tumultuous rift between the erstwhile best friends. “Nah, it’s just business,” Stringer offers tersely (3.11).<sup>35</sup> Left alone with his ambitions, Stringer’s past executive decisions as a gangster catch up with him. Omar and Mouzone murder him in his unfinished investment property.

“NATURE DON’T CARE. NATURE JUST IS.”

For an approximation of Avon’s tautological language with telling differences, we might close with Lester Freamon. His colleagues come to praise him as “natural police” and a man who has “the stink of wisdom on him” (2.7). One night, Lester and Bunk Moreland (Wendell Pierce) are well

into an evening of serious drinking when Lester begins to wax philosophical: “Age is age. Fat is fat. Nature is nature. . . . Pitiless. Nature don’t care. Nature just is” (4.4). The pronouncements resemble Avon’s tautologies, though Lester is, as usual, only showing half of his hand. Unlike Avon, he does not resign himself to fighting (whether as a king or a pawn) in a world of institutional games. While Avon fancies the rugged sporting life, Lester has a lighter touch and takes delight in artifice, make-believe, and the patient craftsmanship of the artisan. In his world of refined dollhouse furniture, an armoire is an armoire but also something else—a toy or a valuable piece of individually crafted woodwork that could fit into a sock. Despite his fatalistic tautologies, Lester respects the difference between *what is* and *what is not*, and his tautologies do not reinforce the customs of Baltimore law enforcement where a funhouse world of institutional games massages data to claim social progress and assuage politicians and voters.

Following orders by “joking the stats” in order to advance one’s career—another example of a “wheel running idly in a mechanism of cog-wheels”—never appealed to Lester. The string of tautologies he offers Bunk is not about institutions, traditions, and ossified bits of second nature that cannot be questioned. Lester has not misrecognized such contingencies with the conclusion that *it is what it is*. His tautologies instead speak to a more elemental vision of human existence as bare life: “Age is age. . . . Nature don’t care. Nature just is.” Lester’s artisanal mastery as a miniaturist reveals the behavioral residue of thirteen years and four months in the pawn-shop wilderness. It also crystallizes the same kind of patience and skill he brings to the Major Crimes Unit. Expertise in building miniature furniture presented an artisanal substitute for Lester’s refusal to play at political and institutional mastery within the game of Baltimore law enforcement. “The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world,” Gaston Bachelard once hypothesized, “the better I possess it.” “But in doing this,” he continued, “it must be understood that values become condensed and enriched in miniature.”<sup>36</sup>

In his first days at the Major Crimes Unit, Lester barely participates in the new group’s activities. He seems far more interested in using a magnifying glass to work on his miniatures and is even mistaken as a useless “hump.” Bachelard prophesied Lester’s investigative genius when he noted that the “miniature is one of the refuges of greatness.”<sup>37</sup> While idling over the pawn shop’s collection of lost and unclaimed objects, the fallen detective retreated into a world of private mastery. Once his investigative powers are rekindled by Daniels’s idealism—“back from the dead,” as McNulty puts it (1.4)—Lester is willing to play with ideas and life-sized

investigative possibilities and move beyond the aesthetic realm of the miniaturist.

“Cool Lester Smooth” (Detective Shakima “Kima” Greggs’s nickname for him) has a rare degree of patience, intelligence, and ease with unorthodox thinking. Alongside those characteristics and his musical taste, his first name alludes to the master jazz musician Lester Young, another unassuming genius and African American archetype of cool. Viewers see Lester working silently on a miniature while listening to postwar jazz on a tinny radio in the basement office of the Major Crimes Unit. At another point, he listens to Sarah Vaughan singing from his car radio during a stakeout. The ghastly string of murders ordered by Marlo Stanfield, and the police department’s refusal to continue the investigation, distress the otherwise unflappable Lester. As the series winds to its conclusion, he startlingly decides to transfer his full powers of make-believe from the usual domain of aesthetic mastery over furniture miniatures to the empirical domain of police work. He recognizes the turn within himself when he unwittingly echoes Bodie’s “I feel old” valedictory speech:

I’ve reached a point, Detective Sydnor, where I no longer have the time or patience left to address myself to the needs of the system in which we work. I’m tired. . . . I’m going to press a case against Marlo Stanfield without regard to the usual rules. . . . If you have a problem with this, I understand completely. And I urge you to get as far fucking away from me as you can. (5.6)

Lester presses the case but fails to put Marlo behind bars; the homicidal gangster walks free and clear as a millionaire. Nonetheless, the detective ends up with a more enviable kind of forced retirement than the rich gangster despite the young man’s outsized victories. Marlo’s precarious legal triumph means that he has to immediately exit the game. His best friend and top enforcer Chris Partlow will serve a life sentence for all the murders Marlo ordered. The charismatic assassin Felicia “Snoop” Pearson has been shot dead by a hardened Michael Lee, who may become the next generation’s Omar. Left alone on the streets, Marlo at first finds no old or new games to enjoy. In particular, the economic opportunities of Andy Krawczyk’s world of condominium redevelopment and architectural models (a world opened by Marlo’s lawyer) cannot fire Marlo’s joyless imagination. His peak moment of pleasure may instead have been watching Proposition Joe’s face crumble as Chris Partlow shot the elder gangster in the back of the head. Such pleasure is now behind him.

Even after helping to perpetrate a serial killer narrative built on pure “make-believe,” Lester Freamon manages to leave the force with his retirement pension intact. The senior detective is shown comfortable at home pursuing his alternative life of building and selling dollhouse miniatures. He lives with Shardene Innis, the much younger nursing student whose bravery helped put Avon Barksdale in prison. Upon meeting him and learning of his avocation, she had observed that it was just sad that he had no dollhouse for all of his beautiful model furniture. Lester told her at the time, “I just make ’em and sell ’em” (1.8). For Bachelard, one purpose of a house is to allow a space for make-believe, daydreaming, and imagining the world otherwise. To construct furniture miniatures and then build a dollhouse for them is in Lester’s case an allegory of critical distance, a way of standing apart from a world of deadening institutional tautologies. By the series’ end, he is playing house with Shardene, an equivocal surrogate for the rare victories possible in the investigation of major crimes. Lester the free man has drawn up a smaller but still fragile world of hope where “all the pieces matter” and there found a kind of miniaturized mastery.

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## NOTES

1. Where particular scenes or pieces of dialogue are discussed in this essay, I include the actor’s name within parentheses (for the first mention only). Otherwise, only character names are given. All quotations are my transcription of the spoken dialogue from *The Wire: The Complete Series* (New York: HBO Video, 2008), DVD; I know of no public access to the printed scripts. Wherever dialogue is quoted, I note the season and episode numbers; for example, the sixth episode of the second season is rendered here as “(2.6).”
2. David Simon, interview by Nick Hornby, *Believer* 46 (2007): 71–78, quotation on 71; available at [www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview\\_simon](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon) (accessed 24 March 2011).
3. The final season introduced a new story line about an impatient junior reporter who wins professional kudos by fabricating pieces to meet his editors’ taste for “the Dickensian aspect.” Scott Templeton’s ill-gotten Pulitzer Prize winked at the disappointment of *The Wire*’s creators that their slow-moving series never won a single Emmy Award—not for acting, writing, or production—despite thunderous critical praise. If only they had presented it as an HBO documentary.
4. In some allegorical narratives, especially of the morally didactic kind, the latent narrative can be so close to the surface that the allegorical structure maintains only a minimal degree of doubling and parallelism. The didactic or pedagogical function of *The Wire* is often barely concealed (e.g., the allusion to President George Bush’s premature declaration of wartime victory in the episode “Mission Accomplished”).

5. As the position and social power of the allegorist varies, so too will the political valence of allegorical interpretation. Social allegories are not necessarily critical, as the game of chess illustrates. For a review of relations between allegory and power, see Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).
6. Richard Pryor, . . . *Is It Something I Said?* Reprise Records, 1975.
7. The Benjamin Franklin quotation appears on the title page of Wallace E. Nevill's "*Chess-humanics*": *A Philosophy of Chess a Sociological Allegory* (San Francisco: Whitaker and Ray, 1905). Nevill's book offers a trove of allegorical readings of chess from literary and philosophical sources.
8. Fredric Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-contemporary Interventions series (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 1–54, quotation on 51. D'Angelo may offer a "poor person's cognitive mapping," but (contra Jameson) conspiratorial paranoia is not his dominant note (Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg [London: Macmillan, 1988], 347–57, quotation on 356).
9. Simon, interview, 72.
10. The long shadow of D'Angelo's pedagogical chess allegory might be likened to Tony Soprano's repeated therapeutic encounters with Jennifer Melfi on the immensely popular HBO series *The Sopranos* (1999–2007). Soprano's distrust of therapy stems from his habit of leaning on the fatalism of tautological proverbs to interpret his life. Melfi battles the murderous gangster's reluctance to build a new interpretive frame or metalanguage for his past and present life:

Melfi wants to instruct Tony in how to make his life mean something other than what he thinks it means. She introduces him to allegory and symbolism and tries to push him beyond "I am what I am" and "it is what it is." She is nothing less than the woman . . . who will nurture, absolve, and enlighten him, a fairy tale from the Freudian century with lady analyst as heroic knight. (Christian K. Messenger, "*The Godfather Sung by The Sopranos*," in *The Godfather and American Culture: How the Corleones Became "Our Gang"* [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002], 253–90, quotation on 272)

11. Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, "Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with Their Moms?" in *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, Deckle Edge series (New York: William Morrow, 2005), 89–116, quotation on 106. Their analysis references Sudhir Venkatesh's sociological study of the crack economy and gang culture in Chicago. A narrative account of this research, as told through Venkatesh's relationship with J.T., a young leader of the Black Kings gang, is in Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* (New York: Penguin, 2008).
12. Theodor Adorno, "Little Heresy" (1965), trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, by Adorno, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 318–24, quotation on 319.
13. *Ibid.*, 320.
14. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), 197.
15. Georg Lukács, "The Inner Form of the Novel," in *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 70–83, quotation on 80.

16. The “game is rigged” phrase stuck with David Simon, who wrote the teleplay for “Final Grades” (4.13):

Much of our modern theater seems rooted in the Shakespearean discovery of the modern mind. [The writers of *The Wire* are] stealing instead from an earlier, less-traveled construct—the Greeks—. . . to create doomed and fated protagonists who confront a rigged game and their own mortality. (Simon, interview, 71)

17. Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 80.
18. Along similar lines, see Gary Taylor’s interpretation of Thomas Middleton’s 1624 allegorical play *A Game of Chess*. Middleton’s play

is not only an allegory, but also a critique of chess. Chess depends upon absolute distinctions, upon the maintenance of fixed visible categories created by precise rules. Like Nabokov’s *The Defence*, Middleton’s *A Game of Chess* combines this totally ordered universe with the disordered world of “a dream.” . . . Dreams have no rules and no fixed categories. The very clarity and regularity of chess provide a background against which irregularities are conspicuously foregrounded. . . . In chess, players ought to obey the rules. But what if it were impossible to obey them? (*A Game of Chess: A Later Form*, ed. Gary Taylor, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 1825–86, quotation on 1827)

19. Similarly interested in the misrecognition of current social realities as natural or noncontingent, David Simon ruefully writes that the world of *The Wire* “is a world in which the rules and values of the free market have been mistaken for a social framework, a world where institutions are paramount and every day human beings matter less” (introduction to “*The Wire*”: *Truth Be Told*, by Rafael Alvarez [New York: Grove Press, 2009], 2–34, quotation on 30).
20. When a quotation attaches to a particular character or characters, I place it within quotation marks. When a proverb or short phrase is attributed to no particular speaker in *The Wire*, I italicize it.
21. Ludwig Wittgenstein: “In a tautology the conditions of agreement with the world—the representational relations—cancel one another, so that it does not stand in any representational relation to reality” (*Tractatus Philosophico-Logico* [London: Routledge, 1974], 4.462, p. 35).
22. Max Black, *A Companion to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 229.
23. Denise Riley, introduction to *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–8, quotation on 4.
24. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (1972; repr., New York: Hill & Wang, 1986), 109–59, quotation on 152.
25. *Ibid.*, 153.
26. As Roland Barthes hints, the use of tautological reasoning sometimes maps onto class differences. Scholars of the contemporary American family have shown how social class maps onto different models of parental authority. College-minded and middle-class parents often model elaborate reason-giving and negotiation with authority figures (including themselves), whereas working-class and poor parents often model more

- passive acceptance of directives from authority figures (including themselves). The contrast speaks to Avon Barksdale's leadership style. See Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
27. Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tamowski and Frederic Will (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 88.
  28. For a comprehensive analysis of proverbs from a linguistic perspective, see Neal R. Norrick, *How Proverbs Mean: Semantic Studies in English Proverbs* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1985). Norrick shows how proverbs
 

are doubly indirect. First, they are quoted. As such they express observations not original with the speaker; the speaker need not take full responsibility for their form or content. Second, proverbs generate implicatures. The speaker means what he says on the literal level, but he means something more in context. It is up to the hearer to piece together the intended implicature. (27)
  29. Adorno, *Jargon of Authenticity*, 88.
  30. Lukács *Theory of the Novel*, 60.
  31. Paul de Man, "Allegory (*Julie*)," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 188–220, quotation on 200.
  32. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Prentice Hall, 1973), sec. 67, p. 32.
  33. The systemic corruption of what we here dub institutional macrogames in American society was a major concern of David Simon:
 

You show me anything that depicts institutional progress in America, school test scores, crime stats, arrest reports, arrest stats, anything that a politician can run on, anything that somebody can get a promotion on. And as soon as you invent that statistical category, 50 people in that institution will be at work trying to figure out a way to make it look as if progress is actually occurring when actually no progress is. . . . I mean, our entire economic structure fell behind the idea that these mortgage-based securities were actually valuable. And they had absolutely no value. . . . But if you looked inward you'd see that the same game is played everywhere. That nobody's actually in the business of doing what the institution's supposed to do. (interview transcript, *Bill Moyers Journal*, PBS, 17 April 2009, [www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04172009/watch.html](http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04172009/watch.html) [accessed 25 October 2009])
  34. One might imagine following Mouzone further into the role of tautological esotericism in Biblical reasoning: *The game is the game. I am at peace with my God, and with the game; as the game is the game, so God is God.*
  35. When Stringer realizes that Clay Davis has stolen \$250,000 from him, Stringer suggests that the Barksdale organization should assassinate Davis. Avon angrily chides his old friend: "What'd I tell you about playin' those fucking away games. They saw your ghetto ass coming from miles away, nigger. You got a fuckin' beef with them, that shit is on you" (3.11).
  36. Gaston Bachelard, "Miniature," in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 148–82, quotation on 150.
  37. *Ibid.*, 155.