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Horizons of Enchantment

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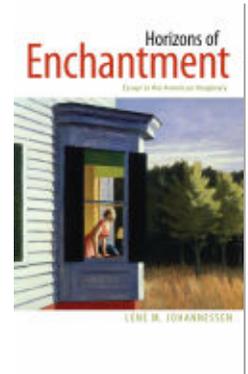
Published by Dartmouth College Press

Johannessen, M..

Horizons of Enchantment: Essays in the American Imaginary.

Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011.

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THE “LONG EMPTY MOMENT”: RICHARD FORD’S
THE SPORTSWRITER

We live alone in our own core, flitting over the surface now and then,
pretending.—Ana Menéndez, *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*

IN CHARLES TAYLOR’S EXPOSITION, one of the main characteristics of the modern social imaginary is its severance from significations and practices grounded in religious time or origins, what he calls a “time out of mind.” He remarks that “Modernity is secular, not in the frequent, rather loose sense of the word, where it designates the absence of religion, but rather in the fact that religion occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time.”¹ But this does not mean the utter absence of alternative constructs that embed, of the emergence of other symbolic spheres, alternative mythological anchorages that are as persuasive and total as the inherently sacred paradigms of archaic times. In the end, the drive of mobility from station to station in life, personal and collective, hinges on the participants’ conviction of the righteousness of the actualization of these ideals, and in the final instance, the ideals are sacrosanct, as many a foreigner to the American imaginary has discovered. It is precisely the confidence in the inherent good of the project that comes to constitute this imaginary as enabling and enabled filter, a curious veil that is most profane, yet simultaneously sacred and therefore ever renewable, even portable. It is indeed the case that religion in our day “occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time,” but one wonders, in the case of the American manifestation of modernity, whether this means that social action and the myth of progress are collapsed into a modality best

characterized as sacred-secular. In that case, attaining a “clean” perspective is nearly impossible: wherever you are, there you are, and you are invariably a fragment of the imaginary to which you belong. It follows that it becomes as unimaginable to step outside this mythological-social parameter as it was in Castoriadis’s example referred to in chapter 1: “A Hindu of the past who would decide to ignore the existence of the castes, would most likely be mad—or would soon become so.”² Such a decision rejects the very premises on which that imaginary is founded, and with them the belief and willingness to participate in its practices and institutions. This is neither plausible nor desirable.

And yet it may have been *Bartleby*, Herman Melville’s notorious scrivener and Walt Whitman’s contemporary, who first voiced such a mad rejection of the American imaginary, a flat-out refusal to take part. “I prefer not to” resounds across the decades, bemusing generation upon generation of students and scholars of American literature. The question of what Melville’s obscure character prefers not to do, or not to be, is among the obligatory riddles found on many a college reading list, commonly illustrating the skeptical currents in early American literary and intellectual culture. Read as a response to and from the reach of the American imaginary, however, the tenor of *Bartleby*’s stubborn reiteration has a more radical sound. As a “mad” rejection of participation itself, it is an outright repudiation of the core of the project. Indeed, it stands as a negation of the faith in the validity of individually and communally held ideals of transference and progress that both uphold the imaginary and are upheld by it in turn. “I prefer not to” relegates the obstinate scrivener to a place firmly on the outside of the American imaginary, and the negation of the faith-driven ideas of metamorphosis and transformation, of boundless mobility and progress, must result in the immobilization that in the end annihilates *Bartleby*.

Such madness of utter refusal is not the rule, but when confronted with the mythology of perpetual progress, we do find in American literature a tradition that configures social and individual torpor. A powerful strand speaks of and to alienation and apathetic withdrawal from the demands and expectations of the imaginary,

searching for the proper outlet, the right addressee for an unease that is not always clearly identifiable. I now proceed to explore the configuration of this particular kind of response in Richard Ford's acclaimed novel *The Sportswriter*. In a manner similar to Melville's reduction of Bartleby's refusal to partake into the brief "I prefer not to," thereby configuring his existence into utter immobility and finally death, Ford follows and scripts his sportswriter on a sliding scale of static apathy. Moreover, his portrayal of the alienated subject in the midst of postmodern life gives existential crisis a current form, on the foremost contemporary stage at the very heart of the American imaginary, the suburb. The relationship between suburban aesthetics and the protagonist of *The Sportswriter* is impossible to ignore, and perhaps the most poignant attributions are the tropological spillovers from a particular version of this space into a narrative mode of hazy monotony and semi-apathy, even indifference, which extends to and lies over character description, structure, and thematic exposition. The upshot is a conflation of the boundaries between the main character's epistemological senses of interiority and exteriority into a lethargic sameness, echoing Bartleby's immobility as a stark response to the ideas and ideals of the life deemed desirable by most.

"My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter."³ With these words, the protagonist and narrator begins his story. In the course of an Easter weekend, Frank will meet his ex-wife at the grave of their oldest son, as he does every year; fly out to Detroit with his new girlfriend Vicki Arcenault to do an interview with a disabled football player for a human-interest story; identify the corpse of a fellow member of the Divorced Men's Club; break up with Vicki; leave for France with a girl twenty years his junior; and end up in Florida to stay with relatives he has never met. To some readers, the opening phrase will resonate with another famous introduction: "Call me Ishmael." Like Melville's narrator in *Moby Dick*, Frank displays the characteristics of an ancient biblical figure, the outcast and lonely survivor. But while the biblical Ishmael emerged from the desert to come into a literal as well as metaphorical presence, and while Melville's Ishmael ascends from the ocean to create his narrative, Frank's surfacing is more diffuse. The uncertainty origi-

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nates in the text’s marked resistance to positing the boundaries that figuration typically relies on, and in its allowing the absence of distance to become the main trope itself. This abstract quality replicates the setting of the narrative, and even if *The Sportswriter* is not, strictly speaking, a novel of the suburb, the institution of the suburb, its aesthetics, and its ideology are nevertheless crucial to the generation of forms and figures in Frank’s apathetic response to the imaginary that embeds him.

Frank’s story unfolds in Haddam, New Jersey, a suburb whose insistent neutrality and resistance to interruptions and breaches enhance his growing sense of alienation. The significance of suburbia as the stage set for *The Sportswriter* makes some consideration of the suburb in its American cultural and literary context of imaginary ideal necessary to appreciate its refraction in the novel’s tropological grammar. To do this, I refer to the suburban as it permeates a certain strand of literature and film, and to its function as an affirmative space of relief from cultural contestations in the broader sense. One of the most poignant contributions of *The Sportswriter* is the quiet, aestheticized acceptance of the protagonist’s resignation in the face of his obligation to perpetuate and uphold faith. This novel does not defy the premises of the imaginary, nor does the text battle against its sway. Indeed, the novel reads in a broader perspective thematically than what I am focusing on here. Ford’s representation of inertia, set psychologically against the concreteness of a particular kind of habitat, does, however, invite a reading of the text as participating in a conversation moving from and to the demands and expectations of the American imaginary.

The concreteness of *The Sportswriter’s* setting in Haddam is emblematic of the qualities and characteristics that in 1961 Lewis Mumford diagnosed and cautioned against, in an admonition that remains aesthetically, sociologically, and ideologically relevant. In an early assessment of the suburb, Mumford concluded that it is

inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in

every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.⁴

Even before this, the possibility or impossibility of escape that this passage describes had increasingly become a major focus in representations of the suburb, in literature as well as movies. Some critics claim that no great literature has emanated from this segment of American cultural life, as when Philip T. Nicholson laments, “Who sings the song of the suburbs? Where is the poet? Where is the Woody Guthrie of Woodmere, the Sinclair Lewis of Levittown? Some fine novelists have set their stories and characters in suburban communities, but the setting is typically a backdrop, a tableau, for a look at characters and stories whose meaning transcends their place.”⁵ This is, as others have pointed out, a somewhat misguided perspective. Robert Beuka, for instance, counters with the argument that: “Rather than being randomly or accidentally placed, [the suburban works under examination] are situated specifically and precisely in suburban communities that are themselves amalgams of various social and cultural anxieties—places that might be read, in geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s terminology, as ‘landscapes of fear.’”⁶ And it is true that, already in the 1920s with a writer such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, but especially from the 1950s, the human limitations of the suburb have been problematized, gauged, despaired at. Sloan Wilson in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, Sinclair Lewis with his *Babbitt* trilogy, John Updike, John Cheever, Don DeLillo, Joyce Carol Oates, David Gates, Frederick Barthelme, and Jonathan Franzen are some names that mark the suburb’s persistence as a focal point in a topography of alienation that profoundly destabilizes the desirability of one of the American imaginary’s principal institutions. And there should be nothing unexpected about this; as Paul Knox observes, the suburb, its growth, and its development are “a consequence of modernity, an expression of modernity, and a conditioner of modernity.”⁷

From its beginnings, the suburb offered and emphasized a safe retreat from city centers, a safe and private environment in which

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to raise children, a space neither rural nor urban, but something in between, or perhaps, as one of the insistent themes in films and fiction suggests, neither. It is in this sense an inherently liminal place, but not the kind filled with the potential creativity of the threshold, or Homi Bhabha’s concept of third space as ethical possibility. It is a space that perhaps shares characteristics more closely with Michel Foucault’s concept of *heterotopos*, a “counter-emplacement,” real places that are “written into the institution of society itself,” in which “all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted; a kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localizable.” I shall not discuss in detail the exact relationship between the six principles that Foucault lists as descriptive of heterotopos; it is the last one that is particularly relevant here. It has a compensatory function in relation to the rest of space, as “another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly.”⁸ Consider this in relation to the following description of the early Levittown suburbs: “Everybody lives on the same side of the tracks. They have no slums to fret about, no families of conspicuous wealth to envy, no traditional upper crust to whet and thwart their social aspirations.”⁹ The newspaper pictures a scenario that almost exactly replicates the Foucauldian conception of “other space” as fulfilling a function of perfection outside of general, inhabited space, often resolving conflicts over race and class—ordering the messy and multicultural into a homogeneous picture. The sameness of the suburb, at least in earlier years (today, gated communities have tended to take over that role), encloses the suburban participant in a modified yet Jeffersonian independence, safely secured, as the previous quotation has it, for unhindered social aspiration.

This particular “other space” is supposed to fulfil a dream, and it marks the proper stage of proper progress, an enveloping of individual aspirations in a framed and curiously communal finished product. The suburb’s promise is, ultimately, the promise of a self-reliance that configures original ideas of individual progress and pursuit belonging to an Arcadian or pioneer spirit into what Cornelius Castoriadis calls second-order institutions. He divides this

category into two subcategories. The first is transhistorical, exemplified by institutions such as family and language: their exact organization varies according to period and place, but they are invariably present in some form in all societies and at all times. The other is the category of “second-order institutions specific to particular societies and playing an absolutely central role in them, in that these specific institutions are the essential embodiments of what is of vital importance to that societal institution, its social imaginary significations.”¹⁰ To this category, I suggest, belongs the suburb. And if we return to the idea of heterotopos as compensatory perfection, the line can be drawn rather effortlessly from Castoriadis’s “essential embodiments” both to other space as the countersite that is “formed in the very founding of society,” and to the suburb as enchanted in the sense of Knox’s article cited earlier. The word does not connote quite the same thing as it does when Charles Taylor refers to the enchanted and the disenchanting; in the present context “enchanted” connotes one of the manifestations of magic, the spell, for better or for worse.

None of this is unique to America, but there the institution may have reached its perfect, most widespread, and most continuously adaptive form, which has not gone unnoticed. However, in the multiple representations of the suburb in movies and literature, especially in the last several decades, irony and sarcasm have tended to dominate the narrative mode. This creates a certain distance between the subject matter and the viewer, a breach. Since the subject matter in these representations tends to center on alienation and detachment, on emotional and aesthetic conflation, the breach goes some way toward sparing the reader or viewer the full impact of the message that these movies and texts at least sometimes attempt to convey. One example is Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty* (1999), in which the protagonist’s acute and deepening sense of slowly drowning in the demands of conformity and materialism brings him to a point of personal crisis that eventually leads to his death. However, shades of humorous and satirical metacommentary soften the relentlessness of the topic, and in the end the movie passes for an astute, funny observation, but not much more. Todd Solondz’s roughly contemporary *Happiness* (1998) and *Welcome to the Doll-*

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house (1995), on the other hand, refract a more nuanced probing into these pressures and characters’ emotional responses. The destructive forces that at every moment threaten to erupt in the lives of the well-adjusted suburbanites underlie the narration and filmic composition in both movies, in such a way as never to slacken the tension between the demands for material conformity and the spirit that yearns for fulfilment and remains unrequited. The most powerful of these is, in my opinion, *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, whose ending leaves the adolescent protagonist alone with her dejected defeat after her attempt to break out, forcing a rupture in the detached evenness of her home. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she is thoroughly secured in her designated place, seated and surrounded by singing, well-adjusted kids in a school bus en route to summer camp.

As a last illustration, I highlight the part of Stephen Daldry’s *The Hours* (2002) (the filmic representation that I think most resembles Ford’s handling of alienation) that focuses on Laura Brown, one of three female protagonists, who is played by Julianne Moore. Laura’s depressed aloofness is visualized for us through her surroundings and her interaction with them. Her movements around the house are slow; she moves among sterile and impersonal furniture. Even though her little son is near her all the time, he is never actually *with* her. We see him looking at his mother from over the back of a chair, from behind a corner, from over the kitchen counter—always from a distance. In one of the film’s most poignant scenes, an eye-level shot shows the boy in the front seat of a car, looking at his mother driving, and behind him, through the car window, rows of identical houses slowly pass by. What the viewer sees is what the mother does not see, or what she cannot any longer bear to see. Her depression is thus masterfully figured before us as the conflation of the utmost intimacy of her son’s beseeching glance on the inside, and the indifferent public display of anonymity on the outside, the engine’s monotonous drone the only accompaniment to both.

It is this peculiar lack of discreetness, of distinctions and boundaries, that also characterizes Richard Ford’s novel: no irony, no loophole, no dramatic turning point allows him—or the reader—to step outside the all-encompassing, isolated, and isolating drone. The

monotony in *The Sportswriter* also extends to the narrative's representation of temporality. Consider for instance the following passage, in which Frank muses on the usability, as it were, of the past:

My own history I think of as a postcard with changing scenes on one side but no particular or memorable messages on the back. You can get detached from your beginnings, as we all know, and not by any malevolent designs, just by life, fate, the tug of the ever-present. The stamp of our parents and of the past in general is, to my mind, overworked, since at some point we are whole and by ourselves upon the earth, and there is nothing that can change that for better or for worse, and so we might as well think about something more promising.¹¹

This juxtaposition of oblivion and remembrance effectuates a temporal orientation that is all about and in the present. Consequently, the narrative voice rejects the existence of boundaries on a very fundamental level, for as Reinhold Görling succinctly puts it: "Borders have to do with traces, which can be understood as territorializations or as spatializations of time. A trace is a recorded difference and a sign of a difference; in other words, a juncture of movement and archive, or memory."¹² We could broaden this and suggest that borders and boundaries are the manifestations of time arrested; they are what succeed the breach and its figuration in the territorial divisions marking the end or the beginning of national or cultural space; in the instrument's spatializing of a phrase; in the visual impression of color grating against color, of form encountering form; in the immobility of the statue's straining in the midst of the mobility that it represents; in the sudden moment that eyes in the crowd meet. In one way or another, these are all stoppages of time, in which discreet spaces engage with each other, if only momentarily. The immobility of the statue is caught in a temporality that violently protests the flow of the present in the beholder's eye. The sudden sight of someone in a crowd is precisely this, a breach where flow and simultaneity as stillness collide: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd." In all of these instances, our perception and recognition hinge on temporal arrest, on breach. *The Sportswriter*, however, resists these arrests. To borrow a phrase

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from one of Frank’s many solipsisms, his is the narrative of the “long empty moment.”¹³

Having lived with his wife in New York for a while, Frank tells us, he one day decided it was time to get out of the city and move to a place where “I knew no one and no one knew me and I could perfect my important writer’s anonymity.” The choice fell on Haddam, New Jersey, “a plain, unprepossessing and unexpectant landscape.” Throughout the book, the white, middle-class suburb of Haddam remains nondescript, neither pleasant nor unpleasant: “all in all it’s not an interesting town to live in, but that’s the way we like it.”¹⁴ The characterization resonates strongly with the founder, so to speak, of the literary trope of suburban alienation. Beuka suggests that Sinclair Lewis, more than anyone, scripted a representation of estrangement that has been worked and reworked ever since:

By using the trappings of the suburban setting to indicate his protagonist’s immersion in a banal world or convention and creature comforts—describing Babbitt’s house, the narrator informs us that “Though there was nothing in [it] that was interesting, there was nothing that was offensive”—Lewis fashioned a trope that would be repeated in virtually all subsequent fiction.¹⁵

Beuka’s words, as well as those of the narrator he cites, complement Frank and his assessment of his surroundings well. In *The Sportswriter* the landscape itself resists demarcations that break up its levelled and monotonous impression, forestalling any hint of breach and, certainly, any hint of irony. Similarly, when Frank remembers the time following his son’s death, he recalls that both he and his wife (tellingly referred to simply as “X”) spent hours going through mail-order catalogues. This bizarre therapeutic exercise is recounted matter-of-factly, conveying that the bereaved couple dreamed themselves into the safety of a world of comfortable objects and exterior perfection:

X and I came to believe, for a time, that satisfying all our purchasing needs from catalogues was the very way of life that suited us and our circumstances; that we were the kind of people for whom catalogue-

buying was better than going out into the world and wasting time in shopping-malls, or going to New York, or even going out into the shady business streets of Haddam to find what we needed.¹⁶

The reader learns why Frank became a sportswriter, that he abandoned a promising career as a novelist because he was unable to write a second novel. The reason, one reason among several but nevertheless the main one, was that he lost his sense of anticipation, “the sweet pain to know whatever’s next—a must for a real writer.”¹⁷ Reflecting on his current profession as a sportswriter for a glossy sports magazine, Frank ponders:

Why, you might ask, would a man give up a promising literary career—there were some good notices—to become a sportswriter?

It’s a good question. For now let me say only this: if sports writing teaches you anything, and there is much truth to it as well as plenty of lies, it is that for your life to be worth anything you must sooner or later face the possibility of terrible, searing regret. Though you must also manage to avoid it or your life will be ruined.

I believe I have done these two things. Faced down regret. Avoided ruin. And I am still here to tell about it.¹⁸

I referred initially to the evocation of other survival narratives. Here too, as Fred Hobson has pointed out, we hear the echo of Job from the “Epilogue” to *Moby Dick*: “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”¹⁹ But unlike Ishmael, who was saved by Queequeg’s coffin, Frank in his survival is, as Edward Dupuey has observed, closer to Walker Percy’s ex-suicide, a “person for whom ‘[t]o be or not to be becomes a true choice, where before you were stuck with to be.’”²⁰ This condition is hinted at early on in *The Sportswriter*. Reflecting on his relationship to his ex-wife, Frank notes: “Toward the end of our marriage I got lost in some kind of dreaminess.” The exact reason for and nature of this dreaminess is then left unexplored for a while, until, after a preliminary retreat into his past and the question of why he has ended up where he is, Frank explains dreaminess as “among other things, a state of suspended recognition, and a response to too much and useless factuality.” While he admits that his condition may have something to do with the death

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of his oldest son, he does not think it explains everything: “I’m unwilling to say that that was the cause, or that anything is ever the sole cause of anything else. I know that you can dream your way through an otherwise fine life, and never wake up, which is what I almost did. I believe I have survived that now and nearly put the dreaminess behind me.” When Frank describes his rather noncommittal membership in something informally called the Divorced Men’s Club, the state of dreaminess assumes a slightly different character. Here Frank muses in more general terms that “We simply try to settle into our lost-ness as comfortably and with as much good manners and little curiosity as we can. And perhaps the only reason we have not quit is that we can’t think of a compelling reason to. When we do think of a good reason we’ll all no doubt quit in an instant. And I may be getting close.”²¹

Against emptiness and nonconsequence, that is, against apathy, Frank and his narrative only give us more of the same, offering not resistance but instead a polite compliance with the “factualities” of existence. There are several ways of approaching this aspect of the text. Hobson, for instance, observes that

Ford is indeed a discriminating writer, but he is also a writer who would object less to the excesses of popular culture than to a particular view—call it elitist or privileged—that would pass judgment on that culture. It is precisely this resistance to easy irony, a resistance to the *temptation* to be ironic in dealing with popular culture, that distinguishes Ford from numerous other contemporary writers; for if an ironic vision is generally assumed to be a literary virtue, such a transcendence of accessible irony—or, perhaps, a deeper irony that turns on itself, ironizing the ironists—may be even more desirable.²²

Hobson succinctly locates the distinctive voice of Ford’s work, but the implication is that irony is nevertheless involved, if not on the most readily accessible level. However, what if irony is simply not part of Frank Bascombe’s worldview? What if, as in Bill Owens’s peculiar book of snapshots *Suburbia*, where he documented his neighbors’ lives in Livermore, California, the suburb and its aesthetic are simply portrayed as they are, from a position beyond elitist disdain or other objectifications, one in which the persons in

the pictures have, as Owens matter-of-factly introduces his photos, “realized the American Dream. They are proud to be homeowners and to have achieved material success.”²³ Does a similar absence of distance lessen the literary quality of *The Sportswriter*?

Or, as some critics have done, do we have to illuminate Ford’s Frank Bascombe via other traditions and thereby provide the justification that we feel we need to explain this epistemological collapse? For instance, if we place Ford within the Southern tradition, will that clarify things? Hobson argues that Frank may be closer to the ur-Southern character Quentin Compson than Ford is willing to admit, and that the novel is firmly entrenched in the Southern literary tradition. Ford himself has expressed some exasperation with critics’ desire to have him fit neatly into this camp, and for that reason he has set all his stories except the first two in specifically non-Southern places. Hobson suggests, however, with quite convincing references to *The Sportswriter*, that “the lady doth protest too much”:

Frank’s great interest in the absence of past, of historical burden, of family heritage, of fixed place, of community suggests a southern mind that is fascinated by these things. A true disregard of place, of history, would require an unconsciousness of it, and Frank has anything but that. . . . It is Frank Bascombe—who resembles in many ways his creator—saying, “I’m not interested in the South. I’m not. I’m not.”²⁴

Hobson suggests that the disregard in Ford’s Frank Bascombe novels for the significance (and burden) of place, tradition, and memories may in fact be homage per negation to the Southern tradition. Such a reading certainly sheds light on the Frank Bascombe character in unexpected and interesting ways, and adds an element to the Southern tradition itself that opens up intriguing vistas. For my purposes here, however, it is the discursive figuration of conflation, of the presence of absence and indifference, which ultimately forms something close to a *Bartleby*-esque rejection of the imaginary’s enchantment, that provides the most rewarding pathway into this novel. For if, as in enchanted, embedding imaginaries of the past, taking a stance outside of the imaginary’s reach is not an option, then indifference and refusal to partake perhaps are. Moreover, approaching *The Sportswriter* in this manner, as the narrative

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analogizes a whole subset of practices lived in second-order institutions, enables commentary on modernity's foremost disease, alienation, from a slightly different angle.

The process of figuration in Ford's literary craftsmanship crystallizes only gradually. For instance, after the death of his son, but before his marriage to X ends, Frank indulges in a series of nonsensical, short relationships and one-night stands, eighteen to be exact, all in order to enter into a different life. This is much like sifting through mail-order catalogues for the comfort of those glossy, safe lives: "What I was doing . . . was trying to be within myself by being as nearly as possible *within* somebody else. It is not a new approach to romance. And it doesn't work. In fact, it leads to a terrible dreaminess and the worst kind of abstractions and unreachableness."²⁵

While this is told in retrospect, the trip to Detroit ("city of lost industrial dreams, floats out around us like a mirage of some sane and glaciated life"), and the interview with the disabled football player, take place in the present. That meeting turns out to be painfully meaningless when it becomes clear that Herb, the interview object, no longer has the ability to look at the future with any real sense of faith and so torpedoes Frank's human-interest story. As he leaves Herb, Frank reflects: "It is the sadness of elusive life glimpsed and unfairly lost, and the following, lifelong contest with bitter facts." Frank's response to this sadness is to invoke his mantra of avoiding what he has earlier called "searing regret": "Only I do not want to feel it and won't. It is too close to regret to play fast and loose with. And the only thing worse than terrible regret is unearned terrible regret."²⁶

Other incidents could be pointed out: the dinner at Vicki's house, when Frank is introduced to the family and already knows that it is too little, too late; the several telephone conversations with X, all ending on an ever-deferring note of sadness and what is truly a state of dreaminess and "suspended recognition." The only time Frank comes close to being actually present in a human relationship, to engaging affectively, is in his new if hesitant friendship with a fellow member of the Divorced Men's Club. He is partly propelled into it by Walter's sudden confession to him that he has had sex with a perfect stranger, and a man at that. After what seems to Walter an intimate moment (which is the nature of any confession), he

tries to forge a real friendship with Frank, but the latter is reluctant and avoids any further deepening of the relationship: "Don't call, my silent message says, I'll be sleeping. Dreaming sweet dreams. Don't call. Friendship is a lie of life. Don't call." When Walter eventually shoots himself, however, Frank is jolted into at least a semblance of affective presence, and he comes closer than before to articulating the gestalt of his dreaminess, now rephrased as invisibility: "Walter would say that I have become neither the seer nor the thing seen. . . . I drive, an invisible man, through the slumberous, hilled, post-Easter streets of Haddam. And as I have already sensed, it is not a good place for Death. Death's a preposterous intruder. A breach." Frank quickly reinstalls dreaminess as invisibility into his being-as-choice: "Haddam is, however, a first-class place for invisibility—it is practically made for it."²⁷

And Frank goes on dreaming himself into invisibility, in France, with a young girl he meets in the Gotham offices of his sports magazine, after he flees Haddam. As the novel ends, Frank is hopeful: "And there is no nicer time on earth than now—everything in the offing, nothing gone wrong, all potential." He is, however, hopelessly lost in the "long empty moment" that has shown itself over and over again to paralyze him in abstraction and isolation, and, indeed, the main part of the novel ends with Frank's thinking: "No one's noticed me standing here at all."²⁸ It bears emphasizing, however, that the various representations of Frank's being-as-choice are identifiable neither to Frank nor to the reader until the "Epilogue." Until that point, the reader, as well as the narrator, is far too immersed in the monotonous and levelled narrative to be able to conceptualize this choice as an ideational position, a deliberate act on the part of the protagonist. Throughout the story the convergence of backdrop, plot, and character has been complete, indifference met with indifference. In the "Epilogue," however, Frank's perspective is different. A new sensibility to and engagement with temporality is noticeable:

I am usually (if only momentarily) glad to have a past, even an imputed and remote one. There is something to that. It is not a burden, though I've always thought of it as one. I cannot say that we

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all need a past in full literary sense, or that one is much useful in the end. But a small one doesn't hurt, especially if you're already in a life of your own choosing.²⁹

When we consider that Frank has previously discarded the usability of the past, this reflection marks a definite turning point. More importantly, his mere acknowledgment of the existence of a past recognizes the existence of a temporal boundary and allows for an interruption in the narrative's even flow. “Dreaminess” expands and mutates slightly, into “lost-ness,” all but vanishes again as “invisibility,” and then becomes more distinct again as a “film”: “And I thought that one natural effect of life is to cover you in a thick layer of . . . what? A film? A residue or skin of all the things you've done and been and said and erred at? I'm not sure.”³⁰ Frank's one-dimensional narrative is a vehicle for his focus on maintaining the emotional and intellectual balance of avoiding “searing regret” while still “remaining human.” This project is conceivable only through the absence of a breach. There must be no distinction marking the inside of Frank's existence as apart from or contradicting the outside; this would generate a boundary from which regret almost certainly would be configured. In the breach of Frank's acknowledgment of a past (even though a “small” one), however, a figure with a distinguishable tenor appears, and paradoxically, it is absence, framing the “long empty moment.”

The tropological mode in which this configuration comes about belongs to metonymy. As David Lodge observes of the opening paragraph in *A Passage to India*, “It is metonymic writing, not metaphoric, even though it contains a few metaphors and no metonymies; it is metonymic in structure, connecting topics on the basis of contiguity, not similarity.”³¹ So too in *The Sportswriter*. Whereas metaphor leaps and jumps across discreet conceptual spaces, forging new connections and constellations out of dissimilar spheres that provide outlets of differentiation, metonymy is confined by the principle of contiguity. The varied representations of the same, in this case the apathy of the “long empty moment,” are carried out according to this basic principle. In the end, as we have seen, the description is taken to an extreme through the ultimate positing of

a property that is closely associated with the whole as *identical* to the whole. Constituted by and constitutive of absence, of nonbreach, Frank must remain within the confines of contiguity, of “same-ness.” Transgression would mean breach, and a breach would imply the overwhelming likelihood of a figuration, which the character’s objective of remaining unaffected could not sustain.

The Sportswriter, therefore, can be read as an arrangement of loneliness and alienation. The process that generates it, however, originates at a point prior to the actual tropological manifestation, marking what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the architectonics of meaning as follows: “the intuitionally necessary, non-fortuitous disposition and integration of concrete, unique parts and moments into a consummated whole can exist only around a given human being as a hero.”³² Frank’s tale of nothingness and its despair, surging from nothingness and its gloom, is ordered around him in an architectonic order, in which a multitude of parts and moments all strive to break away from Lacan’s “rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the *desire for something else*.”³³ Frank is only able to escape these rails when he gets a glimpse of a life not covered by the “film,” from a conceptual space that is not implicated in and by them. If only momentarily, situating himself outside the simultaneity of his empty moment allows the figure to emerge and speak:

But you are under it [the film], and for a long time, and only rarely do you know it, except that for some unexpected reason or opportunity you come out—for an hour or even for a moment—and you suddenly feel pretty good. . . . Have you been ill, you ask. Is life itself an illness or a syndrome? Who knows?³⁴

“The relation of the Figure to its isolating place defines a ‘fact’: ‘the fact is . . .,’ ‘what takes place is . . .’ Thus isolated, the Figure becomes an Image, an Icon.” Gilles Deleuze’s introductory comments in his work on Francis Bacon’s paintings bear on the process of figuration in *The Sportswriter*. In fact, there is a remarkable resemblance between Ford’s subtle handling of isolation and alienation and the representation of isolated horror in some of Francis Bacon’s paintings. The relationship in Bacon’s art between the recurring oval shape and the human shape placed on it or inside it is

The “Long Empty Moment”

what creates the “straining figure” in all its immobile and lonely fright. Since the contours of the human figure are often distorted and diffuse, and, more importantly, are painted onto or even as part of the frame against which they are contrasted, it takes us a while to discern these contours of the emerging figure. As Deleuze observes, it is in their relationship to the oval shape or field that people in Bacon’s paintings form a figure. He compares the field to a circus ring, “a kind of amphitheatre as ‘place.’” The “place” may also be a round area, a cube, bars, but the important thing, Deleuze argues, is that “they do not consign the Figure to immobility but, on the contrary, render sensible a kind of progression, and exploration of the Figure within the place, or upon itself. It is an operative field.”³⁵ If we transpose Deleuze’s reflections on figuration in visual art to what happens in *The Sportswriter*, we see a similar effect. There, the “person” Frank is “painted” against and onto a “place” that is as nondescript and floating as many of the “places” in Bacon’s paintings are. In both cases, place is rendered diffuse and difficult to discern clearly, yet they isolate the figure and its explorations within the “circus ring,” or onto itself. In the case of Ford’s representation of Frank, this dynamic works in two ways: it not only brings about the figure orchestrated around Frank as hero but also serves to isolate isolation. In the awkward relationship between Frank’s apathetic, dreamy, lost, and anesthetized response and the equally apathetic and lost suburban backdrop (the oval shape, the grids), the figure of solitude materializes in its “long empty moment.”

Frank’s fate is not quite that of *Bartleby*. Frank does, after all, surface out from under the film, and he does not choose *not* to participate. However, the immobility that both characters share turns them both into statue-like emblems of the stationary and indifferent. *Bartleby* drives his employer mad with what seems to the latter an utter lack of interest in and concern for his surroundings, and Frank’s similar apathy gets on the reader’s nerves. Herein also lies a stark critique of this particular manifestation of the imaginary’s arrangement: staged as suburban ideal, one of the American imaginary’s second-order institutions, organized into the homogenized and homogenizing suburban landscape. A most effective articulation of a response would be the figuration of the institution’s, and

on a different level, the whole imaginary's, cancellation, which is not so much open defiance and refusal as just immobility and resignation, the neglect of further aspiration. To return to Beuka's observation, noted at the beginning of this chapter, that suburban communities are "places that might be read, in geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's terminology, as 'landscapes of fear,'" we could perhaps modify this and suggest that it is not fear as much as resignation and immobility that are the characteristics. For it is important to note that resignation, not rebellion, poses as aspiration's opposite.

In light of the foregoing, if the sustenance of the imaginary relies on transference, or, in tropological terms, metaphoricity, the dynamics of crossing conceptually discreet spheres of meaning and reference, then a position such as that represented in *The Sports-writer* is anchored in metonymically circumscribed and unyielding pockets of meaning and reference. That constellation brings us into a slightly different area, the potential conflict between the drive of transference and forward orientation, and the static and retrospectively oriented. Herein lies the variance of transculturation and transvaluation that was discussed in chapter 1 and that I consider in two diametrically opposed contexts in the following chapter. For in order to gauge the sway of the imaginary, the places where it runs up against limitations must also be considered.