

ECLECTIC MODERNISMS,  
OR  
RIDING OUT THE MAELSTROM:  
GLOBAL AESTHETIC REFLECTIONS ON DISAPPOINTMENT

by

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# ABSTRACT

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In this thesis I interrogate the role of aesthetic modernisms in art and culture, using, as a *point de départ*, Susan Stanford Friedman's recent book, *Planetary Modernisms*. In her book, she lays the ground work for an aesthetic conception of modernisms. She declares the aesthetic experience of modernity is marked by the eclectic recurrence of themes across genres, artistic mediums, or other boundaries, themes which do not always follow one particular system and can be taken from many sources. This essay argues that aesthetic modernisms found in art, when read diachronically, offer a therapeutic perspective on narrativity not only to the artist, but also the reader and viewer who are consumers of it. Therefore, modernisms serve as outlets for human agents to reckon with the experience of disappointment with which human agents are presented throughout their lives.

## **DEDICATION**

For Michael Sheridan, my dearest family, the greatest of friends,  
my readers, Anthony Meyer, and Fr. Fountain,  
with eternal gratitude.

Without each of you,  
I would have never found my way out of the woods.

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The problem of modern man is to keep discerning  
in the face of knowing desire is inherently unsatisfiable.  
-Stephen Gardner, *Myths of Freedom*

## **PREFACE**

To quote Walter Benjamin, “To live is to leave traces” (Benjamin 155). In a sense, to live is to leave pieces of ourselves along our paths. Whether they are chosen or forced, fulfilling or disappointing, we leave imprints of ourselves as we move from one stage to the next in our lives, and everywhere betwixt. Although these paths are often unkempt and strewn haphazardly across the tiny blip in time that represents our short time in existence here on earth, as they leave traces, they also create a trace leading back to themselves. Perhaps it is to create a legacy for ourselves because we are aware of our finite existence on earth, which Martin Heidegger traced in his philosophy, or perhaps it is to express the futility and inherent struggle of life in the face of an afterlife which is glorified by the faithful. But as time marches on, we come to see that whether we are faithful or Nihilist, this trace is a common denominator amongst all human existence, and it is through fiction and testimony through art that we are able to make this important realization.

According to Jacques Derrida, fiction and testimony are a lot like the ‘unexperienced experience’ of death. For Derrida, death is the ‘impossible necessary’, “where impossibility and necessity both reciprocally refer to and co-implicate each other” (Derrida 47). It is impossible because one cannot experience that which they are not present for and it is therefore not possible for us to truly know death during our life by means of experience, but it is also necessary for us to die in order to experience it in the sense that it is inevitable in mortal existence, and in the sense that in dying, we fulfill the experience of life by ending it, which is something that we cannot know since we are dead once we die. (Derrida 80) It is not

just one of these things, but both—that it is impossible and necessary—that make death the unexperienced experience.

In a sense, and as we will come to see through our analysis in the following chapters, fiction and testimony are also like this—both impossible *and* necessary. Like the time in which they occur (time being a human concept of language in and of itself), they are real, yet they are also unfixed, and therefore in a sense unreal. Meaning is fluid and changes with the ebb and flow of the diachronic movement of time, which makes it also synchronic, aesthetically separated by its changes as if in episodes, but still linked by a trace of what once was. “The testimony,” Derrida says, “testifies to nothing less than an instant of an interruption of time and history, a second interruption in which fiction and testimony find their common resource” (Derrida 1998: 73). Therefore, testimony is a sort of iteration, and even more precisely—a reiteration, or an attestation. For Derrida,

(...) this attestation both secret and public, fictional and real, literary and non-literary—we only judge it to be readable, if it is insofar as a reader can understand it, even if no such thing has ever “really” happened to him, to the reader. We can speak, we can read this because this experience, in the singularity of its secret, as “experience of the unexperienced,” beyond the distinction between the real and the phantasmatic, remains universal and exemplary. (Derrida 93)

Fiction, is, in a sense, a testimony of the unexperienced experience—a testimony, therefore, to our deaths (and therefore our lives, which one cannot have without the other), or at very least, our being towards them.

Recalling Heidegger, if we are *zum tode*, or *toward death*, than we must have a way of looking at this experience if we are not to live in utter despair of the finite nature of our human existence. Yet in departure from Heideggerian notions of legacy (an unexperienced experience), fiction and testimony offer us a window with which to look through at this experience *in the moment* of any given modernity (an *experienced* experience). Perhaps at

odds with the original intentions of Derrida and Derridan theory, I believe that viewing aesthetic modernisms (which I will define here as the experience of the recurrence of themes across genres, artistic mediums, or other boundaries in a given modernity, following Susan Stanford Friedman) through the psychoanalytical perspective is the precise window frame that we must look through in order to appropriately position, or frame, ourselves for a meaningful analysis of the fictions and testimonies that we create and encounter throughout our lives. In doing so, we are able to reckon with the experience of disappointment which is inevitable in our mortal lives, and attempt to find meaning in a world riddled with ambiguity.

There may not be a “transcendental signified, no ultimate reality or end to all the references from one sign to another, no unifying element to all things,” as Ann Dobie, registering Derrida, claims (Dobie 145). But even in the presence of what Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence—the Western belief since Plato that consciousness is the center of human existence—it is undeniable that the things which make up our lives are inextricably connected, even if not by some “transcendental signified”—and for this reason, we must attempt to make connections and encounter new meanings in order to make sense of our lives (Dobie 146). We may stand to face disappointment upon the realization of such connections, but we stand to face much more profound disappointment if we fail to ever try to make them. In fact, it seems like some kind of peculiar punishment not to try to make connections in light of this.

## I. MODERNISMS: A RECLAMATION

It is not possible to disregard the fatal  
intersection of time with space.  
-Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"

There is simply no such thing as an aesthetic whole  
that can be separated from the social worlds  
of its creation and reception.  
-Caroline Levine, *Forms*

For quite some time, there has been intense discussion on the topics of the modern, modernism, modernity, modernisms, and even postmodernism. This discussion, much like its very content, has in many ways become boundless—providing an ever-flowing stream of ideas to drink from for the likes of academics to the advertising industry to family at the Thanksgiving dinner table. At least from a Western perspective, in the face of our own modernity, the modern is accessible to seemingly everyone and anyone in an age when even the remotest tribes in the world have been star struck—and conceivably horrified—by the sight of drones flying and hovering above them in the sky, maneuvering above them like birds, yet being controlled and created by unknown people beyond their periphery.

As a result, we are interconnected with our surroundings in a multiplicity of ways, and the technological advancements of the past century appear to make these connections even more profound. Yet at the same time, technological advancements and the connections that they bring with them can also be profound representations of disconnect and discord. In this sense, the same thing that seeks to connect us and bring us together as a global community once and for all could also be our downfall—the same technology that has the potential to bring us together also has the startling ability to further divide us.

Whether we choose to embrace it with open arms or reluctantly adapt to a society that has, what is technologically modern is here to stay for the foreseeable future, as we have come to see over the past sixty or more years with the rapid emergence of computers and computerized technology—an event that seems so profound that it appears as if cosmically connected to something even greater than itself—a constellation of human existence which exists beyond the physical space of our earthly one, and that does so alongside other constellations which have been born again and again, repeating themselves endlessly through time yet appearing in different forms. However, this constellation has become obscured by the schizophrenic nature of capitalism which acts like an astigmatism on the sight of society.

In part as a reaction to and result of war, the nefarious head of capitalism has reared its way into nearly every aspect of life, yet has done so discreetly—camouflaged by the conflation of corporations to individuals and the signification of capital to meaning and fulfillment. Amidst this maelstrom, the field of cultural production has experienced what appears to be immense change, and it is necessary to recognize these changes—which are often aesthetic ones. The force that capitalism holds over the individuals in a capitalist society thus calls for a constant refocusing on the behalf of the individual in order to remain centered and grounded and in order to maintain one’s own autonomous perspective in the midst of the others which pop up in its field of vision.

### **A Changing Field of Cultural Production**

We live in a time when writing fan fiction on blogs has given people the ability to rise meteorically to success in the world of contemporary literature—at least in the sense that they are on best-seller lists and actually sell and profit from physical copies of their books. We find ourselves in a technologically driven, mass-consumer-based culture that implicates creators,

consecrators, sellers, and markets. Even the way in which we represent things appears different as a result. What was parody might now be pastiche, as Jameson claims when he speaks of his conception of postmodernism. But are these things really so different?

In the span of less than one hundred years, we have seen alongside these advancements a proliferation of military technology which may appear to us unparalleled by an event in any commonly accepted view of history. That in World War I we were fighting in trenches, and that less than one hundred years later we are waging wars against people in lands thousands of miles away with drones being remotely controlled on computers is both incredible and profoundly disturbing. But it also points to a change, like that of the cultural field, which exists as an aesthetic one alongside diachronic history, which is itself constantly changing—perpetually in a state of self-referential motion. After all, war and death are war and death no matter what vehicles they are given as a means to their ends. And, as the first law of thermodynamics stipulates, energy cannot be created nor destroyed, and so neither can history.

The things from the past and present of which I will give examples in the later chapters are therefore symbols for things which have existed throughout time—things, people, sentiments which persist, even if apparently paradoxically so and with different aesthetic facades as time dances schizophrenically onward. Things *appear* differently, and yet they find a way to persist over time. They are aesthetic judgements of human experience in the moment in a world in which moments are reproducible across time, and narrative is one of the things that makes this possible. There may be an urge to defend our time, to make claims that we are more advanced, and as a result, are better, further than those before us. But this project seeks to question, confront, and repress that urge in order for us to question how our

diachronic relations across time and space help us deal with disappointment, and how that help might advance our human civilization by seeking to make it coherent.

In many ways, art *is* the embodiment of the human experience. Those who create—whether it is purely for the sake of creation, to eulogize, to condemn, or to make amends—are given the potential to embody the human experience through their creation, and are therefore in a sense able to come to terms with their experience in doing so. However, the power of art as a therapeutic medium, as well as the study of it as a therapeutic activity in and of itself, although previously celebrated in the recent past, is all too often dwarfed by the prevalence of other projects which turn their heads away from modern psychoanalysis in favor of more recent, supposedly ‘post-modern’ psychological and critical theories.

The problem of the shift away from and reluctance with psychoanalysis in the academy and contemporary culture is not only a problem of favoritism toward post-modern theory within and outside of academia, but more importantly one of language which has unnecessarily and dually complicated the current state of scholarship and that of the broader cultural perception in doing so, and can be resolved by distancing modernism from adjectives such as “post-”, as well as distancing it from restrictive patriarchal theories in favor of more inclusive ones which often arise from feminist concerns brought to light through readings of them. As Scott Carpenter succinctly expresses, detractors have attacked Freud, and by extension, psychoanalysis, “as if he were one of those fathers whose abuse they have suddenly recalled.” (Carpenter 67) For this same reason—the urge to resist and defy both modernisms and psychoanalysis—we must question the academic and cultural tendency to repress them in contemporary art and criticism, since history does repeat itself and the energy of our past cannot be destroyed.

## Defining Key Terms

A definition of modernism and modernity is in order. These words have come to mean many things and are used less than judiciously in contemporary culture, yet they still have basic meanings which remain straightforward amidst this confusion. According to Friedman,

As contradictory terms resisting consensual definition, modernity and modernism form a fertile terrain for interrogation, providing even more sites for examination with each new meaning spawned. As parody of rational discourse, their contradictions highlight the production of meaning possible by attention to what will not be tamed, but what refuses consistency and homogenization. Their use ensures the open-ended ongoingness of the scholarly/pedagogical project whose first task is to sustain the continuation of interrogation, to ensure, in short, its own perpetuation. (Friedman 25)

For the sake of clarity, we will define **modernism** here as the aesthetic experience of modernity, and **modernity** as the moment, or space, in which the modern, which is the experience of history in-the-making, the living of life in the moment of one's modernity, occurs—experiences which I argue are reproducible across time.

In the midst of the proliferation of technology alongside things such as global, mass-consumer cultural capitalism and war, which are themselves technologically-driven realms in the present era, the word modernism appears to take new meaning by adopting the adjective technological. Being in this apparent state of metamorphosis—at very least, an aesthetic one—has come to reinforce the necessity of questioning what messages are hidden within the proliferation of meanings for modernity and modernism—which we may find to be new and profound, or conversely, may find to be disappointingly similar to sentiments held in the past. Regardless, we must constantly question the status quo and interrogate why things appear to be the way that they are presented to us and even how we perceive them as we do. That is, recognizing how our realities shape our perceptions, and therefore render us capable of being able to put ourselves in check for things such as for mistakes we have made or privileges

which we have enjoyed which have caused inequality in order to make sense of the world around us and make meaningful connections to that world and others in doing so—particularly in the face of the institutionalization which has occurred in the past hundred years, as Michel Foucault focused on the effects of in his work.

In order to achieve a more focused and nuanced answer to the problem of language that exists in contemporary modernist studies, especially in light of the prevalence of and tendency toward post-modernist theories such as that of Frederic Jameson, Susan Stanford Friedman's recent book *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (2015) proposes a paradigm shift. She regards aesthetic modernism as the "aesthetic dimensions of any given modernity", which contribute to the creation of modernity itself. So as to make sense of her claim, Friedman calls on us to ask the same question which I continue to ask here, "What is hidden within the proliferation of meanings for modernity and modernism" (Friedman 28)? Her answer to the question is that modernisms are planetary—that is, a global phenomenon—and exist across time, and therefore resist periodization. However, she does not tackle the question of the significance of diachrony to her project in the book, which appears to me an essential feature of planetary modernisms, and which I would like to expand upon here since it is also an essential feature of the therapeutic nature of modernisms in that it helps connect people to themselves and others across time. Recalling Freud, it becomes "possible to discover what is not said directly, perhaps what even the author did not realize he was saying" (Dobie 48). In a sense, it helps people see things about themselves that they may not have seen otherwise—to sit back and look at themselves through the perspective of self as Other (that person who is not oneself, who is *different*).

## **Capitalist Influence**

Friedman's question and response alone do not suffice when we live in a time in which the cultural field of production—that is, the field as envisioned by Pierre Bourdieu in which the literary and artistic fields are held in place by a “field of power” where heteronomous and autonomous hierarchization exist by proxy of players such as those who consecrate the art and those who consume it, respectively—has seen drastic aesthetic change alongside the natural ebb and flow of style and sentiment. After all, ours is a time when the viewer and the consumer have essentially been made into the same thing by capitalism. Capitalism endorses consumption as voyeurism and vice versa, rather than voyeurism *through* consumption, (that is to say, it encourages people to consume as a way to be like someone else, rather encouraging people to simply be able to look at what it might be like to be someone else through consuming). In doing so, it strangely and perplexedly mutates the cultural field by eliminating—or attempting to eliminate—it by confusing the heteronomous principle of hierarchization with the autonomous principle of hierarchization.

However, as Hegel's master-slave dialectical shows us and Audre Lorde points out, the slave does not overcome the master with the master's tools, and individuals do not simply achieve more autonomy by being removed from a heteronomous society. Rather, viewer and consumer metamorphose into mutants who are muted by the capitalists who fund them by proxy of funding things such as their entertainment—especially that of television and film, which one could argue have taken precedence in popularity over other art forms in recent times. That is to say, capitalism not only changes us aesthetically, but it also takes away or voice and replaces it with its own. For some, such as Frederic Jameson, this change has transfigured the aesthetic experience of art by muddling any true sense of an individual's autonomy with the influence of capital on autonomous individuals—a problem which is even

more pronounced as the cultural field evolves in light of technological modernism. However, the change in the field strikes me as a remedy for yet another problem which contemporary man has faced—the despotism of individualism, which I will discuss in more depth in chapter five in particular.

At the same time, the existence of modernism itself has been put into question by theorists such as Jameson, who claim we are in a time beyond modernism as a result of the disruptive force of capitalism. In doing so, theorists like Jameson threaten to minimize the significance of modernisms by reducing them to things of the past which are supposedly irrelevant and disconnected from the present and future when they are truly the threads which help bind together our complexly interwoven webs into intelligible pictures. In the face of the changes in the cultural field and society at large, and the persistence of modernisms amongst them, this project, like Susan Stanford Friedman's, calls us to ask—why do modernisms continue to appear different, and yet also the same, as time goes on? How do modernisms help reinforce a cultural field? In light of their recurrence, and their apparent aesthetic changes which occur over time and in conjunction with the moments in which they occur (their modernity), what is the significance of aesthetic modernisms in relation to a diachronic notion of modern history?

In this thesis I interrogate the role of aesthetic modernisms in art and culture, using, as a *point de départ*, Susan Stanford Friedman's recent book, *Planetary Modernisms*. In this thesis I interrogate the role of aesthetic modernisms in art and culture, using, as a *point de départ*, Susan Stanford Friedman's recent book, *Planetary Modernisms*. In her book, she lays the ground work for an aesthetic conception of modernisms. She declares the aesthetic experience of modernity is marked by the eclectic recurrence of themes across genres, artistic mediums, or other boundaries, themes which do not always follow one particular system and

can be taken from many sources. This essay argues that aesthetic modernisms found in art, when read diachronically, offer a therapeutic perspective on narrativity not only to the artist, but also the reader and viewer who are consumers of it. Therefore, modernisms serve as outlets for human agents to reckon with the experience of disappointment with which human agents are presented throughout their lives, as well as reinforce connections which, like cobwebs, are often overlooked and neglected, yet present and of significance nonetheless.

### **A Recuperation of Psychoanalysis**

As Scott Carpenter says, “psychoanalysis is a lot like reading” (Carpenter 67). And as Anne Dobie succinctly affirms, “With Freudian theory, it is possible to discover what is not said directly, perhaps what even the author did not realize he was saying” (Dobie 48). In light of this, Freudian theory, and even more generally, psychoanalysis, has the potential to be a profound mechanism which has the ability to endow us with the power to reveal things about ourselves and others through the act of writing and reading. For, as Freud’s iceberg reveals to us, it is often difficult to see things for what they are other than how they present themselves to us on a surface level, regardless of the fact that there is so much which lies beneath it in the unconscious. However, as Freudian theory importantly demonstrates, what is inaccessible in the unconscious—that which is invisible and hard to see—can be *made* accessible through the conscious act of psychoanalytical reading and writing.

Further, if we view psychoanalytical readings as a sort of allegorical reading, then this in and of itself suggests that the reading which we are performing is a timeless one. As Jeremy Tambling points out in his book *Allegory* while channeling Joel Fineman, “[A]llegory is always a hierarchizing mode, indicative of timeless order, however subversively intended its content might be. [...] However, against this, allegory is also open-ended” (Tambling 166). Allegory is

therefore indefinite in the sense that its meaning is open, and is produced out of the desire to know and understand—to allegorize is to interpret through a different aesthetic lens—a desire which has and continues to exist throughout time. “The desire to know,” says Tambling, “which produces allegory, also engenders allegorical interpretation (allegoresis)” (Tambling 167). And, “psychoanalysis, like allegoresis and allegory, is fascinated by new knowledge, rather than simply explaining old knowledge” (Tambling 167). In light of this, we must recognize that allegorical and psychoanalytical readings seek to build upon the ruins of our pasts, rather than to simply rediscover them, and this dual goal is a worthy pursuit for those who seek to find meaning in face of the maelstrom of modernity and the disappointments which life brings.

### **Reading as Therapy**

For whatever reason it might be, human beings undoubtedly stand to face immeasurable, crippling disappointment. The things that we want and for which we hold deep desire and longing are sometimes incompatible with the things that we need. However, what is not directly accessible can be and is made accessible by psychoanalysis, which helps draw out that which is hidden by the unconscious and bring it into the light of consciousness, which is why it is necessary to continue to perform psychoanalytical readings of texts. Lying on the chaise lounge, or metaphorically doing so by reading, is far better than sitting opposite a lawyer, or going to the grave with deep-seeded resentment which all too easily finds and metastasizes in the darkest places within us. And as we will come to see upon examination of the characters in the proceeding chapters, no matter where in the world, which artistic medium used, or from what time period, it is probably at least worth a try to attempt to change our perspective in an attempt to see things differently, and to possibly heal ourselves as a

result—otherwise we stand yet even more disappointment, and to take this disappointment with us to the grave.

“Psychoanalysis is a lot like reading,” like Carpenter says, but moreover, reading and psychoanalysis are also a lot like watching—they are activities which use the process of viewing in order to experience something (Carpenter 67). We look out at the world and watch it, analyze it with the eyes that are given us—and even when we look out from our periphery, we cannot always see everything. Contemporary theorists such as Hans Robert Jauss try to account for this with reader response theory, whose basic implication is that readers generate meaning for and from texts, just as authors manipulate their writing for their perceived audiences in order to influence the way in which they read. However, I argue that such theories often tend to offer us either too little in the way of the productive value of such analyses, or have a misplaced hyper-focus which also limits its value. After all, as reader response theory teaches us, readers have their own burdens that they bring along with them, and it is impossible for them to eliminate the bias of those burdens—but it is also impossible to eliminate the significance of the author and their world to the text. Although I do not seek to further explore reader response theory here, I argue that in order for reader responses (readings of) to texts to be productive, readers must confront their burdens through psychoanalytical reading.

Such a confrontation motivates my own analysis of modernisms here. If we are to agree that, “There are only representations,” as Susan Sontag claims, particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when many of those representations are created by capitalist media outlets, then we must have means by which we can come to view and understand these representations, distanced from the source and yet still in acknowledgement of it, and psychoanalysis is one

of those forms of engagement (Sontag 109). And in viewing the representations of others, we can hopefully find meaning in our own lives.

As contemporary scholars such as Philip Rieff and Stephen Gardner have reiterated since Freud, therapy might be the answer to the problems of our experience with modernity, and I insist here that a therapeutic approach to reading can be a profoundly insightful one. Reading in the sense that one is viewing the world—or different worlds—through the act of engaging with a text, whether literature, film, or otherwise, is therapeutic in the sense that it allows us to think more openly about our own situations while living vicariously through others—a kind of voyeurism. In so doing, we are able to acknowledge and legitimize our feelings, and hopefully as a result, we are able to learn to respect others and allow them to do the same—and therefore hopefully helping the pain of disappointment sting a little less knowing that we are not alone, even if we are different.

Philip Rieff recognized the shift towards a therapeutic culture in the 1960s. His words about how the millennials would be affected by this shift has proven to be prophetic, as he predicts an unraveling of contemporary culture.

Our cultural revolution does not aim, like its predecessors, at victory for some rival commitment, but rather at a way of using all commitments, which amounts to loyalty toward none. By psychologizing about themselves interminably, Western men are learning to use their internality against the primacy of any particular organization of personality. If this re-structuring of the Western imagination succeeds in establishing itself, complete with institutional regimens, then human autonomy from the compulsions of culture may follow the freedoms already won from the compulsions of nature. With such a victory, culture, as previously understood, need suffer no further defeats. It is conceivable that millennial distinctions between inner and outer experience, private and public life, will become trivial. (Rieff 21)

With the help of therapy, we are able to escape the problem of individualism and avoid the retreat into the self that technology encourages. And in many ways, Rieff was correct when he said that millennials would trivialize the distinction between their inner and outer

experience, as we see the emergence of a culture of what verges on over-sharing in contemporary society. But even with over-sharing, the fact remains that at least we are moving towards a time of more honesty—and hopefully, a time in which people can more fully embrace their authentic selves.

In some ways, the way that the therapeutic has manifested itself within contemporary culture is very different from Freudian psychoanalysis, and turns a focus on things such as health and physical wellness that affect the whole population, rather than just the individual in the chaise lounge. We can see this in the numerous growing fitness and health movements that have swept the Western world and beyond. There has also been a global push for greater social equality and spiritual wellbeing (such as a number of movements in support of LGBTQ+ rights and minority groups)—and not just internalizing these therapeutic activities for ourselves, but externalizing them for the world around as well, and therefore bringing the individual back to the foreground of society, rather than stealing them away into the retreat of individualism. However, as the individual is where the problem of disappointment begins, the individual is the same place it must also end, and for this reason, the necessity for psychoanalysis is ever-present. We must have a way to view representations, including our own—and a psychoanalytical reading of modernisms in literature and art offer us the insight to do so.

As Carpenter says in his analysis of psychoanalytical theory, “(...) words are ‘haunted’ by the spirits of all usages past and present, as well as those yet to come” (Carpenter 118). Therefore, viewing and reading are the psychic mediums which allow ourselves to connect synchronously to the world in which we live and come to be a way to judge that world. While knowledge is power—a message that even my health care provider provided to me in a recent email—it is not definite. Knowledge is also one of the greatest sources of disappointment.

After all, if we were ignorant, there would presumably be nothing to be disappointed about—which presents an incredible paradox between conscious existence and the power of the unconscious. Reason does not provide all of the answers to the questions that arise from our consciousness just as science does not provide all of the answers, but using modernisms to view the placement of this reason relative to their modernities and others can help us come to an understanding that we would not be able to achieve devoid of it.

### **Scope and Methodology**

The scope of this paper is limited to the time frame of the late 19th century to the present in that my choice of primary texts are works taken from 1897-2009. Although this time frame may be limited in that less than two centuries is relatively recent when taking into consideration that human civilization is thousands of years old, and cosmic existence infinite, it is also vast in that it has supposedly seen so many (aesthetic) changes in such a short period of time. I would also argue that I could present the same argument that I present here elsewhere by drawing comparisons to texts much older, and with much more time between them (Dante's *Commedia* being a ready comparison to all of the men in this essay), but have chosen not to do so in order to since the texts from my chosen time frame can and have been categorized by the same names as the movements which emerged alongside them—the same terms which have complicated the dialectical movement of modernism. By acknowledging the emergence of these movements and terms alongside the works analyzed here, I will be able to show how analyzing the content of the works and the experiences with disappointment which they portray, when read diachronically, allows for the possibility of a therapeutic reckoning with those experiences—whether it be the loss of faith or the loss of a loved one—

no matter what time they are from, language they are written or spoken in, or medium that they use to do so.

In order to contextualize my argument and demonstrate how aesthetic modernisms have existed and will continue to exist across time and space—particularly from the 19th century to present, in this essay—I will examine four primary characters from literature and film. The characters that I will examine are Uncle Vanya from Anton Chekov’s play of the same name, *Dyadya Vanya (Uncle Vanya)* (1897), Joaquín from Miguel de Unamuno’s novella *Abel Sánchez: Una historia de pasión* (1917), Professor Moses Herzog in Saul Bellow’s novel *Herzog* (1964), and Professor Larry Gopnik from the Coen brothers’ recent film, *A Serious Man* (2009). I have chosen to analyze these four men alongside one another in order to draw out the similarities between them, thus breaking down any barriers that language, space, or time created between them, and reaffirming the diachronicity of modernity while also acknowledging, accepting, and embracing the synchronic, episodic nature of perspective. In doing so, I will be able to expand upon the framework within which we define and view modernisms as outlined by Friedman.

Engaging in an examination of psychoanalytical theory alongside of this analysis will ultimately offer us a reason for the recurrence of and importance of modernisms. In turn, we will rediscover and build upon a theory which helps us deal and cope with trauma. In order to deal with disappointment, we must confront it through its experience—through the living of it, and thus its connection to infinity (our diachronic history is conceivably connected to an infinite one since we do not know when and where our universe began or will end).

I have chosen to put significant emphasis on the analysis of a multiplicity of characters from multiple mediums of art for several reasons. Foremost, the eclectic choice of texts serves to demonstrate the reproducibility of modernisms across time, no matter who the

person is or in what society they live—modernity being the space in which themes are reproduced and given different aesthetics. Secondly, although the characters who I have chosen may be different, they all have something important in common: they are stories about men dealing with the experience of disappointment. Whether it be in their social situation in life, in love, or in loss, each of the characters with which I perform a character analysis on and close reading of have acute experiences with disappointment which are documented through their narration—whether it be through literature, film, or otherwise. Through a reading of their experiences, I will be able to draw out their similarities and show how the recurrence of themes across genres and artistic mediums lends us an understanding of disappointment which can be a therapeutic one.

Thirdly, the inclusion of a play and film seemed particularly important to include in this project since it reaffirms my point that modernisms are invoked through mediums other than in novels. Only an eclectic reading which takes into account the fact that modernisms are drawn from many sources, rather than just one, could offer us this conclusion and even sustain the cultural field. For this reason, I strategically chose pieces which were created in or around different pivotal moments in the field of cultural production for this project, ultimately demonstrating how modernisms can both de-center and re-center our perspective as they are reproduced across time.

### **Exploring Objections**

So as to confront any possible objections to my argument, particularly from those in favor of postmodernist theory, I also engage in a discussion of the critical theory of Frederic Jameson, whose body of work has carefully documented the startling significance of capitalism to culture in the late-20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. I have chosen to put particular focus

on Jameson and postmodernist concerns in my rebuttal since it is my strong belief that language is a powerful tool not to be reckoned with, and that Jameson's theory—whether wittingly or unwittingly—uses it as a threatening one. I argue that while Jameson has been able to make important distinctions about the influence of capitalism on culture and use his voice to advance our understanding of its negative effects on culture and people more generally, he also complicated and distorted the language which surrounds modernism with his assertion that we are post-, and therefore taken part in the prevention of creating important and necessary links between people and things of the past and present. In order to take away some of the confusion which language has imposed on us in this manner, my reading of Jameson alongside my primary and secondary texts will ultimately dispel the exclusive concept of the postmodern in favor of a more inclusive concept of modernisms, even in light of the sheer power of late capitalism. I intend to show this by demonstrating how capitalism itself can be viewed as a type of aesthetic modernism.

### **Garnering Support**

Although my study engages in a conversation with ideas from an eclectic pool of scholars and artists, the contemporary scholar whose work that I intend to expand upon in particular in this essay is Susan Stanford Friedman. Friedman herself draws from an impressively rich vein of scholarship on the topics of the modern, modernity, and modernisms in order to make her assessment a well-informed one. In this essay, I plan to do the same not only by drawing upon the recent scholarship of Friedman, but also revisiting the works of some of the most famous thinkers associated with these topics, particularly those of Sigmund Freud. In doing so, I will be able to expand upon Friedman's scholarship and reclaim the triumph of the therapeutic in art and culture, which Friedman is only able to touch very briefly upon in her book. I intend to show that eclectic modernisms help ground our conscious

existence and cope with the experience of disappointment which we inevitably encounter in our lives, just as the narrativity of the characters in the pieces that I will engage with in this essay grounds them.

## **In Conclusion**

Our experiences may be different and occur at different points in time throughout our lives, but they are also recurrent and repeat themselves over and over again, creating a sort of diachronic narrative of disappointment which trails along—albeit haphazardly and with many casualties—across human history, as if it were a thread part of a much larger tangled web. The realization of this cyclicity helps us deal with our mortality in that it acknowledges that we are but human and flawed, capable of so much, yet limited by our consciousness and mortality at the same time. It loosens the knot of the pain of disappointment to know that others feel the pressure, too. It is only when we allow for ourselves to meet the experience of humility and can finally admit to ourselves that we are the same as those before us that we can depart from and come to be different than those preceding us. It is at this point when we become free to grow without shouldering too much of the burden of the pain of the past which we often find ourselves (too) deeply rooted. In a technological age which connects and disconnects people at the click of a button, which swipes right for “yes”, and left for “no”, man can still be awestruck by the beauty of a sunrise, and utterly devastated by the pain of a loss, and modernisms are what diachronically and episodically connect us to and give us the potential to understand these experiences, especially those which disrupt our worlds with the pang in the heart that is disappointment.

## II. FACING THE BANAL: UNCLE VANYA

Only religion can answer the question of the purpose of life.  
-Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Existing in a time before the mass-produced automobile, World Wars, or cultural capitalism, Chekov's Imperial Russia may appear distant to those of us living over a century after his death. In stark contrast to Chekov's world, ours is a world that has embraced computerized technology, so that drones are used both to wage war and to deliver life-saving HIV medications to remote villages, and a time in which, as some claim, we could be on the verge of a third World War. Some may perhaps even make the claim that for such reasons, such as that we are technologically advanced, we live a life of privilege. The worlds in which we and Chekov live therefore come to appear as if they are parallel universes when we begin to make value judgements while taking into consideration just how different things are in 2016 than they were in 1897 when *Dydy Vanya* was originally published.

Russia herself has seen immense change in the span of just over a hundred years. From Imperialism, to Communism, to the pseudo-democracy under Putin that she exists in today—Russia has surely changed. However, despite these transformations, patterns emerge, images reoccur, and the number of similarities existing between times past and that of the present seem prolific. These patterns, I argue, are created by the psychological residue left behind by modernisms, and exploring their connections offers us a way to cope with the experience of disappointment.

Chekhov's play *Dydy Vanya* offers a realistic—although potentially unsatisfying—solution to the problem of disappointment imposed on us by the experience of consciousness. Before exploring this solution, it is necessary for me to provide a brief summary of the story

line in order to provide an adequate backdrop for the reader. The relatively short four-act play takes place over the course of several months and begins on the weekend which retired professor Alexander Vladimirovich Serebryakov and his stunning, youthful second wife Yelena Andreyevna return to his country estate. After a series of events between the couple and the inhabitants of the estate unfold, the play ends with their departure for Kharkov—an estate that he inherited from his first wife—as if to suggest that things will continue to go on as they have.

The professor's daughter from his first marriage, Sonya, lives at the country estate along with her maternal grandmother, Mariya Vasilyevna Voynitzkaya, her maternal uncle Ivan ("Vanya") Petrovich Voynitzky, and her old nanny, Marina. Serebryakov's doctor Mikhail Lvovich Astrov visits the estate in the first and second act as well. While staying at the estate, its inhabitants begin to grow bored. From boredom, passions, like unruly flames, are ignited to try to fill the void that is created by inaction.

During the Serebrykov's time at their estate, sparks fly—but not between the couple wed in Holy matrimony. In fact, Chekov presents us with a situation much more complex than any ordinary love triangle. While Sonya admits her love for Astrov, Astrov rejects her and makes advances toward Yelena, who is already married to Sonya's father, the professor. Around the same time, Vanya admits his love to Yelena, who is repulsed by him. Shortly thereafter, Yelena struggles with the temptation to cheat on the professor with Astrov, but ultimately makes the decision not to. Regardless, for each of the characters, the heart is at odds with the head.

Meanwhile, the caretakers of the estate begin to grow cold toward the professor when he proposes to sell the estate, which is the place that they all call home and which they have deeply invested themselves in—both emotionally and financially. After all, the estate is not

only their home, but they have also worked tirelessly for the professor and trusted him with most of their money. To sell the estate and to leave them behind would be to take away their livelihood, and so, although we can clearly see as outsiders that their faith in the professor is perhaps misplaced in the first place, it is difficult to not sympathize with them.

As a result of his disappointment and anger at his present situation, Vanya attempts to shoot the professor twice, but fails, and later feels intensely guilty about doing so. In the face of guilt and shame—the ultimate forms of personal disappointment for conscious man because they are so taxing on consciousness for anyone without a psychosis—Vanya steals a vial of morphine from Astrov in order to try to commit suicide. However, Vanya's attempt at taking drastic measures is thwarted once again when Astrov notices that the vial of morphine is missing and he and Sonya 'talk him down from the ledge', so-to-speak.

The professor ultimately decides to keep the estate and makes amends with Vanya. Although this is a satisfying outcome in that its inhabitants are no longer in jeopardy of losing their home and money, it is also dissatisfying in that the professor leaves right away for his other estate with Yelena in tow, leaving Sonya and Vanya to return to their work and to continue on as they had before the ordeal of his visit. This suggests that nothing has been resolved and that perhaps nothing in life ever really is—unless, of course, we choose to find a way to move on from our disappointments, and boredom and loneliness have no place in such movement other than to limit us. But when passion can be both the cause of loneliness and boredom and exonerate us from loneliness and boredom, how do we cope?

The passions that the characters develop for one another over the course of the play are directly attributable to boredom and loneliness—both experiences of disappointment in their own right. For example, Astrov and Vanya are both single men in a house with the equally bored, beautiful twenty-seven-year old Yelena, so it seems perfectly normal that the two men

would be attracted to her. After all, Sonya is Vanya's niece, and therefore not a suitable match for him, and Astrov does not see in Sonya what she sees in him, so their attention turns to the youngest, most attractive woman—regardless of the fact that she is taken and married to the man who holds power over all of them. This also perhaps suggests that although the slave may want what the master has, it will not fulfill him—after all, as Hegel's dialectic teaches us, both are slaves. Similarly, one might say that Sonya's passion for Astrov might have arisen because he is one of the only suitable men that is also not a family member whom she encounters—and therefore the man who is likely to leave her with the least disappointment and loneliness.

Trying to find a solution for her disappointment and loneliness, Sonya seeks out company, which she finds in their guest, Astrov, on the night of his arrival. Sonya tries to confide her feelings in Astrov. However, rather than speaking to her, Astrov, drunk and not in love with Sonya, speaks to his own loneliness instead. Astrov, a lonely man, does not have a "small gleam of light" before him. He walks his path alone, and therefore in darkness, so it is no wonder why the physical attraction of a young woman such as Yelena would interest him and give him ideas of sexual fulfillment—ideas contrary to that of disappointment. Yet even he knows that sexual fulfillment is not the kind of fulfillment that lights the dark place that is loneliness when he says, "[...] What attracts me? What attracts me? Beauty attracts me. I can't remain indifferent to it. Yelena Andreyevna, for example, you see, she'd turn my head in a day. But *that's* not love, now, is it ..." (Chekov, 36)? This admission is the admission that having what we want does not translate into happiness or fulfillment. Whether it is of knowledge or of a person, possession is no cure for the disappointments of life.

Attaining beauty and fulfilling sexual desires—things that invoke passion in us—do not illuminate the darkness and take away the burden of loneliness. In fact, those things which

invoke passion in us often do quite the opposite and reveal the disappointment and highlight the resulting pain in harsh lighting, such as the presence of Yelena Andreyevna does for Vanya and Sonya during her time at the estate. The passions which Yelena's presence awakes in Vanya are the most volatile of all, and which exemplify the danger of passion, including disappointment, which leaves us to toil in the despair of what could have been, which gives him the desire to end his life in order to end the suffering imposed on him by toiling away in loneliness, the birthplace of his passions.

At the close of the play, once the professor and Yelena have departed for Kharkov, Vanya and Sonya are left to themselves once again and resume their work. Vanya works to keep himself busy, but this work alone does not cure the disappointment of his unfulfilled passions. But Sonya—a faithful, gentle soul who is wise beyond her years—seeing that Vanya cannot shake his sadness, gives her uncle words of advice. Her words offer him and the reader an alternative way to deal with disappointment, which is to live life with the comfort in knowing that in death, “Мы отдохнём!/ We shall rest!”—as if to say that death (and spiritual rebirth) will remedy the disease of disappointment that life infected us with.

However, this does not offer Vanya—nor does it offer us—an answer to the question of how to deal with disappointment while we are living. For the reason that there is no answer given, the conclusion of the play—on the literal level—is a disappointment in and of itself. However, this is only on a literal level, which calls us to ask—does it really have to be a disappointment that we are given no answer? Or can we engage in a metaphorical, or even allegorical reading of the text which helps us cope with such disappointments?

In order to answer such questions, we must first engage in readings of other texts which deal with disappointment in order to establish the persistence of modernisms across time, but only after a close consideration of the presence of themes in the novel which persist

in the time in which we live. The example of Vanya, similar to the other characters examined here, but perhaps more intensely, as we will see in the following chapters, succinctly expresses the Freudian concept of our being threatened with ‘suffering from three directions’—ourselves, the world around us, and other people (Freud 729). In the play, Vanya experiences the threat of suffering from all three of these directions. He is threatened by himself and his own consciousness, which drives him to attempt suicide, he is threatened by the world and society in which he lives being born into the social situation that has made him essentially a slave to someone else’s dreams, and by others—by the Professor, who threatens to take his home, Yelena, who threatens his sanity, and even Sonya and Astrov, who thwart his attempt to end his suffering. It is as if Vanya lives in a state of siege.

Essentially surrounded by suffering and disappointment, it would even appear as if Vanya’s attempted suicide is an attempt to shut down the threat of suffering and to suppress the pain of disappointment. But if death is the only way to ultimately end our suffering (which is a statement in and of itself that we are unsure of) and death is not an available option to us, as *Uncle Vanya* demonstrates, then we must find and utilize other ways to cope with the experience of it. If we are to face disappointment in our lives, which we, like Vanya, continue to face, we must have ways of coping with our experiences and putting them into perspective, and psychoanalysis is one of these productive coping mechanisms.

Although Vanya did not live in a time whose modernity allowed for his characters’ interaction with such therapy, it is not hard to image that it would be beneficial to him. After all, it is through talking to Sonya—as if like a therapist—that Vanya is able to find some comfort. By talking to someone else who acknowledges his presence in the maelstrom that is life, and in coming to recognize that he is not alone in the experience of disappointment, Vanya is able to receive a kind of therapeutic benefit from speaking with Sonya, who acts as a sort or

therapist for him. In doing so, his life is literally saved. Thus, therapy is presented to us a way to mediate our experience of disappointment, and, in the chapters which follow, we will see a persistence of the power of this theme across time and genre.

### III. YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT: JOÁQUIN

What decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle.  
-Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Written over twenty years after *Uncle Vanya*, *Abel Sanchez*, a Spanish novella written by Miguel de Unamuno in 1917, is a loose retelling of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. While turning on the story of a man who, like Vanya, experiences disappointment in the face of modernity, it presents a different picture of how to deal with disappointment. The story follows Joaquin Monegro (the modern Cain), and his best friend since childhood, Abel Sanchez (the modern Abel), from infancy to death. Envy for what Abel has and who Abel is blossoms and poisons Joaquin's heart from a young age, so much so that it transforms his character into one which controlled by envy. The resulting disappointment which ensues follows him as he grows into adulthood. The novella calls us to question: is the search for the fulfillment of our passions our salvation? Or is it our eternal, internalized hell?

In the novella, which is a *bildungsroman*, we are told the story of how the characters Joaquin Monegro and Abel Sanchez grow to be the way that they are as adults. Once Joaquin and Abel have grown into young men, Joaquin becomes a doctor, and Abel a famous artist. But while Joaquin's job entails that he be a reasonable man, we come to see just how unreasonable his passions have made him. As an adult, Joaquin's jealousy for Abel flourishes all the more as endeavors of love and success in work become ripe opportunities for Joaquin's envy of Abel to flourish. For example, Abel "takes away" Joaquin's love (and cousin), Helena, by falling in love with and marrying her, and Joaquin's soul is tortured by this unrequited, "stolen" love so much so that he devotes the rest of his life to hating his own best friend.

Joaquin tries to do things to relinquish, or at least mask, his hatred for Abel, which is ultimately a hatred and disappointment in himself. Hoping that marriage will save him, he gets married to Antonia, a sweet and devoutly religious woman who cares very deeply for him. However, even from the onset of their marriage, she feels a divide between them whose foundation is based upon the unrequited passions that torture Joaquin's soul. As the image of goodness—and perhaps even more profoundly, understanding her husband's faults, yet choosing to accept them and look beyond them—Antonia stands by his side no matter what.

However, since Antonia's love and purity lay no claim on Joaquin's decrepit heart, their marriage becomes yet another expression of Joaquin's envy, and his life's ultimate and final expression of failure and disappointment, as we will come to see. For instance, when Abel and Helena have a son, Abelin, it causes Joaquin immense jealousy, and Antonia gives him a daughter, Joaquina to try to satiate him. Joaquin, like Antonia, hopes in vain that Joaquina will change him and give his life meaning in place of his defective passions. Neither Antonia, Joaquina, nor even religion when he seeks refuge in the Church brings him satisfaction. No matter what he does, Joaquin still envies Abel and loves Helena, leaving behind and revealing to us a trail of disappointment which continues throughout his life.

When Abelin has grown into a young man, Joaquin accepts him as his apprentice, partly to redeem himself of his hatred of Abel, partly to anticipate and aid in Abelin's failure in medicine. As such, this is Joaquin's attempt to defame the Sanchez name and make Abel feel the disappointment which he has so acutely felt his entire life. However, Joaquin grows fond of Abelin, eventually even finding out that he, too, feels some resentment towards Abel, and takes solace in this. But as Joaquin is consumed by only concerns for himself, he makes yet another decision which stands to add to the disappointment of his life. He has his only

daughter, who wanted to become a nun, sacrifice herself in marriage to Abelin for Joaquin's sake.

As he grows older, Joaquin tries yet again to move past his envy, beyond what has not been but which he deeply desires. However, this proves difficult when Abelin reminds him that we don't have "anything left but the past" (Unamuno 141). This serves as a reminder for Joaquin that his past with Abelin is inescapable, and as time continues to pass, this feeling is only intensified and further internalized by Joaquin, no matter what good occurs that attempts to reverse or remedy it. For example, when Abelin and Joaquina have a son together, he is given the name Joaquin after his grandfather. One might assume that this event was a joyous occasion for Joaquin Sr., and can even see as to how such an event might initiate an internal change which would affect Joaquin positively, but for Joaquin, this is not the case.

Unfortunately for Joaquin, as Joaquin Jr. grows into a young boy, he begins to take a preference to his Grandpa Abelin. As a result, Joaquin is not able to receive the kind of fulfillment that he had hoped for from having a grandchild begotten of Abelin, the son of his enemy, and Joaquina, his failed savior and daughter. What was intended to save him is his end, and once again, Joaquin feels slighted by Abelin, and his envy consumes him.

When Abelin falls ill and calls on Joaquin, Joaquin takes the opportunity to express his rage and jealousy for him once and for all—a violent, yet truly cathartic moment. In a fit of rage, Joaquin begins to lay hands on Abelin when Abelin is suddenly seized by an attack of angina and dies. The person that Joaquin thought was the source of his envy and disappointment is finally gone, and although we may have come to dislike Joaquin, we hope that he might finally find peace.

A year passes, but time, for Joaquin, does not put an "end to his gnawing disease", and he himself falls ill (Unamuno 172). On his death bed, Joaquin considers how his life may

have been had he embraced love and let go of his hatred. He ultimately decides to put an end to his hatred once and for all by welcoming death. For Joaquin, death was the only way to escape the sickness that was his envy which poisoned him from living an enjoyable life. But what was the root of this so-called sickness? Surely Abel did things unbecoming of a friend to Joaquin, as we have seen, but there is evidence in the text which suggests that Joaquin's bitterness toward Abel has its root in their childhood, and we must revisit this place in order to understand how it affected him.

All during their secondary school studies, which they pursued together, Joaquin was the incubator and hatcher, hotly in pursuit of prizes. Joaquin was first in the classroom; Abel was first outside class, in the patio of the Institute, and among his comrades, in the street, in the country, and whenever they played hooky. It was Abel who made everyone laugh with his natural cleverness; he was especially applauded for his caricature of the professors. "Joaquin is much more diligent, but Abel is quicker ... if he were only to study..." And this was the prevailing judgment on the part of his classmates, of which Joaquin was aware, served to poison his heart. (Unamuno 5)

We see from this passage that it is the alienation and isolation imposed on him by the judgment of his classmates that sours Joaquin on Abel, and it does so because it makes him feel inadequate, and therefore isolated and alone. As Allan Bloom says, "a sense of lack of profound contact with other human beings, seems to be the disease of our time" (Bloom 14). And even if Bloom was not speaking to Unamuno's time, this sentiment is readily applicable here. Being different than Abel, who always came out on top in all things social, causes Joaquin to experience isolation and loneliness from a young age, and ultimately gives birth to the disease that is his passionate envy.

As we have noted, Joaquin tries many different things to try to cure the passion that has manifested itself as envy in his soul. For instance, after reading Lord Byron's *Cain*, he begins to believe in God and to go to church, hoping that it will change him. In a sense, it is Joaquin's own attempt at intertextuality and engagement with another text—Byron's *Cain*—

which extends beyond the already present intertextual link between himself and the Biblical Cain. As Maria Alfaro says, “There are always other words in a word, other texts in a text” (Alfaro 268). Joaquin recognizes this, but fails to do anything about it. Since he fails at any real analysis of this intertextual connection beyond its recognition, its connection remains a superficial one for him, rather than serving as a revelatory connection.

Although Joaquin later goes to confession, which is a kind of therapy in itself, this experience affirms his affliction when he is able to admit that what he feels for Abel is envy. However, it does not move him to repent because it does not move him to confront his passions, but represses them instead. The priest suggests to Joaquin that he take up noble work and try to emulate God in order to sublimate this envy, but Joaquin does not allow this to be a valid option for himself, as his doubt overcomes his belief more often than not. Joaquin also tries to ‘drown the passion which devastates’ him at the club in alcoholic drink, but this offers no solution to his problems either.

No matter what Joaquin tries to do to cure himself of his passions, he fails. Neither the joy of having a child nor the compassion of his loving wife lifts him from the pit of his hatred. Joaquin becomes so fixated on and obsessed with redeeming himself and curing himself of his passion that he convinces his daughter and Abelin to wed in order for them to bear a child which carries his own blood as well as that of his enemy Abel and of his unrequited lover Helena, and even of his wife Antonia, whose ‘blood is like baptismal water’ and has redemptive powers. (Unamuno 134-5) As the reader, we understand just how insane this is because we can see that it won’t fix the other problems in Joaquin’s life, but Joaquin, deluded by his passions, sees this as an opportunity to remedy the pain of his disappointment. Joaquin is correct in thinking that it is an opportunity—but it proves to be one that ends quite tragically for him.

Joaquin's grandson, whose blood was supposed to redeem him, is afraid of Joaquin and loves his grandfather Abel more. The potion which Joaquin concocted by joining his daughter's blood with that of his enemies is impotent, like Joaquin. Abel's death does not work as a cure for Joaquin either, and so, after many failures at curing his pain, Joaquin succumbs to death, lamenting his reasons for doing so to Antonia before he passes on.

"What for? So as finally to grow old, really old? No, old age isn't worth it, egotistic old age is no more than state of infancy with a consciousness of death. An old man is a child who knows he will die. No, no, I don't want to become an old man. I would fight with my grandchildren from pure jealousy, I would grow to hate them....No, no....enough of hatred! I could have loved you, I should have loved you it would have been my salvation, but I did not." (175-6)

This admission—that there was an alternative, and it was to follow the duty of their marriage, rather than pursue their unvirtuous passions, and that in doing so, he might have found unexpected fulfillment—is a profound one. Joaquin realizes that if he had loved Antonia, his wife and the mother of his only child, it may have saved him from the turmoil imposed on him by his passions.

By admitting that he failed to do just this, Joaquin is at least an honest man—fully aware of the consequences of his passions and taking accountability for them. However, Joaquin believes that death is the only remedy for the sickness that is his disappointment embodied through envy, and so he embraces death in order to escape further despair rather than living out his life in search of meaning and fulfillment—the same fulfillment that he admitted could have been had but which he chose to forego in favor of suffering for his own selfish reasons.

In the end, Joaquin is essentially unable to overcome the disappointment stemming from his own existence in a world where the man he most wanted to be like would always come before him. Even after Abel's death, Joaquin favors and accepts his own death in the face of the knowledge that at least in his own mind, Abel would always be better. Regardless

of the fact that there was another option which preserved his life and had the potential to offer him a sense of fulfillment at last, Joaquin chooses death. Therefore, as the novella demonstrates, fulfilling our passions is not necessarily our salvation. In the case of Joaquin, as we have so clearly seen, the pursuit of our passions can ultimately become our hell on earth. However, it is not only the pursuit of our passions, but also the repression of them that is dangerous. Both endeavors spring forth many paths on which we can proceed, and both have the potential to lead us into situations which cause us disappointment.

## IV. LIFE AS BONDAGE: MOSES HERZOG

The life of every citizen is becoming a business.  
-Saul Bellow, *Herzog*

It would be ignorant to ignore the influence that capitalism has had on culture over the past several decades. Over the past few decades in particular, we have begun to see more clearly just how influential capitalism is, and many people have started to accept that some of the things that we were and continue to be sold are not what they seem to be and may even be harmful to us—an admission that is no conspiracy in 2016, although it may have been in the 1950's when big tobacco reigned supreme. We live in a time when corporations are considered people in the eyes of the law; when false claims propagated by people such as famous television doctor Dr. Mehmet Oz are sold to us sullyng the Hippocratic oath for profit. We are constantly being inundated by a barrage of messages which have been created by industries— pharmaceutical, military, food, media, and even political—for profit, whether or not their claims are valid, and we are expected not only to accept but also to believe them, and follow docilely along with the status quo.

One might think that consumers would have learned their lesson with the tobacco industry in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and realized that corporations often care more about selling their product than the potential harm they may cause, but this belief is sorely mistaken. However, thoughtful individuals have come to question the proliferation of consumerism around them, and begin to confront the problem of it in their criticism of it. This is exactly how big tobacco met its match. But this does not solve the problem of thinking—the problem of facing disappointment and not being able to know in the face of consciousness, which, as we

have seen thus far through the characters of Vanya and Joaquin, has existed across time and space.

Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog* is a book which engages in thinking about "the *problem* of thinking," and which calls us to accept that we cannot always understand everything. (Bellow, xvii) This message has the potential to appear even more profound in light of the problems imposed on us by capitalism in an age in which capitalism reigns supreme, although it would be made no less profound in its absence and applied to other times—and attempts to grapple with other difficult questions as well. Is suffering unavoidable? How does our experience with things such as morality and capitalism influence our perception?

Unlike the coming-of-age story of Joaquin which more linearly elucidates the reasons why he has come to live with such disappointment, by the time we are introduced to Professor Moses Herzog at the beginning of *Herzog*, he is already a middle-aged man in the midst of a midlife crisis. Moses Herzog is a man of contradictions—much like the periodized modernist movement itself. (Bellow 7) *Herzog* is a success, and yet also a failure. He looks keenly at the world, but "he felt half blind." (Bellow 4) He is a man who pursues his passions only to be met with the bitterness of disappointment as an end—a man with who had "strong impulses, even faith, but lacked clear ideas". (Bellow 103)

Twice-married and divorced, he is an unproductive academic, a selfish lover, and a lousy father. All in all, Moses's life has come to be a disappointment. Yet, as the narrator points out, "Perhaps he was luckier than he knew" (Bellow 20). Moses's fortunate state is revealed not only by the narrator, but also through the letters inserted into the novel.

When his second wife, Madeline, leaves him for his best friend, Valentine Gersbach, Moses attempts to retreat to the Berkshires, and then to Martha's Vineyard, but finds himself in New York and Chicago before he returns to the Berkshires by the close of the novel. The

disappointments of Moses's life, like his journeys throughout the novel, are akin to a labyrinth, however, they all lead back to the same thing—himself and his need to come to terms with himself. When Moses writes letters to confront people— living or dead, friend or philosopher—for causing the disappointments in his life, letters which he never sends, he is really confronting himself.

While he is in Chicago visiting the home of his father's widow, Moses takes the gun of his late father, and contemplates murdering Madeline and Valentine, who have brought him immense pain and disappointment, with the two bullets that he has for the gun, but he ultimately decides not to. Seeing Valentine bathing his daughter, Junie, through a window proves to him that things aren't so bad, after all, and that Junie is safe. Upon this realization that things are not how they initially appeared to him, Moses decides not to use the bullets on Madeline and Valentine. Later, when he gets into an accident and the police find the gun on him, he is arrested for gun possession, and his brother suggests that maybe he should seek mental help. But by this time, Moses has finally come to terms with himself and realized that he is the source of both the problem and the solution, and so he decides to rebuild himself, just like he plans on fixing up the house in the Berkshires. And so the novel ends, "At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word" (Bellow 371). As a result of choosing to revitalize himself and his home, Moses no longer needs to write letters that he had never sent. Rather, he can enjoy living life in the moment and even be at odds with his past and tradition.

An accurate reflection of the world in which it was written, *Herzog* is a meditation on the ways in which the loss of tradition (that is, those things which would please our ancestors)—whether it be in religion, others, ourselves, or consciousness—impacts our lives. Hannah Arendt, whose famous book of theory *Between Past and Future* (1961) was published

the same year as *Herzog* was, would perhaps call the world of Herzog a turn away from traditions past. Yet undoubtedly, when we leave something behind, we adopt something new, just as Moses moves from one lover to the next. As Arendt points out, the loss of tradition is not synonymous with the loss of the past—and neither is religion with faith, and this meditation is important to keep in mind while we embark on a journey to debunk the periodization of modernisms. (Arendt 93-4)

It is necessary to resist the periodization of modernisms because, as Friedman points out, “we need a radical shift in the frameworks for thinking about modernity” (Friedman 93). Rather than as a periodized movement, we can and should view the loss of tradition that so profoundly influenced the modernist movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as an *aesthetic* change, although there are other changes present as well, which are largely outside of the scope of this paper to explore further—and this aesthetic change perhaps becomes increasingly more noticeable as we move into an analysis of *Herzog* from the texts discussed in the previous chapters. But if this change is an aesthetic one—rather than one which can be periodized, as I argue—then what does this sort of viewing offer us?

In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt offers us a solution to this question, that we may reach “depth through remembrance”. (Arendt 94) That is to say, we can find meaning and significance in remembering *through* consciousness, but in order to do so, we must allow for awareness of the past—that which is often repressed and hidden in the unconscious. It is through engaging in this awareness of the past, present, and future that we are able to gain a dynamic, deep perspective. Perhaps even more profoundly, *Herzog* prompts us to question what the repression of tradition really means—and exposes just how aesthetic tradition itself really is, consciously changing its appearance with the times. After all, tradition is just one way among many to view consciousness, and it is an aesthetic one which exists on the

conscious level, although it also finds its way to emerge in the unconscious as well. But when tradition is repressed, what happens?

According to Scott Carpenter, “One of the lessons of repression is that unacceptable or unpleasant ideas will veil themselves in order to find expression” (Carpenter, 86). We may try to mask things with different aesthetic facades, but they will continue to persist in the face of our attempts to make them otherwise. Some may, as Arendt says, have lost the fear of hell, but I argue here that our grappling with our mortality and immortality has not been lost—it just *looks* differently than it has in the past as viewed through other modernisms, through other experiences with modernity.

Millennials have just as much confused distaste for the Dionysian lifestyle as Moses Herzog—evidenced in the recent craze for the Kardashians in Western popular culture, which constantly criticizes the family and their antics, yet continues to support them by clicking on articles about them, or not turning the channel when a story about them comes on CNN, yet immediately doing so when a commercial showing footage of abused and neglected animals comes on. We want to be good and to feel as such, but we continue to flirt with the devil.

A 1964 book review of the novel seems particularly provocative to consider for this study. In his *New York Times* review, Julian Moynahan concludes that Bellow’s message in the novel is that:

The age is full of fearful abysses. If people are to go ahead they must move into and through these abysses. The old definitions of balance and sanity do not help on this journey, but the ideals these terms gesture at remain, even though they require fresh definition. Love still counts, justice still counts, and particularly intellectual and emotional courage still count. (Moynahan 1964)

What Moynahan appears to expose in this passage, in my view, is that the experience of modernity is the experience of “fearful abysses”, and *Herzog* succinctly reveals this message by exploring Herzog’s movement through it. Things may appear differently at different times,

including philosophical sentiments, but their significance remains, even where the necessity for a re-envisioning of their meaning emerges as a result of different experiences with modernity. We are, as the title of Arendt's famous book stipulates, somewhere between past and future, and studying modernisms help us recognize this.

## V. TORNADOS AND TUMULT: LARRY GOPNIK

Reading is only one means among others of acquiring  
the knowledge that is mobilized in reading.

-Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*

A man much different than Joaquin Monegro or Moses Herzog, Larry Gopnik, protagonist of the 2009 Coen brothers' film *A Serious Man*, is our final, and perhaps most significant character of this study. Set in the 1960s, yet filmed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and very much so still in tune with issues that contemporary man faces, *A Serious Man* presents us with the ultimate picture of modernism—an individual's experience with an amalgam of people, places and events as it affects them in the moment. It calls us to ask: is there an answer to our problems and a reason for human suffering? Are we alone in suffering from disappointment? Or is reality much more chaotic and fluid than the conception of objective truth permits, which wouldn't make things so disappointing after all? In attempting to answer these questions and in exploring the film itself, it will become clear that *A Serious Man* is the crux on which this project rests. Although the other texts surely demonstrate modernisms and establish a foundation for my argument about their significance, it is *A Serious Man* that affirms and concretizes the persistence of them in the present day, and a reading of which seeks to reform that we that we look at reading.

Although I argue that Larry Gopnik (played by Michael Stuhlbarg) and Moses Herzog are much different characters, it is important to note from the start that they do bear certain resemblances which are unavoidable, and as the film was produced nearly a century later than the novel was published, it is hard to ignore these similarities. Not only do Larry and Moses share Judaism, they also share their profession—they are both professors in a fight for tenure. In addition to this, both of their spouses leave them for other men with whom they

are acquainted—and each man passively resigns from their marriage in their own way. However, they are also quite different, as my analysis of the film in this chapter will come to show.

The film opens with a quote sprawled across the screen. “Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you.” - *Rashi* After the phrase dissolves into darkness and snow, we are shown a scene of a man returning to his wife late at night in a humble cottage—presumably during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, based on the costuming. When Velvel returns home to his wife, Dora, he announces to her that he had run into Traitle Groshkover on his way home. She reacts and appears as if she has seen a ghost: she had thought Traitle Groshkover had died of typhus. However, Velvel tells Dora that he has invited him over for soup.

When the man who calls himself Traitle Groshkover shows up at their home, they let him in, but Dora almost immediately confronts him, calling him a dybbuk, which, according to Jewish mythology, is the soul of dead malicious spirit that takes control of a living person’s body. To this, Traitle Groshkover laughs at Dora, which incites her to stab him in the heart. With the weapon still in his chest, Traitle Groshkover laughs and implores Velvel, “I ask you Velvel, as a rational man, which of us is possessed?” He then gets up, excuses himself, and walks down the dark, snowy street as he stumbles away holding his bleeding chest. We are left wondering if he was dybbuk or if he was still human as the screen cuts to black and red introduction credits before our question can ever be answered. There are mixed signs, but the film plods on as if to suggest that that is what we must do—plod on—in order to move forward even amidst the confusion.

After this sequence, the screen cuts and we are shown two different scenes unfolding: the protagonist, a middle-aged physics professor named Larry Gopnik visiting his doctor, and

his son, Danny, in Hebrew class. Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love" eerily comes calling out to us from Danny's cassette player which is hidden behind his Hebrew book, as if a prophecy of what is to come. "Don't you want somebody to love? Don't you need somebody to love? Wouldn't you love somebody to love? You better find somebody to love," Grace Slick implores us with her enchantingly psychedelic voice as the groovy melody sucks us in.

While Danny's Hebrew teacher catches him listening to music instead of conjugating verbs and takes away his cassette player, resulting in a trip to the principal's office, Larry gets the all-clear from his doctor during a physical. However, Larry has to get an imaging scan done on his midsection, which his doctor reluctantly pressed on during his physical exam, and one is left with a strange impression that maybe the doctor isn't telling Larry everything. This scene therefore becomes the second scene in which we are given mixed signs, which is followed by yet another scene which encounters the same problem. We see Larry thoroughly enjoying himself explaining a mathematical equation that is sprawled out across a gigantic chalkboard while his students are utterly disengaged and unenthused.

The failure to make proper connections continues when Larry's student, Clive, visits him in his office after class. Clive, who received a failing grade on his exam and is disappointed in it, demands that he get a better grade. Although Larry insists that it is not fair for him to change Clive's grade or to allow him to retake it and not give other students the same benefit, Clive insists that he do it anyway.

When Larry receives a phone call from someone named Sy Abelman and has to turn away for a moment, Clive leaves the office, and before Larry can get a word in edge-wise with him. After he is off the phone, Larry realizes that there is an envelope with money in it in the same place that Clive was sitting—it is a bribe, and Clive is long gone from the building, so

Larry is left with the envelope in hand, as well as a difficult decision about what just occurred looming over his conscience.

By the time Larry returns home the same day, a picture of a home in disarray is painted. While his son is out buying pot and getting bullied, his daughter complains about their live-in uncle. And in the midst of a student attempting to cause him scandal, all that Larry can think about is how he is bothered that their neighbor is mowing part of their lawn. However, as his home in disarray and his head is in the clouds, things are only about to get worse. After sitting him down at their family dinner table, Larry's wife Judith tells him that she is leaving him for Sy Abelman—the same Sy who had tried to call Larry's office earlier. In addition to this, she wants a divorce and a 'git', or a Jewish ritual divorce. Incapable of reading the signs presented him, Larry is in shock, and does little to defend himself.

The next day, Larry tries to confront Clive about the money that was left on his desk, but does an awful job communicating with him and only manages to make things worse. When Larry returns home, he finds his kids fighting and his home in disarray once again. His inability to communicate is further exemplified when his wife asks if he has found a lawyer, yet he has not even thought about the matter. At this time, we also learn that Larry's live-in brother, Arthur, is sick with something that causes him to be mostly home-bound, although he is working intensely on something as if a mad genius—his body at odds with his mind.

This same night, Sy comes to visit Larry at his home, offering him a bottle of wine—as if as some form of compensation for taking the wife with whom he has built a life away from him. Sy tells Larry that they need to talk about what is going on, but Larry resists, preferring to return to the safety of himself and his own mind. It is perhaps this continual retreat and failure to find a resolution, as we will see later, that is Larry's error and ultimate source of disappointment.

Elsewhere later on, Danny tries to break into the principal's office in order to try to get his cassette player and Jefferson Airplane cassette back, but fails to do so. Meanwhile, at home, Larry attempts but subsequently fails to fix the television antennae on top of their roof at home. While on the roof, Larry notices his neighbor sunbathing in the nude, which causes him to feel overcome with pleasure and literally knocks him out—as we later find him resting on the couch, head sunburned and with an ice-pack in hand.

Now sleeping on a cot in the living room (since Arthur already sleeps on the couch), Larry finds himself incapable of sleeping through the night. As he wanders into the kitchen before dawn to make coffee, he sees his neighbor and his son leaving, geared up to go hunting. We see a glint of jealousy—a thought of what if—pass before Larry's eyes before he decides to avert his attention elsewhere to take a look at what Arthur has been working on. The book is titled "The Mentaculus", and we see as Larry looks down at them in a kind of silent shock that its pages are literally filled and covered with numbers in what appears to be in a random disarray, breaching on pure and incomprehensible insanity.

At school later on, the tenure director Arlan tells Larry that someone has been writing letters to the tenure department which put his moral character into question. Larry tells Arlan about having a student that it could be (Clive), but Arlan quickly shuts him down by telling him that the letters were written in perfect English (and Clive is an ESL student, which rules him out). However, Arlan says he shouldn't be worried—although we can clearly see that he is.

When Larry's neighbor and his son return from hunting later that day when he is back at his house, Larry tries to confront his neighbor and tell him that he is encroaching on their property line. However, the neighbor shuts him down, and Larry retreats once again. Later that day, Larry, Sy, and Judith all meet at a diner to discuss living arrangements. Sy and Judith hijack the meeting and use it as an opportunity to tell Larry that he must move out and live

and a local motel called the Jolly Rodger (a clever and dark nod to Captain Hook's pirate ship from *Peter Pan*, no doubt).

When Larry returns home, his problems are only further complicated and he seeks to receive even more disappointment when Clive's Dad threatens to sue him for. However, Larry's neighbor sees this and does try to stand up for Larry—a clue to the viewer that there is hope in that although people may be different and retreat into themselves and their own ways, they can still be good. Although Larry does not take up his offer, we are still left with the feeling that maybe things do have the potential to be okay—whatever that is—if this man who appeared at first so hardened can show such loyalty to his neighbor who misunderstands him.

In a park later on, Larry talks with a friend about all of the events unfolding in his life. Larry tells her, "It was a bolt from the blue. What does that mean? Everything that was one way turns out to be another." She tells him that it was a learning opportunity and that, "It's not always easy to decipher what God's trying to tell you." This is a pivotal moment in the film, as it is the first time that it has been suggested that things are not always what they appear, and that that's normal—especially since we are human. This also calls for further reflection, and she suggests that seeing a rabbi will help him with such reflection.

Following his friend's advice, Larry embarks on the journey of trying to see Rabbi Marshak, which turns into seeing two rabbis other than Rabbi Marshak. The first rabbi that Larry sees is Rabbi Ginsler, a young man who has to be at least 10 years Larry's junior. It is clear at the beginning of their conversation that Larry is uncomfortable with their age difference, but Ginsler tries to comfort him and Larry tells him about what is going on in his life. After Larry tells him what is going on, Ginsler tells him that he has lost track of HaShem (a less formal name for God in the Jewish tradition) and that he needs to learn how to see Him again.

In contrast with his visit to Rabbi Ginsler, Larry later visits his lawyer, whose presence almost appears to be a relief. While visiting the lawyer, who is a part of the same Jewish community, the lawyer guffaws at the fact that Judith is leaving Larry for Sy Abelman, much like Rabbi Ginsler did. It seems as if it is some cosmic joke that she is leaving Larry for Sy—not only to Larry, but to everyone around him as well. While he is at the lawyer’s office, Larry’s son calls the office to speak with him. We assume that something must be amiss, but Danny was just calling to tell Larry that the television set was fuzzy again.

On his way to his family home after he leaves the lawyer’s office, Larry nearly gets into a car accident, while Sy Abelman perishes in another automobile accident elsewhere. Although we think that the joke of Sy and the disappointment that he has brought Larry might be over upon this news, we are mistaken. We can hear the moans and wails of disappointment from Judith in the other room, and it becomes clear that things will never be the same between him and Judith again—no matter how much or how little hope he has that it will.

Faced with the confusion of how to deal with the loss of Sy Abelman, Larry goes to see the second rabbi, Rabbi Nachtner, whose advice appears even less helpful than Rabbi Ginsler’s. After telling Nachtner what is going on and why he is in distress, Nachtner tells Larry the story of the goy’s (goy meaning non-Jew) teeth. According to Nachtner, Dr. Lee Sussman, a man that each of them know, had a patient at his orthodontic practice named Russell Krauss, and when he took a mold of Russell’s mouth, he found “Help me, save me” written in Hebrew behind his bottom row of teeth. As a result, Sussman could not sleep and could not eat until he found answers for the reason that this message appeared behind the goy’s teeth. He goes on a wild goose chase that only leads him to dead-ends until he finally approaches Rabbi Nachtner for advice—who told him that helping others couldn’t hurt, but that we cannot

know everything—much like he tells Larry. Sussman continues to check his patient's teeth for messages after his visit to Nachtner, but eventually stopped checking and "returned to life". After telling Larry this story, Nachtner then compares Larry's questions about why what is happening to him to a tooth ache, saying that they may hurt for awhile, but that they eventually subside and go away.

After his encounter with Rabbi Nachtner, Rabbi Nachtner presides over Sy's funeral service—imploing the congregation "How could such a serious man just disappear?" And directly after this, the police literally appear at Larry's home where they are sitting Shiva, asking where Arthur is and telling him that he should tell Arthur that gambling is illegal. When Larry confronts Arthur about it, we discover that what is really going on is that Arthur's Mentaculus is a way to count cards, and that he has come into a lot of money—and trouble—as a result.

To add insult to the injury of the day, Larry has a less than positive encounter with his attorney regarding Judith's aggressive approach with their divorce—which she has decided to proceed with regardless of Sy's death. Larry breaks down in the attorney's office under the pressure of it all and he asks if he talked to the Rabbi. When Larry tells him that he has, he jokingly asks if he told him the story of the goy's teeth, and that he should seek Rabbi Marshak's help instead. However, the ultimate disappointment, which Larry shares with him, is that he cannot see Rabbi Marshak since he no longer does pastoral work, and instead just congratulates the boy celebrating his bar mitzvah each week. The one person that can help Larry will not.

When Larry tries to call to see if Rabbi Marshak will see him, he comes up against a wall yet again and is given the run-around by his secretary a second time. Nothing ever seems to work in Larry's favor. Suddenly, we are in Larry's classroom full of students and he is

teaching them a complex equation, to which he concludes, “It proves that we can’t ever really know what is going on.” Then, “Did you follow that?”, he implores Sy Abelman after all of the students empty out of the lecture hall, the only person left in the crowd is Sy, who sits proudly at a desk. Sy tells Larry after they talk more, “It’s so simple. See Marhsak.” And as Sy begins to beat Larry’s head against the chalkboard, he wakes up in bed at the Jolly Roger.

The next day, Larry visits his neighbor Mrs. Samsky, the woman who Larry saw sunbathing in the nude from his rooftop earlier on. After making some small talk, Mrs. Samsky offers Larry to smoke a joint with her, and as the two sit, stoned on the couch, talking, they hear a sirens. When they emerge from Mrs. Samsky’s home, he finds Arthur being arrested by the police, who say that he was arrested for solicitation and sodomy in North Dakota—an offense not taken lightly in the homophobic culture of the 1960’s which allowed for such laws to exist. Not only does Larry have to figure out how to help himself, but Arthur as well.

While visiting his lawyer and finding out that he will have to pay an arm and a leg for Arthur’s legal counsel, the other lawyer in the office has a heart attack and dies—but Larry must continue on with his day regardless of the tragedy and disappointment that he is faced with. When he arrives back to his office at school, he finds out that the tenure committee will make their final decision on whether or not he will receive tenure. Everything in Larry’s life is intensified.

“Somebody to Love” plays as Larry has sex with Mrs. Samsky, only to be awoken later on by Sy closing a casket on his face, to then finally wake up in bed at the Jolly Rodger—the distinction between reality and dreams has become blurred. The next morning, Larry tries to go see Rabbi Marshak, telling his secretary that he has “tried to be a serious man” and that he needs help. However, Rabbi Marshak is busy thinking according to his secretary, and cannot see him.

Later on at the Jolly Rodger, Arthur has a break down and Larry comforts him—which leads us into yet another dream sequence that we do not realize we are in until Larry wakes up. This final dream sequence is of Larry driving Arthur to a river where he gives him an envelope of money (the money that Clive left him, presumably). As Arthur paddles away, he is shot by Larry’s neighbor’s son. Larry’s neighbor says “There’s another Jew, son,” as he points to Larry and shoots. Suddenly, Larry wakes up in bed—only to find himself in the Jolly Rodger with Arthur nearby.

But no matter how strange Larry’s dreams are, and no matter how troubling his reality, his life must go on, and his son must become a man—the time for his bar mitzvah finally arrives. Having gotten high beforehand and in a daze, the ceremony seems even more intense for Danny than it would otherwise—but he still manages to find his voice and reads the lines that he needs to, and with these words, becomes a man. During the ceremony, Judith tells Larry that Sy admired him so much that he wrote letters to the tenure committee about him—and we finally discover who was defaming him—a man who resorted to childish behavior and regressed.

It is as if while one person is given a voice, another’s is taken away. Afterward, Danny is taken to see Rabbi Marshak, who hands him back the cassette player that he missed so much, and recites the lines from “Somebody to Love”, followed by the names of the members of Jefferson Airplane. Marshak warns him about the company he keeps, and then tells him to be a good boy. This advice is profound and disappointing all at once coming from the man who had no time to see his father, yet supposedly had the advice that could save him (and one thinks that he might have, having been such an old, wise man, whose office full of mysterious things gives one the sense that he is a man who has known the world).

While Larry is sitting in his office another day, Arlan stops by to tell him that Danny's bar mitzvah was nice, and gives him the heads-up that the tenure committee voted in his favor—he can finally breathe, if only a little. Elsewhere, Danny finds the \$20 he owes his bully for weed in his cassette player while in Hebrew class as Larry changes Clive's grade to a C- after seeing the bill from Arthur's attorney—as if to say that we all must give in to bullies some time or another. As the Hebrew students are evacuated from their classroom because there is a weather advisory for a tornado, Larry gets a phone call from his doctor. A storm is coming for both of them.

As a tornado closes in on the school, Danny attempts to pay his bully, who is only concerned with the tornado that is literally in front of them. Even a small-minded bully can recognize that money is a small, insignificant matter in the face of death. In his office, Larry faces his own tornado—the results from his x-ray were abnormal, and his doctor insists that he comes to see him immediately that day so that they can discuss it. As the tornado draws nearer for each of them, and as the maelstrom of life quickens, the film ends.

The film ends how its soundtrack begins—a tornado comes ripping through the street like Grace Slick's voice comes booming through the screen at the beginning of the film, and as the screen cuts to black, Jimi Hendrix pierces like a bullet through the silence with his hit song "Machine Gun". "Machine gun/ Tearing my body apart," Jimi cries out from behind his guitar. We just want somebody to love, and we are torn apart for it. And so, just as the music from Danny's headphones brings us into the second scene of the film, it also ends the last one—as if to illuminate the noisiness of life—how we come into the world wailing, and leave it the exact same way. Further, we can never be prepared for what is to come.

At any moment, tragedy could strike—whether it is the tragedy which appears to rain down on us from the heavens, or which comes as a result of human relationships, our lives

could be forever changed in the matter of an instant. In that instant, the small, insignificant things which we laboriously concern ourselves with and which populate our minds in the mundane are instantly diminished to traces of nothing, and the things that truly matter, like phantoms, come to have an almost haunting presence in our lives—they are there, but only when we emerge both from and into the darkness and disorder of our unconscious and courageously, consciously acknowledge them.

And so, we may come to think that maybe Danny should have learned Hebrew and prayed, rather than getting high with his friends. Or maybe none of it mattered at all, and getting high was just a way to give him a different perspective—just like it gave Larry. Getting his cassette player back to pay his bully didn't really matter in the end, after all, just like seeing Rabbi Marshak offered no utterly profound insight into life, like Larry hoped it would offer his own. Once we accept that knowledge is not the answer and that we know that we will always be faced with the possibility of meeting the experience of disappointment when we are looking for something to fulfill us, we come to see that it is thus perhaps *how* we are looking that is the issue, rather than looking for something to fulfill us in the first place.

For Stephen Gardner, the psychological man is able to avoid this problem by following the “fundamental law of temporalization, to *keep things going*, in the absence of any definitive, authoritative ends.” (Gardner 237) By prolonging our passions, or conversely, by repressing them, we delay their end, as well as ours.

The problem for psychological man is not, finally, that of the satisfaction of desire, because he is conditioned in advance by the knowledge that desire is inherently unsatisfiable, at least in any definitive, classical, or teleological sense. His problem, rather, is how to keep desiring in the face of this knowledge. His aim is how to postpone the inevitable, the end of desire. (...) The individual who is to survive in the modern world must become the “genius” of himself, the artist of his desires as the vital source of his being. (Gardner 237)

In order to survive, one must continue to generate and create meaning in one's own life, and art is the site at which we are able to perform this operation, as evidenced in our own analysis of these four separate texts here. No matter which given modernity we are speaking of, these words reign true. If we are to survive in the face of our consciousness of the insatiability of our desires both conscious and unconscious, than we must constantly re-envision and recreate ourselves.

## VI. ECLECTIC MODERNISMS: MEDIATION THROUGH ART

To make peace is to forget.  
To reconcile, it is necessary  
that memory be faulty and limited.  
-Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

When we look at life with cold, sober eyes, there is often not much to see in the way of profound introspection, which so often comes up against the wall that is our ego. But when we are stoned—whether it's from a joint, a dream, the emotions drawn out of us from a therapy session, or just from the circumstances of our lives—things appear differently, and if we take a moment to analyze them, we are able to see this in our analyses. In these moments, things no longer look the way that they used to, and as a result, we are able to re-envision them. Connections that we perhaps would have never made are made possible. New insights into things that we once looked at dully come to us like new life. And from these connections and insights, we are offered the ability to hurt a little less, and to take comfort in knowing that although we truly are so very different, we are never alone in the experience of disappointment. These connections may not themselves be reasonable ones, and may, in fact, defy reason—love and friendship often do this—but we are made better for marking them, and where reason cannot suffice, they attempt to take its place as a guide.

The true paradox here is that consciousness is made possible by accessing the unconscious, and vice versa. To be fully conscious, we must be both unconsciously and consciously aware of this unconsciousness—that is, we must be consciously aware, but not too much so. It may be impossible to ever come to fully understand why things are the way that they are, but it is necessary to try. It is impossibly necessary for us to continue to create, and from those creations, to both dissect and construct meaning—for in the maelstrom that

is life, attempting to make still that which is ever-flowing is to experience moments—however fleeting—of clarity. After all, we are always positioned toward the impossible necessary that is death when we are living life, which may not be neatly packed into some sort of time line, but follows some sort of diachronic movement as it dances on from one episode of our lives to the next. In doing so, we leaves traces of life along the way—as if to suggest that there is some sort of cosmic residue left behind for us to follow ourselves not only vicariously through others, but also back to ourselves. Thus, we must leave the cave, like Plato’s prisoner, but we must always return—if only to remerge once more.

Drawn from different genres, times, nations, and tongues, and therefore eclectically, so as to demonstrate their transient nature, the examples of Vanya, Joaquin, Moses, and Larry are each examples from art which deal with traces of the experience of disappointment. Although each man experiences disappointment differently, the persistence of different strains of the experience across time—regardless of the absence or presence of things such as faith and capitalism—suggests a profound conclusion—modernity is an experience reproducible across time, as are the modernisms which emerge from them. And, further, as each of the texts which we have explored show, in light of our consciousness, human beings stand to face many forms of disappointment in their lives. It may be because we feel at odds with our identity, like Joaquin, or live in the face of tumult, like Larry Gopnik, but the fact is, at some point—or many—in our lives, we will meet the experience of disappointment.

### **A Final Word on Modernisms**

As I have demonstrated, an analysis of aesthetic modernisms which channels the psychoanalytical approach holds the potential to offer a therapeutic perspective on narrativity not only to the artist, but also the reader and viewer who are consumers of it. In doing so,

such analyses serve as outlets for human agents to reckon with the experience of disappointment which we are presented with in many different ways throughout our planetary lives, as well as reinforce connections which, like cobwebs, are often overlooked and neglected, yet present and of significance nonetheless. The experience of modernity will always produce modernisms, and for this reason alone, aesthetic modernism is here to stay, and the repression of it would only keep it hidden as long as it took to find a way to reveal itself, albeit differently, once again—and so, we must not resist. We must recognize the traces of past, present, and future which reveal themselves to us. With these traces, we must intertextualize, reconstruct, re-envision, and psychologize, for viewing and analyzing eclectic modernisms provides us a vehicle to ride out the maelstrom of modernity.

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