


Spring 2016

# Proto-Postmodernism: Constructing Postmodern Ethics through Cold War Literature and Theory

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## Recommended Citation

LaManna, Rock, "Proto-Postmodernism: Constructing Postmodern Ethics through Cold War Literature and Theory" (2016).  
*Departmental Honors Projects*. Paper 48.

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**Proto-Postmodernism: Constructing Postmodern Ethics  
through Cold War Literature and Theory**

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An Honors Thesis  
Submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with honors in English  
from Hamline University

29 April 2016

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## The Postwar and the Proto-Postmodern

Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

While the meaning of Ralph Ellison's concluding remark to his 1952 novel leaves a sort of Gordian knot for readers to untangle, the text clarifies at least one point: "here" is underground, a sanctuary for the narrator as he retreats from a society that renders him invisible. Like the entirety of the novel, though, the *who*—the "human" identity—that takes refuge remains indeterminable, since the narratives of the past—whether Booker T. Washington's or W.E.B Du Bois's ideals of racial uplift, trade unionism or bootstrap individualism, or, ultimately, racial Nationalism or Marxism—continually name and rename the invisible man's identity, offering him a place in the chain of history(s) they say will guarantee emancipation. By staging the novel as a frustrated search for visibility and recognition within these histories that constantly leave the "I" in flux, Ellison's account of "invisibility" not only serves as an aesthetic expression of Du Bois's "double consciousness," but it also provides a term to make the erasure of his dignity intelligible. To cope with this revelation, the "invisible man" thus takes sanctuary to think and sort out the question, "And what shall I do now?"

Like the "invisible man" of Ellison's novel, Western civilization after World War II undergoes a process of reevaluation that is essentially ethical and political in character, prompted by the crises of systemic violence. After the horrors of the Nazi regime, whether its external pursuit of European conquest through warfare or the Holocaust, modernity's ethical framework of Humanism—"the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity" that "assumes an unchanging, wholly self-aware [and rational] subject unaffected by exterior forces"—and its narrative of Progress and human perfectibility (both "metanarratives") ring hollow because of

their complicity with genocide (Davies 5; Holland 4-5). With Nazism's racial narrative of Aryan supremacy driving and legitimating a systematized form of violence, Humanism's central concept of "humanity" begins to unravel because of totalitarianism's ability to conduct such mass degradation of human dignity while espousing the humanist ideal of rationality. Put more succinctly, Tony Davies writes in *Humanism* that "[i]n the face of [systematized violence] ... not only humanism ... but the very notion of the *human* was called to account" (51). Similar ethical questions are raised surrounding Harry S. Truman's decision to annihilate two Japanese cities with products of state-sponsored science, introducing the world into the atomic age and setting the stage for a geopolitical standoff between Capitalism and Communism that will define the remainder of the century.

Out of this destruction, the Allied victory, and the introduction of the atomic bomb, a new political paradigm emerges where a dualistic balance of power between the United States and the USSR dominates. As Jeffrey Nealon suggests in *Post-Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*, this global context shapes and defines the theories and theorists that will later be labelled "postmodern."<sup>1</sup> Postmodern thought, as Nealon sees it, is defined by its attempt "to find a kind of 'third way'" between the positions presented by "American consumerism on one side and Russian communism on the other," and from this search for a third form of engagement with the world, he claims an underlying "open/closed" binary emerges in postmodernism (120). For postmodern thinkers, political choices and allegiances coincide either with "openness and possibility" or "rigid, inflexible, univocal standard[s] of value or right," and the postmodern perspective identifies the either/or of Capitalism versus Communism, of liberal versus social humanisms, with such univocality (120-1).<sup>2</sup> Such a conception of the world prompts a departure from the humanisms, shifting toward an epistemology based on the

indeterminacy of knowledge, language, and their relationship to authority in order to reevaluate modern ethical thought.

While this ethical aim runs contrary to the “advoca[cy] ... [of] moral nihilism” that A.T. Nuyen describes as the preliminary understanding of postmodernism (“Normative Question” 411), postmodern thought advocates decoupling ethics from modern concepts of “humanity” and the metanarratives modern humanists use to legitimate their claims because, according to postmodernists, such constructions ultimately service hierarchical social relations. In terms of Nealon’s binary, then, “openness” represents a “linguistic turn” toward what critics such as Davies call philosophical “anti-humanism,” while modern humanism occupies the “closed” position of totality and universality because of its assuredness of the immutability of . Although, as Alan Schrift claims in *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, the theories of Michel Foucault, one of the prominent intellectual figures in the postmodern reevaluation of modern ethics, are “less an anti-humanism than an attempt to think humanism and the subject after the end of (modern) man” (63). “Far from being a thinker of ‘the death of the subject,’” Schrift argues, “Foucault simply refuses to accept the subject as given, as the foundation for ethical and rational thinking” (63). Apart from the modern view, Foucault views a matrix of knowledge and power structures, constructed through language, as the “ethical center” rather than the individual (or subject). While concerned with the human subject like the moderns and not completely “anti-humanist,” postmodern theory’s emphasis on the subject’s constructedness and the privileging of structures in the formation of ethical thought still demarcates a dividing line between modernity’s “ethics of the individual” and postmodernity’s “ethics of the structure.”

When we return to the cultural and intellectual climate of the post-war and early postmodern period, however, theories and literatures of the time complicate such a clean binary.

If we accept Jean-François Lyotard's claim in *The Postmodern Condition* that postmodernity is marked by an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), works by Hannah Arendt, Albert Camus, Ralph Ellison, Joseph Heller, and Kurt Vonnegut also reside in the period we have come to understand as "the postmodern" because of their critical engagement with the ideological constructs fueling the engines of the Cold War, carving out a period in late modernity I am calling the "proto-postmodern." Unlike Lyotard and poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, these writers remain invested in the modern humanistic concepts of ethics and human dignity yet simultaneously struggle with the violence modernity produces in its political and social organizations, thereby blurring the open/closed binary of political and ethical commitment. Caught between modernity's introduction (the ethical ideals of uplifting the human community out of authoritarian structures) and its conclusion (the dehumanization of entire populations caused by intensified forms of modern ethical thought), they search for ways to salvage humanist values and reorient modernity's ethical code as society departs from the post-war and enters the Cold War, but without falling back into the same authoritative totalizations typical of modernity. Although, as Ellison's closing line to *Invisible Man* reminds us, the proto-postmodern attempt to revitalize aspects of humanism, when faced with its violent consequences, leads into a cycle of despairing yet hopeful contemplation both of the past and present.

In order to explore the Sisyphean nature of the pursuit to rethink humanism without discarding it, my essay first discusses the modern/postmodern binary as framed in the terms of humanism and anti-humanism, respectively, which emphasizes the hybridity of proto-postmodernism and the possibilities that it opens for reevaluating modern ethics from an ethical and committed standpoint. Although the term "anti-humanist" prevails in criticism surrounding the differences of the modern and postmodern, I propose that the student rebellions of 1968

demonstrate the inapplicability of this term when we consider the intersection of Ihab Hassan's belief that the events of 1968 were the beginnings of the postmodern spirit and the students' hybrid stance on humanism. Rather, these events express a "counter-humanism" that desires a (post)modern humanism and underscores the political commitment of proto-postmodernism: in other words, a "humanistic counter-humanism" still explicitly concerned with the value of dignity as well as ethical and political questions. After surveying 1968, I examine the periodizing work of literary and cultural critics such as Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, Robert Genter, Andreas Huyssen, and Tony Davies to situate the proto-postmodern writers in terms of modern/postmodern ethical and political commitments. Against this critical backdrop, proto-postmodernism represents an in-between of the (postmodern) questioning and the (modern) committed stances because it interrogates how modern humanism's ethics spawned its opposite (anti-humanism), yet also attempts to reforge ethics in light of postwar crises as one of its central tasks. Because of their specific concern with violence, the proto-postmoderns resist a retreat into the reductionist casting of humanity in the "linguistic turn" that the postmoderns express in their theory and fiction, but they criticize the unfettered belief in the modern idea of progress and self-centric ethical thought as well.

Following this section, I detail the counter-humanist side of proto-postmodern texts as they write and theorize delegitimation on an ethical and political level and redefine "anti-humanism" in connection with the metanarratives of modern humanism. Beginning with an exploration of the famous quarrel between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus to further our understanding of the French political context out of which poststructuralism arose, this section on the proto-postmodern resistance to anti-humanism uses Lyotard's definitions of metanarratives and his theory on its legitimating function to introduce Hannah Arendt's and



Albert Camus's understanding of totalitarianism and its connection to modern humanism's metanarratives. Providing a complementary reading of this "post" of the postmodern by explicating the link between metanarratives and the legitimization violence, Arendt and Camus's ethico-political incredulity toward totalitarianism illustrates the destructive capacities of modern humanism's totalizing ethics, which attempts to enforce through terror an abstract logic—or metanarrative—despite the chaotic world of human spontaneity that guarantees human dignity. Through Arendt's theory, I draw connections between totalitarian logicity, ideology, and systematic violence, exposing modern humanism's complicity in violence through its metanarratives and its fundamentally anti-humanist character. In the latter part of this section, Camus's deconstruction of Marxism in *The Rebel* connects its metanarrative to the metanarrative of capitalism, which explicates how "progress" in terms of capitalist techno-science plays a fundamental role in Marxism's thought and the violence of Stalinism. Interspersed in the discussion of these theories, Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* supplement the theories of Arendt and Camus with metaphorical examples of these modern forces at work, performing similar political deconstructions as Arendt and Camus in their fiction.

After defining the contours of modern humanism's anti-humanism through the connection between metanarratives and totalitarianism, the final section interprets the humanistic rebellions against American forms of anti-humanism Ellison, Vonnegut, and Heller conduct in their literature. Forefronting their novels with a negation of violence and the sacrifice of dignity in these modern ethical frameworks, the proto-postmodern novelists also affirm the necessity of ethical thought because of its role in preserving human dignity. Using Camus's concept of the absurd "gap" as a theoretical tool, I examine how these proto-postmodern novelists use absurdity to expose the divide between American humanism's claims to enrich collective human dignity

and the violence it produces in the world. Afterward, Arendt's concepts of the "two-in-one" and "representative thought" provide a framework for interpreting the ethical, humanistic drive underlying each novel, particularly in Vonnegut's representation of the Hoenikker family in *Cat's Cradle* and the concept of "invisibility" in *Invisible Man*. With their representations of unthinking characters, Vonnegut and Ellison draw the parallels between thinking, judging, and action and the role the lack of conscientious and representative thought plays in abetting violence and degrading human worth. In the last part of this section, I apply the established Arendtian framework to explore the narrative monologue of Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Camus's *The Fall* in order to interpret key thematic elements in Heller's *Catch-22*, such as the mental binding of the monologic narrative form and the blurring of traditional concepts of judgment such as "guilt" and "innocence."

With World War II bringing the consequences of modern humanism's metanarratives to their logical extreme, manifested in totalitarianism and the Cold War either/or, proto-postmodern theory and fiction expose the cracks within the logicity of modern humanism by using humanist ethics to untangle the legitimacy of metanarratives and the violence they cause. Conducting their interrogation in this way, by folding modernity back upon itself, the proto-postmoderns thus rebel, in Camus's sense of the term, against political modernity and its ethics, whose legitimating rationales promise emancipation and dignity yet only guarantee death and degradation. Using fiction as a means to explore the reasons we ought to compel ourselves into thought and, therefore, revitalize our faculty of judgment, the proto-postmodern novelists look to reassert the humanistic value of dignity that does not reproduce the binding and logical elements of the metanarrative form of legitimation, demonstrating that a dismissal of modern humanism does not necessitate a disavowal of ethics or values. Ultimately, the efforts of the proto-

postmodernists suggest that the novel—as a communicative and representative medium of human plurality—has the capacity to construct a new ethical framework for the postmodern era. Because of the recent turn toward humanism in contemporary literature and theory, which Mary K. Holland details in *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*, Arendt, Camus, Ellison, Heller, and Vonnegut hold a revived critical and cultural importance as foundational figures for contemporary writers and theorists who want to revitalize humanistic values yet temper them with a poststructural awareness of language.

## **Complications in the Modern/Postmodern Binary: Situating the Commitments of 1968 and Proto-Postmodernism**

Even more surprising in this odd loyalty to the past is the New Left's seemingly unawareness of the extent to which the moral character of the rebellion—now a widely accepted fact—clashes with its Marxian rhetoric.

—Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*

Despite the postmodern position that typically holds a deeply ingrained suspicion toward humanism, Hannah Arendt's observation in her 1969 essay *On Violence* of the global student rebellions, particularly the New Left movement in the United States, complicates the neat periodizing of postmodernism as an outright rejection of modern humanism. The postmodern dismissal of modern humanism, as Geoffrey Harpham intimates in "Ethics," comes from theoretical discourse: "[A]ll the leading voices of the Theoretical Era [1968–87] ... organized their critiques of humanism as exposés of ethics..." (388). Harpham's periodizing of this era, where theory tackles humanism through unraveling its ethics, raises an interesting intersection between what Arendt sees as humanism in the streets and what Harpham sees as anti-humanism in the academy, which includes postmodern theorists such as Jameson, Irigaray, and Derrida. Problematizing the contours of the postmodern further, Ihab Hassan writes in his concluding essay of *The Postmodern Turn* that the migratory course of the term "postmodernism" from American to European discourse suggests "the energizing matrix of postmodernism, if not its origin, may have been the sixties in America, with all their liberationist and countercultural tendencies" (215).<sup>3</sup> If we accept Hassan's assessment of the originary role the sixties play in the postmodern, then a humanist stance marks the beginning of the postmodern era, yet anti-humanism marks its theoretical position both concomitantly with the student rebellions of 1968 and in its aftermath. Thus, the multiplicity of stances on the "humanism question" problematizes our concept of the dawn of postmodernity and the twilight of modernity. This contradiction in

postmodern genealogy demands a rethinking of the way the events of 1968, the thought influencing it, and the thought coming afterward are situated. Staging the humanism/anti-humanism binary through the theoretical valencies of 1968 illustrates the complications the periodizing framework of the modern/postmodern presents along ethical lines of thought.

Arendt's analysis of the New Left and the global instances of rebellion offers a preliminary understanding of the contradictory elements of 1968 that confuse, muddle, and resist categorization. According to Arendt, the students' "claim for 'participatory democracy'"—while "constitut[ing] the most significant common denominator of the rebellions in the East and the West"—runs contrary to the ultimate aim of Marxist ideology, which seeks to wither away "the need for public action and participation in public affairs" (*Violence* 22). Again, like their moralistic and humanistic stance, the students espouse Marxist theory yet diverge from it in practice. As Ronald Fraser notes in *1968*, however, "Marx's early writings ... were [an] important source of inspiration for many students" during the years leading up to 1968 (82). Thus, the locus of the divorce between Marxist philosophy and the students' ideals resides not in a misinterpretation, as Arendt wants to suggest, but instead in the trajectory of Marx's thought. While outlining Louis Althusser's "assault ... on Marxist or socialist humanism," Davies writes that "the young Marx parted company with ... humanistic premises and pieties [such as notions of will, freedom or human potential]" and instead "formulated a model of history and society based ... on such 'structural' concepts as class, ideology, and the forces and relations of production" (57-8). The students, then, influenced by Marx's humanism during their development divert from the structuralist Marx, whose thought only enters their rhetoric as antagonisms intensified.<sup>4</sup> The contradictions within the student movement between its cause and its theory thus arise from the complexities and unresolved strains of Marxism because it can be

divided against itself, and observers such as Arendt exacerbate these contradictions when they attempt to force coherence between Marx's structural and humanist conclusions, both of which operate on fundamentally different premises and areas of analysis.

Analogous to the confusing variance between Marxist humanist and structural philosophy in the student movements, their moralistic and political stance co-mingles enlightenment (or bourgeois) and socialist humanisms. As Arendt adds to her analysis in *On Violence*, the students' cause of participatory democracy embodies "the best in the revolutionary tradition—the council system, the always defeated but only authentic outgrowth of every revolution since the eighteenth century" (22). Analyzing the correlations between participatory democracy, anarchism, and social movements, Shmuel Lederman in "Councils and Revolution" typifies Arendt's concept of revolutionary councils as "spontaneous associations of citizens ... through which they will be able to take part in determining the fate of their body politic and 'govern themselves'" (248). The language of spontaneity and self-governance resonates with the liberal humanism of John Stuart Mill: mixing the idea of "liberty" with spontaneous action, participatory democracy relies on a universal and essential "Man" that legitimates the "revolutionary discourse of rights," initiated by Rousseau and Paine, while simultaneously staging a "'romantic' and anti-rationalist ... revolt against the chilly despotism of enlightened reason..." (Davies 26, 40).

The movements take the notion of romantic spontaneity further than Mill's humanism, extending the revolt against reason to Western capitalism and its humanist claims. In "The Revolutionary Romanticism of May 1968," Michael Löwry defines the spirit of the student rebellions as a "revolutionary romanticism, [which] protest[s] against the foundations of the modern industrial/capitalist civilization, its productivism and its consumerism" (950).

“[R]ebell[ing] ... in the name of past or premodern social and cultural values ... against ... the triumph of mechanization, mercantilization, reification, quantification,” the students take a fundamentally anti-capitalist stance according to Löwry (95). Like the major from Minnesota in Heller’s *Catch-22*, the students incredulously demand the Milo Minderbinders of capitalism to give society its share and take to the streets because they realize society has only received a disdainful IOU on a “scrap of paper” (378). So while the students’ common platform of participatory democracy reflects an enlightenment humanism, socialist values and socialist critiques permeate their philosophical foundation alongside their humanistic ethical vision. This vision subsumes the traditional concept of “liberty” in the liberal humanist tradition, which Mill and other political thinkers saw as “guaranteed by reason and natural law” (Davies 40). Instead, the students insist on an ideal of human dignity centered on its political, social, and economic subjectivity rather than its rationality and notions of natural law. Echoing Marx, they advocate for a humanism vying for “the complete restoration of man to himself as a *social*, i.e. human, being” (qtd. in Davies 12), because they base their values on a “concept of socialist freedom ... consisting not only in the social reappropriation of the economy but in the individual’s power of decision over his or her own life as well as that of society...” (Fraser 82). The guarantee of the students’ concept of freedom is the very spontaneity that operates as an antithetical strain in liberal humanist thought, which places human rationality in tension with its anti-rational reality. Instead of employing transcendental laws of nature and the solitude of rationality to construct their ideals, the students of 1968 privilege the irrational and spontaneous aspects of human sociality as the guarantor of freedom and dignity. In other words, political and social existence, or the interaction in the public realm where the self is constantly subject to the other yet still validated through expression, defines the “human.”

In this view, where the student rebellions act as a cultural and political sign of the advent of postmodernity in the West, the two postmodern positions discussed here, proto-postmodernism and the traditional postmodern view, are better understood as “counter-humanism” rather than “anti-humanism” because of their resistance to modern humanism’s conception of the human subject and humanity generally. However, the students maintain the human and the spontaneity of human subjectivity as central to its thinking, similar to its modern, liberal humanist predecessors, yet reject the totalization of modern humanism’s belief in Reason that dehumanizes people under Capitalism and Stalinism, similar to the postmodern position. For this reason, Hassan proclaims “[d]issent was part of the motive” of the student movements while “another ... was visionary” (216). This optimistic dissent results from their simultaneous resistance of the authoritarian aspects of the bourgeois and Marxist social orders as well as their co-mingling of the liberatory elements of each ideology to construct a new humanism. To state the students’ resistant optimism in different terms, the students—as proto-postmoderns—are humanistically counter-humanist in their ethical and political thought, and although the development of postmodern theory turns away from the humanistic ethics of proto-postmodernism, the poststructuralists maintain the counter-humanism of the 1968 rebellions.

The juxtaposition of Hassan’s take on the sixties as a “post” of postmodernity and Arendt’s explication of the students’ confounding ideological stance yields a premise for comprehending a possible prologue to postmodernity, a proto-postmodernity. Emblematic of the period, the ethical and political ideals of 1968 complicate the humanism/counter-humanism binary critics use to differentiate between modernity and postmodernity because it rejects modern humanism in its theoretical and immanent forms on the grounds of preserving the spontaneity and contingency of human life, ultimately a different form of humanist thinking.



From the proto-postmodern perspective, the ruling binary thus is totality/contingency rather than humanism/counter-humanism, and this modification of the open/closed Cold War binary that Nealon identifies with postmodern theory not only defines proto-postmodernism but also indicates an in-between approach between modernism and postmodernism that simultaneously reproduces and resists both in its aesthetics and ethics.

Aesthetically, the proto-postmodern position takes political commitment and action as one of its fundamental concerns and struggles with the humanistic and modern idea of a “center” from which one can speak, which diverges from the politics of postmodern literature. As Linda Hutcheon says in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the postmodern mode is “that of a complicitous critique,” or the self-awareness that its resistance to ideology, which is inevitably bound to an ideological framework, never fully resists but always reproduces it in some way (2). Rather than developing an “effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*,” the postmodern “works to ‘de-doxify’ our cultural representations and their undeniable political import” (3). While it seems ridiculous to say any critique can operate without some measure of complicity in the ideologies it resists, especially as this position has itself become “doxified,” the complicitous critique self-sabotages itself by rendering it unable to move beyond the cognizance of its own complicity. Its de-doxifying exigency commands that the work participate in an endless loop of reproduction and subversion, making and unmaking. As Hutcheon notes, “If [the work] *finds* [a totalized] vision, it questions how ... it *made* it” (*Poetics* 48). Postmodern literature thus questions endlessly in order to reveal the nature of its own textuality and its extra-textual elements as wholly constructed.

On this point, proto-postmodernism focuses more intensely on its extra-textuality, its relationship to the world and the political reality of its historical situation, to represent action or,

at least, to call for action. For instance, *Invisible Man* externalizes the struggle between the narrator's "self" and subject positions as a "fight ... with Monopolated Light & Power" (7). He conducts this "act of sabotage" against a capitalist institution, in this case a monopolized utility, in order "to carry on a fight against [those who make him invisible] without their realizing it" because he sees "[his] old way of life" as "based upon the fallacious assumption that [he], like other men, was visible" (5). The narrator feels as if he takes some of the power (literally and figuratively) back from the society that renders him invisible when he decides to stop "the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates" (5). By contextualizing (in)visibility with an anti-capitalist stance, Ellison forefronts his novel with a mode of agency, offering readers an outlet of potential resistance for the battleground over the narrator's own self-definition. Unlike a postmodern work, the novel does not deconstruct how his decision plays back into capitalist life or question why he desires visibility. It asserts, "This is what I have chosen," and breaks out of the postmodern loop of indecision. Refusing to admit its interpellation continuously, *Invisible Man* avoids questions such as, "Why do I desire visibility?" or "How authentic is the visible I?" Rather, it rejects invisibility and tackles the question "How do I become visible to others?"

Likewise, though to a lesser extent in its determinacy, Yossarian's free indirect dialogue as he contemplates his own complicity in Nately's death, hinting at Heller's own stance, calls for action:

Yossarian thought he knew why Nately's whore held him responsible for Nately's death and wanted to kill him. Why the hell shouldn't she? It was a man's world, and she and everyone younger had every right to blame him and everyone older for every unnatural tragedy that befell them; just as she, even in her grief, was to

blame for every man-made misery that landed on her kid sister and on all other children behind her. Someone had to do something sometime. (414)

In this passage, Heller foregrounds the idea of complicity itself as the problem that necessitates action. He recognizes “every man-made misery” is “unnatural” and constructed as do the postmoderns, implying everyone’s complicity in these structures, but he also invests a faith in the human capacity for reconstructing the world because Yossarian does not turn back and eternally question the *how* and *why* behind such constructions and the complicity that follows. Unlike the postmoderns, complicity is the premise, not the conclusion. Instead, Yossarian concludes that someone has to act to make complicity in human-made structures more bearable and humane. If we must always be complicit in our own constructions—the “human artifice,” as Arendt would say, that is a product of spontaneous human actions—then Heller argues we need to ensure we act in ways that construct a world where complicity does not degrade the dignity of the self or the other.

The representation of action in *Invisible Man* and *Catch-22*’s call to construct a more humane world aligns the politics of these novels more closely with Robert Genter’s “late modernism” than with Hutcheon’s postmodernism. Contrary to the postmodern variation of political engagement, Robert Genter, explicating the stance of late modernists in *Late Modernism: Art, Culture, and Politics in Cold War America*, characterizes the commitment of these writers as “one that refused to shy away from the notion that art at its essence was a form of rhetoric, persuasion, and social communication” (12). In Genter’s formulation, the late modernist literary work has an expressed and overt political purpose, acting as a medium to communicate its message to the reader. The aim of this communicative art, in the opinion of Kenneth Burke, who Genter sees as one of the critical exemplars of late modernism, demands the

artist “to offer new forms of orientation, new ways of understanding modern experience, and new sites of communion” because World War II destroyed common ethical and political concepts that grounded the conventions of modernist engagement (3).

The last of these recastings of the modern project, the need for “new sites of communion,” predicates the political commitment of proto-postmodernism as well as part of its modern humanist parallels. According to Jeffrey Isaac in *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion*, Arendt and Camus take this call to reconstruct a common site for communication as the most serious political task in the postwar world. As theorists, they look to “the promotion of dialogue [as the] key to the creation of freer, more satisfying forms of politics” where “ethical standards and public policies can be collectively agreed upon than arbitrarily imposed” (123-124). Politically committed to “seeking foundations ... [whose] provisional character.... [recognizes] the enduring facts of human difference and plurality” (110, 124), Arendt and Camus advocate for a polyvocal politics and ethics grounded in the unifying, rather than separating, aspects of language because “totalitarianism exhibited a frightening and extreme form of human oppression that sought to suppress all difference through the manipulation of language and the suffocation of dialogue” (123). While their desire for unification hints at the totalizing excesses of modern humanism, they conclude that the arbitrariness of totalitarian language necessitates meaningful, referential language and ethical concepts based in pluralistic consensus in order to safeguard human dignity. Analogous to the site of political unity that Arendt and Camus see in dialogic communication, Heller and Ellison construct the novel as a place of communicative unification for readers, one which uses the characters’ thoughts and actions as representations of the potential for political engagement, whether against bureaucratic systems (Heller) or racial oppression (Ellison). In their struggle to unify, they concoct a political language to ground their

visions of resistance, exemplified by the titles of each novel, *Catch-22* and *Invisible Man*. As signifiers, both titles express a way to talk about political and social realities, common terms that have moved into extra-literary discourse.<sup>5</sup> Because of their commitment to represent the ailments of their political context, these works are as much ethical as they are aesthetic, compelled by a humanistic stance to question the world as they see it.

While Genter's conception of "late modernism" has parallels with proto-postmodernism, late modernism's definition remains contested with a lingering debate over its political import and aesthetic character. In Jameson's view, the late modern—associated with the Cold War as in Genter's work—produces a "theory of art, the ideology of modernism [or abstract expressionism] ... which then accompanied [this theory of art] everywhere abroad as a specifically North American cultural imperialism" (168). Jameson conceives of late modernism as a calcified variant of high modernism where "experimentation" transforms "into an arsenal of tried and true techniques, no longer striving after aesthetic totality or the systemic and Utopian metamorphosis of forms" (166). While proto-postmodernism aligns more with Genter's optimistic late modernism, Jameson's pessimism raises an important point, although his conflation of late modernism with high modernism is problematic.<sup>6</sup>

According to Jameson, modernism in its traditional form "[holds] to the Absolute and to Utopianism," which he uses to classify Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot's "extrapoetic, extraliterary concerns" as "the sign that they were genuine modernists..." (168). While this focus on the political has parallels in Genter's late modernism, Jameson equates the period with a cultural imperialistic purpose distinct from Genter's:

Now, what was wanted in the West and in the Stalinist East alike, except for revolutionary China, was a stabilization of the existing systems and an end to that

form of properly modernist transformation enacted under the sign and slogan of modernity as such.... Now the Absolutes of [high modernism] have been reduced to the more basic programme of modernization – which is simply a new word for that old thing, the bourgeois conception of progress. (166)

From an American imperialist standpoint, then, late modernism is to art what capitalism is to industry and the economy. High modernism becomes “the way” to create, just as capitalism is the way to produce and “representative” democracy is the way to organize the body politic. Modernity and modernization in artistic, economic, and political forms thus equate with stasis, a staid form of engagement reinforcing the Cold War political and economic paradigm. Jameson’s characterization of late modernism separates the blurring of postmodernism’s complicitous critique into a binary, that between the complicit and the critical, between the reproductive and the transformative. It is on this point that Jameson and Genter argue: while Genter sees late modernism as transformative and critical, Jameson views it as reproductive and complicit. On the one hand, Jameson equates late modernism with an evolved and co-opted high modernism; on the other, Genter claims modernism evolved its subversive politics to meet new challenges and contexts.

When placing Genter against Jameson, the transformations Genter identifies in Cold War American writing is the emergence of postmodernism (or proto-postmodernism) rather than a continuation of modernism, which contradicts aspects of how the postmodern is typically defined. As Lyotard argues in “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?,” the postmodern “is undoubtedly a part of the modern” (79). Such a vague definition could be used to support a claim that either the calcified high modernism or evolved politics of late modernism are postmodern, but when Lyotard adds that “[a]ll that has been received, if only yesterday ...

must be suspected” (79), the questioning yet committed stance of the late modernists in Genter’s thought makes them better candidates for being postmodern in Lyotard’s sense of the term than Jameson’s complicit twin. However, Andreas Huyssen, in *After the Great Divide*, takes Lyotard’s sweeping generalization to account for his conception of the postmodern. Untangling the implication of Lyotard’s use of the Kantian sublime to ground his emphasis on the avant-garde, he calls attention to Lyotard’s contradictory “interest in rejecting representation, which is linked to terror and totalitarianism,” and the inherent “desire of totality and representation” contained in Kant’s concept of the sublime (215).<sup>7</sup> For Huyssen, the divide between Lyotard’s application of the sublime and his rejection of its philosophical underpinnings means “[his] sublime can be read as an attempt to totalize the aesthetic realm by fusing it with all other spheres of life...” (215). Here, Huyssen identifies the ultimate conflict in postmodern theory: it ends up recasting the modern to the point where it produces Jameson’s late modernism, albeit in different packaging. Indeed, Lyotard’s valorization of a totalized avant-garde plays directly into the cultural imperialism Jameson sees in the abstract expressionism at the core of the ideology of aesthetic modernism.

More generally, though, Huyssen comments that “French theory provides us primarily with an *archeology of modernity*....not as a rejection of modernism, but rather as a retrospective reading which ... is fully aware of modernism’s limitations and failed political ambitions” (209). If the continual modification of and reflection on the modern defines postmodern counter-humanism aesthetically and theoretically, then Lyotard certainly was correct in asserting that the postmodern “is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state” (79), but defining the postmodern in this way nullifies the “post-” signifying “after modernism.” Because the postmodern remains trapped in a continuous struggle with its introspection on the modern, the

self-awareness of its aesthetics and the counter-humanism of poststructuralist theory offers a perspective that limits its own transformative power. Postmodernism provides tools for understanding and conceiving the contours of modernity, but subverts its own commitment to overcome and transgress the modern.

Because of postmodernism's ultimately reproductive nature, proto-postmodernism presents a hybrid third way between the (post)modern when considering ethics and critical engagement with the modern, particularly between essentialist modern humanism and structure- and language-centric postmodern counter-humanism. As Davies says in his introduction, "[T]he question of humanism remains ideologically and conceptually central to modern – even to 'postmodern' – concerns" (5). Recalling Pound and Eliot, Jameson argues their allegiance to Utopianism and the Absolute, ultimately abstract terms, marks them as "genuine modernists," and because this stance derives from the political engagement of their writing, these desires reproduce the abstractions of political modernism. Davies explains that "abstract humanism, with its universalist and essentialist conception of Man ... is a political rather than philosophical notion, deriving from the revolutionary discourse of rights" (25). He defines this abstract humanism as essentialist "because humanity – human-ness – is the inseparable ... defining quality, of human beings" and universalist "because that essential humanity is shared by all human beings, of whatever time or place" (24). This idea of a transcendent, absolute human condition grounds the utopianism of the modernists, who attempt to encode individuated emancipation from modern life into their writing and aesthetics. For the modernists, "self"-expression becomes the primary site of political and ethical thought, a problematic centering both from a postmodern and proto-postmodern standpoint.



Postmodern counter-humanism rejects the abstract and essentialist vision of humanity the modern humanists profess. As Hutcheon says in *Poetics*, “For many [postmodernists], it is the ‘rationally, universally valid’ ideas of our liberal humanist tradition that are being called into question” (187), and as Davies notes, Friedrich Nietzsche inaugurates this questioning by focusing on the “figurative nature of all statements” and the linguistic genesis of all matters asserted as “truth” (36). With philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Foucault following in Nietzsche’s footsteps—what Davies calls the “‘linguistic turn’” in philosophy—they reveal how “the ‘humanity’ to which [modern humanism] appeals is nothing more than a figure of speech, a metaphor so moribund and inert that we no longer recognise it as such...” (37). Postmodern counter-humanism thus unravels the abstracted “self,” itself an instance of this groundless metaphor, as well as abstracted “humanity,” yet it also maintains a faith in abstraction like the modern humanists. Calling back to Althusser’s Marxist “anti-humanism,” Davies articulates how his structuralism sees “the ‘subject’ ... not [as] the individual human being, speaking and acting purposively in a world illuminated by rational freedom, but the impersonal ... ‘forces and relations of production’ ... ‘operat[ing] outside man and independent of his will’” (60). Similar to Althusser, Foucault’s concept of discourse, like “the relations of production for Marx” or “ideology for Althusser,” centers on “capillary structur[es] of social cohesion and conformity ... [that] situat[e] us as individuals, and silently legislates the boundaries of what is possible for us to think and say” (70). For postmodern counter-humanism, the center shifts from the self to the structure. Unlike the modern humanist who sees the self wholly determining identity through expression, the postmodern counter-humanist envisions the structure wholly determining the identity of its subject by constructing and delimiting boundaries around the subject’s action and thought.

If politically engaged writing that faithfully adheres to a modern humanist notion of the self as the ethical center characterizes modernism while postmodern counter-humanism questions modern humanism through privileging structures that nullify such ideas about the self, then what differentiates proto-postmodernism from either? In periodizing terms, the hybridity of proto-postmodernism has many similarities with the way Genter classifies late modernism. He argues that “Burke’s criticisms ... predated what would become a larger revolt against the aesthetic and epistemological assumptions of modernism ... associated with the movement known as postmodernism...” (3), and, on the level of conceiving the subject, “late modernists saw the self as formed through a series of identificatory and linguistic practices ... [yet] refused to believe that the self was reducible to the context in which it was situated” (16). Wouldn’t this critical, yet engaged, artistic position make proto-postmodernism just a rebranding of late modernism? In a way, yes, but not necessarily. The crucial difference that differentiates the proto-postmodernists from Burke is their shared preoccupation with the ethical questions that violence provokes. For the proto-postmodernists, violence represents the fundamental problematic of political living and modern humanism generally. and their theoretical and artistic engagements center on disentangling the structures and abstractions that create violence and the violence’s destructive impact on individual dignity, whether the self acting on the other or the structure on the subject. On this point, proto-postmodernism overlaps with yet diverges from postmodernism as well because it critiques modern humanist systems and structures because of the violence it causes. However, the proto-postmodern writers frame their analyses and representations of these structures with respect to ethics and political life, maintaining a humanistic faith in individual autonomy and expressiveness because they envision language as a site of unity rather than division and commit to promoting political action and ethical thought,

not just questioning. Despite their underlying humanistic compulsions, they view modern humanism's unbridled belief in the self's expression and self-creation as a legitimating factor in violence.

Arendt's analysis of the students' violent rhetoric and its genesis best encapsulates the proto-postmodern rejection of modern humanism's excesses and its advocacy of the limits of humanistic agency.<sup>8</sup> Pulling on the threads of the students' principles, Arendt finds another major divergence between the student rebels and Marxism besides its moralism: its glorification of violence. Again, this contradictory exaltation points not to a misreading of Marx, but to the complicated ground between abstraction and political reality in modern humanism. In "[t]he strong Marxist rhetoric of the New Left," Arendt sees "coincid[ing] with [this rhetoric] the steady growth of the entirely non-Marxian conviction, proclaimed by Mao Tse-tung, that 'Power grows out of the barrel of a gun'" (*Violence* 11). While Arendt argues "Marx was aware of the role of violence in history," she reads him as placing it as "secondary" because "not violence but the contradictions inherent in the old society brought about its end" (11). The turn of some of the student factions post-1968 into believing in violence as a means of social change roots itself then not in Marxist thought but rather, as Arendt outlines, the violence-as-ontology of Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Fanon (12-13, 19-21).<sup>9</sup> She quotes Sartre via Fanon as saying "that 'irrepressible violence ... is man recreating himself,'" and she sees in his thought both "his basic disagreement with Marx on the question of violence" as well as his investment in modern humanism: "[T]he idea of man creating himself is strictly in the tradition of Hegelian and Marxian thinking; it is the very basis of all leftist humanism" (12). A different take on the self-centricity of aesthetic modernism, Sartre's and Fanon's theories take political subjectivity of the individual as self-expression and self-creation through violence. Although they represent the

extremes of leftist humanism, the theoretical stance espoused by Sartre and Fanon, which the student rebels integrate into their thought, remains in the boundaries of modern humanism. On one hand, it holds a political vision centered on the human subject and its formation, and yet, on the other hand, the exigency of this formation requires the negation of the “other” through violence, much like the logical abstractions of totalitarianism but on an individual, rather than collective, level. The violent rhetoric in 1968 thus embodies an anti-humanist humanism, one which remains humanist in its theoretical abstraction but calls for an “immanent anti-humanism” to bring the self to fruition. In this instance, anti-humanist means serve modern humanist ends.

The ultimate end of this form of anti-humanism, the essence of its excess that legitimates this violence for the proto-postmoderns, is Progress. As Arendt remarks, she believes the many inconsistencies in the students’ “loyalty” to Marxism “has something to do with the concept of Progress, with an unwillingness to part with a notion that used to unite Liberalism, Socialism, and Communism into the ‘Left...’” (25). Tracing the trajectory of this concept, she describes how at the “[b]eginning of the nineteenth century, all ... limitations [to Progress] disappeared” as its “movement” was conceived to have “neither beginning nor end” (26). The allure of Progress, as Arendt sees it, is its ability “not only [to explain] the past without breaking up the time continuum” but also to “serve as a guide for acting into the future....giv[ing] an answer to the troublesome question, And what shall we do now?” (26). Progress settles the uncertainty of the future because “nothing altogether new and totally unexpected can happen” (27). It reduces social change, as with Marx or his revolutionary progeny Sartre and Fanon, or continual development, as with the imperialist capitalism such revolutionaries resist, down to a predetermined process. Unlimited Progress—the hangover of enlightenment and modern humanism—acts as the common ground between these oppositional forces within humanism,

fostering an ethical framework that legitimates any action, including violence and murder, that will conceivably march their goals into the future. The final legitimating factor both for the liberal humanist and its revolutionary counterpart is the metanarrative, whose center relies on this notion of Progress. Although modern humanists defend their violent actions by invoking metanarratives of human emancipation, an ideal that will come at some unforetold date in the future, the ethical counter-humanism of proto-postmodernists such as Arendt and Camus expose the illegitimacy of this claim because of its ties to totalitarianism and the infringements on human dignity under Nazism and Stalinism.

**“Is There a Logic to the Point of Death?”:  
Totalitarianism, Anti-Humanism, and Humanism’s Metanarratives**

Indeed, if Prometheus were to reappear, modern man would treat him as the gods did long ago: they would nail him to a rock, in the name of the very humanism he was the first to symbolize.

—Albert Camus, “Prometheus in the Underworld”

The insanity Nazism represented within modernity’s ethical framework brought into question collective faith in human progress and its modern humanistic origins. Its systematic violence and abuse of authority predicated a fracturing of Western postwar society’s confidence in modern humanism’s efficacy to prevent such trespasses against humanity, particularly for France, whose intellectual and political climate birthed much of the groundwork for poststructuralist theory. As Germaine Brée comments in her comparative critical biography *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment*, “[The Enlightenment] had been ... a whole way of looking at life that, for the French, 1914 had shaken and 1940 had shattered” (39). The political fallout from the Occupation years recast the Enlightenment intellectual tradition as “a dangerously illusory fiction if not a downright lie,” causing the philosophical framework of the French intelligentsia to become “inextricably entangled in the process of reevaluation” (39). As Brée presents it, Camus and Sartre “are a certain degree representative” of the work done in untangling Enlightenment values as they “reoriented their thinking toward the social dimensions of the individual” after exploring the modern themes of estrangement and alienation in their early works (39-40). The failings of modern humanism’s self-centric ethics and their shared experiences in the Resistance to Nazi occupation prompted their commitment to this new task because modernist themes, engagements, and concepts, as Genter reminds us, could no longer respond to the political demands of the time.

Camus's invocation of the Promethean myth in the context of humanism, going beyond the symbolism of rebellion and revolt, lyrically calls attention to the divisions between his politics and Sartre's, a precursory statement to their feud over political violence that split them in the 1950s. Leading into his claim about how his contemporaries would treat the mythical figure in "Prometheus in the Underworld," he argues Promethean humanism "believes that both souls and bodies can be freed at the same time," whereas "[m]an today believes that we must free the body, even if the mind must suffer temporary death" (139). Although this essay was originally published in 1947, it signals his stance on the constraints he sees underlying the abstractions of Marxist thought that dominated French intellectual circles. Camus illustrates his objection to Marxism most poignantly when he says, "[M]en today have chosen history ... [b]ut instead of mastering it, they agree a little more each day to be its slave" (140). Between this provocation and the epigram's claim, he highlights the troublesome relationship Marx's philosophy has with the humanism/counter-humanism binary we have constructed in retrospect: the proletariat (humanity) is the agent of historical change, yet its agency will always remain subject to the forces and movement (or narrative) of History. Such complexities and discontinuities in Marxism's relationship to modern humanism open the conceptual space for humanist values to invert its professed ends of enriching and emancipating humanity collectively into ideas that legitimate violence and anti-humanism.

When viewed from an ethical angle, "discontinuity" provides a language to understand the humanistic ground from which proto-postmodern theorists' critique Marx's historical understanding. For Arendt and Camus, it represents the unrelenting modern desire to give human existence a dignified meaning in the wake of dethroning God and King. Camus asks in *The Rebel*, "But if we are alone beneath the empty heavens, if we must die forever, how can we

really exist?” (250). The moderns answer by “attempt[ing] to conquer a new existence” that lives by the principle “to be was to act” in the hope of “fabricat[ing] an affirmative ... dismissed until the end of time” (250-251). As Arendt says in “The Concept of History,” conceiving history as a process of fabricating a determined end is an attempt “to escape from the frustrations and fragility of human action” driven by an inability “to cope with unpredictability” and “human plurality” (303, 294). When Marxism turns history into *History*, it concocts a story that places every action and event in a narrative chain progressing toward a predetermined end—an end that achieves continuity and totality, a “closed universe” that realizes the end of history. However, Arendt argues the process of fabricating this end could only come about through “[t]otal conditioning” because of the spontaneous nature of human plurality and sociality (303).<sup>10</sup> Due to the discontinuities in the political world and history itself, Marxism thus necessitates methods of enforcing the truth of its “metanarrative”—its claim of knowing the story behind humanity’s collective emancipation—and as Arendt and Camus critique Stalinism’s totalitarian character, they penetrate how its violence, logicity, and terror results from the aspiration to achieve the Marxist metanarrative’s supposedly humanist and ethical end.

Although the term “metanarrative” furthers our understanding of Arendt’s and Camus’s humanistic criticism of Stalinism, this philosophical concept originates with Jean-François Lyotard’s epistemological work in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, which does not explore modern humanism’s and the metanarrative’s complicity in totalitarian terror. Thus, in order to understand why Lyotard overlooks the political ramifications of the metanarrative as well as Camus’s exclusion from postmodern theory, a brief look into the Sartre and Camus quarrel throughout the 1950s over Stalinism will explicate the Sartre/Camus binary’s influence on the poststructuralist turn toward language, contextualizing the formative moments



of postmodern counter-humanism. Although the poststructuralists sought a “third way” out of Cold War politics, Charles Forsdick, in “Camus and Sartre: The Great Quarrel,” underscores how both Camus and Sartre had their sights set on a similar third form of political engagement between capitalism and communism, but the immediate and intense divisions in geopolitics caused a fracture in their commitments:

In the political climate of the Cold War, with the collapse of any hopes of social revolution in France, Sartre (and to a lesser extent Camus) had briefly flirted with the idea of creating a third political force, the ‘Rassemblement démocratique et révolutionnaire’. When this project faltered ... Sartre ... drifted towards the French Communist Party (PCF); Camus ... found himself increasingly unwilling to align himself with any orthodoxy or common cause. (121)

Nealon’s “open/closed” binary and the search for a third way emerges here once again in contraposition to the Cold War paradigm, but in the generation prior to the poststructuralists. Unlike the postmodern counter-humanists, however, Camus and Sartre imagined this binary in the context of their political situation rather than philosophically, seeking to form a political movement apart from American capitalism and Soviet communism at first.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Brée notes the influence Sartre’s and Camus’s writings had on students of the era, observing that “the questions they had raised and the solutions they had adopted were ... those debated by the insurgent students” (41).<sup>12</sup> Framing the political issues of the time, Sartre’s turn toward Marxism and Camus’s resistance to its dominance on the left sketches the intellectual and philosophical grounding of the two political positions of the student movements—the revolutionary and the moralistic.

However, like tumbling dominoes, their split along the boundaries of political violence also foretells the doom of leftist opposition in the sixties. Deconstructing Sartre's and Camus's "transform[ation] ... into unapologetic Stalinist and reactionary apologist" stereotypes (Forsdick 122), Ronald Aronson in "Camus and Sartre on Violence" moderately describes how "[e]ach of them ... denounced a single dimension of contemporary violence, Camus targeting revolutionary violence and Sartre targeting the violence structurally imposed by social systems based on inequality" (68). Despite Aronson's narrow reading of Camus, his insight into the ripples caused by Camus and Sartre's fallout on this issue, sparked by the publication of Camus's *Rebel* in 1951, underscores the importance of this fracture in the French intelligentsia.<sup>13</sup> He writes:

After their split the Cold War's 'either/or' would dominate the Left.... Much of the Left learned to justify one side or the other. Thus were the hopes of a generation to move toward socialism *and* freedom ... to be dashed. People on the Left were pressured to make an impossible choice: between what became Sartre's grim realism (communism as the only path to meaningful change), and Camus's visceral rejection of communism.... Sartre and Camus voiced ... the half-truths and half-lies of what became the tragedy of the Left – not only in France but across the world – for at least the next generation. Camus and Sartre came to insist [through their literature] that there were only two alternatives: Camus's rebel and Sartre's revolutionary. (72)

Their spat had wider reaching effects than just a crumbling friendship: it set the terms of the Left's counter-discourse through the Cold War period, constructing another political binary reflective of the larger geopolitical context. In the wake of their argument, the Left became fractured, factionalized around Arendt's question, "And what shall we do now?" Modes of

political engagement and ethical thought thus calcified along lines already demarcated by Cold War geopolitics, and leftist dialogue closed off to the acceptance of either fighting for the Stalinist model or the implicit continuation of American capitalism.

This backdrop of the Sartre/Camus political binary in France makes the poststructuralist search for openness more intelligible because it explains how the failure of these existential humanists to provide a tertiary mode of politics prompted the need for a new method of engagement. Thus the turn toward epistemology and language as politics and ethics collapses back on itself and reproduces modern forms of humanism. Even with this turn, political questions are not completely off the table: as Huysen notes, “Lyotard,” one of the only French theorists who has named and described the postmodern at length, “is a political thinker” (214).<sup>14</sup> For Lyotard, who Alan Schrift notes was active in “third way” politics throughout the 1950s, the language of modern humanism, which legitimated various forms of knowledge in the form of the metanarrative during modernity, implicitly unravels into postmodernity.<sup>15</sup> Despite his political attitudes and concerns, Lyotard’s analyses never clarify the political reasons behind the decline of metanarratives, and his oversight opens space for the proto-postmoderns to speak and complement his work on the beginnings of the postmodern period.

While he indexes a series of political events that invalidate each metanarrative in “Missive on Universal History,” counting Auschwitz and May 1968 among them (29), Lyotard does not theorize a comprehensive framework that explains the political mechanisms of metanarratives and their consequences. In “Marxism, Postmodernism, Zizek,” Brian Donahue highlights this missing component when he writes how Lyotard’s epistemo-linguistic approach “precludes the kind of large-scale analyses that would allow adequate attempts to elaborate connections between the ... theory he proposes and the social, economic, and cultural forces to

which he only occasionally refers” (par. 2). Such an accusation does not fall far from the mark, but Donahue’s cynicism deemphasizes the usefulness of Lyotard’s contribution to the discourse of postmodernity and the purpose of his approach. Contrasting Donahue’s analysis of *The Postmodern Condition*, Wlad Godzich clarifies the reason for Lyotard’s approach in his afterword to *The Postmodern Explained*, arguing that “[Lyotard] did not ... seek an external cause ... for the disinclination felt toward the metanarratives of legitimation, but attempted instead to locate it in these metanarratives themselves...” (114). Here, Huyssen reminds us that poststructural counter-humanists are the archaeologists of modernity, and Lyotard performs the same role in his theory on metanarratives: descriptive in posture and operating within modernity’s assumptions and premises. Such a stance, though, does not discredit Lyotard, as Donahue may want to suggest. Rather, reading Lyotard’s theory on metanarratives in conjunction with Camus and Arendt adds not only to our understanding of the postmodern perspective but also the role of totalitarianism in sparking the postmodern turn.

Buttressing Lyotard’s deconstruction of the metanarrative’s linguistic and epistemological intricacies, Arendt and Camus examine the metanarrative’s political functions and implications, actively questioning its legitimacy (delegitimizing it) as an ethical standard for judgment and action. Indeed, for Lyotard, delegitimation is inherent to the metanarrative itself, an inevitable *process* arising out of the proliferation of science, but for the proto-postmoderns, the metanarrative’s delegitimation is an act founded in an ethical criticism of political life, a reaction to violence and the anti-humanist ideologies that degrade dignity. Where Lyotard says, “[Postmodern] incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it” (*Condition* xxiv), Arendt rebuts, “Progress ... can no longer serve as the standard by which to evaluate the disastrously rapid change-processes we have let loose [through

science]” (*Violence* 30). In short, the proto-postmodern exploration of modern humanism’s metanarratives exposes their liberatory claims as wholly absurd because they produce the opposite of human emancipation: a systematized violence that actualizes immanent anti-humanism. By immanent, I mean immediate, “in the world,” *real* in the sense that either a lifeless corpse can be touched and witnessed or, from the standpoint of proto-postmodern humanistic ethics, oppression of the mind and body that coerces enslavement by logic or violence. At the center of this active delegitimation through fiction-making and theory are the metanarratives of Marxism and capitalism, viewed by the proto-postmoderns as one in the same because of their iron grip on Cold War political and ethical thinking and because of their mutual reliance on the Idea of Progress, whose logic breeds immanent anti-humanism and eternally defers dignity and emancipation to the future. Indeed, Progress itself as an idea embodies the absurd humanistic anti-humanism of modernity that the proto-postmodernists resist.

As Lyotard conceives it, metanarratives are at the heart of modernity and are linked to modern humanism. Rather than getting steeped in the contest over the technicalities engulfed in defining the “metanarrative,” a simplified interpretation from Lyotard himself serves as a better grounding for this discussion.<sup>16</sup> In his “Apostil on Narratives,” Lyotard clarifies:

The “metanarratives” I was concerned with in *The Postmodern Condition* are those that have marked modernity: the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labor, ... the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience, and even — if we include Christianity itself in modernity — ... the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls.... (17-18)

Lyotard rebrands various modern humanisms in this passage under the name metanarratives: Enlightenment, Marxist, and liberal humanisms, respectively, alongside a Christian humanism. Indeed, speaking of Enlightenment humanism, Davies claims Thomas Paine's "*Age of Reason* forms a link between what Lyotard calls 'the two major versions of the narrative of legitimation'" in *Postmodern Condition*: the political narrative of humanity's emancipation and the philosophical narrative of speculative knowledge (27). According to Angélique du Toit in *The Lyotard Dictionary*, these narratives legitimate because they "exer[t] a strong influence on what is considered true and just ... [because they] act as a measurement against which other truths are to be judged" (86). As the sovereign truth and ethical standard, humanism gains its weight in modern thinking, which explains in part the counter-humanism of postmodern theorists, but on a closer inspection of *The Postmodern Condition*, these two types of narratives do not produce a homogenous mode of thought for Lyotard. Instead, the political and philosophical narratives diverge in how they express their humanist tenets along the lines of history and emancipation.

As Davies's comment on Paine implies, the two narratives of legitimation Lyotard identifies—the philosophical (or speculative) and the political (or emancipatory)—are not intrinsically linked, but oppose each other in their relationship to human subjectivity. Davies notes this opposition when he argues, in connection to his reading of *The Age of Reason*, "[t]he two themes converge and compete in complex ways ... and between them set the boundaries of its various humanisms" (27), which Lyotard's epistemo-linguistic analysis details further. In *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard describes the political narrative as holding "humanity" as its subject,<sup>17</sup> while the philosophical narrative uses "the speculative spirit ... embodied ... in a System" instead (31, 33). While he formulates these narratives in terms of their relationship to

scientific knowledge, it is more important to focus on the theoretical implications of how each narrative situates science in its paradigm. The political narrative takes science as its object; it serves the narrative's subject, humanity or the people, in its ability to self-govern. However, for the philosophical narrative, both science and humanity act as objects; the subject, an "idea of a System" or a "universal 'history,'" sees these objects as "its own self-presentation and formulation in the ordered knowledge of all of its forms contained in the empirical sciences" (34). In humanist terms, the first centers on the human subject, taking the emancipation of humanity as its legitimating principle, but the second holds the process and movement of history as its center, where human emancipation acts as an affirmation of this movement. Its principle is Reason by virtue of its immanence in the human history it constructs, or, as Lyotard says in his "Missive," "*All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real*" (29).<sup>18</sup> Although Lyotard separates the speculative narrative, or Hegelian Idealism, from the emancipatory narrative, or Humanism "proper," Hegelian philosophy remains invested in the value of human emancipation, but focuses on philosophical, rather than political, means.<sup>19</sup>

When discussing the political contours of metanarratives, however, Lyotard abandons the speculative narrative of legitimation. Consequently, he signifies metanarrative solely with "the [political] narratives of emancipation" in his "Memoranda on Legitimation" (41), an essay on the relationship between mythic narratives, metanarratives, and totalitarianism, despite the term being associated only with the philosophical narrative in the body of *The Postmodern Condition* (34). The ultimate irony in this reversal is the antagonism Lyotard expresses toward the emancipatory narrative when he defines the metanarrative in *Postmodern Condition*: "But what [German idealism] produces is a metanarrative, for the story's narrator must not be a people mired in the particular positivity of its traditional knowledge ... [but] a metasubject in the

process of formulating both the legitimacy of the discourses of empirical sciences and that of the direct institutions of popular cultures” (34). The definitional language here implies that the political and philosophical narratives are distinct according to the narrator’s identity, and Lyotard privileges the latter when defining the metanarrative. While a collective notion of humanity tells the tale of its own emancipation in the former narrative, a transcendent, abstract subject speaks of “the becoming of spirit ... in a rational narration” of history in the latter (33). Despite the application of the philosophical label to the speculative narrative, it still legitimates political institutions, implicating it in political modernity as Davies points out regarding Paine’s political thought. For Arendt, however, the symbiosis of political and abstract narrators embodies the missing link between totalitarianism and modern humanism’s metanarratives because of the nature of political ideology.

While Lyotard argues that “[t]otalitarianism ... subject[s] institutions legitimated by the Idea of [emancipation] to legitimation by myth” (“Memoranda” 56), Arendt conceives of totalitarianism as subjecting political thought to legitimation by the abstractions of the speculative narrative. Her argument in “On the Nature of Totalitarianism” illustrates the domineering role of abstraction over politics in the totalitarian model rather clearly. Distinguishing the totalitarian dictator from the tyrant in order to extinguish claims that Nazism and Stalinism are merely tyrannies, she describes how “[t]he totalitarian dictator ... does not believe that he is a free agent with the power to execute his arbitrary will, but, instead, the executioner of laws higher than himself” (346). The abstract, transcendent “laws of Nature or History” legitimate the actions of the totalitarian figurehead, and as Arendt interprets this type of legitimation, it inverts the end of human emancipation driving most metanarratives, a product of the Hegelian conception of history: “The Hegelian definition of Freedom as insight into and



conforming to ‘necessity’ has here found a new and terrifying realization” (346). Such legitimation through abstraction leads to inverting emancipation to signify freedom not for a collective idea of humanity but for a universal law that unifies reality and subjects humanity to itself.

However, Lyotard acerbically contests linking Hegel and speculative discourse to totalitarianism. Responding to an attack by Gérard Raulet in “Postscript to Terror and the Sublime,” Lyotard reasserts the mythic quality of totalitarian legitimation: “[The totalitarian] appeal is to an inverse legitimacy, [not to achieving an idea in reality but] to the authority of roots and of a race placed at the origin of the Western epoch...” (68). Of course, he separates speculative *discourse* from totalitarianism rather than the speculative *narrative*, which may seem like an inconsequential nuance, but Arendt’s definition of ideologies, which “determine the political actions of the [totalitarian] ruler and make these actions tolerable to the ruled population,” clarifies the narrative’s role in providing legitimacy: “[I]deologies are systems of explanation of life and world that claim to explain everything, *past and future*, without further concurrence with actual experience” (“Nature” 349-350, emphasis added). In the case of ideology, the originary myth encompasses only one part of the narrative because ideology envisions a history from its origin to its end and appeals to an progressive explanation of history rather than a “founding” instance. Ideology and its speculative narrative links together all events in time according to a totalized principle, or law, that predetermines not only the narrative chain but also the actions needed to achieve its end. However, as Arendt observes, this principle does not necessarily adhere to reality, and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* represents the disconnects and discontinuities between ideological thinking and the spontaneous human reality outside its abstractions and the hold ideology has on those who believe in the speculative narrative.

While not representing totalitarianism in *Invisible Man*, the interaction of Ellison's narrator with the Brotherhood complements Arendt's thought by representing the mindsets of those faithful to its ideology. After seeing Tod Clifton, a former Brotherhood member, selling and performing with Sambo dolls on a street corner, the narrator reflects on this act "as though [Clifton] had chosen ... to fall outside of *history*" (434). The fact that the narrator conceives of an inside/outside binary to history speaks to the ideological nature of his thinking; it replicates legal discourse, where "out-law" signifies being outside of the law, and people can fall inside or outside of a legal or social code. Beyond conflating history with legality, the narrator equates this inside position with meaningful, dignified existence and human emancipation as well, believing "[Clifton] knew that only in the Brotherhood ... could [they] avoid being empty Sambo dolls," yet Clifton's "contemptuous smile" when he recognizes the narrator while manipulating the puppet implies both acknowledgement and an identificatory subversion of the narrator's belief (433-434). Johnnie Wilcox speaks to the double meaning of "Sambo" during *Invisible Man*'s battle royale scene in "Black Power: Minstrelsy and Electricity." He says, "When the 'blonde man affirms with a wink' what the M.C. says and calls the narrator 'Sambo' ... [t]he wink announces ... 'Sambo' is not just a demeaning epithet but also a contextually accurate naming of the narrator" (997-998). Clifton takes the place of the blonde man from earlier in the novel, another cyclical recurrence in the novel, and his smile announces that the narrator's place "inside" history means he embodies the empty Sambo doll, while being outside history puts him in charge of the Sambo image. For Clifton, plunging out of history and ideological thinking means empowerment, a thought foreign to the narrator because he remains in the grasp of the Brotherhood's Marxist ideology.

Indeed, Clifton's "plunge" takes a greater and contrary significance for the narrator once he witnesses Clifton's death at the hands of the police, foreshadowing his eventual defiance of the Brotherhood doctrinaires. The narrator's initial anger at Clifton turns into questioning as he churns the meaning of being "outside history" while wandering in the Harlem community. A group of African-American boys sparks this shift, and he asks himself whether "history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment ... not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise!" (441). His ruminations pull on the threads of the ideological concept of history his Brotherhood training professes. History is scientific and rational, a driving logic. By juxtaposing this view with a history personified as spontaneous and chaotic, he realizes the contingency of the reality around him: "They'd been there all along, but somehow I'd missed them.... They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them" (443). His ideological thinking, conceiving the world only in terms of history, produces his blindness to his community—to their dignity—and renders Clifton invisible once he falls outside the Brotherhood. Only after witnessing a moment of violence does he reconcile what actually happens with what is *professed* to happen, and the community's visibility congeals if and only if they accept to be inside history and conform to its logic. When the narrator expresses his experiences and the reason why he valorizes Clifton at his funeral to the Brotherhood, he explains to them, "I'm describing a part of reality which I know;" however, one of the Brothers counters, "And that is the most questionable statement of all" (471). This rebuttal exposes how the Marxist Idea of history negates any reality outside of its ideology. According to its logic, Clifton cannot be reconciled and is outside of history because "the [Brotherhood's] directives had changed on him" (478), but this view of reality effectively says, "To be outside the Brotherhood is to be outside history." Its logic and only its logic

explains the world, yet as the narrator comes to realize, this ideological assumption cannot hold a monopoly on life and politics because of the spontaneity of human existence. However, the ideological thought of totalitarianism sees human plurality only as a barrier to actualizing its logic in the world, which, Arendt argues, “foreshadows the connection between ideology and terror” (“Nature” 350).

Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* provides the most illustrative metaphor for the connection between ideology and terror because its technical description of the apocalyptic ice-nine demonstrates the intersectionality between speculative logic and anti-humanism, symbolically detailing both the socio-political and ideological elements that play into totalitarian terror. As Dr. Breed—the lead scientist at the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company—describes it, ice-nine relies on “‘a seed’ ... a tiny grain” in order to “[teach water] atoms the novel way in which to stack and lock, to crystallize, to freeze,” and replicate its pattern (45). Thus, the seed of ice-nine functions like the domineering ideology of totalitarianism because it imposes a pattern, or logic, upon the atoms to which they are forced to adhere in order to actualize ice-nine in reality. To draw the connection between ice-nine’s metaphorical representation of terror further, Arendt deploys the phrase “atomized society” when recounting the socio-political conditions necessary for terror to dominate society, and this condition enables terror to have “the power to bind together completely isolated individuals” (“Nature” 356). Taken as a social and political metaphor, ice-nine describes both the social condition of terror, where individuals are “atoms,” and its result, the “binding together” and freezing of these atomized individuals according to a “seed” that produces a totality.

While this metaphor for the terroristic paradigm under totalitarianism already represents an anti-humanist social order, where ideology trumps the spontaneity social and individual

human living, Vonnegut's narrator presses Dr. Breed to reveal the global anti-humanist consequences of ice-nine, a parallel of totalitarianism's aspiration to totality. Starting with a back-and-forth that explains how an entire swamp would freeze over by putting a seed of ice-nine in a puddle, the narrator pushes him to extrapolate that eventually—after the swamp's streams freeze over as ice-nine—lakes, rivers, oceans, and rain would also become ice and, as he exclaims in frustration, “that would be the end of the world!” (47-50). At the end of the novel, ice-nine precipitates a totalized, frozen world where all forms of life are eradicated and crystallized in ice as the scientist prophesied. Although this aspect of ice-nine does not perfectly parallel totalitarianism, which needs a social body in order to rule, it provides an allegory for the way totalitarian domination seeks to totalized the world and human society according to a single logic, a single “seed,” as well as the “human” aspect of society itself—its spontaneity.

Again, Arendt's thought is instrumental in understanding Vonnegut's metaphor for totalitarianism. She claims, “For the totalitarian experiment of changing the world according to an ideology, total domination of the inhabitants of one country is not enough” because “[t]he existence ... of any non-totalitarian country is a direct threat to the consistency of the ideological claim” (“Nature” 352). Because totalitarianism's legitimacy relies on the complete consistency of its logic, it thus demands globalized coherence, a totalization of the globe that reflects its claims about reality, much like what ice-nine produces once unleashed on the world. It restructures and solidifies life according to its pattern, remaking the world and humanity in its image. However, whereas totalitarianism only aspires to totality, ice-nine automatically totalizes the world by virtue of its scientific and technological character, and this contrast between political and scientific totalization underscores the danger science poses to the continued existence of human life as well as its political consequences. Both in totalitarianism and its

symbolic representation in the totality of ice-nine, a single idea calcifies “human” variance and subjects the world to its truth, but as the scientific and apocalyptic nature of ice-nine implies, the logicity of modern science that produces violence proves to be even more insidious than the overt militarism and terror of totalitarianism, which Camus analyzes in each of his philosophical essays.

Although Camus’s analysis of totalitarianism and its logic comes in his 1951 political treatise *The Rebel*, the problem of adhering to pure logical thinking also informs his earlier philosophical work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942 under Nazi occupation. While *The Rebel* continues the project of delegitimizing Marxism’s grip on political thought in France by reimagining the disastrous potential of modern humanism’s mode of legitimation through a totalized narrative, *Myth* hints at the ethical core of Camus’s thinking that resounds with his claims in *The Rebel* because, as Ronald Srigley explains in *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity*, “the famous ‘starting point’ arguments” of both works express a desire for “a way beyond modernity’s conclusions while remaining faithful to its premises” (8). In “Rethinking the Absurd,” David Carroll remarks how a single “‘exigency’ informs Camus’s writings long after he abandoned the concept of the Absurd itself” and the propositions he laid out in *Myth* in the postwar years (54). Although he correctly characterizes Camus’s answer to this exigency as a “‘will to resist,’ even or especially when resistance appears hopeless” (54), Carroll glosses over what Camus identifies as the demand of his time—violence done onto the self and the other—which is a much more significant thread between *Myth* and *Rebel* when considering Camus’s critique of modernity.

The opening pages of *Myth* lay out Camus's intended method of exploration and the essential problematic of suicide he wishes to cover. Beneath his focus on the question of suicide, he reformulates the boundaries of his inquiry in terms of logic:

Shades of meaning, contradictions, the psychology that an 'objective' mind can always introduce into all problems have no place in this pursuit and this passion. It calls simply for an unjust—in other words, logical—thought. . . . Reflection on suicide gives me an opportunity to raise the only problem to interest me: is there a logic to the point of death? (7).

Taking an anti-rationalist (and postmodern) stance when explicating his method, one which “acknowledges the feeling that all true knowledge is impossible” (9), Camus names purely rational thought as one of the central problematics enveloped in the question of suicide. Framing death in these terms, he places logic at the center of his critique of modern philosophy and modern politics because, for Camus, the pairing of logic and violence are ever-present forces during both Nazi occupation and the Cold War era. “Does logic lead to violence?” Camus continues to ask from *Myth* to *The Rebel*, which extends his protest to modern rationality into the realm of political and historical thinking.

While *Myth* looks into epistemological and personally existential forms of violence, affirming totalizing logic's role in “philosophical suicide,” *The Rebel* centers on the question of murder, which he calls “logical crime” (3), and terror, a systematic violence whose speculative logic needs the ethical values of modern humanism in order to be legitimate.<sup>20</sup> Concluding his thoughts on Stalinism, Camus writes:

Those who launch themselves into [history] preaching its absolute rationality encounter servitude and terror and emerge into the universe of the concentration

camps.... The rational revolution ... wants to realize the total man described by Marx. The logic of history, from the moment that it is totally accepted, gradually leads it, against its most passionate convictions, to mutilate man more and more and to transform itself into objective crime.... [Stalinism represents] the exaltation of the executioner by the victims.... [It] aims at liberating all men by provisionally enslaving them all. (246-247)

While it seems ridiculous that the abused would place the abusers on a pedestal, Camus implies in this concluding flourish how this absurd position results from the subjection of the humanist value of emancipation to speculative logic—subjecting the ethic of dignity to the speculative narrative of History that is imbued with rationality. Because History extols human freedom and dignity as its end and is viewed as the only guarantee for these values, those who believe in its movement claim erroneously that “it is already, in itself, a standard of values” (247). Only by virtue of the political narrative of legitimation can doctrinaires bestow it with ethical value, yet it maintains legitimacy only if History remains consistent and moves along to its predetermined end. Thus, everyone in the political community must assert the objectivity and consistency of historical logic, or, in other words, the inevitability of emancipation’s eventual realization via History. The marriage of this modern humanist end of emancipation with faith in History’s abstract inevitability, for Camus, leads directly to violence and terror.

Thus, when it promises emancipation through a deterministic law of history, modern political humanism becomes an anti-humanism that kills and enslaves, inverting its own ethical values. Camus expresses this transition when he says, “The land of humanism has become ... the land of inhumanity” (248). Matthew Sharpe’s reading of *The Rebel* in “Rebellion and the Primacy of Ethics” explains that Camus argues against the supposed humanism of Marxism



because its “founding principle or value ... is a future community—a ‘we shall be’—whose pursuit renders secondary the people (or ‘we’) who happen to exist today...” (84), and as Camus announces, the realization of this future human community through historical inevitability will never come to pass because “[t]he idea of a mission of the proletariat has not ... been able to formulate itself in history” (215). The “historical objectivity” of Marxism “has no definable meaning, but power [and terror] will give it a content by decreeing that everything of which it does not approve is guilty” (243). The idea of history, which guarantees the modern humanist end of emancipation and dignity, must rely on terror and anti-humanist means in order to remain objective and consistent because actual history has disproved its foundation premise. Because those bound in Marxist ideology continue to proclaim the inevitability of dignity at the end of History, it legitimates every death that has been framed as necessary to reach this end. Those faithful to history’s ability to realize freedom take the rebel Prometheus, who actively works toward humanist ends in the present, and nails him to a rock because his actions do not fit the historical paradigm. In an absurd twist, the modern humanism of Marx inevitably creates the violence of anti-humanism.

Camus’s fervor when attacking Marxism, though, hides his anti-capitalist stance, an often overlooked aspect of Camus’s contribution to critical theory because of the stereotypes consequent of the Sartre/Camus binary. As Camus sees it, a major portion of Marxism’s ideological anti-humanism results from the modern bourgeois soil from which it grew, indicting capitalism’s claim to human enrichment through industrial production in the anti-humanist turn Marxist historical logic makes. Indeed, prior to his polemic against the legitimated violence of Marxism’s vision of history, he frames the Marxist metanarrative as an offspring of capitalism and enlightenment:

Marx's scientific Messianism is itself of bourgeois origin. Progress, the future of science, the cult of technology and of production, are bourgeois myths, which in the nineteenth century became dogma.... [According to Marx,] [t]he inevitable result of private capitalism is a kind of State capitalism which will then only have to put to the service of the community to give birth to a society where capital and labor, henceforth indistinguishable, will produce, in one identical advance toward progress, both justice and abundance.... [This inevitable progress of production means] [t]he proletariat "can and must accept the bourgeois revolution as a condition of the working-class revolution." (193, 204)

As much as Camus condemns Marxism, he does so because it intensifies the capitalist faith in production and the scientific faith in progress. It not only tolerates but praises the perpetuation of modernity's economic injustices and the degradation of human dignity. If we recall how Lyotard defines the capitalist metanarrative, he says its end envisions "the enrichment of all humanity through [its] progress," so when Camus juxtaposes Marxism and capitalism, he illustrates how Marxism merely poses an addendum to capitalist humanism, which complicates the revolutionary aspect of its metanarrative. Marxist History maintains that the progress of capitalist production will realize "the enrichment of all humanity," but then stipulates this production will eventually transform into a more humane and dignified form of labor.

For Camus, this commonality has wider reaching effects in Marxism, determining its own idea of history because "[i]n that all human reality has its origins in the fruits of production, historical evolution is revolutionary because the economy is revolutionary" (197). Marxism's speculative narrative, the transcendent logic to which all human reality conforms, thus derives itself from capitalism as well because it follows in step with the modern, capitalist notion of

economic and scientific progress. Camus reinforces this point when he says, “Nineteenth-century Messianism [or faith in emancipatory progress], whether it is revolutionary or bourgeois, has not resisted the successive developments of this science and this history, which to different degrees they have deified” (197). While Stalinism produces terroristic anti-humanism because it transposes its historical logic into political life, anti-humanism lies dormant in the metanarrative of capitalist humanism as much as in the Marxist metanarrative because they both deify progress as a guiding logic and principle in spite of the reality progress has created, which Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* echoes. Camus accounts for the divide between the logic and reality of progress when he says, “That is the mission of the proletariat: to bring forth supreme dignity from supreme humiliation” (205), meaning works must subject themselves to the enslavement of production before finding dignity at the end of history when the proletariat revolt will institute classless society. While he states this anti-humanism in respect to Marxism, the same can be said of the capitalist metanarrative—simply replace “the proletariat” with “economic progress”—which the proto-postmodern novelists aim to illuminate. Through their fictions, they represent the anti-humanist products of America’s humanist metanarratives in order to delegitimize the ideologies of capitalism, scientism, and racism by exposing the absurdity of their humanist and ethical claims.

## **Combating American Anti-Humanism: Absurdity, Rebellion, and Ethics in the Proto-Postmodern Novel**

If, however, loss and violence may be deemed absurd, then we may imagine a way out of the dilemma of excusing violence done to victims or legitimizing revolutionary violence done to victimizers. It is possible to read ... both Camus's and others' absurd ethics, in this sense, as endeavors to make loss and violence meaningless for the sake of delegitimizing loss and violence.

—Matthew H. Bowker, *Rethinking the Politics of Absurdity*

Although Bowker's recent study on the connection between Camus's Absurd and political theory makes significant inroads toward re-reading Camus's *oeuvre*, his central thesis, which reads absurdity "as an endeavor ... to make experience meaningless....[or] an effort to obfuscate or mystify experience," embarks on a logic that hamstring the import of Camus's political and ethical insights (xv). While it serves his argument that absurdity is "the postmodern passion *par excellence*," it misinterprets *The Rebel* by having Camus assert that violence is absurd (or "meaningless").<sup>21</sup> Rather, Camus accounts for violence differently: "In terms of the encounter between human inquiry and the silence of the universe [which results in the Absurd], murder and suicide are one and the same thing, and must be accepted or rejected together" (6). Absurdist reasoning, as presented in *Myth*, famously rejects suicide by virtue of the Absurd and, therefore, rejects murder on the same note: in order to maintain the Absurd, neither the inquirer or the irrationality of the universe can be negated. For Camus, violence is not absurd or meaningless but *a consequence of rejecting* the Absurd either through self-negation (suicide) or the negation of others (murder), the physical manifestation of the refusal to accept that the world is "indifferent." Thus, Bowker's thesis is an analytical misstep; it connects the Absurd to a process of "making" or "fabricating" that Arendt and Camus identify as an aspect of violence. Instead, the Absurd is "the gap" dividing "the certainty I have of my existence and the content I try to give to that assurance," the "divorce" between knowing I am human and the

constructions—the meanings—I impose on the world to remind myself of this humanity (*Myth* 14-15). It is a feeling of morbid epiphany recognizing the meaninglessness of what we “know,” prompted when “the stage sets collapse” rather than a process (10), and seeing it as a process deprives absurdity’s theoretical import because it obscures absurdity’s potential function in political thought and literature.

Deploying the Absurd as a literary tool, the proto-postmodern novelists exemplify how it can be used as a tool for intervening in ethical and political systems that degrade dignity, and critics have observed the role absurdity plays in each work. In the conclusion of “Invisibility, Race, and Homoeroticism,” Michael Hardin sketches the overlaps between racial and sexual invisibility in the context of the absurd choice of passing when “be[ing] freely visible and visibly free” signifies “public liberation” for Ellison and other authors (116-117). Although “lying about one’s identity [is] absurd” when liberation and personal dignity is the goal, he notes that “visibility brings about its own dangers” as he recounts two hate-motivated lynchings as recently as the 1990s (117). While Hardin connects Ellison’s use of absurdity with the anti-humanism Arendt and Camus see operative in modern thinking, Robert Scholes’s argument in “Black Humor and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.” sees the absurdity in *Cat’s Cradle* as a provocation to laughter: “Progress, that favorite prey of satirists from Swift and Voltaire onward, means that some people get free furniture and some get the plague ... [b]ut the spuriousness of progress is not seen here with the [fiery indignation] of the satirist” (par. 11). In his interpretation, Scholes recognizes Vonnegut’s “affinit[y] with some existentialist attitudes” in his humor as well as his tongue-in-cheek prodding at modern progress, but viewing *Cat’s Cradle* and the other proto-postmodern novels like Scholes does as solely “offer[ing] us laughter” instead of “scorn” and “resignation” in their use of absurdity misses the political and ethical intervention at the center of these works

(par. 11). However, Leon Seltzer's take on the absurdity in Heller's *Catch-22* aims closer to its disruptive potential. At the outset of "Absurdity as Moral Insanity," he clarifies "how the novel's absurdities—comic and otherwise—operate almost always to expose the alarming inhumanities which pollute our political, social, and economic system" (290). In this ethical sense, absurdity as device for intervention unifies *Invisible Man*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Catch-22*. Through representing the absurd "gap" or "divorce" between the espoused ethical values of American ideologies (capitalism, scientism, and racism) and their immanent anti-humanism, these proto-postmodern texts expose the absurdity of American humanism and of the idea of progress they rely on for legitimacy.

*Cat's Cradle* presents one of the lucid representations of modern humanism's absurdity in its representation of the gap between capitalism's claim to human enrichment through science and the intended purpose of ice-nine, the scientific product that precipitates the apocalypse at the end of the novel. In doing so, Vonnegut delegitimizes the idea of scientific progress by exposing the banal insanity of "progress" as well as the immanent anti-humanism at the core of such banality. During the narrator's foray into the past life of the deceased father of the atomic bomb, Felix Hoenikker, whom the narrator intends to write about in a nonfictional "account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima" (1), Dr. Breed, a former colleague of Hoenikker, explains to the narrator what prompted Hoenikker to create ice-nine. Breed recalls how "a Marine general ... was hounding [Felix] to do something about mud," and as the general imagined it, "one of the aspects of progress should be that Marines no longer had to fight in mud" (42-43). Out of this request, Hoenikker develops ice-nine to fix the Marines' "mud problem." For the reader who knows that ice-nine causes the world to end, eliminating mud is incomparable to the consequences of the

solution, and the banality of the request in the name of “progress” calls into question not just the legitimacy of the request but the idea of progress itself. This modern “value” rings hollow when solving the mundane problem of mud trumps perpetual violence and war. Moreover, because progress leads to the creation of a scientific product dooming the world to annihilation, the underlying legitimization humanism bestows on the progress of science as an agent of emancipation becomes absurd: ice-nine would liberate the Marines from “two-hundred years of wallowing in mud,” yet realizing this liberation perpetuates war and destroys life in its totality. Just as Camus argues about Marxism, Vonnegut highlights how the deification of progress, scientific in this case instead of political or economic, opens the moral space for the violent and destructive means of ice-nine to be developed and deployed.

In the same vein, Heller’s representation of Milo Minderbinder, the mess hall officer who establishes a capitalist conglomerate in *Catch-22*, exposes the absurdity of capitalism’s faith in unbridled profit as a vehicle of progress, emancipation, and dignity. Seltzer takes this absurdity and the absurd character of Milo as the central theme in *Catch-22*. While he views the novel’s absurdity arising from Milo’s supposed innocence when his actions are framed solely in terms of a loyalty to the “morally insane” logic of capitalism, Seltzer’s interpretation of this “innocence” routinely speaks to capitalist humanism’s absurdity. Reading the scene where Minderbinder “arranges and mercilessly executes the tremendously profitable deal with the Germans to bomb and strafe his own base,” Seltzer argues that “[Milo] is able to commit this cold-blooded atrocity with a clear conscience” because “his morally insane business ethic [makes human impediments] disappear altogether” (294). Likewise, he interprets Milo’s imposition of chocolate-covered cotton on the squadron as a foodstuff as evidence that “Milo’s ruthlessly capitalistic commitments do not, and cannot, support life” (295). Despite Seltzer painting “[his] treachery”

as being “innocently motivated by ... [a] mistaken faith” (299), his numerous examples of Milo’s transgressions against humanity expose how capitalist logic promotes and abets such violence. Seltzer underscores the absurdity of capitalist humanism when he claims that “[Milo] idealistically envisions [his syndicate] as affirming humanity (since ‘everyone has a share’) at the same time that his bedazzled commitment to [profit] leads him systematically to trample on the rights of others” (302). While Seltzer’s article highlights how Milo embodies an “absurd innocence” (302), it also reveals the absurdity of capitalism’s humanistic logic without naming it directly. Indeed, for Milo’s violent actions to be deemed absurdly innocent when viewed through his commitment to capitalist logic, capitalism itself has to be absurd and anti-humanist for Milo to have the moral space to act “faithfully” within its ethical framework.

Ellison takes the absurd anti-humanism of capitalist humanism a step further than Heller in *Invisible Man* by struggling with the absurdity of the relationship between American capitalism and racism. In the narrator’s ruminations during the epilogue, he reflects on the dying words of his grandfather and poses himself a series of questions as he tries to untangle its meaning.<sup>22</sup> Two of these questions, related to one another, ask:

Did he mean say “yes” because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name? Did he mean affirm the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised *to the point of absurdity* even in their own corrupt minds? (574, emphasis added)

The principle he names, in the American context, evokes the humanism of the Declaration of Independence and the social foundations of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”



However, these humanist values were paired with the capitalist institution of American slavery.<sup>23</sup> Richard Hofstadter notes in *The American Political Tradition* that Southern antebellum statesman John C. Calhoun argued for the slave's relative dignity when compared to the devastating effects of free labor relations on workers in Europe (103). Despite such a claim, slavery's inherent violence and human degradation, legitimated by economic and racial logic, undoes the underlying humanism of economic liberalism because it simultaneously dehumanizes African-Americans and excludes them from its emancipatory vision. Thus, Ellison reveals how the capitalist logic of enriching humanity, even from its inception, is an absurd notion because the institution of slavery functioned on an immanent anti-humanism and implies that such thinking aids in perpetuating violence, and thought is the starting point for lapses in humanist ethics.

Complementing Camus's concept of absurdity as a tool for understanding the function of each novel's representation of American logics and their anti-humanism, Arendt's concepts of "representative thinking" and the Socratic "two-in-one" offer a framework for interpreting the texts' portrayal of self-contradictory thought, such as the case of Milo Minderbinder, as well as how such portrayals pose a rebellious counterpoint to the Cold War paradigm. This rebellion, like the novels' use of absurdity, can also be understood in Camusian terms. As he describes it in *The Rebel*, rebellion "says yes and no simultaneously" (13). The contradiction of rebellion's affirmation yet negation comes from its foundation "on the categorical rejection of an intrusion [by authority] that is considered intolerable and on the confused conviction of an absolute right which [...] is more precisely the impression that [the rebel] 'has the right to ...'" (13). Springing from "a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself," the rebel "[t]hus ... implicitly brings into play a standard

of values,” yet because “the individual is not ... the embodiment of the values [the rebel] wishes to defend [but] needs all humanity ... to comprise them,” rebellion engages in the ethical discourse of humanism as well (14, 17). Because the proto-postmodern novels target their negations against the modes of thought and social hierarchies that create or lead to violence and dehumanization rather than humanism itself, they thus rebel against humanist logics by saying “no” to the violence anti-humanist ideologies produce while simultaneously affirming the humanistic value of dignity that they see neglected by modern humanism. For Ellison, Heller, and Vonnegut, the rebel (and humanity) has a right to dignity that is common to all life.

However, the absurdity of modern humanism and its ethics are not self-evident because the novelists play with cultural logics that may also interpellate the reader into the ideologies they represent. Thus, the literary characters who act from these ideologies only can be understood as absurd or humanistically bankrupt by the reader if the novelist intervenes by representing the relationship between thought and action, as in the case with their use of representative and dialogic thought. In “Understanding in Politics,” Arendt explains that “understanding [is] the other side of [political] action” (321). Because thought and action continuously supplement and inform each other, the texts must go beyond representing modern humanism’s absurdity and also rebel against the thinking that allows its characters to commit (or be complicit in) violence while continuing to profess humanist ends. To do so, the novelists represent a humanistic character in their narratives, whether a protagonist or narrator, to contrast with the unthinking (or perverted thinking) of morally reprehensible characters in order to expose modern humanism’s anti-humanist logic and ethics. They contrapose a humanist character with an anti-humanist character, or humanism with anti-humanism, and this juxtaposition defines each novel’s rebellion. Camus elucidates this interplay between art and

rebellion as he concludes *The Rebel*, claiming that “art ... give[s] us a final perspective on the content of rebellion” because “[a]rtistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world ... on account of what [the world] lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is” (253). However, his analysis of the novel places emphasis on “the demand for unity” rebellion desires, and he argues that its “aim” is “to create a closed universe or a perfect type” (259). In this conception, the novel expresses metaphysical rebellion by creating a “perfect” universe in which humanity overcomes its limits and achieves the condition it desires.<sup>24</sup> The proto-postmodern novel, on the other hand, creates a anti-humanist universe—the world that it negates—and represents it as absurd while also creating an individual in this world who rebels and affirms individual and collective dignity.

*Invisible Man* most potently expresses this form of rebellion in its symbolism of Brother Tarp’s broken chain, and the narrator carries this symbol with him to the end of the narrative, where he lucidly expresses his own rebellion. During a conversation between Brother Tarp and the narrator, the elderly Brotherhood member tells the narrator the crime that led to his time on a chain gang. He explains, “I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me; that’s what it cost me for saying no, and even now the debt ain’t fully paid and will *never* be paid in their terms” (387). While the nature of his crime remains ambiguous, Tarp’s dialogue suggests he was jailed for rebelling against the demands of a debt collector or financier, and even after his imprisonment, he “kept saying no until [he] broke the chain and left” (387). This act, though, goes beyond simply saying “no.” As Tarp gives the broken chain link to the narrator, he explains “it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it ... think[ing] of it in terms of but two words, *yes* and *no*, but it signifies a heap more” (388). Tarp’s language evokes the exact wording of

Camus's definition of rebellion and thus defines his act of saying no to imprisonment as an affirmation of his own humanity.

Because the narrator carries this symbol of rebellion with him through the rest of the narrative, Ellison draws the connection between Tarp's act and the narrator's story. To emphasize this connection, of all the symbols he carries of his past life—his high school diploma that taught him humiliation is progress, the racist symbol of the Sambo doll, and an anonymous threatening letter revealed to be written by the Brotherhood leader who named him—Tarp's chain link is the only symbol that remains at the end of the narrative because the narrator burns the rest for light in the sewers after he escapes the Harlem riots (567-568). Through this contrast, Ellison suggests the permanency and substance of rebellion and the hollowness of the narrator's lives while following the capitalist and Marxist metanarratives. The act of burning them implies that the narrator figuratively says "no" to their paper-thin content and signals that he chooses visibility and solidity over darkness, and he proclaims his rebellion in the epilogue: "[A]fter years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible* man" (573). In rejecting those who named him, he declares his resounding "no" to their narratives and his place in them. Although "invisible" signifies an erasure of his humanity, his naming himself as such affirms his rebellion against his lack of representation in others' minds, those who have dictated his existence in the past, which provides a language for him and others to represent his condition.

As Ellison conceives the term, "invisibility" directly invokes Arendt's concept of "representative thinking." In "Truth and Politics," Arendt claims that "[p]olitical thought is representative," meaning that people "form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to [their] mind[s] the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, [they] represent [others]" (556). In the prologue, the invisible man's explication

of invisibility as a consequence of his existence being erased in the minds of others reflects the incapacity of representative thought. As he describes it, “[T]hey approach me [and] they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (1). This passage indicates how his lack of representation in others’ minds produces his invisibility, how the narrator does not appear to those who “see” him. When the narrator says this inability to represent “occurs because of a peculiar disposition . . . of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (1), he implicates their inability to think and judge in this condition as well, which Arendt calls a “blind obstinacy” (“Truth” 556). Because others subject him to erasure in their minds, they prompt him to question his human existence, forcing him to “wonder whether [he isn’t] simply a phantom in other people’s minds” (2). However, his phantasmal, invisible existence, besides having personally existential ramifications, takes an essentially political character when he ruminates on what creates such cognitive blindness, connecting racism and racially motivated violence with the limited space whites allow African-Americans in the humanist vision of American politics.

Because others are unable to “see” and represent him in their minds, they deprive him of his humanity and consequently exclude him from the American ideals of emancipation by fixing him into an inhumane, undignified place in its “humanist” narrative. Although the novel negates this condition, it rebels against anti-humanism by providing it a language and a concept, which then allows readers to represent the anti-humanism embedded in American humanism in their own minds. Although Shelly Jarenski focuses on the empowering potential of invisibility in “Invisibility Embraced,” her reading of the novel’s “battle royale” scene, where powerful white community members subject the invisible man to a bloody boxing match for entertainment, alludes to visibility’s political ramifications. She argues, “Whites can only ‘see’ the narrator

when he performs the roles expected of black men, as in this case when he can only give his speech after he has been dehumanized by the battle. Similarly, he can only visualize himself within the context of a black role that has already been officially recognized, specifically that of Booker T. Washington” (90). The narrator’s visibility thus depends on the anti-humanism of racist ideas, ones which subject the black body to violence, as well as a constrained idea of humanism, one which, as the narrator summarizes the speech he delivered at his graduation, sees “humility [as] the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress” (17). Here, Camus’s explanation of the proletariat’s supposed mission resonates with Ellison’s critique of racism: through the Washingtonian narrative of uplift, the African-American community must bring “supreme dignity from supreme humiliation.”

Only through humility or humiliation, or, in other words, by foregoing his dignity, can the invisible man find representation in white minds, which is antithetical to the proclaimed ethics of American humanism and the ideal of equality. The narrator elucidates this absurd anti-humanist humanism at the foundation of American political thought when he says in the epilogue, “You won’t believe in my invisibility and you’ll fail to see how any principle that applies to you could apply to me” (580). In other words, white minds conceive humanist progress in a way that erases the humanity of African-American being by demarcating restraints on what constitutes the “human,” excluding any representation of race other than white or subordinated, humiliated black-ness in the capitalist idea of human enrichment. His human-ness and dignity are never represented because visibility always depends either on whitewashing or inequality, but by having the narrator name “invisibility” and unravel what creates it, the novel gives readers a way to see how humanism applies to the invisible man. Its representations provide visibility to invisibility itself and provide readers the tools to think representatively when

they make judgments, reminding them of the invisibility, the erasure of African-American dignity, that the American narrative of economic progress and political equality historically entails.

While *Invisible Man* rebels against the racial anti-humanism at the heart of American humanism, which gives readers language to think more humanistically and expand their capacity for representative thought, *Cat's Cradle* uses representative thinking to expose how science's "blind obstinacy" leads it to become complicit in violence. As Vonnegut creates the mindset of Felix Hoenikker, the scientist lacks the capacity for representative thought, which leads to a lapse in moral judgment that allows him to create ice-nine and indirectly cause the apocalypse. As Arendt claims, representative thought relies on a person "to remain in this world of universal interdependence, where [one] can make [herself] the representative of everybody else" (556). Hoenikker, though, divorces himself from this mutual world: one of the narrator's interlocutors in *Cat's Cradle* remarks that he had "never met a man who was less interested in the living" than Hoenikker (68). This disinterest renders him unable to represent anyone else in his thought because he makes minimal effort to relate with the human world. His negligence to account for the human world and the violent consequences of science leads to his failure to judge the consequences of his actions and his research. While Arendt views this lack of representative thought as only invalidating the impartiality of a person's opinions or judgments, Daniel Zins's reading of *Cat's Cradle* in "Rescuing Science from Technocracy" pushes her concept of representative thinking to connect Hoenikker's blindness to the inhumanity in which he participates. Before noting that "Felix ... has allowed his own brain to be stretched only in the most narrow, technocratic manner," Zins concludes that Hoenikker's thoughtless character challenges our "prefer[ence] to blame our nuclear predicament on an unbridled technology" and

“suggests that it is our failure to be fully human that especially endangers us” (172, 171).

Through Hoenikker’s blinding enamoredness with science, Vonnegut thus vilifies absolute belief in scientific progress because it makes people such as Hoenikker narrow-sighted, corroding the sense of moral responsibility that defines our individual humanity and maintains the dignity of others.

What allows the persistence of such narrow-sightedness to represent others? In other words, what thought process leads a person to participate in logics that perpetuate anti-humanism while believing it emancipates and preserves dignity? Seltzer’s account of Milo Minderbinder accounts for one answer to this question when he names Milo as “innocent,” though “morally insane.” This insanity, Seltzer argues, is “a curiously innocent perversion of reason so total as to blind the actor from any meaningful recognition of the moral components of his (or anybody else’s) behavior” (292). Felix Hoenikker represents this same type of insanity: after the detonation of the atomic bomb, his remark to the idea that “[s]cience has now known sin” is, tellingly, “What is sin?” (Vonnegut 17). However, characterizing Milo’s or Hoenikker’s thought in this way leaves unanswered how they are able to follow the corrupted logic of capitalist techno-science and simultaneously maintain their innocence when the evidence of their complicity in violent acts should prompt a feeling of guilt. In these terms, another aspect of Arendt’s theory on the nature of thinking provides a method to understand how this absurd innocence is possible.

In a section of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt posits the dialogic “two-in-one” as the primary mode of thought, and she suggests that neglecting this dialogic relationship aids in absolving an individual’s conscience because, by avoiding dialogue with oneself, he or she never comes to take account of his or her actions. As Arendt conceives it, the “*duality* of myself with



myself” characterizes the two-in-one, where “I am both the one who asks and the one who answers,” and its dialogic nature means “[t]hinking can become ... critical because it goes through [a] questioning and answering process...” (408). This dialogic thought process engages in a self-criticism and thus operates on the Socratic maxim, “It is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong” (410). Acting morally thus “keeps the integrity of this partner intact” and ensures one does not “lose the capacity for thought altogether” (“Truth” 559). As Arendt conceives it, individuals have a choice when they allow “a basic contradiction” to divide these interlocutors, such as committing murder: either take account of the action and reconcile oneself with the guilt or “never start the soundless solitary dialogue we call ‘thinking’” (“Two-in-One” 412).

Vonnegut represents the latter choice when accounting for the agents who precipitate the ice-nine apocalypse and their lack of thinking. The three children of Felix Hoenikker all embody the “unthinking” mindset, and their forgetfulness blinds them to their guilt and complicity in mass death and allows them to believe they act from a sound ethical framework. According to Arendt, the unthinking individual who chooses not to enter dialogue with himself or herself “will not mind contradicting himself ... nor will he mind committing any crime, since he can count on its being forgotten the next moment” (412). The nature of unthinking therefore absolves any and all self-contradictions by nullifying unethical act itself, obliterating its existence in the person’s mind because he or she never account for it in their internal dialogue.

*Cat’s Cradle* represents the centrality of unthinking’s role in abetting violence when the Hoenikker children fail to recall the details of the night they divided up their father’s invention among themselves. After the three children and the narrator clean up the ice-encrusted room of “Papa” Monzano, whose suicide initiates the total freezing of the world under the metaphorical terror of ice-nine, the narrator writes how their recollection of that night “petered out when they

got to the details of the crime itself” (251). The narrator signals here how the simple act of dividing up ice-nine itself was a crime, an anti-humanist act that should have precipitated a self-contradiction in the Hoenikkers’ thinking because each of them armed warmongering nations with the means of total destruction (244). However, all they could remember was “what *ice-nine* was, recalling the old man’s brain-stretchers, [with] no talk of morals” (251). As David Ullrich argues in “The Function of ‘Oubliette,’” they “commit symbolic ‘oubliation’” in this instance, obliterating their memory “in order to ... evade individual culpability and global responsibility” (150). While Ullrich reads the Hoenikkers as agents who “willfully repress memories of past events” (149), their ability to recall other details of the night yet inability to remember the obvious moral ramifications of this act indicates otherwise. They never thought about what dividing up ice-nine meant and never registered it as a crime. In doing so, they protect themselves from grasping their complicity in the world’s end, and this unthinking forgetfulness permits Frank Hoenikker, the one who is most directly complicit in the apocalypse, to “dissociat[e] himself from the causes of the mess; identifying himself ... with the purifiers, the world-savers, the cleaners-up” (*Cradle* 242). Similar to his father and Milo Minderbinder, Frank perceives himself as innocent and part of the moral bastion of human progress.

However, his innocence only makes sense in his own mind because his unthinking frees him from realizing his own ethical misstep, and Vonnegut’s representation of the Hoenikker children and their innocence is absurd because of the novel’s rebellion against their unthinking. With the narrator’s intervention, who poses the questions that expose their complicity, they cannot maintain their innocence in the eyes of readers. By naming and representing their act of dispersing ice-nine as a “crime,” like the account of their father’s inability to represent the violent and unethical consequences of science in his thought, the narrator acts as a humanistic

conscience. He calls these supposedly innocent characters to account for their actions either directly to them within the text or to readers. Through the narrator's outrage at the Hoenikkers' turn away from their consciences, *Cat's Cradle* affirms its humanistic and ethical stance by having the narrator resist and rebel against the world constructed around him. Moreover, the novel presents the act of text-making as a sort of rebellion. The religious leader Bokonon, whose religion frames the narrator's concept of the world throughout the novel, closes the novel with his last lines, which read, "If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity ... and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who" (287). The narrator, a Bokononist as he writes the novel presented to us, heeds the words of Bokonon and writes his own "history of human stupidity," and he directs his rebellion, or "thumbing his nose," at the anti-humanist thinking of Felix, the disingenuous humanism and innocence of Frank, and the violence of ice-nine he saw in his world instead of God. Through its representations both of the humane and inhumane elements of its world, the rebellious text enables the reader's own two-in-one by reflecting the dialogic nature of thought in its dialogic universe. Using the two-in-one as a mode of intervention in combating anti-humanism, it connects unthinking and absurdly innocent characters to the monologic thought that modern humanism's logic engenders, which Camus critiques in *The Fall* as central to modern ethics.

Like Frank Hoenikker's self-deceit, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, the judge-penitent in Camus's novel *The Fall*, takes extensive measures to avoid his conscience, which he aggressively acknowledges in his meandering monologue. Clamence reveals that at "the very moment" he felt "a vast feeling of power and ... completion ... a laugh burst out," and as he describes it, this laughter had "come from nowhere unless from the water" (39). The connection

between water and this laughter is crucial; one of two moments buried in Clamence's "monological confession," as David Ellison names it in "Withheld Identity," provide the necessary context to understand this event as a phantasmal invasion of the conscience.<sup>25</sup> The last in the chronological sequence (rather than the twisting narrative sequence) shows Clamence neglecting to prevent a woman who plunges off a bridge from committing suicide (69-70).<sup>26</sup> His conscience thus haunts him years afterward, manifesting itself in laughter emitting from the water, and it reminds him of the life he could have saved and figuratively calls him "home," as Arendt would say, to rectify himself. However, prior to the laughter's intervention, Clamence travels the same path as the Hoenikkers and chooses to forget the incident and the self-contradiction it causes, which he reveals in his response to the narrative's interlocutor about the suicide: "What? That woman? Oh, I don't know.... The next day, and the days following, I didn't read the papers" (71). David Ellison draws a similar conclusion of this scene, noting how "[i]mmediately after the telling of this central ... event, Clamence ... arrives at [his] Amsterdam residence, which [he] describes ... as an *abri*, or 'refuge'" (180). Jean-Baptiste thus maintains his innocence by putting his complicity out of mind through monologuing and making the event utterly banal. Instead of thinking, he takes symbolic refuge in the ignorance of his (in)action that led to a woman's death.

However, Clamence's conscience continuously confronts him, and he chooses to look for other means of silencing it instead of reconciling his two-in-one and accepting his guilt. As Ellison claims, he turns to "verbose assertions of a generalised human guilt" as "a strategy of avoidance ... [and] an attempt to hide from his own guilt" (181). Clamence speaks of this strategy when he uncovers the aim of his confession at the end of the narrative: "Now my words have a purpose. They have the purpose, obviously, of silencing the laughter, of avoiding

judgment personally, though there is apparently no escape” (131). This passage attains a particular significance if we read it in conjunction with Amit Marcus’s analysis of Clamence’s futile attempts to silence his conscience in “The Dynamics of Narrative Unreliability.” After detailing Clamence’s period of self-indulgence as an attempt to escape, Marcus says, “[T]he attempt of the narrator to forget the laughter succeeded merely for a short period.... [H]e realizes that the outcry of that woman and the laughter that ensued would never leave him, that he would never be able to immerse himself in self-forgetfulness” (par. 14). The incessant reminders of his crime of human neglect means his mind will always compel him to enter dialogue with himself, so he has to take recourse in other means in order to avoid self-judgment and put himself in agreement with his conscience, “[t]he only criterion of Socratic thinking” according to Arendt (“Two-in-One” 408).

Because he refuses to think and engage with his conscience, Clamence must have others present to listen silently to and reproduce his confession in order to reconcile his guilt, and his method eradicates the dialogic nature of the two-in-one and of communicative speech by binding it into a monologue. In this relationship, where he continuously professes his guilt to strangers, he symbolically embodies his conscience and gives it a voice, ironically silencing his thought by externalizing the two-in-one and projecting it into a monologic form: he paints a “portrait” of himself that “becomes a mirror” to his listener (140). In constructing this portrait, Clamence produces a representation of his conscience, which he reflects onto his listener. He thereby renders the capacity for representative thought useless because the listener cannot represent him or herself or any other person in their mind; only Clamence is heard and represented. Thus, his monological confession constricts the listener’s mind into reproducing his guilt, and in binding his listeners to regurgitate his confession, Clamence dissolves the dialogic nature of conversation

and thought alike into a monologue where only his voice and his representation of the world exists, which, for Camus, leads to terror.<sup>27</sup>

Because Clamence's form of discourse constrains the listener's representative thought into a monologic form, he also distorts his listener's ability to judge his actions according to humanist standards, which provides him final absolution. Returning to Arendt's theory on thinking in "Two-in-One," she argues thinking "does not create values ... [and] does not confirm but, rather, dissolves accepted rules of conduct," and she names this aspect of thought its "purging component" (413-414). Because this purge "brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and thereby destroys them," it has a "liberating effect on ... the faculty of judgment," which handles "*particulars* without subsuming them under general rules which can be taught and learned," by enabling a person "to say 'this is wrong'" (414). If the two-in-one relies on being in agreement with oneself, then thought must also interrogate common-sensical "values, doctrines, [and] theories" to see if they will lead to a contradiction in the particular self (413-414). Out of this interrogation, a person is then able to judge whether a universalized or socially accepted value will be a just standard for action or speech in a particular situation. The connection Arendt draws between thinking and judging helps explain why Clamence's method targets his listener's capacity for representative thought. Through the process of pontification and repetition, by mirroring himself onto the listener, he silences the listener's thoughtful interrogation of guilt's universality, which coerces his listener to judge every particular—especially Clamence himself—according to an anti-humanist "doctrine" of universal guilt. Forced to take Clamence's assertion that humanity is, was, and always will be guilty as universally true, the listener then judges Clamence's choice to neglect saving a life as acceptable. In his logic of guilt, he is absurdly innocent even if he is "an enlightened advocate of slavery" and fundamentally opposed

to the ideals of emancipation and dignity. His absurd way of thinking legitimates any and all violence he may commit because everyone is already declared guilty and deserves punishment (*Fall* 132).

Using Seltzer's language of "absurd innocence" to describe Clamence clarifies an important point about logic in both *Catch-22* and *The Fall*: Jean-Baptiste Clamence's monologue expresses a Catch-22 when applied to judgments about guilt and innocence. In "Negation as a Stylistic Feature in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*," Laura Hidalgo Downing concisely breaks down the propositional structure of the novel's (il)logical "catch" as follows: "If you are crazy you can be grounded / If you want to be grounded you have to apply / If you apply you are not crazy" (4.3.14).<sup>28</sup> Clamence's monologue constructs a similar logical pattern that assumes guilt is universal: "If you judge Clamence for his actions, he is guilty / If he is guilty, you are also guilty / If you are also guilty, you cannot judge Clamence for his actions."<sup>29</sup> As Downing clarifies, Catch-22 "is a kind of trap that prevents the proposition You can be grounded from ever being applicable" (4.3.14). Likewise, Clamence's logic forbids his listener from ever passing judgment on him. The listener cannot say "he is guilty." His logic affords him a logical escape hatch to "permit [him]self everything again, and without the laughter [the judgment] this time" (*Fall* 141-142). While *Catch-22*'s namesake most clearly binds its characters into flying combat missions and continuing war endlessly, Milo Minderbinder expresses a logical trap (or trapdoor) similar to Jean-Baptiste Clamence. As Seltzer claims, the name "'Minderbinder' may possibly have been contrived to suggest Milo's amazing 'binding of minds' through his steady deluge of self-serving capitalist rhetoric" that is supported by its own Catch-22 (299).

Like Jean-Baptiste Clamence, Milo relies on capitalism's humanist claims to permit himself to act in whatever way he wishes by binding Yossarian's capacity for judgment, which

produces a *Catch-22* that disrupts Yossarian's thinking. An argument between Minderbinder and Yossarian over Milo's responsibility for a man who died in an absurd military engagement, where Milo "realized a fantastic profit" from defending and attacking a bridge simultaneously, foregrounds Minderbinder's logical twist (261). Reacting to "Yossarian's angry protest" that "[he] organized the whole thing... [and] got a thousand dollars extra for it," which makes him guilty for the man's death, Milo invokes capitalism's metanarrative to make Yossarian complicit in his actions: "But I didn't kill him. I wasn't even there, I tell you.... And I didn't get the thousand dollars. That thousand dollars went to the syndicate, and everybody got a share, even you" (262). Punctuating his rebuttal with "even you," Minderbinder constructs an identical logic to Clamence. Rather than universal guilt, however, he uses the capitalist assumption that "everybody has a share of the syndicate's profits." If the syndicate profits, Yossarian profits; therefore, he is as guilty as Milo for the man's death and thus cannot pass judgment without judging himself as well, and this logic expresses how capitalist anti-humanism gets an ethical pass.

While this binding of Yossarian's mental faculties conveys a localized instance of Milo's and capitalism's *Catch-22*, the pages follow Minderbinder globalizing these bonds of guilt after he conducts a bombing raid against his own squadron, which "looked like the end for [Milo].... until he opened his books to the public and disclosed the tremendous profit he had made" (264, 266). Despite official condemnations and "clamor[s] for punishment" (266), Minderbinder sidesteps guilt for his actions and legitimates the violence he commits on society en masse by resorting to the same universal humanist assumption that deflected Yossarian's judgment. Even on the societal level, Milo deteriorates collective judgment, allegorically representing, according to Gary Davis in "*Catch-22* and the Language of Discontinuity," "the close alliance between



conceptions of language, society, and economics within the modern intellectual order” (72).

Although Davis bases this reading of Minderbinder on the discontinuous relationship “between the [syndicate’s] shares and a ‘reality’ beyond,” a discontinuity readers can see only because of Yossarian’s (and Heller’s) intervention, he adds that what “M & M Enterprises reminds us” is how “violence and the characters’ often unusual attitudes toward violence are inseparable from the question of discontinuity” (72). When considering “Milo & Minderbinder” and the capitalist order he represents, the discontinuity in the responses to violence and acts of violence revolves around guilt and innocence. These categories have become meaningless in capitalist humanism’s system of logic and its imposed assumption of universal enrichment. Because of the logic’s circular structure, Yossarian and society as a whole must remain silent and refrain from judging Milo’s actions as wrong and anti-humanistic in order to maintain their innocence. Milo’s deflection of judgment and dissent, however, represents only one connection between the *Catch-22*’s linguistic structure and the novel’s dysfunctional bureaucratic language.

In order to distort concepts of judgment, the *Catch-22* depends on the bureaucracy’s ability to manipulate language and reconstruct reality into a narrative. In *The Language of War*, James Dawes reads *Catch-22* in order to explore “how language functions within a system of institutionalized violence” (162). Regarding the dislocation of referential language in the novel’s bureaucracy, with “referential refer[ring] to the ways verbal representations are mapped ... to the material world,” Dawes argues that the novel “presents a language system in which the dictates of authority rather than referentiality determine manner of representation....[where] moments of description become performative speech acts” (163, 188). The difference between the descriptive (or denotative) and performative here is crucial. In *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard calls each a “language game” between sender, addressee, and the referent—the object being represented in

speech (9). In the denotative language game, the sender and addressee are “in the context of a conversation ... [where] the addressee is put in a position of having to give or refuse assent” over the sender’s description of the referent, which is a dialogic speech paradigm that affords the addressee space to judge what is said (9). For the performative, however, the meaning of the referent “is not subject to discussion or verification on the part of the addressee,” which is a monologic speech paradigm that does not allow the addressee to judge the referent’s meaning (9). Thus, when a language system distorts denotative descriptions into performative utterances, such as in *Catch-22*, it constructs narratives, which “themselves ... have authority” rather than the speaker (23).<sup>30</sup> With referential descriptions transformed into narratives, anyone outside positions of authority, such as Yossarian, can no longer make judgments about the world or about themselves once they become objects of the narrative; the heads of the bureaucratic structure predetermine these judgments by constructing objects into a narrative, which results in the logical structure of the *Catch-22* that inverts concepts of thought and judgment into their opposite.<sup>31</sup>

Yossarian’s commanding officers confront him with such an ethical bind by blurring the intersection between the guilt/innocence and complicit/critical binaries into a *Catch-22*, which dislocates such concepts in order to maintain the organization’s innocence, legitimacy, and, therefore, authority by manipulating the course of Yossarian’s service into a narrative of brotherhood and complicity.<sup>32</sup> After Yossarian’s repeated refusals to fly more combat missions, the basis for the invention of the *Catch-22*, Colonel Korn and Colonel Cathcart offer him a deal to send him home (430), and the content of this chapter, entitled “*Catch-22*,” details the military bureaucracy’s attempt to co-opt Yossarian’s rebellion. Their first exchange represents the first blurring of guilt and innocence in this multi-layered *Catch-22*: Yossarian is responsible and

guilty for the outfit's low morale because he refused to fly more missions rather than the fact that the officers raise the number arbitrarily so that no one can be released from duty (430-431).<sup>33</sup> Yossarian must accept this premise and implicitly admit his guilt if he wants to go home, and if he does not and asserts his innocence, he will be court-martialed. However, as the last chapter, "Yossarian," reveals, Yossarian will inevitably be found guilty because "[i]f [he] were court-martialed and found innocent, other men would probably refuse to fly missions, too" (453). To ensure his guilt, the military court will charge him with "rape, extensive black-market operations, acts of sabotage and the sale of military secrets" (452). Most of these crimes were actually committed by Milo, and because Milo merges into the military's bureaucratic complex (457-458), imposing these actions onto Yossarian thus absolves both Milo and the bureaucracy of its guilt. More significantly, though, this constructed narrative of guilt makes Yossarian's only possibility for innocence impossible, resulting in another Catch-22 because they revise the crimes of others and apply them to Yossarian's personal narrative.<sup>34</sup> He will be guilty either way despite being right when arguing that the number of missions keeps getting raised, and because being court-martialed will not realize the aim of his rebellion—to have the officers send him and/or his fellow pilots home and cease subjecting them to further violence because they fulfilled their duty—the only option he has to rebel is to accept the offer.

Accepting their offer, however, produces the final Catch-22 that reconstructs his rebellion into complicity, which explains why Korn and Cathcart seemingly acquiesce to his demand for recognition. Colonel Korn explains the "catch" as such: "Like us. Join us. Be our pal. Say nice things about us here and back in the States" (436). Conjoining this performative to Yossarian's rightful release from duty, Korn thus rewrites Yossarian's rebellion into a narrative of solidarity and complicity. The Catch-22 reads, "If Yossarian rebels, then he will be sent home / If he is sent

home, then he will praise the officers and be their friends / If he praises the officers, he does not rebel.” The logical structure voids Yossarian’s rebellion because it forces him to affirm, rather than resist, the officer’s decision to raise the missions and keep everybody at war. In addition, Korn expresses full awareness of the way this revision negates Yossarian’s humanist affirmation when imploring him not “to be a fool [and] throw it all away just for a moral principle.” (437). Yossarian also recognizes that going home and praising the officers would be “a pretty scummy trick [he’d] be playing on the men” (437). It would effectively remove his affirmation of dignity’s commonality from his act, localizing this right only to himself, while having him profess the legitimacy of the officers’ decision to keep the squadron bound in perpetual war. Thus, to go home, which would mean “his act of rebellion had succeeded” as well as affirmed his innocence, collapses the value of his actions into their opposites, into complicity and guilt (439). While Yossarian maintains a forgetful mental blindness to this discontinuity at the end of “Catch-22” in the name of self-preservation, acquiescing to Korn’s Catch-22 (438), he reverses his decision two chapters later, in “Yossarian,” declaring how he “see[s] people cashing in on every decent impulse and every human tragedy” and decides he will run to Sweden to pursue his moral responsibilities (455, 461). Yossarian “seeing” in his mind the violence consequent of Milo’s and the military’s anti-humanism determines this change of course because of the intervention of the penultimate chapter, titled “Snowden.”

Unlike Jean-Baptiste Clamence in *The Fall*, Yossarian heeds the haunting image and memory of Snowden’s death to enable his ability to judge, and his rebellious actions against the violence of the bureaucratic and capitalist logics represent his attempt to reconcile himself with his conscience and make right his complicity in systemic violence. While Yossarian’s reaction to the invasion of his conscience differs from Clamence, *Catch-22*’s treatment of memory parallels

*The Fall*. In “Trauma and Memory in *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*,” Alberto Cacicedo posits that “Snowden’s death is never actually recollected and enacted in its full horror” until the end of the novel because “Yossarian’s memory has worked its way around [it], giving the reader flashes of the event...” (359). Like the woman’s suicide and the laughter of Clamence’s conscience in *The Fall*, *Catch-22* buries Yossarian’s memory of Snowden in its narrative and weaves small recollections and hauntings throughout the narrative structure, but as Bill McCarron argues in “*Catch-22*, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and *Lawlessness*,” this “deja vu facing of the Snowden death scene, numerous times but with ever-increasing clarity ... allows Yossarian to face himself” (678). “To face himself” means to engage in the two-in-one of thought, and because of the odd narrative continuity between the chapters that book-end Yossarian’s recovery of this memory, Heller suggests that facing his conscience is part of a continuous process, rather than discontinuous like so many other thematic elements in the novel. This critical narrative arc has Yossarian presented with the illusionary choice of liberating himself through complicity (like Clamence), Yossarian next engaging in thought and purging the conventions of Milo and the military bureaucracy, and then he chooses to rebel by escaping the system binding him. This act of thinking, Cacicedo claims, “becomes the impetus for the ethical challenge that he takes up in the final chapter” (360). Recalling Arendt’s theory on the relationship between thinking and judging, Yossarian’s dialogic self-conversation through remembering Snowden’s death liberates his faculty for judgment. For Yossarian, Snowden’s death never should have happened, and by submitting himself to Korn’s *Catch-22*, the military bureaucracy will only perpetuate the production of more dead Snowdens. Thus, his silent dialogue enables him to reject the idea of going home, and to the notion of continuing his complicity, he says, “This is wrong.”

Moreover, his recollection contains the two standards of judgment available to him, which Peyton Glass's concise reading of the chapter elucidates as "the humanistic, represented by the dying gunner, Snowden; and the mechanistic, represented by Milo Minderbinder..." (25-26). His thought thus confronts him with the choice either of negating or affirming the normalized standard of conduct—Milo's assertion that "[w]hat is good for M & M Enterprises is good for the country"—that legitimates Milo's theft of morphine from the bombers that deprives Snowden of comfort and dignity in his last moments (*Catch-22* 446). Because he remembers Snowden and converses with himself over accepting the various narratives of the military bureaucracy or Minderbinder's capitalism, Yossarian can judge the inhumane consequences of following and believing in these narratives, enabling him to say no to the Milos, "Peckems, Korns and Cathcarts" standing "[b]etween [him] and every ideal" and to change this ideal in order to affirm the Snowden's dignity and the ethical principle of life as he reads it in Snowden's entrails: "The spirit gone, man is garbage.... Ripeness was all" (454, 450). At its core, the rebellion of proto-postmodern humanism promotes an ethic of dignified existence that combats modernity's systemic and legitimate violence.

## **Continuities in American Literature of the Past and Present: Constructing Postmodern Ethics**

Using their literature to conduct a humanistic rebellion, the proto-postmodernists stand between modern and postmodern positions because they neither engage in making humanism meaningless like the counter-humanistic “linguistic turn” nor advocate for using metanarratives of progress as a legitimating force to achieve emancipation and dignity as expressed by modern humanists. Rather, this rebellious literature resists the consequences of humanism from a humanist standpoint, vindicates a revised humanistic ethic of dignity and life “in the present,” and suggests how to maintain this value without slipping into the moral blindness of modernity. By staging this rebellion through literature, posing a limit to the violence modernity abides, these proto-postmodern novels demonstrate how fiction has the capacity to develop a moral philosophy as well as a third way of critiquing modernity and capitalism without resorting either to period binaries (humanism/counter-humanism) or modernist political binaries (Marxism/Capitalism) that reproduce the Cold War paradigm.

More than representing the novel’s rebellion against capitalist anti-humanism and its absurd humanism, however, Yossarian’s rejection of the nationalist narrative as a functional part of the capitalist metanarrative judges not only capitalism as illegitimate but also Lyotard’s “little narratives” as well because of nationalism’s connection to violence. These little narratives, of which nationalism is an instance, contrast from the totalization of metanarratives, demonstrating, as Tony Purvis argues, “how knowledge [and legitimacy] is both decentralised and localised” (134). While Lyotard proposes these little narratives as the “way out” of modernity’s legitimation crisis and as a new grounding for postmodern society, *Catch-22*’s representation of Yossarian’s confrontations with Milo and Korn, along with the narrative monologue of Clamence in *The Fall*, show the binding and destructive power of narrative construction.

Likewise, in “The Trials of Postmodern Discourse,” Ihab Hassan reminds us that Lyotard’s little narratives, or “*petites histoires*, can prove nearly as much terrorist as Marxist totalities prove tyrannical” (200). If even Lyotard’s atypically political theories cannot solve the problem of legitimacy, then poststructural counter-humanism does little to provide an ethical foundation from which one can act. As Hassan writes in the 1980s, “[E]ven Language, youngest divinity of our intellectual clerisy, threatens to empty itself out, another god that failed,” that literary theory gives us “no way to make sense of . . . our lives, immersed as [we] are in an ever-changing sea of signifiers,” and poststructuralism “can only tease us into further thought, not anchor our meanings” (196, 202). While valuable, poststructuralism only provides us a method, a set of analytic tools, to understand language’s complicity in power structures. It shows how the language of Humanism privileged “Man” over “human,” but it suggests neither standards nor values. Rather, the poststructuralists act like the dialogic partner in modernity’s “two-in-one”: their epistemological and linguistic theories give Western society its “purging component” that opens the space for ethics and judgment to reemerge in a postmodern form, which the proto-postmodernists anticipated in their literature and theory. Beyond the proto-postmodernists, however, contemporary literature has begun this process of reevaluating Language and ethics.

In the introduction to *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*, Mary K. Holland surveys the poststructural counter-humanism/modern humanism binary that has dominated theory in the humanities, paralleling Linda Hutcheon’s assessment of postmodern theory as an rejection of liberal humanism (3), and supplies evidence both for the usefulness and limits of poststructuralism. She explains that the project of poststructural counter-humanism “[seeks] to recognize a fundamental unknowability, particularity, and multiplicity in truth and identity that would end the marginalization,



reductiveness, conservatism, and colonialism of humanist ways of thinking” (4). It opens our understanding to “a more varied representation of what it means to be human than humanism allowed,” Holland observes, but poststructuralism at its extreme also “fail[s] to recognize that some of the goals and beliefs of humanism remain worthy and in fact crucial to the continued production of art and literature, and perhaps even our continued humanity” (4). The transition from language to Language—when our concept of language moves from seeing it as a problematic in social life to conceiving it as an absolute and universal determinant, an ironic absolute (or “fixed”) arbitrariness—perceives the central signifier of humanist thought, the “human,” as so determined by language that the human content of the world is ruled by “incommunicability, irrelevance, or, worst, nonexistence of meaning and real things” according to Holland (4)—that floating signifiers, detached from a referent, reproduce themselves to the point where their arbitrariness becomes immanent in the world.

If we recall the Cold War open/closed binary Nealon proposes in *Post-Postmodernism*, then the deification of Language itself becomes closed despite its desire for openness. While its theories on language and knowledge give us the tools to “encount[er] the text and its representations of the human as continuous with, rather than discrete from [as the moderns believe], the world and the culture in which they were created” (4), poststructuralism divests language’s communicative (between people) and referential (“human” signifying a content instead of a sign) possibilities. Poststructural theory aids in realizing not *all* language holds to these qualities, as in the totalitarianism and the anti-humanist humanisms that the proto-postmoderns resist, but to maintain that Foucault’s “discourse” explains knowledge in its totality or that Baudrillard’s “simulacrum” describes the totality of the sign’s mediation in “hyperreality” reproduces the same totalizations of modernity but with different terms. The modern, totalized

view of language as self-expression and creation inverts to the postmodern, totalized view of language as disconnected from the world outside structures, signs, and discourse. In either concept of language, ethics and judgment, which deal explicitly with the particularity and plurality of existence, are sacrificed or transformed into universals that lead to violence. Confronted with the totalities of modern humanism, the proto-postmodernist resist with an appeal to the right of particular, yet universal, dignity, and confronted with similar totalities in postmodern counter-humanism, contemporary literature seeks to reconstruct human connections through the communicability of the dignity of “human-ness” in language.

The contemporary literature that Holland discusses and the proto-postmodern literature and theory I have analyzed share these ethical and humanistic compulsions, but because they write in different periods—the former “after” poststructuralism and the latter prior to it—their ethics express themselves in different ways. Written after the “linguistic turn” and the dominance of poststructuralism in our theories of the world, contemporary humanistic literature is “inherently and essentially poststructuralist in its assumptions about language, knowledge, and the world—always conscious of the *struggle*, and specifically the struggle *through language and representation*, necessary to access any version of truth” (Holland 201). The counter-humanist tendencies of contemporary literature then coincides with the typical postmodern view, but as a methodology or a “mode” of writing; they do not combat Humanism proper like the poststructuralists or the proto-postmodernists. Rather, contemporary American writers maintain the poststructural position of “the arbitrariness and problems of language, and yet still [use] this ... poststructuralism to humanist ends of generating empathy, communal bonds, ethical and political questions, and, most basically, communicable meaning” (17). Holland’s thesis about the contemporary turn toward humanistic thinking helps forefront the importance of the proto-

postmodernists as the reevaluation of poststructural counter-humanism begins: despite recognizing the validity of poststructuralist ideas about language and how it functions, contemporary writers rebel against incommunicability and struggle to rediscover human solidarity and dignity through language, to redefine what it means to be human, and to reinvest belief in language's, and particularly literature's, communicability in the postmodern context.

While there is not enough space to cover all of Holland's insights, her work indicates that the postmodern "project" is entering a new phase after our confrontations with totalitarianism, the Cold War, and postmodern disaffection. The project now is reconstructing ethical values without resorting to monologic language and narratives, and the proto-postmodern novels and theories, though written during the deconstruction of modernity's humanist underpinnings in which they took part, offer a potential postmodern ethics to ground our capacities to think, judge, and act, a project which contemporary humanist literature carries into the future. Because Holland and I share the conception that contemporary and proto-postmodern writers are neither "separate from the project of modernity or of modernism, [nor] from the project of postmodernism" (201), a reinvigoration of humanism permeates their writings. Although, these beliefs express themselves differently—contemporary writers affirm human "truth, belief, and knowledge" in the face of and through poststructuralist language (201), while the proto-postmoderns affirm human dignity and freedom in its confrontations with and through modern political thinking and language. Writing during the formative moments of poststructuralism, the proto-postmodernists view truth and knowledge, especially in its communicability through language, not as their central problematic like contemporary writers, but rather how modern versions of truth, knowledge, and discontinuous, non-referential language produces violence. Proto-postmodern resistance and rebellion counters modern Humanism because of their shared

humanist value of dignity, and from this value, they believe in the self's ability to know and to communicate the world around itself, which is a precondition for the proto-postmodernists' ability to judge the violence of modernity.

Like modern, liberal humanists, the proto-postmoderns believe in our capacity for referential thought and communicative language, viewing it as a site of resistance to violence that they take as the central problem in the worlds they represent in their novels and theories. For these humanistic counter-humanists, discontinuous language and thought—that which is non-representative of its world—abets violence. George Orwell includes an illustrating example of the relationship of discontinuous language and violence in “Politics and the English Language” when writing about the euphemisms used to describe Soviet terror: “People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck, or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: This is called *elimination of unreliable elements*” (807). In Arendtian fashion, he says the erasure of violence in this euphemism allows a speaker “to name things without calling up mental pictures of them” (808). Representative thought begins with representative, referential language that accurately names and describes the world, and from the proto-postmodern standpoint, discontinuous language hides the real violence and immanent anti-humanism underneath its words, doing a figurative sort of violence on the human capacity to think and judge. Rather than acquiesce to the arbitrariness of language, the proto-postmoderns resist by attempting to name violence as it appears in the world. The Hoenikkers dividing and distributing ice-nine brought about the end of the world; it is a crime. The social visibility of Ellison's narrator depends on his humiliation; his dignity is invisible. Milo orchestrated the military action that killed people in his own unit; he is guilty. Indeed, as Orwell writes after providing his example of the euphemism used to describe Stalinist violence, “[I]f thought corrupts language,

language can also corrupt thought” (808). Because of this reciprocal effect between thought and language, the proto-postmodern novels are central to understanding the violence of scientism, racism, and capitalism: they provide representations that run counter to traditional and preliminary conceptions of these legitimate American ideologies, communicating how actions and conditions refer to violence done onto human life.

Communicating the connection between these ideologies and the violence they cause, the novels of Vonnegut, Heller, and Ellison aid us in representing in our minds the violence underneath the language and narratives supporting unlimited progress in science and capitalism or the othering of African-Americans that excludes them from American ideals of freedom. In counter-humanist fashion, their novels deconstruct the discontinuity, or the absurdity, of American Humanism and its narratives: their claims to enrich human life and dignity hollow out in the frozen world of *Ice-Nine*, in the illuminated hole the invisible man falls into to see himself, and in the scrawled “A Share” of the syndicate’s profits on a napkin. Moreover, the political deconstructions of these proto-postmodern novelists rely on a belief in the commonality of dignity because, in order to be seen as hollow and absurd, the novelists need a value from which they can judge American Humanism. Through the use of referential representations to rebel and say “no” to the violence abetted by Humanism, unraveling its legitimacy when compared to the humanist ethic of dignity, their novels communicate a “limit” on unfettered adherence to American ideologies, a belief that supports and refers to a common human value that should not be infringed. The best expression of the commonality of dignity comes in Yossarian’s interpretation of “Snowden’s secret” as Yossarian futilely attempted to save his life, reading that “[r]ipeness is all” as Snowden lay dying. In this interpretative moment, *Catch-22* communicates to its readers that Snowden’s “ripeness,” his very fact of existing, is the expression of his dignity,

and because this reading prompts Yossarian to refuse continued complicity with the Milos and Korns of his world, the novel also communicates that dignity should be the central value against which we should judge actions in the world outside the text. Suggesting a value in its climactic moment of recovering memory, turning Yossarian back to remembrance and thought, the novel crosses the boundary of fiction and becomes a site of ethical thought.

Writing about the political commitments of French existentialism, Arendt mentions how the existentialists “look ... to politics for the solution of philosophic[al] perplexities that in their opinion resist solution or even adequate formulation in purely philosophical terms,” and she believes their investment in politics “is why Sartre never fulfilled (or mentioned again) his promise at the end of [*Being and Nothingness*] to write a moral philosophy, but, instead wrote plays and novels...” (“European Political Thought” 437). Although Camus ought to be included in Arendt’s assessment, her point remains: the novel is a site of exploring ethical questions and communicating the ethical values at the foundation of our continued living in a pluralistic, political world, and the proto-postmodern novels give us one of the most illuminating examples of the intersection between ethics, politics, and fiction and the novel’s potential in constructing ethics. Because judgment and political thought rely on representations of the particularities of the world outside ourselves, the novel enables these mental faculties when we encounter the text with already crafted representations of the world and its particulars. While all novels have this capacity to enable our political thinking and judgment, these proto-postmodern novelists take a further step in communicating the need for reevaluating our standards of judgment after modernity. Like the existentialists, Vonnegut, Heller, and Ellison take the political content of their culture as their mode of posing ethical questions, and they represent not only the absurdities and discontinuities of Humanism but also represent “a way out” of thinking through Humanism’s

metanarratives by representing characters who rebel against the violence Humanism supports and who hold a truly humanistic value. Despite all three novels ending with their characters grasping for some sort of escape—Yossarian escaping to Sweden, the invisible man contemplating in a basement apartment, and the Jonah-esque narrator of *Cat's Cradle* writing in a cavern—their narratives compel the reader to think and to act humanistically, to break the narrative chain of History like Brother Tarp in *Invisible Man* by contemplating other lives and people presented in their narratives and conversing with them. Through the affirmation of dignity underlying these novels, the proto-postmodernists reorient the values modernity had distorted yet continued to profess, asking the reader to do the same as we continue to depart from modernity and into postmodernity.

With our further understanding of the monologic nature of narratives themselves, however, is there a guarantee that the ethics of humanism that the proto-postmodernists write into their narratives do not slip into the same moral blindness of modernity? Fortunately, I believe the dialogic character of texts, theorized by Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin, who is a precursor to French poststructuralism, gives readers the necessary resistance to the mentally binding elements of narratives. Echoing Arendt's observation of the intersection of ethics, politics, and literature, Geoffrey Harpham reminds us that “[w]ithin ethical theory, narrative serves as the necessary ‘example,’ with all the possibilities of servility, deflection, deformation, and insubordination that role implies” (401). Texts will always subvert themselves internally through their language and externally when each interpreter encounters them. Moreover, the act of writing fiction is itself dialogic: in “Intelligence and the Scaffold,” Camus says, “One must be two persons when one writes” (212). The writer thus encodes their own internal dialogue, their

two-in-one, and representative thought into his or her work, which produces part of its ethical capacity.

Although these encodings safeguard the text from becoming another legitimation factor in violence, we must remember that the modern philosophers who constructed Humanism's metanarratives in the first place produced texts. Modern philosophy's role in Humanism and its violence suggests one of two things: either fiction provides a better grounding for ethical thought and values, or fiction holds the same dangers as philosophy when we consider what makes violence legitimate. It seems this is not either/or; rather, it is and/both. As Camus introduces the myth of Sisyphus in *Myth*, he recalls for us that "[m]yths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them" (89). While we need myths and fictions to orient ourselves in the world because they suggest standards and values in their representations and make our world more intelligible, we also give them content, which is why we must discern and judge the values lurking between the words and narratives we produce and read before we act. As the (meta)fictitious religion of Bokononism in *Cat's Cradle* proclaims, "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (5), and so are the stories we tell ourselves.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See pg. 120. Nealon prefers the word “poststructuralist” in this instance. While Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide* would object with this substitution (214), I believe, because poststructuralism dominates the postmodern theoretical paradigm, this conflation describes how we conceive at least part of the postmodern.

<sup>2</sup> See Davies pg. 39-71. I will explore some of the contours of liberal, socialist, and what critics typically name “anti-humanism” in the first section.

<sup>3</sup> To identify these tendencies singularly with the American instance of 1968 is a bit reductionist, ironically reproducing a kind of American Exceptionalism postmodernism resists. See *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt*, ed. Ronald Fraser, for a comparative perspective that demystifies Hassan’s assertion.

<sup>4</sup> See Fraser 108 and 287-8 for some of the impetuses prompting this turn toward structural Marxism.

<sup>5</sup> A simple search in any library database for the phrase “Catch 22” will pull more results out of areas such as organization studies than literary studies, and the term “invisibility,” for example, is a central term in our discourse of justice for the homeless.

<sup>6</sup> Part of Genter’s central thesis sees “late modernism” as distinct from “high” and “romantic” forms of modernism, and the purpose of his book is to clarify these categories in context of post-war American culture.

<sup>7</sup> Lyotard defines the sublime as the result of “a conflict between the faculties of a subject, the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to ‘present’ something ... when the imagination fails to present an object which might ... come to match a concept” (“What is Postmodernism?” 77).

<sup>8</sup> Although this idea of limits is the thesis of Camus's political thought, Arendt's account provides a concise description of these modern excesses.

<sup>9</sup> See also Varon's *Bringing the War Home*, pg. 101-103. Speaking of the radicalized Weather Underground faction of the New Left, he claims that they "made violence the measure of authenticity ... champion[ing] Sartre's provocative dictum that revolutionary violence 'is man re-creating himself....'" (102).

<sup>10</sup> Arendt's concept of "action" and Camus's "rebellion" coincide in this view of politics and history, although Camus's language is less clear and concise than Arendt's. In *On Violence*, Arendt argues "the political [realm's] ... essentially human quality is guaranteed by man's faculty of action, *the ability to begin something new*" (82, emphasis added), and Camus says the rebel acts "in terms of *the obscure existence that is already made manifest* in the act of insurrection" (252, emphasis added). The emphases I have added point to the idea that all political action, an inseparable part of our existence, imparts new realities into the common world, as Arendt says, "whose end [we] can never foretell" ("Concept" 307).

<sup>11</sup> See Ian H. Birchall's "Neither Washington nor Moscow? The Rise and Fall of the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire" for the character of the organization. Formed in February 1948 as an oppositional voice between the Washington-leaning French political leadership and the Moscow-leaning French communist party, the RDR "stressed the moral aspect of socialism," and its dissolution predates Sartre's support of Stalin's USSR (365, 369).

<sup>12</sup> See also Fraser pg. 82, which underscores Sartre's and Camus's influence across the Atlantic.

<sup>13</sup> Brée explains that Camus criticized both "'comfortable murder,' that is, the violence of the intellectual who calls for blood while comfortably ensconced in his study; and what he called 'institutionalized' violence..." (212).

<sup>14</sup> It would be useful to note that, even in this essay, American critics are much more invested in answering the “postmodern” question than the French poststructuralists who exemplify postmodern counter-humanism.

<sup>15</sup> See Schrift’s concise biography of Lyotard in *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy*, pg. 161-163.

<sup>16</sup> See Paul Crowther’s “*Les Immatériaux* and the Postmodern Sublime,” A.T. Nuyen’s “Lyotard’s Postmodern Ethics and the Normative Question,” and Peter Murphy’s “Postmodern Perspectives and Justice.” The problem rests inherently in Lyotard’s writing, where he employs “metadiscourse,” “metanarrative,” and “grand narrative” as a constellation of terms without explicating their connections. This theoretical ambiguity leads Crowther, Nuyen, and Murphy either to conflate terms or construct hierarchies that contradict the other critics, leading to wholly different definitions and conclusions.

<sup>17</sup> Subject in this sense is understood as the subject-object paradigm: the one who acts, speaks, or, specifically in Lyotard’s thought, “knows.”

<sup>18</sup> Here, Lyotard rephrases Hegel’s philosophical maxim, “What is rational is actual; And what is actual is rational,” from *Philosophy of Right* without citation (10).

<sup>19</sup> Davies explains, using Lyotard’s language and concepts, that Hegelian Idealism “seeks the totality and autonomy of knowledge, and stresses *understanding* rather than *freedom* as the key to human fulfilment and emancipation” (27).

<sup>20</sup> A short caveat on Camus’s anti-rationalism: when Camus implicates modern logicity, he does not elevate pure irrationalism to take its place. Rather, he wants to show how the question of suicide and the world’s fundamental irrationality frustrates rational thought and demonstrates logicity’s limits, namely because it leads to its opposite—the deification of the

irrational and meaninglessness (the Absurd). Although he wants to say his “reasoning developed in [*Myth*] leaves out altogether the most widespread spiritual attitude of our enlightened age: the one, based on the principle that all is reason, which aims to explain the world,” it seems to me the enlightenment assumptions about reason are exactly what he targets. See *Myth* 24-5, 31-2 for a further look into philosophical suicide and *Srigley* 39-42 for its connection to violence. Also see Duran, pg. 368-9, who perceives the parallels between *Myth* and *Rebel* as well.

<sup>21</sup> According to Bowker, this passion “include[s] the imperative to decenter and disrupt subjectivities, the obsession with the ethical primacy and sanctity of the other, the valorization of loss, grief, and mourning as constituents of political life, and individuals’ and communities’ profound identifications with the status of victim” (xvi). The first two “postmodern imperatives” seem fairly commonsensical (though spun in an anti-postmodern fashion), but “valorization of loss” and “identifications with the status of victims” only make sense in his maladapted framework based on a fundamental misreading of absurdity.

<sup>22</sup> See *Invisible Man*, pg. 16. For this discussion, the most important line reads, “I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction....”

<sup>23</sup> See Johnson, pg. 303, 305, for the inextricable link between capitalism and slavery despite Marx’s claim that this “feudal” mode of production was “superseded” by capitalism.

<sup>24</sup> Camus defines metaphysical rebellion as “the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation” (*Rebel* 23).

<sup>25</sup> See Pasco and Roberts. Most literary analyses take the monologic structure of the novel as a given, but as David Ellison notes, the novel is “constructed [either] as a dialogue in

which only one voice is heard, [or] as a dialogue that may be the imaginary projection of one monomaniacal consciousness” (179).

<sup>26</sup> See David Ellison, pg. 187-188. He untangles the jumbled events Clamence presents into a very intelligible and compartmentalized version of *The Fall*'s linear chronology.

<sup>27</sup> In *The Rebel*, Camus defines terror as “an interminable subjectivity which is imposed on others as objectivity” (243), which Jean-Baptiste enacts when he imposes his portrait of guilt onto his listener, binding them in his guilt's objectivity and universality. See Daniel Just's “From Guilt to Shame: Albert Camus and Literature's Ethical Response to Politics,” pg. 888-902, for a more in depth analysis of the connections between Clamence's logic of guilt and terror as well as what Camus suggests as a more dialogic grounding for ethics.

<sup>28</sup> In *Catch-22*, this logical structure operates on the assumption that “a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind” (47). This proposition is almost impossible to refute, which gives this logical trap its power.

<sup>29</sup> As in the above case, Clamence's assumption that guilt is universal is hard to refute if we detach it from Camus's existential implications and the extreme justifications it affords Clamence: we have all been guilty at one time or another, whether or not we lived with a bad conscience afterward.

<sup>30</sup> In *Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard describes the narrative as being reliant on performative utterances, which subsume all other “language games”: “[The narrative] determines in a single stroke what one must say in order to be heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play ... to be the object of a narrative” (21).

<sup>31</sup> See Apostolos Doxiadis's "Narrative, Rhetoric, and the Origins of Logic," pg. 77-78, 96-97, where he argues that logic emerged out of narrative and mythic modes.

<sup>32</sup> See Arendt's "Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility," pg. 149-150, for the way totalitarianism blurs this binary in its systematized murder.

<sup>33</sup> In the structure of a Catch-22, this reads, "If morale is low, then the officers are guilty for raising the number of missions / If they raised the number of missions, then Yossarian refuses to fly / If Yossarian refuses to fly, then the officers are not guilty for raising the number of missions." Subsequent Catch-22s in this paragraph will be footnoted in this format for clarification.

<sup>34</sup> "If Yossarian is innocent, he will not go home / If he does not go home, he is court-martialed / If he is court-martialed, he is not innocent."

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