Benjamin Mangrum The Age of Anxiety: Patricia Highsmith, Existential Psychology, and the "Decline" of American Naturalism

Theodore Schiebelhut, the independently wealthy painter of Patricia Highsmith's *A Game for the Living*, has difficulty explaining why "all his conscious ideas were those of a pessimist." Theodore insists that his bleak outlook has "no causes that he or anybody else could discover" (Highsmith [1958] 1988, 5). Conventional psychological explanations—such as his family history or sexual repression—do not apply in his case. Rather, Theodore at first believes his pessimism is a function of an abstract philosophical commitment to the notion that "the world had no meaning, no end but nothingness, and that man's achievements were all finally perishable—cosmic jokes, like man himself" (5). When Theodore discovers that his mistress, Lelia Ballesteros, has been raped, murdered, and mutilated, his abstract pessimism is confronted with the violent realities of a senseless world. Her death is a pointless tragedy perpetrated by Carlos Hidalgo, an alcoholic friend who becomes infatuated with Lelia. Indeed, the meaninglessness of the trauma confirms Theodore's pessimism, albeit not without ambiguity—why, for example, is such violence requisite for his enlightenment? Still, Theodore is forced to piece together an existence that is otherwise absurdly irrational. He finds himself driven to make sense of a senseless world according to what his friend Ramón characterizes as an "Existentialist's conscience" (76). Theodore's search for the murderer of his lover is driven less by a demand for moral order than by the vicissitudes and private exigencies of his psyche. Detective fiction thus becomes the stage for existentialist angst.

Much like Theodore's attempts to navigate an often-hostile world by drawing on the philosophical resources of existentialism, Highsmith's

novels from the 1950s bear the imprint of the flourishing of American existentialist thought during the postwar era. However, in a way unlike such contemporaries as Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, and Ralph Ellison, Highsmith blends existentialist sensibilities about choice, angst, and authenticity with another prominent postwar development: what Nathan Hale (1995, 276) characterizes as psychoanalysis's "golden age of popularization" in the United States. Highsmith's novels from the 1950s—particularly her widely read *Strangers on a Train* (1950) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)—explore these entwined intellectual threads, which I argue helped reshape the wider political culture of the postwar moment. In particular, this essay charts the nascent development of the existential psychology movement and, more broadly, the normalization of therapeutic psychology following the Second World War. The growing public purchase of these developments had significant consequences for American intellectual life: in effect, the ego and its vicissitudes—rather than socioeconomic or structural conditions—became the normative template for understanding society and the self. Highsmith's novels helped shape this intellectual terrain by representing public phenomena such as violence, class envy, and social alienation as existential crises of an embattled private realm.

In her construal of the darker phenomena of human experience, Highsmith is at pains to distinguish her work from the literary naturalists who dominated the American cultural scene of the 1930s and early 1940s. I argue that Highsmith frequently adapts and revises certain tropes of the naturalists in order to repudiate a narrative world governed principally by structural, socioeconomic, and environmental conditions. Highsmith's revisionist project reinforces a prevalent assertion of the "decline" of naturalism by postwar intellectuals, who hail instead a new cultural order focused on the interior life of the self. Indeed, the temporary deflation in literary naturalism's cultural authority—a phenomenon I trace through the work of intellectuals such as Philip Rahv and the influential *Partisan Review*—is a marker of the growing public currency of psychological templates for understanding society. I demonstrate that this trend was itself a central feature of a wider crisis in the intellectual legitimacy of the New Deal regulatory state during the 1950s. As the cultural fortunes of naturalism declined, existentialism and a spectrum of therapeutic psychologies flourished in the United States, and one consequence of these shifts is that violence and class

conflict were increasingly construed as phenomena of the largely autonomous arena of the psyche. Such trends in American cultural history, I argue, participated in the erosion of the intellectual grounds for an activist-managerial state, which was predicated on intervening in structural conditions for the welfare of its citizens.

Professional Psychology, Psychoanalysis, and Their Discontents

The 1950s marks the apex of the so-called age of anxiety—a phrase whose wider circulation begins with W. H. Auden's book-length poem, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947). This era was defined not only by public fear surrounding the emerging nuclear threats of the immediate postwar years, but also by the popularization and professionalization of psychological discourse in America. Psychology took its first steps toward becoming a formalized discipline in the United States through the work of William James, whose two-volume *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and undergraduate courses at Harvard institutionalized the field. Psychology as an object of inquiry, however, had existed in less formalized ways long before the late nineteenth century. The roots of American psychological fiction, for example, stretch at least as far back as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). Yet unlike these earlier varieties of psychological experience, the postwar years saw an unprecedented expansion in the use of personal trauma and formal mental categories as explanatory mechanisms for everyday experience. Part of this expansion was a direct result of the belated flourishing of psychoanalysis during the postwar moment. Sigmund Freud first visited the United States in 1909, and his followers took it upon themselves to make converts of other psychologists and philosophers. Thus, as John Burnham (2012, 157) explains, "In the 1920s and 1930s, psychoanalysis spread among special parts of the population, frequently in forms that Freud and other purists disdained." But it was not until the mid-1940s that psychoanalysis garnered widespread legitimacy—indeed, as Hale (1995, 35) puts it, becoming a public "vogue." In 1956, one magazine even describes the Austrian thinker as the "Darwin of the Mind."

From the germ of Freud's visit to the legitimacy later cultivated by intellectuals, psychoanalysis grew into a mature and widespread intellectual movement during the 1950s and early 1960s. As Burnham (2012,

159) says, it was during this moment "that Freud's ideas exerted the greatest influence on American culture." Some of the key terms of psychoanalysis became commonplace—albeit often disputed—among the middle and upper classes. For example, seizing upon psychoanalysis's new public currency, Frank Wheeler declares in Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*: "This country's probably the psychiatric, psychoanalytical capital of the world. Old Freud himself could never've dreamed up a more devoted bunch of disciples than the population of the United States—isn't that right? Our whole damn culture is geared to it; it's the new religion; it's everybody's intellectual and spiritual sugar-tit" (Yates 1961, 65). This hyperbolic condemnation of the consensus given to psychoanalysis is ironically a way for Frank to shore himself up against his rage at suburban existence. Frank's discontentment with having ended up in suburbia rather than a wider and ostensibly more important world prompts him to turn against this middle-class form of life. Yet his disavowal is deeply ironic in the sense that, even in the private motivations of his war against Freud's theories of the ego, Frank confirms its status as an explanatory template for his own life. When Frank finishes his diatribe, his wife and friends "looked mildly relieved, like pupils at the end of a lecture" (66). Not finding their customary assent to his outbursts, Frank is nonplussed and withdraws to the kitchen. It becomes apparent that his anti-mainstream rebellion is itself a function of his ego, and the sad irony of the episode is that even dissent against the privileged status of psychoanalysis is rooted in an internal, private arena. There is even a psychological explanation, Yates suggests, for the rejection of psychoanalysis.

The road leading to Frank's malaise had been paved during the previous decade, when psychological discourse had acquired such mass appeal that it even became a central current of American popular culture. The television industry, in particular, drew heavily on psychological discourse in its programming that featured violence and social anxieties. This fact is perhaps clearest in one of the most popular shows of the 1950s, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–65). The series was created to ride the coattails of Hitchcock's successful films, such as *Rope* (1948) and *Dial M for Murder* (1954), as well as his adaptation of Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Whatever Hitchcock's inheritance from psychoanalysis—Ingrid Bergman plays a psychoanalyst in *Spellbound* (1945), but Freud's influence is otherwise an open question—his

work pushed questions of individual psychology to the forefront of American cultural attention.

Most episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* explore some form of violence, framing this trauma through a psychological lens. Hitchcock introduces "Revenge," the first episode of the series, as a story about "ordinary folk": a middle-class husband, Carl Span, who is an engineer at an aircraft plant, and his wife, Elsa, a former ballerina who has recently suffered a "small breakdown" (Hitchcock 1955). Carl, a figure for the working professional, has taken Elsa to a new town for "fresh air" to recover from her breakdown. They move into a small trailer and quickly meet an officious neighbor. Carl leaves for his first day of work, and afterward Elsa is attacked by a man in a "gray suit" who, she enigmatically explains, "killed me." After the trauma, Elsa experiences something like a fugue, a loss of personality, in which her self—"me"— is for all practical purposes destroyed. She becomes nonresponsive, her blank face staring aimlessly at the ceiling. A doctor visits Elsa, and he explains to Carl: "I don't think her condition is too serious, physically that is, Mr. Span. Otherwise, well, she's been through a very emotional shock. And coming so soon after the breakdown—well, I can't tell you anything for certain." Questioning Elsa about the episode, the doctor warns, could even result in "permanent damage." After Carl moves her to yet another town, Elsa identifies an ordinary-looking man in a grey suit as her attacker. Carl follows the man into a hotel room and murders him with a pipe. Afterward, Elsa repeatedly identifies other men in gray suits as her attacker, and Carl slowly realizes that he has killed an innocent person.

This episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* locates Elsa's trauma within middle-class society—a democratization of psychological experience that would become the norm for Hitchcock's series. Carl and Elsa are not members of the intelligentsia or upper classes. Rather, the nuances of psychological analysis map onto their middle-class experience. Any man wearing a gray flannel suit could be Elsa's attacker. Indeed, the perpetrator's attire, as Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel employs it when describing the world of Tom Rath, is the trademark of the organized business community. In Hitchcock's turn on this professional signifier, sociopaths are not confined to the fringes of society; instead, violence is latent within the American Everyman. Hitchcock's series thus construes both the violence and Elsa's trauma as darker manifestations of a

ubiquitous human condition. Although *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* is occasionally attentive to economic markers—the attacker's professional status, or the fact that Carl and Elsa live in a trailer park—the television series nonetheless invites the viewers to understand trauma like Elsa's fugue state as a feature of human consciousness as such, rather than societal aberrations or abstract cases of "abnormal" psychology.

While *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* marks the democratization and mass-market appeal of psychological templates, Highsmith's relationship to these cultural developments signals the heterogeneous threads weaving throughout the fabric of postwar intellectual life. Despite the fact that through film and television the tropes of psychoanalysis were becoming household ideas during the 1950s, Highsmith was never an orthodox Freudian. Part of her discontent with psychoanalysis developed when she underwent therapy in 1948 with New York psychoanalyst Eva Klein Lipshutz. Highsmith decided to pursue this course of therapy in order to cure the disgust she felt during sexual experiences with her fiancé, Marc Brandel. While Americans had become accustomed to visiting a therapist about such putatively abnormal behavior, psychoanalysis for the nonaberrant had become equally commonplace in urban centers. Indeed, Anatole Broyard (1993, 45) recounts that there was in postwar New York "an inevitability about psychoanalysis. It was like having to take the subway to get anywhere. Psychoanalysis was in the air, like humidity, or smoke." Highsmith's decision to visit a psychoanalyst was thus part of the ethic of the moment: private therapy had become integral to the behavior of postwar urbanites and intellectuals. Yet her therapist's view of lesbianism as a mental illness was never fully convincing, and after forty-seven therapy sessions Highsmith determined that her sexual aversion to men was unchanging. She left New York for a European tour in May 1949 and never again trusted mainstream psychoanalysts.

Highsmith wrote *Strangers on a Train* before the abortive therapy to cure her same-sex desires. She learned a few days prior to her last session that Harper and Brothers had agreed to publish the book. Despite the uncertainties that marked her life during the years preceding her first novel's publication, Highsmith found a philosophical anchor for *Strangers on a Train* in European existentialism. She was attracted to the nuanced accounts of human angst and the subversion of a rational construal of life that preoccupies this body of philosophy and litera-

ture. She read several works by Franz Kafka in 1943 and Albert Camus's *L'Étranger* (1942) in 1946. Highsmith found that Kafka's work traced the lines of her pessimism regarding the rationality of "God, government or self" (quoted in Wilson 2003, 118), while the alienated existence of Camus's narrator Meursault inspired her to read the other canonical French existentialists—Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. She also read *Crime and Punishment* for the second time in 1947, declaring that Fyodor Dostoevsky was her "master," as she would later say about Søren Kierkegaard as well (126, 158). Indeed, *Strangers on a Train* borrows Dostoevsky's technique in *Crime and Punishment* of depicting murder as a psychological phenomenon as much as a physical act. Murder and its attendant guilt become an idée fixe for Highsmith's protagonist. After Charles Bruno first proposes the double murder, Guy Haines is disgusted by the proposition. Yet he nonetheless finds Bruno strangely appealing and the idea of violence becomes a recurring feature of his thoughts.

Mistaking Guy's initial reticence for the unconscious consent of a virtuous man, Bruno strangles Miriam and later compels Guy to fulfill his end of the agreement—the murder of Bruno's father. As Bruno's pressure becomes more assertive and disturbing, the murder of a stranger becomes the governing center of Guy's psychological life. Based on Bruno's repeated letters detailing how his father might be murdered, Guy develops a clear mental image of the act. Much like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Guy first imagines the murder:

> It would be so simple, as Bruno said, when the house was empty except for his father and the butler, and Guy knew the house more exactly than his home in Metcalf. . . . He must not let his mind go there again. That was exactly what Bruno wanted his mind to do. . . . But having been there once, it was easy for his mind to go there again. In the nights when he could not sleep, he enacted the murder, and it soothed him like a drug. (Highsmith [1950] 2001, 140)

Much like Raskolnikov, who is paradoxically disgusted and fascinated with Svidrigailov, a wealthy profligate, Guy is at once repelled by and finally feels bound to Bruno. In fact, after the latter drunkenly (but perhaps intentionally) falls off Guy's boat, Guy risks his life by jumping into a tumultuous sea to save him. "Where was his friend," Guy asks himself, "his brother?" (263).

Guy's identification with Bruno is the first instance of a doubling technique that Highsmith would rely on throughout her career. For Highsmith, this technique is part and parcel of the Gothic sensibilities that underwrite her brand of psychological realism: even ostensibly upright and socially responsible human beings have not only the capacity for evil but also a desire for it. Thus, in a moment of dire reflection, Guy frames the doubling like this: "But love and hate, he thought now, good and evil, lived side by side in the human heart, and not merely in differing proportions in one man and the next, but all good and all evil" (Highsmith [1950] 2001, 180). He construes evil as a product of the self, as an internal proclivity that is distinct from materialist explanations or external influences. Guy perceives that this internal provenance for evil—its borderless relationship to good and its origins within the "heart," the psyche or soul—explains his contradictory emotional responses to Bruno: "And Bruno, he and Bruno. Each was what the other had not chosen to be, the cast-off self, what he thought he hated but perhaps in reality loved" (180). Bruno is a "double" of Guy not because they are seemingly trapped within their own subjectivities— and thus project the self onto another—but because the capacity for violence and evil is a universal feature of the human condition. Indeed, Guy explains his refusal to discard the murder weapon, a revolver, after the crime: "it was *his*, a part of himself, the third hand that had done the murder. It was himself at fifteen when he had bought it, himself when he had loved Miriam and had kept it in their room in Chicago, looking at it now and then in his most contented, most inward moments" (178). During these "inward moments"—pauses from his life as a promising architect when Guy reflects on the state of his psyche—the value of the weapon becomes most apparent. It is "the best of himself," he explains, the apogee of his psychological life (178).

Highsmith's construal of the internal provenance for evil is in part indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche's moral philosophy, which dismantles the concepts of "good and evil" by identifying them as vestiges of a failed religio-philosophical system. According to Nietzsche, such moral ideas are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition but have persisted in the modern world after the "death of God," or the collapse of transcendental explanations for human existence and behavior. Highsmith first encountered this line of thought in 1939 when she read Nietzsche's autobiography *Ecce Homo* as an undergraduate at Barnard (Wilson 2003, 211). Highsmith was fascinated with the subversive quality of

Nietzsche's philosophy: "I am not a man," he proclaims, "I am dyna-mite" (Nietzsche [1908] 1911, 131). The destructive thrust of Nietzsche's moral philosophy resides in his claim that the weak of soci-ety promote the lies of "good" and "evil" in order to rein in the strong, despite the "death" of the transcendental and metaphysical explana-tions that originally supported those concepts. What is deemed "evil," Nietzsche insists, is actually the impulses and proclivities of worldly human life. In contrast to such authentic expressions of the will, Nietzsche argues that Christians and ethical humanists are in fact nihilists because they deny the importance of *this* life: as they grope for a higher morality or more spiritual things, they eschew their wills and thus their moral concepts are little more than vapors.

Impressed by Nietzsche's argument, the young Highsmith embraced this position by rejecting transcendental or metaphysical grounds for good and evil, and eventually she would adapt Nietzsche's moral phi-losophy for her own novelistic purposes. The so-called amorality that characterizes many of her most intriguing characters—especially Bruno, Tom Ripley, and David Kelsey in *This Sweet Sickness* (1961)—displaces the conventional concern for moral order that underwrites much crime fiction, searching instead for what Julian Symons (1980, 14) characterizes as "a different and wholly personal code of morality." For Highsmith, evil is only a construct produced by her characters' guilt, while the figure of the criminal is a symbol for the self that asserts its will. Thus, when Guy perceives that the revolver is "the best of him-self," the weapon becomes a symbol of what, though society has deemed it "evil," is actually a genuine assertion of his will (178). Guy's moment of perception about the evil within himself is, in other words, a window into the life that he wants, bringing into full view the amorality required to realize those desires. Following Nietzsche's sentiment, Highsmith's sensibilities about humanity's universal penchant for evil become an avenue for replacing a discourse about crime and morality with concerns about authentic existence. She presents a narrative world beyond good and evil, identifying instead the authentic willing of a self as the narrative center of gravity.

Highsmith's repudiation of moral categories in favor of sensibilities about authenticity created confusion and discomfort among many early reviewers of the novel. For example, one critic with the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* lamented that *Strangers on a Train* "is not always credible, and the characters are not entirely convincing"

because it is difficult to believe that a respectable architect would fail to inform the police once he is convinced of Bruno's guilt, much less commit the double murder (quoted in Wilson 2003, 168). Yet, rather than viewing Guy as an embattled but nonetheless virtuous hero who longs only to live happily with his new fiancée, Anne, Highsmith stages Guy's crime and attendant guilt as a struggle between two selves—one that knows the power and prestige he wants and another plagued by fear, compulsions, and socially constructed prohibitions. This struggle surfaces most clearly in the tension he feels between his ambitions as an architect and his former life with Miriam. On the train Guy shares his frustrations about Miriam with Bruno, situating his disdain for her within the context of his own tentative commission to design the Palmyra Club in Palm Beach. As Bruno says about the commission, "You're gonna be famous, huh?" and, in fact, there is significant professional prestige if Guy's design is successful (Highsmith 2001, 32). As Bruno rambles about his own artistic dalliances, Guy reflects about the social capital that his modern design would acquire for him: "He sipped his drink absently, and thought of the commissions that would come after Palm Beach. Soon, perhaps, an office building in New York. He had an idea for an office building in New York, and he longed to see it come into being. Guy Daniel Hanes. *A name*. No longer the irksome, never quite banished awareness that he had less money than Anne" (32). While Guy earlier says that he has no interest in "making money" (20), the Palmyra affords him the opportunity to gain enough social capital that he can pursue his architectural and artistic interests unencumbered by financial concerns. He would become a "*name*," a public figure with social clout. Furthermore, the Palmyra commission would obviate Guy's concerns about his inferior socioeconomic position with Anne, whose wealthy family is among the upper classes of New England. Miriam, however, threatens to "lose him the commission" by sullying that social capital, either by demanding a divorce because of her love for Owen Markham or by ruining his standing with Clarence Brillhart, the manager of the Palmyra Club (33). In either case, Guy fears Miriam will prompt Brillhart to deny or withdraw the commission.

When Guy learns that Miriam wants to accompany him to Palm Beach for "protection" during her pregnancy (her lover is currently married and first needs to get a divorce), Guy is distraught. He not only fears that Miriam's extramarital pregnancy might become public knowledge, but he also imagines an equally devastating scenario in

which the unsophisticated Miriam meets Brillhart, ruining Guy's image as a member of the cultural elite. Guy thus becomes convinced that Miriam cannot accompany him to Palm Beach. "Yet," Guy suddenly realizes, "it was not the vision of Brillhart's shock beneath his calm, unvarying courtesy . . . but simply his own revulsion that made it impossible. It was just that he couldn't bear having Miriam anywhere near him when he worked on a project like this one" (Highsmith 2001, 43). Even if she did not sully his social life, she would poison his imagination—his ability to work on such an important project. In almost any scenario, then, Miriam devalues the social capital that Guy gains by the Palmyra commission. Her unrefined presence would impede his slow climb from Metcalf, Texas, into the upper echelons of New York society, and for this reason Bruno's murder of Miriam is nothing less than the manifestation of Guy's own will.

This Nietzschean turn in *Strangers on a Train* is not without its problems, however. What, for example, makes the life that Guy wills—his desire to be a "*name*"—any less a social construct than the morality that inhibits the realization of his goal? And, in terms of Nietzsche's argument, what makes the will to power any more natural than the meanings and values that human beings produce? Are not the *natural*, the *vital*, and even *this life* concepts with their own contingent histories? This set of tensions often prompts readers to argue that some social-historical critique underwrites Highsmith's novels. Joshua Lukin, for example, maintains that Guy's desire to climb the social ladder through his profession exemplifies Highsmith's criticism of a constellation of pressures on the postwar professional-managerial class. Through his ostensible commitment to aesthetic purity—to the art of architecture rather than "making money"—Guy thinks of himself as "classless" when in fact this professional fantasy is a product of the "psychic pressures" of a booming market for mass consumption and the demands of social mobility (Lukin 2010, 21–23). These two streams of "psychic pressure" lead Guy to embrace a pair of paradoxical desires: social mobility and the "classlessness" of an aesthetic life apart from mass consumer culture. Lukin argues that Guy understands himself as something like the dispossessed bourgeoisie, who are forced into vulgar labor and long for their lost social autonomy. Lukin glosses Guy's acquiescence to Bruno as the former's paradoxical desire for social mobility and classlessness—that is to say, Guy's crime becomes a function of his professional status.

Yet Highsmith presents the vicissitudes of Guy's psyche and Bruno's obsession with murder as something more fundamental than outcomes of converging pressures on the professional class. For one, Bruno and the genteel Anne share the same economic status, even if the latter is more adept culturally and socially. Put more broadly, though, the problem is that Highsmith seems to take pains to frustrate historicizing interpretations. Rather than capitulating to socioeconomic forces of their respective classes, Highsmith presents Bruno's motivations and Guy's violence as manifestations of a psychological realm. For example, after Miriam's murder, Bruno imagines that he has finally achieved something noteworthy, as if the murder were an accomplishment that bolsters his ego. As Guy puts it, Bruno takes "personal pride in his, Guy's, freedom" (Highsmith 2001, 102). More importantly, after Guy has murdered Bruno's father, Bruno muses that their freedom enables them to achieve a certain intimacy with one another: "Guy and himself! Who else was like them? Who else was their equal? He longed for Guy to be with him now. He would clasp Guy's hand, and to hell with the rest of the world!" (167). The two murders suggest entangled forms of violence and pleasure: Bruno's strangulation of Miriam is strangely intimate, while Guy murders the elder Bruno as the man lies in his bed.

Bruno fantasizes that these two intimate murders become something like a consummation of his and Guy's relationship. They are wedded to one another through the freedom of a prior lover's death and the murder of an oppressive father. Indeed, Bruno even fantasizes about removing Anne as a competitor for Guy's affections: "If he could strangle Anne, too, then Guy and he could really be together" (Highsmith 2001, 250). Bruno's Oedipal desire for his mother, which he wears on his gray flannel sleeve while talking with Guy on the train, transfers to the surrogate murderer of his father. The double crime thus becomes a form of narcissism: Bruno loves the man who has done what he could never do, the self he wishes he could be. Guy has enabled them both to become "supermen," as Bruno drunkenly proclaims, Nietzschean *übermenschen* who *will* the life they want (261). Thus, the explanations for Bruno's murder of Miriam, his subsequent pressure on Guy, and his fantasies about a union through violence are rooted within the realm of the ego and his desire for an authentic expression of the self. The signs of class and socioeconomic distinction that adorn the narrative are subsumed under the auspices of the individual psyche. The arena of psychology therefore serves as the bedrock of the narrative:

Highsmith presents her characters' violence and guilt as performances within a theater of the will and the self.

Existential Psychology and the "Decline"
of Literary Naturalism

Highsmith regularly signals her interventions in literary history by alluding to or adapting a novelistic forebear. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), for instance, Herbert Greenleaf notes that his proposition to Tom Ripley is not unlike the one that Lambert Strether receives in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). In contrast to this conspicuous foregrounding of her debts, Highsmith alludes to a literary ancestor in *Strangers on a Train* in a subtler but more suggestive way. Much like Highsmith's novel, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) begins on a train with a chance meeting between two seemingly antithetical characters, Carrie Meeber and Charles Drouet. Highsmith's small-town waif desires to be upwardly mobile even as Carrie, like Guy, is at first suspicious of the man on the train who seems to be observing her with peculiar and ambiguous interest. The narrator explains that Drouet is a "masher," or "one whose dress or manners are calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women" (Dreiser [1900] 1917, 4). Carrie, on the other hand, is a "waif amid forces," an ostensibly innocent young woman who leaves her childhood home in order to "reconnoitre the mysterious city [of Chicago] and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy" (2, 3). As a "fair example of the middle American class," Carrie allows her naive ambitions to lead her into situations that are far removed from her early innocence (2). Both Highsmith's aspiring architect and Dreiser's middle-class waif seemingly destroy their lives even as they achieve semblances of their desires. Carrie's "wild dreams" are seized and manipulated by the city's "large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human" (2). She eventually becomes Drouet's mistress after she experiences the difficulties of life in Chicago—her sister's stifling home, work in a factory, poverty. Rather than returning to her small town or finding other low-paying employment, Carrie's desire for "some vague, far-off supremacy" prompts her to search for an avenue of escape from her difficulties.

Indeed, Carrie's "vague" desires are defined *for* her as she is exposed to the alluring promises of urban life. For example, after she loses her

job, Drouet takes Carrie to dinner and orders an expensive sirloin. His charm and liberal spending "captivated Carrie completely" (Dreiser 1917, 67). Drouet's interactions with "noted or rich individuals" likewise cast a spell over her (51). His munificence and social standing prepare her to assume "the cosmopolitan standard of virtue," as the narrator puts it, by justifying the decision to become his mistress for the sake of the material opportunity that the relationship affords (2). "Ah, money, money, money," she muses before agreeing to become Drouet's mistress, "What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away all these troubles" (74–75). Carrie has absorbed this fantasy about money through her exposure to upper-middle-class life, and thus when Drouet proposes to "take care" of her, Carrie hears the proposition "passively," as if it were "the welcome breath of an open door" (77). Dreiser's waif is slowly carried away by the currents of Chicago's larger forces.

Having become intimate with this stranger she meets on a train, Carrie allows Drouet to buy her expensive clothes and secure a spacious apartment, and he even enables her to play the heroine in a theatrical performance. In short, Drouet helps define and fulfill Carrie's desires. However, while this waif appears to be a passive subject to Drouet's personal charm, forces beyond this "masher" exert a greater influence over Carrie. She is "the victim of the city's hypnotic charm," the narrator explains before her older sister, Minnie, has a nightmare of Carrie being swallowed up by dark waters (Dreiser 1917, 89). Minnie's dream presumably serves as an occluded sign of the "something" that is "lost" with Carrie—that is, her virginity and, in Dreiser's view, her innocence along with it (90). But Minnie's dream also recalls the larger forces swirling around Carrie's life. Environmental imagery pervades the dream, much like the way it recurs throughout the novel, particularly when representing Carrie's "mental state." The early implication of this imagery is that Drouet is only one among many forces—a fact confirmed when Carrie begins an affair with George Hurstwood, the manager of an upscale bar. Hurstwood, Carrie tells herself, is "more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways" and also more attentive to her (106). Yet even these shifting desires are products of institutional and socioeconomic conditions. The psychological is little more than an aftereffect: "A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives," the narrator explains, "appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms" (2). The urban environment is a cacophony of forces molding the pliable Carrie.

Through her vacillating affections, Dreiser suggests that Carrie's desires are largely unknown to herself and, given the recurring prominence that the narrator attributes to the city, those desires are most often constituted by impersonal forces. The narrator provides such an explanatory template for Carrie's behavior not long after her decision to become Drouet's mistress. Dreiser's narrator, seemingly in an attempt to create empathy for Carrie's situation, reflects on her "mental state" in relation to "the true answer to what is right" (Dreiser 1917, 101). The narrator remarks that much of modern society's standards for moral judgment are "infantile," merely applying principles as an uncritical recitation of popular conventions (101). Indeed, Carrie's "average little conscience" similarly replicates "the world, her past environment, habit, convention, in a confused way" (103). The narrator's point is not that morality is merely a conventional construct, however, for even Carrie, whose "mind [is] rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis," finds that her conventional conscience is "never wholly convincing" (2, 104). The unsophisticated Carrie is able to criticize the received standards for social behavior. She is more than a product of her *social* world. The narrator suggests instead that the more forceful determinants exist on a larger register: "There was always an answer [to her conscience], always the December days threatened. She was alone; she was desireful; she was fearful of the whistling wind. The voice of want made answer for her" (104). Carrie's "morality"—her ethic, the underpinnings of her behavior—is driven by the threat of poverty and being cast out into an indifferent world. By framing Carrie's behavior in relation to the cold "December days" and the risk of exposure to natural elements, the narrator connects such suprahuman forces and the structural conditions of an urban landscape to the earlier question regarding "the true answer to what is right." Carrie's "mental state," in other words, is a creature struggling against the material conditions and structural realities that are its creator.

Sister Carrie had become canonized among the American cultural elite by the 1920s (see Hayes 2011, 399–400), but that later moment of canonization is emblematic of the wider literary history of American naturalism. The early critical reception of naturalism—restricted at first to Frank Norris, Jack London, and Stephen Crane—was largely skeptical: the first naturalist novels were often dismissed as muckraking fiction that appealed to a mass audience on sensational grounds. Malcolm Cowley (2004, 50–52) explains the naturalists' early reception

as a function of the challenge they posed to the "genteel" tradition of American letters. Philip Rahv, the New York intellectual and influential founding editor of *Partisan Review*, similarly argues that naturalism is a product of a nineteenth-century world of industry and science. Naturalism, he suggests, protested the conditions of the former through the resources of the latter. The naturalists, Rahv (1969, 84) concludes, "revolutionized writing by liquidating the last assets of 'romance' in fiction and by purging it once and for all of the idealism of the 'beautiful lie'—of the longstanding inhibitions against dealing with the underside of life." For prominent postwar critics such as Cowley and Rahv, then, naturalism was understood as a rebellion against the socioeconomic inequalities of industrial, urbanized existence.

However, many postwar intellectuals noted that by the 1940s the conversation surrounding naturalism had markedly changed. In 1942, Rahv (1969, 76) influentially claimed that the "endless book-keeping of existence" that characterized literary naturalism was in "decline." While the naturalist style had come to the forefront of cultural attention in the 1930s, Rahv observes that a newer generation of writers had begun to "want to break the novel of its objective habits" (76). Rather than offering historically impersonal narratives that explore the structural or environmental conditions of human life, Rahv argues that new intellectual currents were prompting American writers to become introspective about art, the artist, and the individual. In particular, intellectual discontent with the naturalist style had its impetus in the political animus toward progressive politics, with its (perceived) view of the individual. In opposition to "the political movement in the literature of the past decade [1930s]," there has been "a revival of religio-esthetic attitudes" (76–77). Rahv formulates an objection against naturalism that would be reiterated among many intellectuals for the next two decades: naturalist novels envision a "closed world," one in which "the environment displaces its inhabitants in the role of the hero" (81). Yet more expansive intellectual trends deposed such an ordering of the narrative world. Among the most important of these forces, Rahv cites "the growth of the psychological sciences and, particularly, of psychoanalysis" (86). These trends prompted American fiction writers to turn inward, creating a crisis in the interpretation of human experience. The literary devices and intellectual resources of the naturalist style, Rahv concludes, cannot adequately interpret such a newly disassembled world.

By the late 1950s, so many intellectuals were convinced of the decline of the naturalist style that Edward Stone collected an anthology, *What Was Naturalism?* The title's past tense suggests an expired phenomenon, and indeed Stone (1959, ix) explains that the purpose of the anthology is to introduce "the mind of a buried generation" to young scholars. The "materials" that Stone associates with the movement suggest why he feels that the intellectual era of the naturalists had passed—in particular, selections from Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), Karl Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital* (1867–94), and Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Sociology* (1874–96). These selections represent the "gist" of "a mind," or the intellectual milieu that inspired Hamlin Garland, Crane, London, Norris, and Dreiser (viii). The critical and intellectual shifts of the postwar cultural marketplace mitigated—if not "buried," as Stone suggests—the sociological accounts of society and individuals that had influenced naturalist writers. What's more, American attitudes toward progressive accounts of politics and economics, particularly toward Marxism and its perceived relationship with fascism, led many postwar readers to distrust the narrative worlds that naturalism represented. Stone's anthology, then, suggests how intellectuals not only associated naturalism with environmental determinism and sociology but also with progressive politics more generally.

The ostensible decline of the naturalist style was, in reality, a temporary symptom of the intellectual trends of the postwar decades. Mass-market presses such as Penguin would reprint many naturalist texts during the 1980s as American "classics," discovering through the mechanism of canonization that naturalism had a marketable afterlife. The avowed decline of naturalism during the 1940s and 1950s thus signals important shifts in American intellectual history as much as the changing literary tastes of critics. As part of these shifts, James Gilbert (1992) traces the dwindling cultural fortunes of naturalism in relation to a revolution in the editorial policies of the *Partisan Review*. In 1934, Rahv and William Phillips founded the magazine to "defend the Soviet Union, to combat fascism and war, and to promote a literature which would express the viewpoint of the working class" (Dvosin 1978, xiii). The magazine soon folded, to no one's surprise, and its new editorial board in 1937 replaced "proletarian literature" with "intellectual literature" (xiii). Thus, during the late 1930s the editors abandoned their ambitions of leading a political vanguard—most often through

publishing naturalist fiction and political essays—and transferred those aspirations to the arena of sophisticated cultural tastes. By the early 1940s, the *Partisan Review* generally refused to publish work that was either naturalist in style or pro-Soviet in its politics (Gilbert 1992, 193). These shifts, Gilbert argues, involved growing anticommunist sensibilities among readers in the 1940s, and the editors' changing tastes simultaneously turned "back to the era of the symbolists, the surrealists, and the exiles." The standards for publication established the avant-garde as its gold standard, privileging literary style above political vision. Consequently, the "naturalism so evident in the early magazine was banished and replaced by writing that corresponded more to that printed in the *Dial* during the 1920s" (192). As the cultural stock of avant-garde modernism soared, literary naturalism fell out of favor; the tastes of leading postwar editors and critics turned toward writers like Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot.

Yet the "decline" of naturalist fiction was due not only, as Rahv (1969, 86) acknowledges, to the "growth of the psychological sciences," but also to the immigration of European existentialism into American cultural life. Indeed, many therapists and intellectuals assimilated these twin phenomena, giving rise to the existential psychology movement. Existential psychology was a forerunner of the humanistic psychology movement of the 1960s, and both theories of therapy had profound effects on public sensibilities about the self and its route to authenticity (Grogan 2013, 75–79). For example, Rollo May's edited anthology *Existence* (1958) disseminated existential psychoanalysis to the wider psychiatric profession. May first wed existentialist sensibilities about authenticity with psychological analysis and therapeutic practice in *Man's Search for Himself* (1953), a *New York Times* best seller. This wedding was not unique to May, however, for his work drew heavily on European existential psychology, particularly that of Ludwig Binswanger and Viktor Frankl. May also used the salient terms of existentialism to revise elements from the early humanistic psychology movement developing in the writings of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow (Grogan 2013, 79). In effect, this permutation of professional psychology casts therapeutic work as an avenue for unearthing and expressing an authentic self: psychological analysis becomes the pathway to existential self-realization.

Even as May, Rogers, and Maslow were popularizing psychologized authenticity, other therapists began to employ psychological templates

when analyzing social and political events. Most notably, Erich Fromm ([1941] 1969, ix) accounts for the advent of fascism through "the character structure of modern man and the problems of the interaction between psychological and sociological factors." For Fromm, fascism is a temptation born out of the psychological state of the modern individual: while "modern man" has been freed from the strictures of "pre-individualistic society," modern selves have also become anxious and isolated in their individualized freedom. The temptation confronting the modern self, Fromm argues, is to abandon the burden of freedom for political dependencies. He thus construes fascism as a form of neurosis—an individual psychological template applied to collective behavior. Fromm's version of existential psychology frames *society* and *politics* after a psychological pattern. This turn is not a retreat from politics, then, but a reframing of it. Indeed, the mechanisms of Fromm's "psychosocial" analysis would become widely representative, if not directly influential, on the early literature on totalitarianism, which tended to psychologize the loss of personality that seemingly characterized its supporters. Even Rollo May ([1950] 1977, 12) would assert, "People grasp at political authoritarianism in their desperate need for relief from anxiety." Inverting the accounts of violence in both Malthusian sociology and Marxist political economy, the existential psychology movement embedded social and political behaviors within the explanatory resources of a diverse and growing body of psychological knowledge.

The complicated cultural fabric of the postwar moment thus includes the intellectual "decline" of naturalism, the normalization of psychoanalysis, and the formation of existential psychology—phenomena that meet not only in Rahv's explanation for changing literary tastes but also in Highsmith's allusion to *Sister Carrie* in the opening of *Strangers on a Train*. While Carrie Meeber's desires are caught within a web of structural conditions and a cold urban environment, Guy's ambitions and contradictory desires represent the vicissitudes of an irrational psychological arena. Indeed, much like the narrator in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), Highsmith documents the irrational undercurrents of the human psyche as a way of confronting deterministic accounts of human behavior. For example, when Guy and Bruno first meet, Guy is reading a volume of Plato's philosophy. However, his thoughts consistently drift from the book to Bruno: "His mind wandered after half a page. He . . . let his eyes wander to the

unlighted cigar that still gyrated conversationally in a bony hand behind one of the seat backs, and to the monogram that trembled on a thin gold chain across the tie of the young man opposite him" (Highsmith 2001, 11). The monogram, "CAB," captures Guy's attention more fully than the text of philosophy. No matter how much he concentrates, Guy finds himself reading Bruno rather than Plato: "It was an interesting face, though Guy did not know why" (11). Dreiser's Carrie also tries yet fails to read a novel, but what Florence Dore (2005, 38) calls her "guilty reading" is a marker of the sexual norms and class-based cultural capital that preclude Carrie from the "highbrow" world she desires to enter. Plato similarly is a marker of Guy's desire to enter a world of knowledge and order; yet what frustrates Highsmith's protagonist is not the proscriptions of normative behavior but the psychological appeal of the violent and the irrational.

After Guy performs a thorough close reading of Bruno, he feels momentarily satisfied and is able to return to his book. "The words made sense to him and began to lift his anxiety," the narrator explains. Yet the consolation of philosophy is short-lived: "But what good will Plato do you with Miriam, an inner voice asked him" (Highsmith 2001, 11). Bruno soon provides a solution that Guy's desire for order, virtue, and reason cannot. Indeed, Highsmith's selection of Plato as the author of the volume Guy reads is telling. In Mary McCabe's (2000) apt phrase, Plato's dialogues constitute a "dramatization of reason": his philosophy searches for the best ordering for society and an individual's life. Not unlike Guy the architect, Plato weds rational order with a desire for the beautiful. E. R. Dodds (1945, 16) summarizes the intellectual consensus of Highsmith's day when he explains that scholars read Plato as a "rationalist" in at least two senses: Plato "believes that reason and not the senses provides . . . the first principles on which scientific knowledge is built," and Plato maintains that "the life of man and the life of the universe are governed by, or are manifestations of, a rational plan." Guy's interest in Plato, then, serves as a retreat from the distractions of Miriam: planning, wisdom, and the resources of the Western cultural tradition become a haven. However, before Bruno even mentions his plan, Guy already has doubts about the efficacy of the rational order that Plato represents. An "inner voice"—one among many that will speak to Guy throughout the novel—questions whether such cultured thought is sufficient for the dilemma he faces. Could there be other consolations for Guy's anxieties not bound up with reason and planning?

The proposition from Bruno, the man with the "interesting face," gives voice to the irrational impulses that repeatedly appeal to Guy (11).

While Dreiser is undoubtedly attentive to mental states in *Sister Carrie*, the recurrence of the irrational in Highsmith's novel presents a narrative world governed primarily by the disordered and contradictory psychological life of its characters. Highsmith's allusion to Dreiser's novel reframes the conditions of possibility for the mental states of her characters, removing them from the largely deterministic structures that shape the naturalist novel. Dreiser presents Carrie's desires as either a product of structural conditions—the allure of consumerism in an urban environment—or as a weak haven from the whims of larger forces. Highsmith, on the other hand, presents her characters' behavior within a different nexus of forces. Bruno describes this nexus while having dinner alone with Anne one evening. During a telling inversion of intimacies where the sociopath informs the lover, Bruno quotes Guy's pronouncement that "every man is his own law court and punishes himself enough." He jokes to Anne that "in fact, every man is just about everything to Guy!" (Highsmith 2001, 252). Bruno, who seemingly knows Guy's mind more intimately than his wife does, adapts one of Guy's ruminations to explain that "good and evil" are phenomena of a private arena (251). What's more, Bruno's enigmatic assertion that "every man is just about everything to Guy" suggests that moral judgments, like the conditions of possibility for criminal acts, are *almost* entirely circumscribed by the individual and the chaotic court of the psyche. Sure, social norms and inhibitions influence human beings, Bruno suggests, but criminality is principally a phenomenon of existential conditions rather than structural or environmental ones. Indeed, when Guy neglects to inform the police that Bruno has confessed to Miriam's murder in a letter, Guy justifies the decision because of "some sense of personal guilt that he himself could not bear" (95). On the one hand, Guy fears exposure if he were to go to the police. Yet this feeling is also irrational because, although Guy is strangely interested in Bruno on the train, he nonetheless rebuffs his proposal. Bruno even admits that Guy has rejected the idea of an exchanged murder, but he strangles Miriam anyway. The point is that Guy's "personal guilt" is, as Russell Harrison (1997, 14) glosses it, "an existential guilt, rather than guilt for a specific act." The hesitancies plaguing Guy are a product of his conflicted ego—they derive from the uncertainties about which self he desires to *will*.

Tom Ripley, Kierkegaard's Sickness, and the Fate of New Deal Liberalism

One consequence of the existentialist sensibilities informing Highsmith's fiction from the 1950s is that the amoral presentation of characters and criminal behavior often disorients readers. This is especially the case with *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. For example, explaining Tom's obsession with Dickie Greenleaf's affluent lifestyle, Edward Shannon (2004, 17) says that Highsmith "focuses the reader's attention on the political and economic contexts that define Tom Ripley, who is first and foremost an American bent on ascending the ladder of class and privilege." *The Talented Mr. Ripley* thus is underwritten by Highsmith's "critique of American ideas of class" (18). While Tom is keenly attuned to the markers of Dickie's affluence, the deceptive subtleties of Ripley's character frustrate the idea that a "critique" of American narratives of social mobility underwrites the narrative. Instead, Highsmith differentiates *The Talented Mr. Ripley* from earlier American novels, such as James's *The Ambassadors* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), both of which had presented the ambiguities of class-based self-invention. Highsmith refashions these earlier fictions through sensibilities about free choice and authenticity: the ambiguities of Tom's self-invention are rooted not in his class but in his own oddly comic failure to assume or retain his freedom. Tom is an almost Nietzschean individual willing to become the self that he chooses at any cost, yet paradoxically that self abandons its free choice when confronted with the burden of freedom. Tom, in other words, does not want to escape his class or social position so much as his self.

The philosophical contours of Tom's existential crisis become more pronounced in relation to Highsmith's intellectual debts from the 1940s and early 1950s. Andrew Wilson recounts that the intellectual germ for Ripley developed in 1949 when Highsmith read an anthology of Kierkegaard's work. Highsmith described the Danish philosopher as her "master" (Wilson 2003, 158), and in fact Kierkegaard's investigation of despair in *The Sickness unto Death* (1849), which Highsmith quoted frequently in her journals, helps explain the paradoxes of Tom's behavior. In the anthologized selections from *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard (1946, 353) writes about three types of despair: when an individual is "in despair at not willing to be oneself; or still lower, in despair at not willing to be a self; or lowest of all, in despair at willing to be another than himself." The despairing person is driven to great

lengths by the desire to become someone other than whoever he or she *is*. Thus, for Kierkegaard, the self in despair becomes a kind of ouroboros—at once a self-fulfilling and self-destructive creature. The person in Kierkegaard's lowest form of despair is "infinitely comic" because "this self gets the notion of asking whether it might not let itself become or be made into another than itself" (353). Despairing selves are comic, in other words, because they are so trapped within the immediacy of their own crises that they cannot see the "eternal" quality of the self: they wish to change something that is unchanging. However, Kierkegaard also identifies a paradox at the heart of this form of despair: "Such a despairer, whose only wish is this most crazy of all transformations, loves to think that this change might be accomplished as easily as changing a coat. For the immediate man does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress, he recognizes (and here again appears the infinitely comic trait)—he recognizes that he has a self only by externals" (353). The despairing self wishes to be other than itself, and thus is caught within the immediacy of that crisis. This "comic" notion leads to the disintegration of the self—that is to say, the perception that the self is only "dress," externals that may be exchanged. This inauthentic self-invention, Kierkegaard maintains, is in reality an especially pernicious form of despair.

The "sickness" of despair within Kierkegaard's framework construes the experiences of envy and social mobility as phenomena of an existential crisis. For this proto-existentialist, whatever social markers characterize the self-that-one-is-not—which is also the self that the despairer desires to become—those markers are peripheral to the crisis of the lowest form of despair. Following the pattern of Kierkegaard's thought, then, when Ripley murders Dickie Greenleaf and temporarily assumes his wealth and identity, his desires for mobility are rooted principally in an ambition to change his self. When Tom's forgeries of Dickie's signature on three remittances from his trust fund have been discovered, it becomes clear that Tom's self-invention is principally an avenue of escape from "Tom Ripley" rather than a desire for class status in itself. The Greenleaf trust and Dickie's bank in Naples become suspicious of the forgeries, and Tom realizes that he can no longer continue impersonating his victim:

> This was the end of Dickie Greenleaf, he knew. He hated becoming Thomas Ripley again, hated being nobody, hated putting on his old set of habits again, and feeling that people looked down on him and

were bored with him unless he put on an act for them like a clown, feeling incompetent and incapable of doing anything with himself except entertaining people for minutes at a time. He hated going back to himself as he would have hated putting on a shabby suit of clothes, a grease-spotted, unpressed suit of clothes that had not been very good even when it was new. (Highsmith [1955] 2008, 181)

Tom hopes to switch between being Dickie and himself, but, in Kierkegaardian fashion, his desire for self-invention is symptomatic of his self-hate and despair rather than his freedom. While "becoming" a wealthy Greenleaf allows Tom to live as "somebody" rather than "nobody," this distinction has less to do with Dickie's class than with Tom's own self-appraisal: the persona of "Thomas Ripley" is a "nobody," akin to a "suit of clothes" that one might collect from a closet. Identity becomes nothing more than a feat of sustained impersonation.

Tom's lament at having to return to the "unpressed suit of clothes" of his Ripley identity recalls the moment not long after assuming the "Dickie Greenleaf" identity when he visits Paris. Enjoying a slow walk through the city's streets, Tom "rather liked the idea of going to bed hungry" but resolves instead to go to a restaurant in order to gain weight so that his murdered friend's clothes would be a better fit. To *become* Dickie—"He was Dickie, good-natured, naïve Dickie"—he must fit exactly the new externals of that persona (Highsmith 2008, 124). Yet Tom is unaware that such minor choices construe the self of another— and indeed his own identity—as incidental and easily removable as the clothes on his back. To gain the necessary five pounds, Tom goes to a *bar-tabac* and orders "a ham sandwich on long crusty bread and a glass of hot milk, because a man next to him at the counter was drinking hot milk." The causality of Tom's order—*because* another man ordered the milk—suggests that, even in the first moments of his newly chosen identity, he abdicates the burden of his free decisions by opting for the preferences of others. Similarly, when Tom travels to Arles to discover the spots where Vincent van Gogh had stood to paint, his attempts are frustrated by poor weather, which keeps him from bringing his guide-book on his expeditions. As a result, when he searches for the "real" spots where van Gogh stood, Tom is forced "to make a dozen trips back to his hotel to verify the scenes" (124). This adjacent pair of episodes is emblematic of the despair that underwrites Tom's self-invention. In the face of freedom he repeatedly turns toward external sources of verification: "Is this authentic?" his hesitancies seem to beg.

Therefore, while social markers figure into Tom's calculus, the desire for those markers is nonetheless a symptom of his existential crisis, an oscillation between freedom and inauthentic self-invention. Highsmith's ironic framing of Tom's freedom recalls the paradox that Kierkegaard diagnoses: having achieved the transformation into a self-that-one-is-not suggests, for Kierkegaard, that one's self has in turn become merely a set of externals. Much like Kierkegaard's paradox, Tom is displaced within endless performativity—an eternal loop of becoming some other self—and thus he suffers a deprivation of personality rather than its authentic expression. Indeed, Tom's version of self-invention amounts to a loss of self, as if the only alternative to one persona were another mask. For example, after becoming reconciled to the death of the "Dickie Greenleaf" personality, Tom adjusts to "his dreary role as Thomas Ripley" (Highsmith 2008, 183). That Tom describes his return to "Thomas Ripley" as a "role" suggests the extent to which self-invention distances him from the identity that he seemingly desires. By wanting to become someone else, Tom fails to become a self at all. His desire for the flaneur lifestyle is therefore not a function of his class consciousness, but instead his persistent dread signals a refusal to assume the burden of a free self. The irony underlying Tom's character suggests that the evaluative center of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is not the murder of Dickie Greenleaf or its socioeconomic implications, but rather Tom's inauthenticity and the dread he experiences as the fact of freedom confronts him.

The narrative emphasis on the vicissitudes of Tom's existential psyche also disrupts the historicizing tendencies that naturalism and even Jamesian psychological realism require for explorations of American ideas of class and gender. The seemingly compulsive aggregation of biographical data in the naturalist style is, as Jennifer Fleissner (2004) suggests, symptomatic of the "historical time" that orients this tradition of fiction. In contrast, as Harrison (1997, 20) says, the omissions in Tom's biography frustrate the "material analysis of character," leaving him historically adrift and undefined. Ripley is a person lacking a personality, and his story proceeds through successive impersonations, not biographical aggregations. Indeed, performativity trumps the hand-to-mouth conditions that Tom leaves behind in the United States, and even his failure to graduate high school (among the few facts we are given) does not inhibit him from the cultural capital generally associated with the elite classes: discerning tastes for high

art, the ability to read André Malraux in French, a thorough under-standing of European history and geography. Rather than being bound to a rung on the ladder of social mobility, he is able to scale its length at will. Thus, while Tom cannot determine the choices before him, High-smith nonetheless presents Ripley as the potential arbiter of his self. As Sartre (1953, 607) puts this existentialist sensibility, "Whatever our being may be, it is a choice." Tom's will freely determines his self, despite the fact that everywhere his freedom is constrained by "*people*," as he exasperatedly laments (Highsmith 2008, 172).

The crises confronting Tom's self, much like the conflicts besetting Guy Haines's psyche, suggest how political and socioeconomic condi-tions had become insufficient explanatory templates for the complexi-ties of a world more widely aware of the psychological phenomena surging throughout the tics, dreams, and desires of everyday life. Americanized existentialism, the normalization of psychotherapy, the intellectual legitimacy of psychoanalysis, a burgeoning television industry, and shifting literary tastes all contributed to the heteroge-neous intellectual fabric of postwar America. None of these threads dominated the rich texture of the moment, and certainly no single author or intellectual presided over its warp and weft. Nonetheless, this heterogeneous fabric challenged the cultural assumptions and social thinking about structural conditions underpinning New Deal progressivism, particularly as the circulation of psychological tem-plates for everyday life began to reframe how Americans understood the conditions of possibility for their everyday lives. With the rise of a science of subjectivity and the popularization of psychotherapy, the idea of structural political intervention became subordinate to the terms of an internal existential arena.

One political manifestation of this intellectual shift toward psycho-logical explanatory templates was a 1965 report by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan, titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." The Moynihan report attempted to account for the roots of poverty among African Americans at mid-century. Conducted by the US Department of Labor, the report concludes that psycholo-gized social conditions—rather than structural ones, such as a pau-city of jobs—explain the levels of poverty in black communities. The Moynihan report especially attributes blame to a "tangle of pathology," the center of which is the "weak family structure" among the "Negro" (US Department of Labor 1965). Slavery and decades of Jim Crow laws

precipitated the deterioration of the nuclear family among black Americans, the Moynihan report asserts, and the "tangle of pathology" is now self-replicating. The report thus presents socioeconomic circumstances within the terms of normative psychology: the supposed "weak family structure" of black communities becomes a form of pathology, a psychosocial phenomenon that reproduces itself within individual psyches rather than material or structural arrangements. The report even invokes the "tangle of pathology" among black Americans to explain the increased need for welfare programs. The report maintains that "the steady expansion of [the Aid to Dependent Children] welfare program, as of public assistance programs in general, can be taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States." The expansion of compensatory welfare—that is, one divorced from a regulatory interventionism—measures a psychosocial phenomenon rather than, for example, systemic economic disparities. The significance of the Moynihan report, then, is that it signals the institutionalization of psychological accounts for political and socioeconomic circumstances.

Beyond helping to circulate existential and psychological explanatory templates, postwar writers also questioned the social philosophy of New Deal liberalism on different grounds. For example, Sean McCann (2000) follows the rise and fall of New Deal liberalism through the "hard-boiled" crime fiction that thrived from the 1930s until the 1960s. For McCann, authors such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Chester Himes revise the classic detective story of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. The twentieth-century evolution of crime fiction "became a symbolic theater where the dilemmas of New Deal liberalism could be staged" (5). According to McCann, the conventional detective story functions as a "parable" of classical liberal political theory, in which evil can be abolished and the integrity of an imagined community restored through the governing order of law and rational self-interest. As one permutation of this political tradition, the New Deal welfare state attempted to ensure public well-being through federal regulatory power. The vicissitudes of economic crisis are, according to McCann's gloss on New Deal liberals, an anomaly that can be avoided by ferreting out errors and through reasonable intervention. Yet hard-boiled crime fiction charts the rise and fall of Roosevelt's interventionist liberalism by offering increasingly dissonant images of the public arena. For example, McCann explains that

Chandler's crime novels, such as *The Long Goodbye* (1953), are underwritten by nostalgia for a "fraternally unified culture" that has "fall[en] victim to a society robbed of its cultural integrity and falsely joined by the market, mass media, and bureaucratic government" (193). While the social philosophy of New Deal liberalism depended on the notion of an integrated public that manifested in a consensus culture, Chandler's fiction documents the impossibility of such unity during the postwar moment. Suburbanization, mass consumerism, and a bureaucratic state had, for Chandler, undermined the fraternity that formed the basis for a liberal society by serving as empty surrogates for authentic community.

The sensibilities about individual existential crisis underwriting Highsmith's fiction from the 1950s, in contrast to Chandler's nostalgia, amount to a fervent rejection of an integrated, liberal view of the public arena. Through Highsmith's framing of the isolation and free choice that persistently confronts the individual, the progressive liberal view of a society based on fraternity and shared responsibility becomes intellectually and experientially dubious. Could society really be an integrated body capable of collective welfare if alienation is such a pervasive diagnosis? And why does an individual's psyche seem to explain the manifestations of that anxiety in more compelling ways than impersonal accounts of socioeconomic analysis? Highsmith poses such a dialogue with the social thinking underpinning an interventionist welfare state, yet that is not to say that her fiction is analogous to the "paperback noirs" that signal, as McCann argues, a turn toward the individualistic values of the Eisenhower era. The individual in Highsmith's work is fraught, embattled, and obsessed with its own self-contradictions. However, the very terms of that embattled selfhood nonetheless affirm and depend on the categories of authenticity and free choice. Rather than promoting rugged individualism, then, Highsmith investigates the felt crises of an anxious, ambivalent, and isolated age. Positioning her novels within the intellectual tumult of the 1950s, Highsmith offers something like a Pyrrhic victory over the sensibilities of postwar liberalism: she not only diagnoses the vexed burden of choice that confronts the individual, but she also insists that the darker possibilities of the self cast a long shadow over that burden.

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