

# THE **DEATH AND LIFE** OF **AMERICAN ADAM**

Myth and the Contemporary American Political Novel

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American Adam is dead. According to one report, that once-great mythic figure was “killed off” decades ago (Hesford 411), done in by Richard Slotkin, whose *Regeneration through Violence* (1973) succeeded in bringing history to bear on numerous Romantic era constructions of American identity, stripping them of their formerly alluring appeal. Indeed, in scholarly circles, the figure of the American Adam has largely been expunged from the apparatus through which we approach American literature and culture.<sup>1</sup> And yet, it seems that in other contexts, reports of the American Adam’s demise have been greatly exaggerated.

One of Adam’s recent reappearances occurred in the pages of *The New York Times*, where in 2012 film critics Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott engaged in a dialogue within the newspaper’s Arts and Entertainment Section on the topic of Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist from the blockbuster film *The Hunger Games*, “one of the most radical female characters to appear in American movies.” Early in the discussion, Dargis presents her view that part of Everdeen’s appeal derives from the fact that she represents an alternative to the “enduring” American Adam.<sup>2</sup> Even more striking than the phenomenon of a once-scholarly motif emerging in the mainstream press is the way the figure of the American Adam is, following the publication of this discussion, distilled into the newspaper’s ongoing capsule movie listings, the one- to two-sentence descriptions of everything currently showing in the theaters. Faced with such tight space constraints, *The New York Times* nevertheless felt it appropriate to highlight the film’s box office success as a function of the

way it “radically revisits—and re-sexes—the classic figure of the American Adam.” Has the American Adam reached such a state of cultural capital that he is now capable of filling seats at the local multiplex?

Despite his fate within the academy, within wider cultural circles the American Adam’s mythic status does seem to endure, both as a convenient pop culture touchstone and as a hobgoblin for mainstream literary critics of contemporary American political novels. In particular, the American Adam has frequently come to serve as the default explanation for the popular belief that America and its writers stand at irreconcilable odds with the very idea of political fiction. In this way, American Adam has emerged as a sort of dominant American political fiction himself.

Yet this repeated deployment of the American Adam as rationale for Americans’ supposed discomfort with political fiction ignores an important body of contemporary work: novels about political activists and radicals, protagonists who complicate and challenge much of the enduring wisdom not just about America, its politics, and its myths, but also about American literature. One especially intriguing discovery to be found when one looks beyond the selective, reductive canon of contemporary political fiction within which critics have traditionally searched for Adamic motifs is the largely unexplored role of women. As we will see, the female protagonists in particular in this body of radical political novels offer a complex counterpoint to the conventional heroic figure of the American Adam, something beyond Katniss Everdeen or even Hester Prynne—to glance back to one of the early texts in which a female protagonist, standing alone, brushes up against a hostile society.<sup>3</sup> As in *The Scarlet Letter*, there seems to exist, even now, an ineluctable relationship between women and sin.

First published in 1955, R. W. B. Lewis’s *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, is an examination of the literary and intellectual origins of a central myth around which, Lewis argues, a burgeoning American identity began to crystallize in the years from roughly 1820 to 1860. The myth, for Lewis, is a product of the early American frontier, a vast new space populated by a rugged breed of individuals recently freed from the historical baggage of the Old World—explorers endowed with purity and bravado and, as Lewis himself puts it, “miraculously free of family and race, untouched by those dismal conditions which prior tragedies and entanglements monotonously prepared for the newborn European” (41). The mythic hero, Lewis writes, is constituted “of heroic innocence and

vast potentialities” (1), not unlike the biblical Adam before the fall. Lewis’s “American Adam” quickly became a literary archetype, the leading man of much of the American canon. And for some literary critics, he has remained there ever since.

Perhaps part of the reason the American Adam seems so compelling, even now, is that it appears to be one of those ideas so self-apparent that it need never have been created in the first place. A young nation seeking to understand itself glanced in the mirror, and Adam was there waiting. In Lewis’s telling, however, the myth evolved over time, guided by some of the most influential intellectuals and writers of the day. Ralph Waldo Emerson was among those at the fore, early on detecting in American culture a schism between what he called “the party of the Past” and the “party of the Future,” indicating where each imaginary group found its respective inspiration. Emerson himself was a partisan of the latter, looking to liberate himself from the dead weight of the past, particularly from the oppressive Calvinist doctrine of inherited sin, which Emerson associated with New England Puritan culture and, indeed, with his own family and forebears. Passing beyond the boundaries of even liberal Unitarianism, Emerson threw down the gauntlet with his Address to the students at Harvard Divinity School in July 1838, and the liberal religious establishment responded by barring him for the next thirty years.

Emerson did not have far to look for allies. Over at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau was engaged in his own experiment in forward-looking innocence, having swapped his velvet cushion for a pumpkin. “I wanted to live deep,” Thoreau wrote by way of explanation, “and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms” (91). This reduction to the lowest terms necessitated a great deal of purging, and Lewis describes Thoreau’s quest in *Walden* to discover a new, unfettered existence as a “ritual burning of the past” (20). Thoreau sought purification, and he found it in his humble cabin by the pond, turning the ideal of self-reliance into a personal crusade. There the groundwork was laid.

If Emerson and Thoreau provided the American Adam’s philosophical body, Walt Whitman delivered its ecstatic voice. It was in *Leaves of Grass*, Lewis maintains, that the image of the American Adam received perhaps its purest distillation. “What is known I strip away, / I launch all men and

women forward with me into the Unknown. / The clock indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate? . . . / I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I an encloser of things to be” (61–62). Lewis argues that in Whitman the triumph of innocence over sin, championed by Emerson, reached its climax. And here, too, Thoreau’s ritual burning of the past became a conflagration: “From this hour I ordain myself loos’d of limits and imaginary lines, / Going where I list, my own master total and absolute, / . . . Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me” (109).

While the celebration of unrestrained innocence might have been good for the soul, compelling fiction required moral darkness, or at least ambiguity. The American Adam that Whitman made perfect, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne had already begun to make more fully human, an undertaking carried on in the decades that followed by the likes of Henry James and Mark Twain. From *Moby-Dick* (1851) to *The American* (1876) to *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Adamic protagonists paid the price for their innocence. Melville in particular saw the mythic potential of the American Adam, providing a template for many of the most celebrated works of American literature to come. Melville’s achievement, as Lewis describes it, was his depiction of “the ritualistic trials of the young innocent, liberated from family and social history or bereft of them; advancing hopefully into a complex world he knows not of; radically affecting that world and radically affected by it; defeated, perhaps even destroyed . . . but leaving his mark upon the world” (127–28).

As influential as Lewis’s book was in its day, however, its legacy subsequently has been much more contentious. Generations of scholars have scrutinized the Adamic myth, unburying troubling historical and political implications. Richard Slotkin was at the forefront, historicizing how myths are made when cultures create archetypes (or borrow preexisting ones) that reflect new beliefs and ideologies. Myths thus become self-serving extensions of the truth a culture wishes to see reflected about itself. Slotkin was keenly alert to the dangerous potential of myth, the way it can “reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living” (5). Indeed, in Slotkin’s formulation, Adamism is a familiar manifestation of a mythic pattern of regeneration achieved through violence. The vast virgin frontier upon which an innocent Adam figure could reinvent himself was a European fantasy. In reality, the American landscape was already inhabited, and “even as Adam

envisioned himself as the land's first, originary scion, he was exterminating those native inhabitants who alone had true ancestral ties to it" (Patea 33).

Later scholars working from neo-Marxist traditions elaborated further on what they saw as the insidiousness of Adamism, identifying it as a virulent form of political escapism. Donald Pease articulated an objection to the fantasy of exceptionalism inherent in the idea of the American Adam, implicating Lewis's book as one of many<sup>4</sup> produced during the American Renaissance of American Studies that are guilty of presupposing a "realm of pure possibility . . . where a whole self . . . can internalize the major contradictions at work in American history . . . in a language and in a set of actions and relations confirmative of the difference between a particular cultural location and the rest of the world" (12).

Others have engaged with the various sides and constituencies of this debate at length.<sup>5</sup> My purpose here is neither to resurrect nor to entomb the figure of the American Adam but to examine the influence he continues to exert, for better or worse, in ongoing critical discussions of contemporary American political novels.

The idea that politics and fiction make for a problematical combination predates the rise of the American Adam in the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship emerging from critical theory has emphasized the degree to which all fiction is inherently political and, given that understanding, has cautioned that any effort to distinguish between political and nonpolitical fiction should be considered highly suspect.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as the discussion that follows reveals, this tendency to categorize continues to find traction among non-theorists. The terms of these debates are of primary interest here. In the texts that follow, "political fiction" is understood to be fiction in which primary characters and conflicts arise out of overtly political milieus. Although, as I will argue, those traditional milieus are itself problematical in that they have silently excluded a body of texts that would challenge much of the narrative surrounding the supposed problem of American political fiction.

In the postwar era, the loudest partisans in the battle against the intrusion of political ideology in fiction tended to be the New Critics. Allen Tate, for one, articulated his belief that politics could not help but be at odds with the purely aesthetic humanism of literature.<sup>8</sup> "The task of poetry," he writes, "is the constant rediscovery of the permanent nature of man. Propagandist art exhibits that side of his nature in which he is most interested at the

moment; it is a temporary oversimplification of the human predicament; it leaves the total context of the predicament unexplored” (310). In other words, literature is eternal; politics is fleeting. Barbara Foley has argued that the hostility of the New Critics toward politics during the Cold War grew out of the experiences of the era’s intelligentsia in rejecting Stalinism. Whatever the cause, as the dominant movement in postwar literary criticism, the New Critics’ influence was widespread.<sup>9</sup> Largely due to their interventions, John Whalen-Bridge notes, “aesthetics and politics *became* opposites within the context of literary criticism” (4).

In one of the most influential books on political fiction of the postwar era, *Politics and the Novel* (1957), Irving Howe begins his study with reference to Stendhal’s premise that politics in a work of literature is “like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is impossible to refuse one’s attention” (15). With politics thus established as a “violent intrusion” in literature, Howe sets the tone, unsubtly, for much of what follows. Although the avowedly socialist Howe was politically at odds with the more conservative New Critics, his approach to literature was in many ways sympathetic. In *Politics and the Novel* Howe echoes Tate’s argument about the timelessness of “the nature of man” with a similar plea on behalf of emotion: “the novel deals with moral sentiments, with passions and emotions; it tries, above all, to capture the quality of concrete experience. Ideology, however, is abstract, as it must be, and therefore likely to be recalcitrant whenever an attempt is made to incorporate it into the novel’s stream of sensual impression” (20). The dubious logic that ideology is somehow more abstract than passion and emotion only helps to stack the deck against political novels. In due course, Howe proceeds to dismiss the work of the few American authors he examines, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Adams, and Henry James. “It is a characteristic rhythm of [American novels],” he writes, “that they begin promisingly, even brilliantly, in the portrayal of some area of American political life and then, about mid-way, withdraw from or collapse under the burden of their subject” (161). Toward European novelists, however, Howe retains more affection, a preference even more pronounced in the epilogue to the 1986 edition of the book.

Howe’s negative assessment of American political fiction is largely shared by his contemporaries, including scholars such as Joseph Blotner and Gordon Milne, authors of *The Modern American Political Novel, 1900–1960* (1966)

and *The American Political Novel* (1966), respectively. Their approach to the material is similar as well, again insisting on the aestheticization of the political. In a foreboding gesture, Joseph Blotner closes out the introduction to his text with the questions “why are there so few modern American political novels of any excellence? Why are there so many bad ones?”<sup>10</sup> (17). As John Whalen-Bridge has argued, “this sense of almost unavoidable disappointment” one sees among such critics “is the natural consequence of any attempt to describe the American political novel from an apolitical vantage point,” by turning it into a purely aestheticized object (29).

While some of the more ideological precepts of New Criticism have fallen out of fashion in subsequent decades, the formalist approach to the close reading of texts remains the dominant mode of critical discourse among literary tastemakers—writers and mainstream literary critics—of the latter half of the twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first. As we will see, the New Critical legacy of skepticism toward the blending of politics and fiction continues as well.

If formalist bias has served as the justification for skepticism of political subject matter in fiction on aesthetic grounds, the American Adam has provided the pseudo-sociological rationale for dismissing the output of American writers in particular. A common argument of studies of contemporary American political novels, from the postwar era to the turn of the twenty-first century, circles back to a peculiar notion about our society as a whole: that when it comes to politics, Americans are ambivalent at best, and more often we are outright hostile. Among the questions directing Gordon Milne’s inquiry in *The American Political Novel* is “were [the novelists] successful in relieving the common American image of politics as sordid and venal?” (vii). Howe, in turn, looks to Alexis de Tocqueville and Anthony Trollope to explain why it is that in America “the public life is a thing of ugliness, a source of corruption which every honest man does his best to avoid” (159).<sup>11</sup>

Morris Dickstein, one of the more recent literary critics to tackle the supposed deficiencies of American political fiction, has argued, echoing Howe, that “Unlike Europeans and Latin Americans, we have always seen politics as a world elsewhere, something that unfolds in Washington or Albany or at election times.” And we insist on a strict separation between its domain and the domain of our own private lives—lives that are thought to be the proper stuff of fiction. Politics, it seems, is something Americans would prefer to keep at arm’s length. But arm’s length is a tricky distance from which to write a compelling novel.

This sense of a divide between the American people and political and social issues seems itself to have attained the status of myth, buoyed in part by the enduring figure of the American Adam. Christopher Lehmann's "Why Americans Can't Write Political Fiction" (2005) is one of several critical works pointing to a direct link between the supposedly impoverished state of American political literature and the American Adam. For Lehmann, the history of American political fiction—from Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age* (1873) to Joe Klein's *Primary Colors* (1996)—consists of a series of morality tales about the corrupting power of politics. From the beginning, Lehmann argues, American authors have established detachment as the only possible redemption for protagonists who find themselves trapped in political spheres.<sup>12</sup> Such authors "look upon the political process as a great ethical contaminant and task their protagonists with escaping its many perils with both their lives and their moral compasses intact. . . . The same basic lesson is learned over and over again: spurn the process and save your soul." *All the King's Men* (1946), often held up as one of the better examples of American political fiction, is for Lehmann tainted by Robert Penn Warren's "overheated language of sin and corruption." Lehman describes the book as yet another example of "the odd moral fastidiousness that shapes so much of the obdurate badness of American political fiction." The problem with this insistence on innocence, Lehmann believes, is that it steers writers away from the richest veins in literature, namely "human flaws and excesses." He is not alone in thinking so. John Whalen-Bridge, too, acknowledges the argument that "the American insistence on the primacy of the individual experience and the measurement of that experience in terms of 'innocence' will inhibit or thwart the creation of political novels" (112).

One limitation of Lehmann's essay, as with so many other studies devoted to contemporary political novels, is that they focus almost exclusively on American political novels set in traditional seats of power, whether that be a governor's mansion in Louisiana or the White House and Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Evoking Lewis himself, Lehmann opines that "if much of America's signature literature remains . . . the saga of the American Adam, Washington is the site of Adam's fall." But when Lehmann, like so many of his predecessors, turns to the "scores of wiser, better-written European novels of politics," he widens his view to include novels of political outsiders and radicals, such as Joseph Roth's *The Spider's Web* (1923) and Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* (1936). Had he opened



himself up to similar books by American authors, Lehmann might have discovered something quite different, because within the body of literature on American political radicals and activists, many of these familiar tropes and national myths become much more complicated.

Lehmann is by no means alone in overlooking American novels about political activists and radicals, in which ordinary citizens, as opposed to elected officials, engage directly in political activities. In the vast literature on political fiction, such books are rarely, if ever, mentioned. Norman Mailer's hybrid history/novel *The Armies of the Night* (1967), about the Vietnam War protest march on the Pentagon, is one of the few in this subgenre to receive notice, largely because it fits the mold of political novels that seem to embrace the myth of the American Adam (Whalen-Bridge 107); even while marching alongside the antiwar activists, Mailer feels compelled to make clear he does not count himself among them, insisting on his detachment. One of the most recent additions to the critical literature is Stuart A. Scheingold's *The Political Novel: Re-Imagining the Twentieth Century* (2010), a book-length critique of "novels of political estrangement" in which the existence of novels of political engagement is left unmentioned.<sup>13</sup> This omission leads not only to a highly selective reading of late-modern political novels but also to dire conclusions about the future of literature and democracy itself.

Without a doubt, novels about political activists and radicals are far outnumbered by novels about the political mainstream. But however marginal it might be to most Americans, political activism, including the radical variety, has in the opening decade of the new century been all but irresistible to writers of American literary fiction. The narratives these writers have produced suggest there is more than one type of American political identity, that the American Adam is not our lone representative, and that notions of his primacy continue to be advanced only through selective reading.

What is especially interesting about the recent explosion in books about activists and radicals is that it has come about in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. In the ten years following that date, there have been at least eight American literary novels published dealing with politically oriented individuals whose actions could be, and often have been, categorized as domestic terrorism. And while Philip Roth's pre-2001 *American Pastoral* is a noteworthy example of a novel in which such actions are largely demonized, the books published since then present a much more ambivalent picture. The eight novels published between 2001 and 2011 are: Jay Cantor's *Great*

*Neck* (2003), Neil Gordon's *The Company You Keep* (2003), Susan Choi's *American Woman* (2003), Russell Banks's *The Darling* (2004), Christopher Sorrentino's *Trance* (2005), Sigrid Nuñez's *The Last of Her Kind* (2005), Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006), and David Goodwillie's *American Subversive* (2010). One could easily add to the list Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self* (2008). Although Carey is not American, his protagonists and the book's political backdrop are. There is also Hari Kunzru's *My Revolution* (2008) about British activists radicalized in opposition to the Vietnam War. Of these ten books, not one but two are reimaginings of Patty Hearst's infamous adventures with the Symbionese Liberation Army (Choi and Sorrentino), and five are either inspired by or specifically linked to the notorious Weather Underground (Cantor, Gordon, Banks, Spiotta, and Carey). In other words, the trend has been toward not just political activism, but violent political activism as well. Only Goodwillie's novel is set entirely in the present day.

For R. W. B. Lewis, the American Adam was "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (5). Previous critics have been thorough in arguing about the degree to which this myth seems to have informed, and in many cases undermined, American authors' attempts to write political fiction. Likewise, Christopher Lehmann's assertion is perhaps astute, on formalist grounds, that if American political novelists insist their protagonists be innocent, they have little choice but to make politics into a corruptive evil, in which redemption can be found only by detaching from the political fray. Yet these ten recent novels featuring activists and radicals pointedly subvert the innocence, detachment, self-reliance, and solitude of the American Adam. Nine of these novels (Carey and Kunzru included) are set principally in the 1960s and '70s, the nostalgic high-water mark for political activism. Far from innocent and detached, the protagonists of these novels often feel defiled by family and race and history. In these books the familiar idea that Americans are "not to blame for the fallenness and impurity of history" (Whalen-Bridge 112) is thrown upon the pyre. These ten novels are populated almost entirely with figures constantly confronting history, not evading it. Of particular importance are the American grotesqueries of slavery, Jim Crow, and Vietnam. For the group of Jewish friends at the center of Jay Cantor's *Great Neck*, the inherited legacy of the Holocaust is part of the same

continuum as American racism. Both issues end up fueling the protagonists' involvement in civil rights era activism. The friends' experiences in the South then lead inexorably to involvement in the antiwar movement.

There has been a willingness among some critics to define the American Adam with such flexibility that virtually any figure can fit the mold, where even opposition can be treated as a type of innocence, with the admission of sin functioning as a form of self-purification.<sup>14</sup> That is not the case here. For the radical activists in these novels, guilt is not innocence by another name. The true radical is as unforgiving of herself as she is of others. In a society of pervasive economic, racial, and patriarchal oppression, innocence is impossible. Throughout these novels we see protagonists mercilessly deconstructing themselves in search of even the faintest whiff of bourgeois and reactionary tendencies. Such traces are easily found, but not so easily cast off. A key dynamic in the depictions of some of the most radical groups is the communal flogging, the breaking down of individual ego. In Choi's group, based on the Symbionese Liberation Army, this self-flagellation takes the form of "ego reconstruction." Hari Kunzru is especially effective at describing the way his cell of British radicals repudiates innocence through a vicious process of "criticism-self-criticism," which inevitably results in the purging of the group's weakest members, those unable or unwilling to submit to emotional devastation. One of the most frequent targets of attack is anything that smacks of self-interest. Within the group at the center of *My Revolutions*, even privacy is abolished. In the radical context of these novels, the much-extolled virtue of American individuality must be sacrificed, as a matter of principle, for the greater good. Instead we see the elevation of solidarity conceived of on a global, rather than a local, scale. The radicals see themselves as one with African Americans, with the oppressed third world, with the poor. It is often, as Nuñez's *The Last of Her Kind* painfully demonstrates, an alliance of the imagination, but that does not stop, Ann, the radical at the core of that novel, from pursuing it to tragic ends.

Yet despite their considerable inversion of the myth, these novels do not signal a complete break with the tradition of the American Adam. However important the rhetoric of solidarity is to these narratives, elements frequently surface of the lone hero, the solitary actor—"the simple genuine Self against the whole world," in Emerson's words (141). In David Goodwillie's *American Subversive*, about present-day environmental activists, politics is the backdrop to the drama of life underground and on the run. Neil Gordon's

*The Company You Keep*, about a long-hidden Weather Underground fugitive, also bears many of the hallmarks of the thriller, albeit one unafraid to debate polemical issues. But life underground features in all ten books, not just in these two. Peter Carey's *His Illegal Self* dramatizes the exiled plight of a young woman who inadvertently kidnaps the son of a former comrade. In Russell Bank's *The Darling*, Hannah, another Weather Underground fugitive, makes a new life for herself in Liberia. Choi and Sorrentino's books focus almost entirely on the activities of their SLA-like groups on the run following the police assault on the group's Los Angeles hideaway. In Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document*, the itinerant life of a young woman regularly forced to change her identity is interspersed with episodes of her later life as a single mother living under an assumed name. In these depictions we see some of the romance of cowboys roaming the plains, of Jesse James on the lam. These radical fugitives are complex, hunted individuals struggling to get by on resourcefulness and fortitude. Without exception, these adventures are given political context, justified as being in the service of the larger struggle, but they nevertheless derive much of their power from familiar tropes of the solitary wanderer braving the wild frontier. Perhaps what we see here, as political action on behalf of popular sovereignty gives way to narratives extolling outlaw culture, is what Irving Howe identified as an inherent schism in Emerson's conception of "self-reliance": "the tendency to reduce it to individualism as ideology; or, put another way, the tendency toward a tragic sundering between democratic sentiment and individualist aggrandizement" (*The American Newness* 41–42).

In *Great Neck*, the heroic aspect of the political radical takes its most literal form: the superhero.<sup>15</sup> Among the group of activists at the center of Jay Cantor's novel is Billy, a young illustrator who uses his real life friends as the inspiration for comic book heroes who battle the forces of evil. Beth, by far the most radical member of the group, becomes Ninja B. and Athena X, Billy's most successful characters.

And this is another fascinating aspect of these ten novels: not just in *Great Neck*, but in *American Woman*, *American Subversive*, *His Illegal Self*, *Eat the Document*, *My Revolutions*, *The Last of Her Kind*, and *The Darling*, either the main protagonist or the figure in which the radical fire burns most brightly (and often both) is a woman. Perhaps the same could be said of Christopher Sorrentino's *Trance*, but his cinematic book features so many voices it remains difficult to say that any single one, including the Patty Hearst character, takes center stage. Only one of the ten novels, Neil Gordon's *The Company You*

*Keep*, focuses on a male protagonist, one whose guilt in wrongdoing turns out to be very much in question.

It is certainly likely that the role of women in these novels is a reflection of the significant roles women played in '60s and '70s activist circles. At the same time that female activists were fighting on behalf of the poor and oppressed, they were also confronting American society's patriarchal social order. As these novels suggest, women were well represented even in the militant SLA and Weather Underground. Yet however significant their role, women loom larger in these ten novels than they did in their historical moment. What does that tell us about this literary trend? Does the centrality of sin in these novels require that American Adam be replaced with his counterpart, Postlapsarian Eve?<sup>16</sup>

If so, perhaps an argument could be made that Postlapsarian Eve is merely a variation on a theme, a spinoff of the American Adam. But the differences between the two are more important than the similarities. If one takes away Adam's innocence and self-interest and replaces it with sin and solidarity, one has changed the very nature of the story. The similarities that remain are mostly conventions of plot. The sin here is not the sin that Lewis allows for in *The Scarlet Letter*, which permits him to characterize Hester Prynne as an example of an American Adam. There Lewis argues that "if Hester has sinned, she has done so as an affirmation of life, and her sin is the source of life" (112). The sin animating the protagonists of these ten novels is something larger and more concrete. Often, as in the case of Vietnam, the sin is the very destruction of life. Closer to home, sin takes the form of the repression—frequently brutal—of African Americans and other marginalized groups. Furthermore, as the protagonists learn over and over again in these ten novels, one cannot simply detach oneself from these sorts of sin.

Christopher Lehmann and other critics have complained that all American political novels end with their protagonists retreating from the corrupting world of politics to reclaim their lost innocence. Something similar happens in these radical political novels. In almost every one, radical protagonists discover that their ideals have been corrupted. In *Great Neck*, *My Revolutions*, *American Woman*, and *Trance*, there is a precipitous slide from revolution to what looks increasingly like self-serving criminality. And there is often, but not always, some form of qualified regret. A recurring event in these novels is the accidental death—the innocent bystander killed during some bungled political action. Despite the gloom that taints the political

legacy of the '60s and '70s, however, there is rarely a sense in these novels that their protagonists would not do it all over again. At the end of *The Darling*, Hannah, one of the least romantic radical protagonists in these ten novels, feels sorrow over her failings as a mother, which she attributes to the masculinizing effect of her youthful radicalism. But even so, she refuses to feel regret. Regret comes more easily to Mary, the protagonist of *Eat the Document*, who is haunted by a bombing that went awry. But even as she considers turning herself in, she can't manage to decide whether what she did was wrong. She knows only that "there wasn't moral clarity" (224). In the months preceding her trial, Jenny, the protagonist of *American Woman*, feels a "loss of her confidence in the choices she'd made." Not because they were wrong, however, but because they were ultimately unsuccessful. "It was just the same fatal world as always, with its staggering inequities, which she realized now weren't exceptions to be excised but the rules of the game" (357). Jason Sinai, the central protagonist of *The Company You Keep*, is wholly unapologetic: "You can think we fucked it all up, killed the antiwar movement, destroyed the New Left. . . . [But] the fact is that in every possible way—race, war, the environment—we were right" (365). This is a key difference between novels of mainstream politics and novels about radicals and activists: the novels that Christopher Lehmann and others criticize end with a return to innocence; with radical novels, there may be a retreat, but innocence is no longer possible. In this way, there is a widespread sense of martyrdom in the endings of these novels—sometimes tragic, sometimes foolish, but always unavoidable. There remains no choice but for these radical political protagonists to trade their freedom, and even their identities, for the sake of a larger cause.

This inescapable martyrdom plays no part in the construction of the traditional American Adam. It does, however, manifest in a different sort of political figure, one Sean McCann traces through American fiction of the twentieth century in his 2008 book, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*. Curiously, although McCann's figure is quite different from the American Adam, it nevertheless shares a common progenitor: Walt Whitman.

McCann's focus in *A Pinnacle of Feeling* is representations of executive leadership, specifically the American presidency, and in his book he explores how Whitman, in addition to championing the sense of self that would prove to be so appealing in the conception of the American Adam, was a staunch admirer of Abraham Lincoln. Whitman's admiration had much to

do with Lincoln's efforts in saving the union of the States, but his favor extended as well, McCann argues, to Lincoln's expansion of the power of the American presidency as a means of achieving popular sovereignty. As much as we view Whitman as the personification of the individual spirit, he was, according to McCann's reading, committed as well to the ideal of national community, and Whitman viewed Lincoln—as Lincoln is still commonly perceived—as a uniter, someone who through great sacrifice succeeded in preserving the nation. In his famous address at Gettysburg, Lincoln solemnly celebrates the principal of sacrifice, evoking the honor of a death not in vain, by offering tribute to the Union soldiers who gave up their lives so that “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (788). The speech is haunted, of course, by the echo soon to be found in Lincoln's own demise, an assassination directly linked to president's efforts toward Emancipation. For Whitman, Lincoln thus came to represent the sacral image of the “Martyr Chief” (*Prose Works* 509).

In his book, McCann traces the reoccurrence of this force for popular sovereignty across the twentieth-century literary landscape, as the nineteenth-century understanding of American government as a body driven by the legislative action of congress gives way to the more powerful solitary figure of the president as an embodied “instrument of the people” (5). The Progressive Era and New Deal gave rise to the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, executives who, like Lincoln, were the “suture that could bind together public opinion and political institutions and in so doing restore popular rule” (18). McCann evokes a passage from Wright's *Native Son* to highlight an underlying dream of presidencies such as FDR's, “the hope that the grandeur of the presidency might provide a means to transcend the corruption, indifference, and inadequacy of local political and civil institutions” (McCann 3).

But in Wright's Bigger Thomas, executed for murder, McCann sees echoes of Lincoln and the Gettysburg soldiers: “In both cases, martyrdom gives substance to the thought that the violent exercise of power is not merely arbitrary or abusive, but legitimized by a tacit popular will. In both cases, that is, the killer ceases to be a tyrant and becomes, in effect, a democratic executive when his death legitimizes the impression that he acts not solely for his own gratification but on behalf of a nation whose unknown wishes he articulates and serves” (29–30).

As we have seen, this sort of sacrifice is similarly the animating spirit of the radical political protagonists in the body of work that has appeared since the turn of the twenty-first century. As McCann writes, martyrdom “becomes the foundational political act, the crucial, symbolic means of transforming the abusive exercise of power into a spiritually ennobling, collective agreement” (128). McCann is also helpful at tracing the ways in which periods of national crisis create shifts in popular attitudes toward presidential leadership, attitudes that become reflected in literary trends. World War II and the rise of Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini, for instance, exposed the dangers of charismatic, powerful leaders. In that atmosphere, even the figure of Lincoln became tarnished (111). The war in Vietnam, likewise, demanded that popular sovereignty rise up to curb executive power (153). And thus we see the emergence of the antiwar movement and political activism more broadly, a political awakening that has come to define an entire generation so thoroughly that even now, fifty years later, we have a new body of literature dominated by those very narratives.

Why is it that the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen such a proliferation of novels concerned with political radicals functioning as actors of popular sovereignty? McCann’s book ends where these post-9/11 novels begin, but perhaps he is predicting the rise of such novels when he observes that “the Bush presidency has aimed to make use of the disruptive power of charismatic leadership in the manner that commentators during the nineties thought a thing of the past, seeking to use executive power to dismantle the accomplishments, institutions, and political structures of liberal government” (192). Perhaps the war on terror and the squelching of dissident voices that followed the events of September 11, 2001 inspired authors to seek indirect ways of giving voice to alternative political legacies. Perhaps the invasion of Iraq, the most divisive war since Vietnam, rekindled some of the *anima* of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

But even if some of these novels were written in some form of reaction against the abuses of the Bush administration, the picture they paint of popular sovereignty is not altogether rosy. Something more than nostalgia pervades this rekindling of the political action that characterized the ’60s and ’70s. While they are occasionally guilty of romanticizing the lives of outlaws living underground, these authors as a group seem keenly aware of the failings and limitations of the radical political action of the era. There is little



dewy-eyed reminiscing here. In fact, most of these novels seem intent on cataloging everything that went terribly wrong with these radical movements. Sigrid Nuñez's *The Last of Her Kind* is especially effective at teasing out the ways in which the radical leftwing unraveled and the promise turned to disappointment. The novel is narrated by Georgette, a working-class scholarship student whose wealthy, idealistic college roommate becomes radicalized, ultimately murdering a police officer who threatens her black boyfriend. The resulting trial, which does not end well for Georgette's friend, provides fertile ground for probing what these events mean for the counterculture and for the society as a whole.

And yet, despite how unsentimentally most of these narratives end, there seems to be something about them that their authors feel beholden to explore. There can be no doubt the result of their efforts is a loud, collective refutation of Stuart A. Scheingold's recent inference that "narratives of betrayal and estrangement will continue to be consonant with the prevailing zeitgeist" (222). These novels seem to be demonstrating a very different kind of zeitgeist. In fact, perhaps we should see them as expressions of a desire for a different kind of myth, one that might serve as a corrective for Americans' supposed apathy, a myth emphasizing a new, and perhaps more noble, set of defining American characteristics: idealism, determination, and selflessness. The radical activists in these pages may not have changed the world, but over and over again we see they are not sorry they tried.

If the American Adam is still not quite dead, yet, perhaps we can at least put to rest the simplistic notion that there is only one kind of political book Americans can write, and only one way for them to write it: badly. As that original purveyor of the American Adam might have put it, we are large; we contain multitudes.

## NOTES

1. Though by no means entirely. John Whalen-Bridge mounts a thoughtful defense of the American Adam in his chapter "Political Fiction as Impurity in American Literary Criticism." Likewise, in the introduction to the recent essay collection *Critical Essays on the Myth of the American Adam*, Viorica Patea presents the American Adam as the "ruling metaphor of American culture" and still reigning "central American myth" (18 and 22).
2. Although this argument seems to rely on a willingness to strip away some of the primary characteristics of the American Adam, namely that he be "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (Lewis 5), none of which the critics feel applies to Katniss Everdeen.

3. R. W. B Lewis considers Hester Prynne one of several “tormented extensions and distortions of their Adamic prototypes” (129).
4. Along with F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941); Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* (1950); Richard Chase’s *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957); Harry Levin’s *The Power of Blackness* (1958); Marius Bewley’s *The Eccentric Design* (1959); Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960); Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964); Richard Poirier’s *A World Elsewhere* (1966); Quentin Anderson’s *The Imperial Self* (1971); and Sacvan Bercovich’s *The American Jeremiad* (1978).
5. See especially Chapter 1 in Whalen-Bridge and Patea’s Introduction in *Critical Essays on the Myth of the American Adam*. In a very different mode, Jonathan Mitchell—working from within a Lacanian tradition—has identified within the American Adam “an ideology of masculinity” (30) and has updated the twentieth-century, post-frontier American Adam as “the man who becomes the phallus but has no phallus” (36).
6. Viorica Patea argues that D. H. Lawrence was already wrestling with the implications of Adamic myth in the 1920s (33).
7. T. V. Reed’s *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers* offers an insightful reading into this side of the debate.
8. Irving Howe would go so far as stress the danger of political novelists in handling “large quantities of ‘impure’ matter” (*Politics and the Novel* 20–21).
9. Jancovich has argued that this idea of the New Critics’ hostility to politics and social issues has been overstated and misunderstood. See, for example, Chapter 8 of *The Cultural Politics of The New Criticism*. Nevertheless, misunderstood or not, this dominant narrative is what is of interest here.
10. Harish Trivedi expands on this dismissive critical tradition at length, providing in addition excerpts of the annotated indignations of Fay M. Blake in her study *The Strike in the American Novel* (1972) (5).
11. In a chapter tellingly titled “Some American Novelists: The Politics of Isolation” (Howe 159). Unpacking Howe’s biases, Harish Trivedi argues that “if Howe does not see a political ideology informing America, it may well be because he wishes to see there quite another political ideology” (8).
12. Stuart A. Scheingold’s *The Political Novel* (2010) posits a similar tendency toward political detachment in the postwar era.
13. For example: “With accountability, agency, social mobility and social solidarity all attenuated, especially in the United States, it follows that republican democracy is imperiled” (202). Likewise, Scheingold’s choice of readings permits him to conclude that “the post-World War II late-modern novels all tell tales of insufficient civic engagement to sustain robust republican democracies” (218).
14. See Whalen-Bridge 31, 124.
15. In his Lacanian reading, Mitchell argues that Superman “contains both the ideal and outcome of the Adamic ideology . . . [H]e is both an object to be desired and the impossible object of desire” (50).
16. See Mitchell for an extensive interrogation of the problematical gender dynamics of Adamism—“a privileged type of masculinity as an essentialized American identity” (10).

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