As Adam J. Sorkin observes, differences among critical commentaries on Joseph Heller’s *Something Happened* (1974) have revolved around the “issue of the novel’s emphasis on the pathology of personality versus the interpretation of external actuality” (36). Is Heller’s second novel—a 569-page interior monologue rendered from the point of view of rising advertising executive Bob Slocum—primarily a psychological study of one individual’s tortured psyche, concerned, as Richard Hauer Costa suggests, “with the forces in man which cause him to be terrified of himself” (160)? Or, given that the corporation for which Slocum works is, as Evan Carton puts it, “a synecdoche for America” (49), is *Something Happened* primarily a sociological study of the cultural forces responsible for individual pathology? This chapter will attempt to show that the critical focus on this distinction misses the novel’s analysis of a subtler phenomenon that obviates this debate: the protagonist’s flight from existential inwardness, a psychological/ideological project the fulfillment of which collapses the boundary between the individual and the socius by merging the depersonalized/depersonalizing desire of both.

While *Something Happened* maps the psychological subsumption of the individual by the corporation for which he works, this process is not an example of corporate or national colonization of individual consciousness in which the protagonist is an unwilling or unaware victim. Nor is it, as Susan Strehle’s oft-quoted Sartrean reading of the novel suggests, an existential critique of the bad faith required to accomplish the protagonist’s capitulation to corporate interiority. Rather, Heller’s novel examines one of the most efficient means available in contemporary American culture—corporate commodity psychology—for the
individual’s flight from existential inwardness, a flight whose self-aware and deliberate nature places it beyond the victim model of the relationship between the individual and the socius that informs most historically situated readings of this novel and beyond the existential problematic that informs the works analyzed in the preceding chapters.

Having succeeded, by the novel’s opening, in climbing the American dream’s socioeconomic ladder by commodifying his personal image according to corporate standards, Heller’s protagonist uses a corporate economy as his template to commodify, and thereby try to escape, his own existential interiority. As we shall see, a consciousness commodified on the corporate model achieves the American dream—and accomplishes its flight from existential inwardness—by reducing psychological experience to the kinds of abstract relations that obtain among commodities in late capitalist culture: pleasure is reduced to sign-exchange value, to the fetishization of the signifier; nostalgia is reduced to memory commodified, in which the other becomes an abstraction incapable of impinging on one’s subjectivity; sex is reduced to sign-exchange value as well, and to the masturbatory insulation it thus provides; and love is reduced to a vulnerability to existential contingency, a vulnerability that creates the kind of interiority the project was formed to eliminate. This is an inwardness that, like its corporate template, merely duplicates and coordinates external conditions, an inwardness constituted by absence: absence of pleasure, absence of relatedness, absence of the kind of desire associated with emotion, with affect. This is the postmodern inwardness that Jean Baudrillard compares to “the control screen and terminal . . . endowed with . . . the capability of regulating everything from a distance” (“Ecstasy” 128). And this is the inwardness that, at the novel’s end, Slocum finally succeeds in acquiring.

As the novel opens, Slocum’s ability to commodify his image in the corporate style is evident in every aspect of his social behavior. In contrast to Willy Loman, this salesman of self-image does everything right. He dresses exactly right for every occasion; he takes up the “right” sport (golf), although he doesn’t enjoy it; he goes to the “right” dinner parties and invites the “right” people to his dinner parties; he expresses the “right” opinions; he sleeps with prostitutes, although he doesn’t want to, when the “right” person in the company invites him to do so; et cetera ad nauseum. Slocum knows that the work he accomplishes is of
peripheral importance, if any, because the company's product continues to sell and the company continues to grow without apparent effort on anyone's part. That the company and its product are never named underscores the novel's focus on the psychology of hierarchical corporate structure rather than on the psychology of industrial production. As the protagonist is well aware, the company's success, like his own, is based upon its accumulation of the signs of success: costly, tastefully decorated offices; well-dressed, well-paid, sophisticated employees; luxurious convention sites. Indeed, Andy Kagle, longtime head of the Sales Department, finally loses his job to Slocum largely because the protagonist's dress and manners are more refined, more in keeping with the image of sophisticated success the company wants to promote.

Slocum's perfectly constructed exterior—calm, cool, rational, in total command of himself and of his immediate environment—covers, however, an interior that is besieged by every conceivable fear and barely in control of itself or of anything else. Slocum lives in terror of aging, death, illness, and accidents, both for himself and for his family, and he obsessively imagines an endless variety of catastrophes that could occur. He is afraid that his wife might commit adultery, that he might become sexually impotent, that his son might grow up to be homosexual, that his young daughter might become pregnant. He fears the dark. He fears handicapped people and authority figures. In short, he is afraid that something might happen "for which [he] could not have prepared [him]self" (6; ch. 1). The novel's intensely disturbing quality is due largely to the hellish, tortured images that constitute much of Slocum's inner world: "Things stir, roll over slowly in my mind like black eels, and drop from consciousness into inky depths. Smirking faces go about their nasty deeds and pleasures surreptitiously without confiding in me. Victims weep. No one dies. There is noiseless wailing" (398–99; ch. 6).

His fears are exacerbated by his lack of a unified or consistent ground of self-reference: Slocum feels he consists of many different "selves," some of whom he doesn't even know. He can't experience himself as a coherent and cohesive whole because his desire to be the perfect corporate commodity requires that he show each "buyer" a marketable surface. Because the only value a commodity has is that assigned to it by a purchaser, Slocum "packages" himself with false fronts in order to produce what he believes is the most desirable effect for each situation. These masquerades occur as much at home as at work, and they reveal Slocum's desire to be accepted by others without be-
coming emotionally engaged. Afraid of rejection and unwilling to risk pain, he pretends to have the feelings he thinks others desire. Because he behaves in this way with everyone and at all times, he doesn’t know when to stop: he repeatedly finds himself imitating the speech, posture, and gestures of the person with whom he is speaking. It is no surprise, therefore, that Slocum lacks a sense of self: “I often wonder what my own true nature is. . . . The problem is that I don’t know who or what I really am” (73–74; ch. 3). This feeling of self-alienation is reflected in his experiences of disconnectedness from his own body and his own behavior that occur, for example, when he “float[s] away” from conversations in which he is engaged “and begin[s] to feel [he is] looking down upon a . . . show of stuffed dolls in which someone I recognize who vaguely resembles me is one of the performers” (506; ch. 7).

Such loss-of-self experiences bespeak a fundamental confusion of Slocum’s inner and outer worlds. He sees himself through the eyes of so many others that a privileged “inside,” or private, perspective is lost, reduced to the fears and hostilities he is continually working to hide. Indeed, he is afraid that someday he “will blend [his] inner world with [his] outer world and be disoriented in both” because he has “trouble enough deciding which is which now and which one is the true one” (246; ch. 5). We can see inner and outer worlds merge in much of Slocum’s language: he often uses metaphors of the workplace, the outer world, to describe his thoughts and feelings, his inner world, as, for example, when he speaks of people he has rejected as “dead records in [his] filing system” (104; ch. 3) or describes his relationship with his wife in terms of emotional profit and loss.

While the contrast between the exterior surface the protagonist presents to the world and his interior experience of himself may, at first, seem shockingly incongruous, these two aspects of his personality are, in fact, logically compatible: they mirror the conditions of production in his company. As an entity, the company shows a confident, placid exterior to the public, but internally, at the level Slocum occupies in the corporate hierarchy before his promotion at the novel’s close, fear is the oil that lubricates operations:

In the office in which I work there are five people of whom I am afraid. Each of these five people is afraid of four people (excluding overlaps), for a total of twenty, and each of these twenty people is afraid of six people, making a total of one hundred and twenty people who are feared by at least one person. Each of these one hundred and twenty
people is afraid of the other one hundred and nineteen, and all of these one hundred and forty-five people are afraid of the twelve men at the top who helped found and build the company and now own and direct it. (13; ch. 2)

The only way the minor executives feel safe is if everyone below them is literally their inferior. As Green puts it, “I don’t want whistlers working for me. I want drunkards, ulcers, migraines, and high blood pressure. I want people who are afraid... God dammit, I want the people working for me to be worse off than I am, not better,” (414; ch. 6). Thus, the company’s signs of placid refinement are empty: like Slocum, its confident, calm exterior is constituted by signs that belie its fear-ridden interior.

Although Slocum’s fears attach to many different objects—personal, familial, occupational—they have but one source: all of his frightening fantasies result from his commodity psychology, from his adoption of a corporate economy for use in the psychological domain. It’s not a question of the corporation causing any given event or problem in the protagonist’s life, but of corporate logic—the valorization of extreme competitiveness, paranoia, and sign-exchange value—informing Slocum’s very way of being in the world. He relates to himself and to his family with the same fear and loathing he experiences with his coworkers, and he knows it, as we can see in the following passage in which he sardonically describes his family in the same language he used to describe his coworkers: “In the family in which I live there are four people of whom I am afraid. Three of these four people are afraid of me, and each of these three is also afraid of the other two. Only one member of the family is not afraid of any of the others, and that one is an idiot [Slocum’s brain-damaged child]” (355; ch. 5).

Suspicious that his family conspires against him, Slocum is always jockeying for position, for control: “She [his wife] wants me to tell her I love her. I won’t... This is one advantage I have over her that I’m still able to hang on to” (520; ch. 7). He doesn’t even trust himself outside the constraints imposed by an exterior authority:

I wonder what kind of person would come out if I ever did erase all my inhibitions at once, what kind of being is bottled up inside me now. Would I like him? I think not... Deep down inside, I might really be great. Deep down inside, I think not. I hope I never live to see the real me come out. He might say and do things that would embarrass me and plunge him into serious trouble. (248; ch. 5)
This passage reveals the anxiety that is the source of all his fears: anxiety that he cannot fit the mold his company has produced for rising executives, anxiety that he is not internally constituted for corporate success, anxiety about his own interiority. This is the inwardness Slocum feels he must vanquish. All the objects of his fear—the day-to-day events in his personal, familial, and professional life—are really Heideggerian displacements: because he is tortured by anxiety about his very being, he displaces it into fear of every possible object in his environment.2

Despite the Lukácsian nightmare that Slocum’s adoption of corporate economy has made of his psyche, he has no desire to adopt a different template for human relations. In fact, the protagonist feels more at home at the office than he does with his family: at work the rules are official, the boss’s authority is final, and everybody plays the game the same way. Of course, the game is not enjoyable; it’s a torturous struggle for an uncertain and transient hegemony. But he prefers the game to the risks of personal engagement he would face if there were no masks or role playing. And if he plays it well enough, he might be promoted—he would like to become the head of an important department—and moving up the corporate ladder means everything to him. If he could just climb high enough to achieve the pinnacle of the American dream, like Arthur Baron and Horace White, Slocum believes that he would be beyond the internal struggles that make up the company at the lower levels of operations and that make up his own identity as well. He wants to constitute his interiority according to the model on which the company is constituted, but he wants to do so at the highest executive level possible, the level at which, he believes, the placid exterior the company shows to the world also constitutes its internal operations. Slocum wants to be like the men at the top: “They seem friendly, slow, and content when I come upon them in the halls (they seem dead)” (13; ch. 2). “They seem dead.” Although this statement may appear to be a critique of the corporate heads, it actually reveals the secret and primary attraction of the corporate upper echelon. Slocum’s desire is to be dead inside, to feel nothing, to be safe. If the corporate leaders represent, as James M. Mellard suggests, the Lacanian Symbolic order (146), then it is a Symbolic order grounded in accidie, for the object-object relations that are the emergent value in The Great Gatsby are the dominant value here.

Although Slocum’s awareness of the utter contingency of life gives
him the inwardsness, and the existential opportunity, of Sartre’s Roquentin, in *Something Happened* the existential project of *Nausea* is turned on its head. Roquentin’s realization that all existence is tenuous and can change radically at any moment—and that the ultimate contingency is death—creates his existential engagement with life. For it is life’s lack of any guarantee, and the spotlight this condition puts on issues of being, that make an existential attitude toward life possible. Given that existence is not grounded in some underlying, unchanging, timeless principle, what should I do with my life? This is the fundamental existential question and the fundamental existential opportunity because it puts all issues of being and action, of metaphysics and politics, in one and the same place: in one’s own hands. Thus, an awareness of contingency is, for Roquentin, the source of the possibility of existential growth, an occasion for the assumption of personal responsibility for his being and actions.

In contrast, Slocum’s awareness that life is utterly contingent, his “dread of everything unknown that may occur” (8; ch. 1), results in his obsessive desire to flee that awareness entirely. And given that the ultimate existential contingency is death, it should not be surprising that Slocum’s flight into psychological death is also related to his fear of biological death.

I think about death.

I think about it all the time. I dwell on it. I dread it. . . . I dream about death and weave ornate fantasies about death endlessly and ironically. (And I find—God help me—that I still do want to make that three-minute speech. I really do yearn to be promoted to Kagle’s job. Last night in bed, I stopped dwelling on death for a while and began formulating plans for either of the two speeches I might be asked to make. . . . ) (343; ch. 5)

As this passage illustrates, long before Slocum achieves the accidie that characterizes his interiority at the novel’s close, he uses his desire for advancement—his desire to achieve the American dream—and his obsession with the small victories and failures that make up his daily routine at the office to escape an awareness of his own mortality. Because, as we have seen, his desire for advancement is linked to his desire to be emotionally dead, this character presents us with a fascinating irony: in order to deny death, he seeks death-in-life.

It is not that the possibility of the existential project is overcome by Slocum’s fear of failure; rather, according to the corporate values by
which he lives, the *success* of the existential project would constitute failure. To remain existentially engaged in the contingency of being means that one has not achieved the "correct" subjectivity. Discontent can't become the occasion of a revelation and the opportunity for growth; it can only be a sign that one hasn't "fit in" the way one should. Thus, Slocum's terror of the gaze of the other—his awareness that one is continually evaluated by others—is not, as it is for Sartre, anxiety about having his inwardness, his self-representation, appropriated by others. Slocum *wants* his inwardness appropriated by the other—the corporate Other. The protagonist's attempts to escape his inwardness by commodifying it, by emptying his consciousness until it becomes merely an exterior constituted by the commodifying gaze of the corporate Other, are manifest in his lack of pleasure in the world, his sexuality, and his role in and reaction to the death of his older son.

Slocum's lack of pleasure in the world is evident in the "nothing's-any-good-anymore" refrain to which his interior monologue frequently reverts. Sex, food, and consumer products are not what they used to be, he tells us, and he doesn't even enjoy that avatar of the American dream, his home:

> All of us live now—we are very well off—in luxury ... in a gorgeous two-story wood colonial house with white shutters on a choice country acre in Connecticut off a winding, picturesque asphalt road called Peapod Lane—and I hate it. There are rose bushes, zinnias, and chrysanthemums rooted all about, and I hate them too. I have sycamores and chestnut trees in my glade and my glen, and pots of glue in my garage. I have an electric drill with sixteen attachments I never use. Grass grows under my feet in back and in front and flowers come into bloom when they're supposed to. (Spring in our countryside smells of insect spray and horseshit.) (359; ch. 6)

Slocum doesn't hate his home because he would prefer to be somewhere else; he hates it for the same reason he hates everything. His dissatisfaction with the world is, rather obviously, a displacement of his dissatisfaction with himself. For example, when humiliated by his boss, Jack Green, Slocum thinks, "I'd like to shoot him in the head. I wish I could make a face at him and stick my tongue out. (I wish I could have a hot sweet potato again or a good ear of corn.)" (417; ch. 6). The protagonist wishes he could do something about Green, wishes he could be a "tough guy" with a gun or even a tough little boy making faces. Unable,
however, to effect any change in his immediate environment, he beats a hasty retreat from confrontation and humiliation by shifting the focus of his displeasure to the problems of the larger world where, as Slocum likes to remind himself throughout the novel, nothing is as good as it used to be and nothing can be done about it. This maneuver allows him to avoid responsibility for doing something about his relationship with Green and to avoid the feeling of failure that would be engendered by an unsuccessful attempt to ameliorate his situation.

There is, however, another, more important reason behind the "nothing's-any-good-anymore" refrain: he finds no pleasure in the world because he has reduced pleasure to sign-exchange value. His acquisition of objects and annexation of accomplishments solely for the prestige they confer have made pleasure an abstraction. Thus Slocum, in a single breath, reduces his expected promotion and his sex life—both present and past—to the element they have in common, which is the only content he wants them to have: sign-exchange value.

Who cares if I get Kagle's job or not? Or if I do get into young Jane in the Art Department's pants before Christmas or that I was never able to graduate myself into laying older-girl Virginia on the desk in the store-room of the automobile casualty insurance company . . . ?

I care. I want the money. I want the prestige. I want the acclaim, the congratulations. And Kagle will care. And Green will care, and Johnny Brown will care. . . . But will it matter, will it make a difference? No. Do I want it? Yes. (136; ch. 4)

The protagonist doesn't enjoy the object or the activity because he doesn't really interact with or participate in it: his eye is always on the status, on the abstraction. As Jean Baudrillard explains in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, "It is not the passion (whether of objects or subjects) for substances that speaks in fetishism [the cathexis of pleasure in an object or activity], it is the passion for the code which, by governing both objects and subjects, and by subordinating them to itself, delivers them up to abstract manipulation" (92). That is, what we really fetishize is not the object (not its use value, not the signified) but the signifier. Thus, "fetishism is not the sanctification of a certain object or value. . . . It is the sanctification of the system as such, of the commodity as system: it is thus contemporaneous with the generalization of exchange value and is propagated with it" (92). And if fetishism, or the sanctification of commodification, "is always invading new territories, further and further removed from the domain of economic exchange
value strictly understood”—that is, if it is invading areas such as sexuality and recreation—"this is not owing to an obsession with pleasure, or a substantial desire for pleasure or free time, but to a progressive . . . systemization of these sectors” (92).

Baudrillard’s observations help us understand why Slocum’s ever-increasing activities—professional and recreational—and accumulation of goods are inversely proportional to his pleasure in them, why he intones the perpetual refrain, “I don’t enjoy anything anymore” (325; ch. 5): he is annexing a code, a sign system, an abstraction that removes him emotionally from the objects he acquires and the activities he performs, and that collapses the private and public sectors, the personal and professional domains of his life, into a single, flat dimension governed by status, by the code, by the signifier.

Although it may seem that emotional distance is the price Slocum pays for status, it is actually part of the payoff, part of the incentive to commodify himself and others. For this character wants, at all costs, to be safe from feeling. It is here that Heller can help us extend Baudrillard’s theory. For Baudrillard, the sanctification and generalization of exchange value and sign-exchange value is progressive: the problem is self-perpetuating. Heller shows us one of the reasons why this is so: commodification provides a sense of emotional safety, of psychological insulation. Thus, for Heller, Slocum finds no pleasure in the world because he doesn’t want to. Lack of pleasure in the world keeps him from desiring anything and keeps him protected. His wish to desire nothing is well served by the conclusion that there is nothing worth desiring, that “there is nothing new and good under the sun” (372; ch. 6):

Smut and weaponry are two areas in which we’ve improved. Everything else has gotten worse. The world is winding down. You can’t get good bread anymore even in good restaurants . . . and there are fewer good restaurants. Melons don’t ripen, grapes are sour. They dump sugar into chocolate candy bars because sugar is cheaper than milk. Butter tastes like the printed paper it’s wrapped in. Whipped cream comes in aerosol bombs and isn’t whipped and isn’t cream. People serve it, people eat it. Two hundred and fifty million educated Americans will go to their graves and never know the difference . . . . That’s what Paradise is—never knowing the difference. (483; ch. 6)

“Paradise is . . . never knowing the difference” because, if one never knows the difference, one never wants other than what one has.

That Slocum is willing to forgo pleasure in order to avoid pain is fur-
ther evidenced by his low tolerance for anything painful or even unpleasant. He has a strong aversion to hospitals, sick people, and funerals and avoids all three; he avoids talking with his wife about her problems, just as he avoids talking to Martha, the typist in his office who is slowly going crazy, just as he pretended not to notice when his mother had a stroke. He leaves town when his family is looking for a new nurse for his severely retarded son, Derek, or when the family is moving to a new house. And he avoids his daughter’s problems by avoiding any real contact with her:

When she tells me she wishes she were dead, I tell her she will be, sooner or later . . . . When she told me, in tones of solemn importance, that she hoped to have a lover before she was eighteen and would want to live with him for several years even though she is never going to get married, I nodded approvingly and wisecracked I hoped she’d find one . . . . And when she came to me, even that first time, to say she wasn’t happy, I told her that I wasn’t either and that nobody ought to expect to be. By now, she is able to anticipate many of my sardonic retorts and can mimic my words before I say them. (132; ch. 4)

Unlike Harry in Faulkner’s *Wild Palms*, who decides, “Between grief and nothing, I will take grief” (324; ch. 7), Slocum is willing to feel nothing at all in order to avoid feeling pain. When a friend dies, his sadness is always accompanied by “a marked undercurrent of relief, a release, a secret, unabashed sigh of ‘Well, at least that’s over with now, isn’t it?’” (187; ch. 4). His lack of feeling for his wife was, he believes, one of the reasons he might have married her (195; ch. 4) because the last thing he wants is to be emotionally involved with the people he lives with:

I keep my mouth shut and my sentiments suppressed, and I adamantly refuse to merge my feelings with hers. (I won’t share my sorrows. I don’t want her to have a part in them. They’re all mine.) I wish I had no dependents. It does not make me feel important to know that people are dependent on me for many things. It’s such a steady burden, and my resentment is larger each time I have to wait for her to stop crying and clinging to me and resume placing the silverware in the dishwasher or doing her isometric hip and thigh exercises. (I can’t stand a woman who cries at anything but funerals. I feel used.) (450; ch. 6)

The only pleasure Slocum freely allows himself is nostalgia, and even here the primary attraction is the emotional safety nostalgia offers. The protagonist likes to recall the desire he had as a youth of seventeen
for Virginia Markowitz, a young woman of twenty-one who worked in his office before he was drafted into the army. But he was glad to learn, on his return from the service, that she was dead, because it saved him the risk of taking her to bed, which his army uniform and his experience of the world finally made him feel he was capable of doing. And he is glad now that she is no longer alive because, he says, she would still be four years older than he and no longer attractive: “I think I am still in love with her (and glad she is dead, because otherwise I might not be, and then I would have no one)” (476; ch. 6). Slocum’s tone here reflects his feelings at this moment: a combination of sarcastic self-awareness and loneliness. He is sardonically aware that he doesn’t really want to have Virginia in any concrete way; he “wants” her only in fantasy. Nevertheless, this state of affairs is a lonely one. Of course, his real reason for being glad Virginia is dead is that it frees him from the possibility of emotional involvement he would have faced had she been alive. Love, then, is experienced as extreme vulnerability to contingency. In this context, nostalgia becomes the only safe way to experience love. As memory commodified, nostalgia turns the other into the perfect object: an abstraction molded to fit one’s needs without making one vulnerable to another’s subjectivity.

Slocum’s sexuality is another revealing index of his flight from existential inwardness through corporate commodity psychology. As we saw in chapter 3, through one’s sexuality one enacts one’s conscious and unconscious motives and attitudes toward oneself and others. In *Something Happened*, Heller presents sexuality primarily as missed opportunities nostalgically remembered or compulsively pursued. In both instances, sexuality is commodified: sexual encounters/partners become acquisitions that embody two related desires—the desire for status and the desire for emotional insulation. Slocum’s sexuality underscores his investment in both these desires. Although the protagonist has frequent sexual relations, he doesn’t “get that hot anymore” (385; ch. 6). Drive–discharge, born of the need to vent the frustrations of modern living, has become, he tells us, his reason for having sex: “Apathy, boredom, restlessness, free-floating, amorphous frustration, leisure, discontent at home or at my job—these are my aphrodisiacs now” (385; ch. 6). However, if physical release were his sole motive for sexual relations, as John Aldridge believes (39), why does he need to have them so frequently and with so many different partners, especially given that he
experiences only “sluggish, processed lust,” which he has “to make a laborious effort to enjoy” (313; ch. 5)? The reason is that in sex, as in every other area of his life, Slocum seeks “safety and invisibility” (227; ch. 5), and through misogyny and the reduction of sexual pleasure to sign-exchange value, he achieves it.

Like Giraudoux’s Paris in La guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu, Slocum likes to “faire l’amour à distance” (32), make love at a distance. However, while Paris values emotional distance in his partner—it is Hélène’s aloofness that excites him, not his own—Slocum values emotional distance in himself, not because he finds it stimulating, but because he finds it safe. Although sex can sometimes be physically exciting, he keeps it utterly impersonal: “I do not think of it as doing something together and don’t believe anyone else really does, either” (443; ch. 6). He avoids the possibility of closeness with a woman by having many lovers and by not spending time with any one of them: “I don’t want to see any of them frequently and can’t bear being with them long. They want to talk afterward, get close, and I want to sleep or go home. (I like to date working girls for lunch in Red Parker’s apartment because I know they’ll have to leave shortly to get back to their jobs.)” (363; ch. 6). And if he is strongly attracted to a woman, he avoids getting involved with her at all, as he avoids his coworker, the “slim, smiling, tall, supple, very young Jane, a kid, my refreshing new temptation in the Art Department. . . . I move closest to Jane when there is no chance of moving closer; I never joke with her about meeting after work unless I know it’s impossible” (362–63; ch. 6).

Of course, an effective way to keep sex impersonal is to treat women like objects. Therefore, Slocum likes to think of Jane as “a present I intend to give myself for Christmas this year” (154; ch. 4) and to depersonalize his lovers by thinking of them collectively, as “all [his] Pattys and Judys, Karens, Cathys, and Pennys” (362; ch. 6). As objects, their function is to please him: “Most of my girls have been very good to me” (362; ch. 6). Their function does not involve their having needs and feelings of their own: “I liked it better when they thought they were doing us a favor. I’m sorry they ever found out they could have orgasms too” (424; ch. 6). When a woman ceases to be an object for Slocum—when she expresses desires of her own—he evades the encounter by experiencing profound disgust: “That octopus of aversion had been there in bed with me and my wife again this morning when she awoke me with languorous mumbles and by snuggling close, that meaty, viscous,
muscular, vascular barrier of sexual repugnance that rises at times (when she takes the initiative. It may be that I prefer to do the wanting)" (470; ch. 6). As this passage suggests, a feeling of Sartrean nausea characterizes Slocum’s fundamental relationship to his wife’s desire because her desire is beyond his control. Like Roquentin’s epiphany before the gnarled roots of the old tree, it plunges him into the world of contingency he is continually laboring to escape. At these times, it serves his purposes well to be repelled by women’s sexual organs: “They’ve got nothing there but something missing. I think filthy” (383; ch. 6).

Slocum usually treats women as objects by sadistically exploiting their personal weaknesses: “I feed on submissive feminine loneliness like a vulpine predator. I’m drawn by the scent” (366; ch. 6). Sexual aggression is not his “means of asserting his essential self-worth” (129), as Joan DelFattore suggests in her interesting analysis of Slocum’s dream world, but his means of achieving the sense of mastery—and distance—he wants: “Generally speaking, I prefer to make them do all the doing and giving; that way I feel I have done something to them: I’ve gotten away with something” (366; ch. 6). For this reason, he also likes to force his wife to have sex with him against her desire, if not her will: “I like to fuck my wife when she’s not in the mood. I like to make her do it when she doesn’t want to” (399; ch. 6).

When he does give a woman pleasure, his motive remains selfish and sadistic; his desire is to feel important and in control, to see his partner at what he considers a disadvantage, and thereby to feel removed from her:

Were it not for the element of status, I really would rather not give orgasms... and there’s even an element of sadistic cruelty in [my giving them]. Some of them change so grotesquely. They ought to be ashamed. There really is something disillusioning and degenerate, something alarming and obscene, in the gaudy, uncovered, involuntary way they contort. It’s difficult not to think lots less of them for a while afterward, sometimes twenty years. (365; ch. 6)

Slocum’s misogyny is his way of keeping himself insulated and safe from the emotional connection he might otherwise feel for women with whom he is sexually involved. Because he is closest to his wife, he is in most danger with her of feeling emotionally connected. For this reason, he sets up the rules of the game to preclude the possibility of being sexually satisfied with her. He would be dissatisfied no matter how she
looked: "I wish my wife had bigger tits. I wish my wife had smaller tits" (220; ch. 5). And he would be dissatisfied no matter how she performed in bed: "I'm really not sure I want my wife to be as lustful and compliant as one of Kagle's whores or my girl friends, although I know I am dissatisfied with her when she isn't" (125; ch. 3).

Even more effectively than misogyny, however, the reduction of sexual pleasure to sign-exchange value provides Slocum with a barrier against the emotional risks of sexual closeness. In Slocum's company, sexual activity, provided it is handled with a certain amount of savoir faire and discretion, is associated with corporate success. Male employees are expected to be sexually active—including visits to prostitutes—in and outside of marriage; even the top executives and the very old men are careful to allude to their sexual exploits at the company's annual convention. Therefore, Slocum "get[s] laid" on all his business trips because he "feel[s] the country, the company, and society expect [him] to" (435; ch. 6). Of course, social pressure is Slocum's excuse, rather than his reason, for modeling his sexual operations on corporate operations. His desire to "fuck" women (with all the power play and sadistic mastery this phrase connotes) is psychologically in harmony with the company's practice of metaphorically "fucking" everyone it can, because Slocum wants the sense of power and emotional insulation such an attitude provides. Thus, as he puts it, he likes to "preserve the distinction between executive and subordinate, employer and employee, even in bed. (Especially in bed.)" (42; ch. 2). It is not surprising, therefore, that this character often experiences sexual encounters as if he were watching them through the eyes of a third person:

I remember the first time I committed adultery. (It wasn't much good.)

"Now I am committing adultery," I thought.

It was not much different from the first time I laid my wife after we were married:

"Now I am laying my wife," I thought. (508; ch. 6)

Here Heller points to a phenomenology of commodification that can help us expand upon Baudrillard's notion that the pleasure of sign-exchange value is pleasure in abstraction. The mechanical tone of this passage bespeaks the sexlessness and joylessness of the act as Slocum often experiences it. Even when the sign-exchange value of a sexual encounter provides an enjoyable experience, as when he takes his wife to a luxurious hotel, it is a narcissistic pleasure enjoyed in isolation. Like
Trina lying naked among the gold coins covering her bed in Frank Norris's *McTeague* (277; ch. 19), Slocum's sexual encounters with his wife in expensive hotels enact the symbolic identification of sex with money and illustrate the masturbatory insulation provided by sign-exchange value. Like masturbation, pleasure as an abstraction, because it insulates one from emotional contact with the other, is pleasure that is safe. Thus, when Slocum commodifies his sex partners, including his wife, he uses the relationship to deny relatedness.

Despite the striking resemblance between Slocum's behavior and corporate operations, his long-awaited promotion to the head of the Sales Department does not bring with it the perfect, placid corporate inwardness he expected. Slocum's thoughts after his promotion consist of his usual litany of worries and self-doubts:

> When I am fifty-five, I will have nothing more to look forward to than Arthur Baron's job and reaching sixty-five. When I am sixty-five, I will have nothing more to look forward to than reaching seventy-five, or dying before then. And when I am seventy-five, I will have nothing more to look forward to than dying before eighty-five, or geriatric care in a nursing home. I will have to take enemas. (Will I have to be dressed in double-layer, waterproof undershorts designed especially for incontinent gentlemen?) I will be incontinent. (561; ch. 8)

Significantly, it is only with the death of his older son that Slocum finally acquires the placid, passive corporate inwardness he seeks.

In many ways, Slocum's "boy," as he calls him (we never learn his name), can be seen as an uncommodified version of himself. Father and son share the same fears and sensibilities, and Slocum usually intermingles thoughts about his son with thoughts about himself: "When I think of him, I think of me" (160; ch. 4). In fact, his boy's troubles are largely a projection of his own: "He won't take chances he doesn't have to. (Nor will I...) He has never, to my knowledge, been in a fist fight. (I wouldn't get in one now either unless it was clearly a matter of life or death. The apple has not fallen far from the tree.)" (289; ch. 4). However, while Slocum, like his wife and daughter, has commodified himself and his world, this nine-year-old child has not. Slocum's boy freely gives away cookies, candy, and money to other children and lets them play with his brand-new toys. And he does so simply for the joy of giving:
"I was happy" [he tells his father]. . .
"And whenever I feel happy . . . I like to give something away . . . ."
"Why were you happy?"
"Now it gets a little crazy."
"Go ahead. You’re not crazy."
"Because I knew I was going to give it away."
(302; ch. 5)

Slocum is “charmed extremely by his [child’s] peculiar generosity . . . and beguiling good nature” (286; ch. 5). Yet he tries to change his son without even understanding why: “Why did we proscribe and threaten and interrogate? (Why did we feel so affronted?)” (286; ch. 5). The protagonist knows that his official reason for trying to make the boy more selfish—to teach him to respect the value of money—is a lie: the child understands money very well, and the sums involved are always less than a dime. The real reason for Slocum’s difficulty with his son’s generosity is that the boy is a projection of his own ego—which may be why he never refers to his son by name—and he feels personally taken advantage of by his son’s friends: “I never could stand to see him taken advantage of. It was as though I myself were undergoing the helpless humiliation of being tricked, turned into a sucker. My own pride and ego would drip with wounded recognition” (284; ch. 5).

This kind of projection is also why the boy’s presence in the family is so disruptive for Slocum. His son is like a vulnerable part of himself that he can’t entirely control; therefore, as long as the boy lives, the father will be subjected to feelings beyond his control. And as long as there remains this uncommodified part of himself, Slocum cannot achieve the escape from existential inwardness he seeks. The only solution is his son’s death, a solution that is accomplished by Slocum himself: when the child is superficially wounded in a traffic accident, he hugs him to his breast and smothers him.

Although Slocum is panic-stricken and acts without premeditation when he kills his son, the boy’s death is not the kind of genuine accident many critics claim it is: Slocum does not accidentally destroy “what he most wants to save” (LeClair 80). While the protagonist does not plan the act, his commission of it is a function of his desire for his son’s death. Slocum’s obsessive fear throughout the novel that his son will be killed, and his inability to picture the boy beyond the age of nine, reveal that he wishes, if only unconsciously, for the boy’s death. Heller plays with this idea throughout the novel, as when Slocum tells us, “Poor
Oedipus has been much maligned. He didn’t want to kill his father. His father wanted to kill him” (336; ch. 5), or when he muses about his disappointment in his son’s inability to adjust to life’s difficulties as other children do: “Maybe I am disappointed in him. . . . Maybe that’s why he’s scared I want to take him somewhere strange and dangerous and leave him there. Maybe I do” (341; ch. 5). Slocum’s desire for his son’s death is especially significant just before the scene in which the boy dies. Referring to his son’s recent independent behavior he says, “I want my little boy back. . . . I don’t want to lose him. I do” (561; ch. 8). The reader is thus cued, right before this pivotal scene, to consider the protagonist’s desire to be rid of the boy. His first words after he learns that he has smothered the boy contribute to the feeling that there is something deliberate about the act because they reveal the self-protective mode in which he is operating throughout the incident: “Don’t tell my wife” (562; ch. 8). His request is honored: no one but the medical personnel involved ever finds out that Slocum is responsible for his son’s death.

In a sense, the killing of the son is a suicide on the part of the father: he kills the part of himself that refused to be co-opted and commodified. However, Slocum’s act by no means includes the positive achievement implied by Stephen W. Potts’s statement that “Slocum has smothered with his son the phobias that were unbalancing his mind” (44). In fact, all the seemingly positive changes noted in the protagonist as a result of his son’s death—for example, Sorkin’s suggestion that Slocum is thereby “released from tensions and obligations” (48) and Carton’s observation that the boy’s death grants Slocum greater authority, both in his life and in his narration of the novel (44)—are a function of the protagonist’s escape from existential inwardness, an escape that engenders an almost sociopathic lack of feeling for others.

Freed from the burden of emotion, Slocum becomes the perfect corporate image, inside as well as outside: he is calm, in control, and very, very cold-blooded—an excellent corporate strategist in all phases of his life. In order to remedy his home life, he tells his wife that he loves her, buys her a new house and car, and sends her shopping for furniture; he also buys his daughter the car she’d been lobbying for. And he decides to postpone institutionalizing Derek for a few more years and keep him at home instead. He takes things in hand at work by firing or retiring the “dead wood” and by forcing his sales staff to perform the useless paperwork they’d managed to avoid under their former boss.
These changes do not represent the "self-healing" to which Potts refers (44), but the successful repression of the protagonist's emotional vulnerability. He can finally tell his wife he loves her because he is no longer emotionally vulnerable to her; because the admission no longer has any meaning for him, he relinquishes no power in making it. He can get the behavior he wants from his wife and daughter simply by buying it. He no longer feels the need to send Derek away because he is no longer disturbed by the child's condition. And he can eliminate the people at work he used to feel sorry for—or force them into jobs they don't want—because their plight no longer touches him.4

This transformation is underscored by the abrupt change in the language of the narrative in the brief final chapter immediately following the boy's death. This chapter shows us the new Bob Slocum at the office. His monologue now focuses on how well he's doing; his thoughts are about his successful adjustment to his new job and the control he has taken of things at work and at home. There is no more tortured consciousness, no more fears or worries. The novel ends with this brief chapter because the protagonist has no more inwardness to recount; he has put an end to self-reflection, which is the stuff of which the novel is composed. However, that his emotions are successfully repressed by, rather than replaced by, the signifying system is shown by his fleeting "I miss my boy" (568; ch. 9), sandwiched between a description of his improving golf game and Martha the typist's nervous breakdown. Although Slocum can't keep this one emotion from emerging, he is able to quickly shuffle it out of sight beneath his accumulation of career-related concerns.

The point here is that the corporate signifying system is able to insulate him emotionally only when aided by a desire for insulation so strong that it leads him to eliminate the son who has kept him grounded in existential contingency. The parenthetical observations that have continually erupted throughout the narrative no longer consist of flashbacks to his lost youth and flash-forwards to his fears about the future. As we can see in the following passage, parentheses that used to be filled with the overflow of repressed emotions are now filled with the empty sound of moving air from his golf swing:

I meet a much higher class of executive at Arthur Baron’s now when he has us to dinner. I play golf with a much better class of people. (Swish.) I have played golf at Round Hill twice already as a guest of Horace White, once with his undistinguished sister and her husband. She made eyes at
me. (Swish.) I have a hitch in my swing. I have played at Burning Tree in Washington as the guest of a buyer and heard a deputy cabinet official tell me an old joke poorly. I laughed. (Swish.) I laughed rambunctiously. (568; ch. 9)

And these parenthetical “swishes” are celebratory, triggered by Slocum’s realization that he has acquired the place he has longed for in the corporate structure, the place where celebration is fundamentally empty (swish) because emptiness is what is being celebrated.

Perhaps the protagonist’s new ability to handle emotionally charged situations with no emotional engagement is best illustrated by his handling of the office typist’s nervous breakdown, the event that closes the novel. Martha’s problem had been obvious for months, and Slocum had lived in fear of her breaking down at work—what would he do? Now, however, he says,

I took charge like a ballet master.

“Call Medical,” I directed with an authority that was almost musical.

“Call personnel. Get Security. Call Travel and tell them to hire a chauffeured limousine immediately.”

Martha sits in her typist’s chair like an obdurate statue and will not move or speak. She is deaf to entreaty, shakes helping hands off violently, gives signs she might shriek. I wait nearby with an expression of aplomb.

We have a good-sized audience now, and I am the supervisor. Martha rises compliantly, smiling, with a hint of diabolical satisfaction, I see, at the wary attention she has succeeded in extorting from so many people who are solicitous and alarmed.

“Be gentle with her,” I adjure. “She’s a wonderful girl.”

I hear applause when she’s gone for the way I handled it.

No one was embarrassed.

Everyone seems pleased with the way I’ve taken command. (568–69; ch. 9)

Slocum’s tone in this passage, as in the passage just before, bespeaks a consciousness that consists of complacency—complacency in his lack of feelings, in the fact that he can finally number himself among the upper-echelon executives who “seem dead” (13; ch. 2).

As we have seen, an awareness of the contingency of life and death is, for Sartre, the source of the possibility of existential growth, an occasion for the assumption of personal responsibility for one’s being and ac-
tions. Denial of personal responsibility, refusal to undertake the existential project, is, Sartre maintains, the product of bad faith, a kind of self-delusion in which one places the responsibility for one’s behavior outside oneself (*Being and Nothingness* 47–70). The notion of bad faith thus resonates with the Socratic equation of evil with ignorance. Sartre does not account for the possibility that one can, without self-delusion as a crutch, refuse the existential project, that one can, knowingly and without the denial of personal responsibility, opt for death-in-life.

Most readers of *Something Happened* don’t account for this possibility either. John W. Aldridge (40), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (95), and Joseph Epstein (100) don’t believe that the protagonist makes any choice at the novel’s end; for them, Slocum remains essentially unchanged. Potts sees an important change in Slocum in the final chapter, but he perceives it as a necessary—and therefore healthy—adjustment to a Kafka-esque world (44). For Robert Merrill (91-93, 96), Nicholas Canady (106), and Adam Sorkin (51), the novel’s ending portrays a corporate victory in which the protagonist gives up some positive value toward which he was striving.⁵ Although Susan Strehle recognizes that the protagonist’s problems cannot simply be laid at the feet of a deterministic social order, her claim that *Something Happened* is an existential critique of Slocum’s bad faith (107–8) ignores the novel’s resistance to the Sartrean framework she employs. Almost every instance of Slocum’s self-delusion is shattered by a self-reflection, often sardonic, that cuts through the pleasant illusion and shows Slocum to himself, and to us, in no uncertain terms, as we can see in the following passage in which he indulges in a moment of nostalgic fantasy about Virginia:

> What a deal I blew... What good tits I could have been nibbling on all those months, instead of those... sandwiches my mother made for me to take to the city for lunch to save money... I'd lick her lips and large breasts now with my salmon-and-tomato tongue. No, I wouldn't; everything would be the same; if I had her now and I was the one who was older, I would probably be calculating my ass off trying to keep free of her... (362; ch. 6)

As Merrill puts it, “No one is more critical of his behavior, or more perceptive about it, than Slocum himself” (89).

Thus, although the novel begins with the protagonist’s fundamental anxiety about being, which is, according to the existential view, the precursor of either existential engagement or bad faith, Slocum follows nei-
other route. As we have seen, he does not undertake the existential project: he does not become the author of his own authentic existence who makes decisions based on a responsible engagement with a life maximized by the knowledge that it is temporally limited. And of utmost importance in terms of an existentialist reading, neither does he delude himself about his responsibility for the avoidance of such a project. Without the bad faith that would tie the novel to an existential understanding of subjectivity, Slocum chooses the path of nonengagement, of death-in-life. Thus, while he does change at the novel’s close, his change reveals neither a defeat before the overpowering corporation nor a necessary adjustment to a stuiflying corporate reality. Slocum’s change in the final chapter reveals a choice, the achievement of a conscious goal. We may find the choice bankrupt, but to say that it is the result of bad faith is to seek a guarantee the novel does not offer.

If, as Walter Davis suggests, subjectivity corresponds to its historical moment (Inwardness and Existence 44–45), then Something Happened indicates that history has outstripped Being and Nothingness, for Slocum’s interiority is beyond the existential problematic that informs such works as The House of Mirth, The Great Gatsby, Death of a Salesman, and The Crying of Lot 49. While Lily Bart, Jay Gatsby, and Willy Loman attempt to escape existential inwardness, the bad faith they inevitably rely upon to help them, and their failure, finally, to succeed, keep them within the existential problematic. And as we have seen, while the difficulties of Oedipa Maas’s quest for an existential subjectivity put that subjectivity on trial, the very fact of her quest grounds the text in the existential problematic. Heller’s protagonist, however, achieves an inwardness that insulates both himself and the text from the existential problematic, an inwardness that puts him just where Jean Baudrillard places the postmodern subject: “at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his universe of origin” (“Ecstasy” 128). It may be impossible, finally, to eliminate emotion, but Slocum succeeds in eliminating reflection. He has, if I may be permitted the metaphor, put his internal radio dial between stations and replaced the sound of voices with static; the voices may still be there, but he has found a way not to hear them. Thus, while The Crying of Lot 49 reveals the emptiness of the postmodern cultural landscape, Something Happened reveals the emptiness of the postmodern psyche.

If a nondialectical, or linear, notion of causality were ever useful in
explaining human behavior, Something Happened suggests that it cannot be used to understand the postmodern psyche. For in this novel there is not, as many critics imply, some pristine subjectivity prior to the corporation and then contaminated by it. Rather, the individual and the corporation are responsible for each other: Slocum serves the corporation’s desire for socioeconomic hegemony; the corporation serves his desire to escape existential inwardness. And as we have seen, both projects are grounded in an insular depersonalization of self and other that signals the condition of the larger culture in which they are contained: the culture of the American dream. If The Crying of Lot 49 asks whether or not existential subjectivity can still constitute itself once the individual and the socius are dissolved in a symbiotic system of self-emptying signs, then Something Happened does not offer an optimistic response. For Heller’s novel suggests that our capacity to constitute an existential subjectivity becomes a moot point when our deepest desire is to escape it.