Conclusion

Commodity Psychology in American Literature and Culture

The preceding chapters constitute an Althusserian analysis of the American dream as commodity, using a dialectical model of existential subjectivity both to expand Althusser’s concept of the relationship between psychology and ideology, and to reformulate the traditional Americanist notion of the relationship between the individual and the socius. Certainly, I do not wish to argue that commodity psychology is the only manifestation or the “first cause” of our psychological politics—or the only mirror in which it is reflected in the literary works examined. There are many factors involved in the production and expression—including artistic expression—of any cultural phenomenon. And any attempt to isolate a first cause for human behavior, in a literary work or in the world, is, surely, a dubious project. The notion of causality as it applies to the humanities and the social sciences is, I think, best understood as multiple, circular, and evolving, rather than as conforming to some hierarchical or linear order. What I do claim for this study is (1) that I’ve demonstrated Americanists’ need for a model of subjectivity to take us, as Davis’s model does, beyond the social-individual dichotomy in which American literary criticism tends to stall; and (2) that such a model has allowed me to illuminate the ways in which commodity psychology informs the overall design of our cultural fabric, as the works of Wharton, Fitzgerald, Miller, Pynchon, and Heller illustrate.

As we have seen, the protagonists in The House of Mirth, The Great Gatsby, Death of a Salesman, and Something Happened, and the minor characters in The Crying of Lot 49, are all driven by the desire to escape existential inwardness. In each text, this transcendental project informs consciousness and structures behavior. Gatsby’s obsessive pursuit of
Daisy is the result of his desire to cancel his personal history and escape the existential interiority that history presses upon him: if he can possess Daisy—who, for him, embodies the emotional insulation afforded by the world of upper-class wealth—then he will be transformed into the Jay Gatsby he has heretofore only impersonated, the Jay Gatsby whose family really is of traditional, upper-class stock, the Jay Gatsby who really did travel throughout Europe like a "young rajah" (66) and graduate from Oxford, the Jay Gatsby who is immune to historical contingency. Similarly, if Lily Bart can attain a permanent position in the beau monde of the Trenor-Dorset clique (her project in the first part of the novel) or reify herself as Selden's ideal partner in the "republic of the spirit" (her project in the novel's final chapters), then, she believes, she will be beyond the existential inwardness produced by the demands and contingencies of the physical and emotional universe in which she is vulnerable to other human beings. Even Willy Loman—whose material desires seem so small, and reasonable, next to those of a Jay Gatsby or a Lily Bart—shares with these characters the desire to escape existential inwardness: the complex pattern of avoidance and denial that informs the five regressive episodes structuring the play is grounded in Willy's desire to become the image of socioeconomic success he has worshiped his whole life and thereby to escape his awareness of his failure as a salesman and a father.

It is no surprise, really, that Fitzgerald, Wharton, and Miller have their protagonists die at the end of their narratives: given the failure of the transcendent project in each case, there is no other place for them to go—death is the only transcendence left them. Analogously, the minor characters in *The Crying of Lot 49* either lose their minds entirely in order to lose existential inwardness, as in Mucho's case, or spin their wheels in various kinds of obsessive behavior aimed, albeit unsuccessfully, at getting their transcendent projects off the ground. And although Oedipa's existential engagement, and inwardness, only increase over the course of the novel, the whole point of her experience is to put into question whether or not a genuine existential subjectivity can be constituted in a culture devoted to escaping it. While Heller's Bob Slocum is, in one sense, an exception to this pattern—he succeeds where the others fail, both socioeconomically and in his escape from existential inwardness—the very nature of his success shows that he shares the project, and the desire, of the other characters. In fact,
Slocum's achievement illustrates most explicitly what the other works imply: that the desire to escape historical contingency and the desire to die are both grounded in the desire to escape existential inwardness. For it is clear that Slocum's goal in escaping existential interiority is to achieve accidie, or death-in-life.

How does commodity psychology serve this transcendental project? As *The Great Gatsby* makes especially clear, commodity psychology facilitates the escape from existential inwardness primarily through displacement and mystification. When one desires the kind of control—over life, over contingency, over interiority—that can't be acquired historically, in the real world, one can use the commodity, especially in its sign-exchange value, as a domain in which one can believe such control is possible. And the American dream, because it ties the spiritual domain to the commodity, is the expression of this belief. Thus, one of the central paradoxes of the American dream is that, while it claims to open history to everyone, to allow each individual the opportunity to become a part of American history, in reality it closes off history: it allows each individual the opportunity to escape from history into the commodity. The commodity, then—whether in the form of an object or a person—becomes the site of displacement, the sign that one needs to acquire if one is to feel in control, protected, safe. That is, the commodity becomes, like a religious relic, the site of mystification, of magical thinking. Thus, the commodity is endowed, not just with social meaning, as Marx suggests, but with metaphysical meaning as well. Like the lighting of votive candles or the saying of the rosary, like the repetition of a special mantra or the acquisition of a relic with special indulgences attached to it, the purchase of the right commodities can make good things happen. That is, the commodity can provide an escape from existential interiority that can make it seem as if good things are happening.

Of course, commodity psychology in American culture is not confined to the twentieth century. However, it seems to have become ubiquitous in our society with the passage of time. For two factors in twentieth-century American culture have conspired to promote commodity psychology: the decline of religion and the increasing media promotion of readily available consumer goods. Once religion ceased to be a central factor in American life, we needed another source of those psychological balms religion had supplied: the promise of a better life to come, a purpose to orient the direction of our lives from day to day, a
source of distraction from the painfulness of life in the here and now, and, as I have explained, a site for magical thinking and the "guarantees" it brings with it. Commodity psychology may not provide happiness, but, like religion, it can distract us from our unhappiness. Perhaps this is why, as my selected texts illustrate, the American dream has sold so well across gender, class, and time period, and why commodity psychology has become such a common phenomenon in our culture.

Indeed, the power of the desire to escape the here and now is illustrated in the protagonists' nostalgia for some lost past in which they seem to remember a better life. Lily recalls her carefree days before her father's financial ruin; Gatsby longs to return to the time when he first courted Daisy; Willy is obsessed with the days when his sons were young; Oedipa thinks nostalgically about the stable, unified identity she used to have at Kinneret-Among-the-Pines; and Slocum yearns to return to his early childhood, before, he believes, "something must have happened" to give him the tortured psyche he suffers from through most of the novel.

Yet these literary works suggest that, in reality, there was no time of perfect wholeness in these characters' pasts. Could Lily Bart return to her young womanhood, she would still have to face her dilemma over marriage: given her mother's spending, her father's money would never have come close to what a Percy Gryce could offer her, and Mrs. Bart would have insisted her daughter marry a fortune far greater than her father's. Similarly, the success of Gatsby's initial courtship of Daisy was based on his false identity, and he would have lost her once the war was over whether or not she had married someone else in his absence. The happy young family Willy Loman believes he once had never really existed: they were barely making ends meet, and his young sons were selfish and brutal, much like their father. The stable, unified identity Oedipa seems to think she had as a suburban "young married" was actually a zombie state rather than an identity. And Bob Slocum's youth wasn't any different from his adulthood: he has felt inadequate and frightened all his life. Thus, it seems that our longing for a "golden past" doesn't mean that such a past ever existed. Rather, it is an indication of our discomfort with the present and with the uncertainty of the future. One must wonder if even the pre-Oedipal longing that seems to play such a ubiquitous role in psychoanalytic theory—drive theorists and object-relations theorists, both of whom posit the existence of an
earlier state for which we long, argue merely over whether or not that state is objectless—isn't just symptomatic of a similar desire. Clearly, if commodity psychology can provide even an illusory balm for such pain, it is no wonder that it sells so well.

Obviously, this explanation of why the role of the commodity in American life has become more important and pervasive over time is based on cultural observation and theoretical speculation rather than on the literary texts examined. Nevertheless, there is a kind of chronological "trajectory," which can be traced from the Wharton text through the Heller, suggesting that the nature of the commodity's role has changed over time in a way that might lend support to my speculations. To begin with, The House of Mirth (1905), The Great Gatsby (1925), Death of a Salesman (1949), The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), and Something Happened (1974) map paths of change in a number of areas that impinge on any study of twentieth-century cultural psychology. As we have seen, Wharton's, Fitzgerald's, and Miller's protagonists, as well as Pynchon's minor characters, are in collusion with a social system that, in one way or another, oppresses them. However, while the main characters in the first four works have needs and feelings that conflict with the demands of the milieu to which they aspire or, in the case of Oedipa Maas, in which she finds herself adrift, Bob Slocum is able to deliberately and consciously restructure his consciousness—to repress conflicting needs and feelings—to fit the utterly commodified operational template of the corporation for which he works. And the conscious deliberateness with which Slocum achieves his psychological merger with the corporation is a factor that, in some ways, evolves progressively from Wharton's text to Heller's.

Of the five protagonists, Lily Bart is the only one who at least sustains the attempt to imagine an alternative to her commodified world. Her project, in the closing chapters of the novel, to reify herself as Selden's ideal partner in his "republic of the spirit"—while grounded, like her earlier project to reify herself as an expensive objet d'art, in her desire to escape existential inwardness—is nevertheless different in that it occurs outside the domain of exchange and sign-exchange value. She can remain in the commodified Trenor-Dorset milieu as long as she does only by acting in bad faith, for she cannot permit herself to live their life-style fully conscious of what she is doing.

In contrast, for Jay Gatsby, nothing occurs outside the realm of the
commodity, and consciousness, for him, is purely a matter of magical thinking: he believes that the commodity will buy him Daisy and that possession of Daisy will buy him a new personal history and a new identity. Perhaps in order for Gatsby to grapple with the Hegelian unhappy consciousness that the other characters are forced to deal with—and perhaps for Fitzgerald to be able to imagine Gatsby’s consciousness in this way at all—this character would have to survive the loss of Daisy, and the failure of his transcendental project, by more than just a few hours.

Unlike Gatsby, Willy Loman knows, on some level, that his commodified goals are empty. This is the knowledge he spends the play trying his best to repress—to the point of suicide when ordinary methods of avoidance and denial no longer suffice. He can’t give up his idea that the American dream must be a realm of absolute positive values. Certainly, Willy Loman would like to acquire whatever consciousness would permit him the kind of success Bob Slocum has. However, given the ideological tools available in Willy’s time and place, he wouldn’t be able to imagine how a consciousness like Slocum’s—aware of its own poverty—could ever be rewarded in a world structured by the American dream, which, Willy believes, demands a certain kind of “positive” consciousness. And while Oedipa Maas is horrified by the utterly commodified, existentially impoverished terrain that is postmodern America, she can only wait for something to change, for she is paralyzed by her inability to sustain any projection of a world beyond the one she sees.

Finally, Bob Slocum is very conscious of exactly how corrupt and meaningless his goals are—he’s very articulate about that—but he also knows he wants to achieve them anyway. And he is willing and able to do whatever it takes to succeed. Thus, from Lily Bart to Bob Slocum we see a progressively deeper and more self-conscious psychological investment in a world structured by the commodity.

We also see a progressive emptying of the sign. I have argued that all five works reveal the structures of psychological investments in sign-exchange value, which, by definition, is not based upon the object qua object, for the object’s material existence is, strictly speaking, a function of use value only. The sign can nevertheless be inhabited by the object, I think, to the extent that the sign associates social meaning with some physical experience of the object. For example, for Lily Bart, part of her
desire for a permanent position among the Trenor-Dorset clique is based upon her capacity to enjoy the physical comforts of luxurious surroundings. As I observed in my analysis of Wharton’s protagonist, a beautiful environment is not, as most critics would have it, the ultimate reason for Lily’s single-minded dedication to the Trenor-Dorset milieu. Were that the case, she would have been equally happy with the Sam Gormers. However, for Lily, the sign of social status is associated with the enjoyment of luxurious comfort, and her capacity to appreciate such comfort is very well developed. For Lily, sign-exchange value does not obliterate use value; indeed, sign-exchange value often evokes use value, and vice versa.

For Jay Gatsby, the sign is not so full. His mansion, his car, and his hydroplane have little significance to him beyond their function as signs of his arrival at a social level that will allow him to pursue Daisy—another sign—with a success he was unable to achieve the first time around. Willy Loman’s relationship to the sign is even somewhat more removed from the sign’s content. While Jay Gatsby succeeds in acquiring most of the signs he desires and picks the correct signs for his purposes, Willy Loman fails to acquire the signs he wants, and the signs he wants do not have the content he thinks they have. He never acquires the image, the persona, of the well-liked man, and even if he did learn to behave with the panache he thinks is its sign, such a personality would not necessarily be related to business or parental success.

The postmodern terrain in which Oedipa Maas has lost her way empties the sign even further: it is a terrain dominated by simulation, empty commodity signs that offer nonthreatening, fetishized abstractions in place of authentic experience. However, while Oedipa’s consciousness—her desire to decipher this profusion of apparently undecipherable signs, and the existential engagement that such a desire implies—at least maintains the desire for and possibility of meaningful signification, Bob Slocum’s utterly abstract relationship to his own experience by the end of *Something Happened* empties the sign of all possibility. In the flat consciousness Slocum exhibits in the novel’s closing pages, all thoughts coexist on a single affective plane, an affective plane marked, ironically, by its lack of affect. His narrative, like the signs of corporate success that constitute it, suggests only surfaces. All signs are now corporate signs: they point to concepts such as profit, loss, and power, with no reference to what it is that has been gained or lost, em-
powered or disempowered. That is, signs have become mathematical functions: it’s the \( x, y, \) and \( z \) that count, rather than the nature of the quantity that occupies a given position in the formula.

In many ways, contemporary Americans face the same problem faced by Lily Bart, Jay Gatsby, Willy Loman, Oedipa Maas, and Bob Slocum—and by their authors: how to imagine a world, and constitute a consciousness, outside the psychosocial framework structured by the commodity. Indeed, the commodification of American culture today is as thorough, if not always quite as obvious, as the industrial transformation of American culture was in the nineteenth century. As we have seen, commodity psychology is operating whenever we are invited—or invite ourselves—to replace the problematics of inferiority with the semiotics of prestige, whenever we fetishize the signifier, or the sign system itself, and thereby acquire, however transiently, some measure of emotional insulation against existential contingency.

Fetishization of the signifier is the primary operation, of course, in America’s obsession with fashion in any form, including trends in apparel, motor vehicles, architecture, food, the arts, interior decorating, and even psychological self-help techniques (which, themselves, often consist of methods for avoiding existential inwardness so that we can “feel good about ourselves” whether we should feel good or not). As this short but representative list illustrates, commodity psychology collapses the profound dimensions of human experience with the mundane by transforming them both into abstractions, into functions of the signifier. Indeed, the purpose of commodity psychology is to trivialize the profound in order to render it less emotionally threatening.

Of course, commodity psychology is also evident in America’s obsession with the act of purchasing itself, illustrated in the popular “shop ‘til you drop” slogan—which, although originally intended to spoof obsessive shopping, became its proud “call to arms”—and in the accumulation of money or goods beyond any reasonable uses to which they might be put. Perhaps the most obvious, and the most humorous, examples of commodity psychology can be found in specific consumer products, such as the Cellular Phoney, a fake car telephone produced by Faux Systems, an American company whose corporate slogan is “It’s not what you own; it’s what people think you own.”

In a subtler fashion, the fetishization of the signifier is also the operative element in America’s fascination with simulacra: for example,
amusement facilities, such as those promoted by the Disney Corporation, in which exotic geographic locations and historical figures and events are presented in simulated form unnervingly reminiscent of Lot 49's Fangoso Lagoons. Indeed, Jean Baudrillard's America is largely an examination of the success of simulacra in the United States or, perhaps more precisely, an examination of the ways in which American culture today is simulacra, constituted by the obsession with abstraction, because that which exists in the abstract is, by virtue of its separation from the world of existential contingency, emotionally nonthreatening.

Those of us in academia are perhaps most familiar with the fetishization of the signifier in terms of the runaway careerism evident in the hegemony of the professional image. Here, commodity psychology is evident in the quantification of publication as the determining factor in hiring, promotion, and salary decisions; the "star system" by which prestigious universities compete with one another in terms of the name recognition of their faculty, rather than the quality of education offered their students; and, at the lower rungs of the university ladder, the selection of dissertation topics solely for their perceived marketability and the growing problem, for hiring committees, of "paper candidates" who barely resemble, during the job interview let alone in the classroom, the academic image created by their résumés.

The most frightening examples of commodity psychology can probably be found in the media's commodification of the news, which is, for all intents and purposes, the commodification of history. The most striking example of this phenomenon is the media's commodification of the Gulf War—"Operation Desert Storm"—which was portrayed for television viewers, as some commentators noted, as if it were the Superbowl instead of a military operation. It wasn't simply a case of "selling" the war to the American people; all military actions must be "sold" to the public, which is why, for example, the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 was sold to historians as a "necessary evil." The issue here is that the Gulf War was sold as a surface without an interior—as a sporting event in which the home team was pitted against an opponent it could "clobber" before the end of the first quarter without even sending out the first string—and, as such, its appeal lay in the escape from existential inwardness it offered within a context having the potential to engage that inwardness to its maximum capacity.

Of course, not all manifestations of commodity psychology are
readily visible. However, if we remember that the commodity is not the source of desire but the site upon which desire is displaced—a cultural surface upon which we can project and deny disturbing aspects of our own interiority—we can begin to observe the relationship between the fetishization of the signifier and heretofore apparently unrelated phenomena. The most radical example of the kind of cultural psychology to which such projection points is violent crime, which I touch upon here merely as an example of the range of psychosocial phenomena commodity psychology can help us begin to understand. To return to the theoretical “laboratory” provided by literature, Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* provides us with a useful, and horrifying, example.

Like *The Great Gatsby*, *American Psycho* puts subject (interior) and object (exterior) on a par—and the object dominates. Protagonist Patrick Bateman is obsessed with his physical appearance, his image, and with the ownership of specific, brand-name consumer products that created and sustain his image. Like *Death of a Salesman* and *Something Happened*, Ellis’s novel shows us that the flip side of psychological projection is internalization: Loman, Slocum, and Bateman simultaneously project onto the cultural surface the inwardness they want to avoid and, in its place, internalize that same cultural surface. In other words, they use the commodity—the fetishization of the signifier, the cultural surface—to “launder” their interiority. Both Slocum, at the novel’s close, and Bateman, from the opening pages, illustrate inwardness with no otherness, no separateness from its social milieu: each is an interior wholly constituted by the cultural exterior. However, while Slocum, after the death of his son, represents the placid, anesthetized manifestation of this psychology, Bateman represents its criminal possibility: the psychological imperative to destroy all perceived threats against his maintenance of the emotional insulation that *is* his identity, within an environment filled with such threats.

This last example illustrates, in very speculative terms, what I hope the preceding chapters have revealed much more concretely: that the implications of commodity psychology, and of the merger of ideology and psychology in general, are legion. That these implications have remained, for the most part, unexplored by American literary criticism reveals, I think, both the absence of critical tools with which to perceive such phenomena and the importance of recognizing those tools when they are set before us. An existential understanding of the dialectics of
psyche and socius—of our psychological politics—offers us those tools. With them, we can open American literature and the culture it represents to a new domain for American literary criticism strikingly relevant to the current theoretical impasse in conceptualizing subjectivity and the social crisis it reflects. Without a thoroughly existentialized dialectical model of subjectivity, our understanding of American literature and culture will remain sorely limited.