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### *“The Same Authority as God”: The U. S. Presidency and Executive Power in the Works of Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy*

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**Charles (Thom) Addinall-Biddulph**

**“The Same Authority as God”: The U. S. Presidency and Executive Power in  
the Works of Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy**

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis aims to interrogate the role and representation of the United States presidency, presidential figures and avatars, and the question of executive power more generally, in the works of Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy. Observing a gap in current criticism of these authors, and American literature generally, I propose that the presidency/executive provides a new and important way of mapping these authors' work. In this I seek to build on Sean McCann's work on this area in *A Pinnacle of Feeling*. My project situates itself in a historical framework, investigating the extensive network of historical evidence that each author uses in their conception of and dialogue with the presidency and executive power. My argument takes Pynchon's portrayal of George Washington, the United States' semi-mythical first president, in *Mason & Dixon* as its starting point, then proceeds to consider a range of texts before finally discussing the presence of Ronald Reagan and the rise of corporate power in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*. I posit that in each of these authors' work, the executive power is present simultaneously as an embodied and a “phantom” force, shaping the narrative and subjective individual experiences even when characters are not expressly engaged in political activity. A complex relay between embodied and phantom forces is apparent, with the identity and even physicality of individual presidential figures and avatars substantially affecting the operation of this power, amid a nuanced dialogue with the nation's historical narrative. This dynamic occurs across these authors' work, although they have divergent political and literary approaches. This thesis aims finally to establish this framework of executive power as a fundamental aspect of these authors' writing that is vital to understanding their thinking about the United States, its history, and socio-political context, which could ultimately be extended to many other cultural and literary texts and their producers.

“THE SAME AUTHORITY AS GOD”: THE  
U. S. PRESIDENCY AND EXECUTIVE  
POWER IN THE WORKS OF THOMAS  
PYNCHON, PHILIP ROTH, AND  
CORMAC MCCARTHY

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## Introduction

### **“I am the President of the United States, clothed in immense power”: the presidency in cultural history<sup>1</sup>**

The American presidency – both the institution and the individuals who have held the office – has long been a common subject for artistic depiction, to the point of fetishisation, in the United States. In the past three decades, there has been a proliferation of pop culture products relating to the presidency. Televisual depictions have proliferated. These range from the idealistic liberal optimism of *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006), to the dark machinations of Frank Underwood in *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013- ). *Veep* (HBO, 2012- ) portrays the presidency through the satirical lens of a situation comedy focussing on executive incompetence, while the action series *24* (Fox, 2001-10) displays an obsession with the president, and his or her capacity to act in extremely unethical and even treacherous ways. Films have posited the president as an action hero, such as Harrison Ford in *Air Force One* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1997); an individual citizen looking for romance like any other ordinary person might, as in *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995); a folksy, intellectual hero, as Steven Spielberg presents Abraham Lincoln in his account of the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, simply entitled *Lincoln* (Steven Spielberg, 2012); helpless to the point of absurdity against extraterrestrial invasion in *Mars Attacks!* (Tim Burton, 1996); or an inspirational figure spurring military pilots on to victory against a different unearthly force in *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996). Earlier depictions, during the Cold War period, range from the exasperated Merkin Muffley in *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964), to Richard Nixon, physically absent but constantly present, in *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976), a cinematic portrayal of Bernstein and Woodward's investigation into the Watergate scandal. Various documentaries and documentary series, such as C-SPAN's *American Presidents: Life Portraits* (1999) and PBS' *The American President* (2000), both of which covered the lives of each individual president up to that point in American history, have also fed into the cultural consciousness of the presidency and those holding the office.

Myron A. Levine's observation that “in recent decades...Hollywood has shown a renewed interest in a presidency that has assumed new, and sometimes even quite terrifying, policy

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<sup>1</sup> *Lincoln*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2012.

responsibilities” is germane here.<sup>2</sup> The power of the presidency has grown substantially since World War II, as has the executive branch, which now sprawls across fifteen federal executive departments employing many thousands of citizens – in 2012, the executive branch employed 2,697,000 civilians.<sup>3</sup> The president of the United States is frequently described as the ‘leader of the free world’, and is charged in the global imagination with the defence of the (cultural) West. It is not surprising that, in the animated partly satirical sitcom *Futurama* (Fox and Comedy Central, 1999-2013), set in the thirty-first century, the ‘President of Earth’ is depicted as American and living in the White House, the ‘Earthican’ flag being the Stars and Stripes with an image of Earth replacing the stars. Indeed, the president for the vast majority of the series is Richard Nixon himself, the show’s future technology allowing heads of historical figures to be kept alive in jars. This technology, in itself, privileges existing historical figures rather than providing new, fictional characters from the intervening millennium between the show’s broadcasting and its future setting, suggesting the persistently totemic nature of these figures in American culture. Nixon is often depicted with the ‘headless body of Agnew’ – Spiro T. Agnew, Nixon’s vice-president from 1969 to 1973 – and on occasion with Dick Cheney, George W. Bush’s vice-president (2001-09), as his Vice-President.

*Futurama*’s use of Nixon, and other historical figures associated with, and symbols of, the American presidency, is a useful exemplar of the manner in which the president is commonly construed in American art of various forms as, effectively, the defender of the world and, by extension, the human race – even if, as in *Futurama*, they may be a corrupted and criminal figure. The aforementioned *Independence Day* is another expression of this global role, as fictional president Thomas Whitmore gives the film’s most memorable speech, invoking patriotic memories of the American Revolution in exhorting the soldiers to fight for Earth’s freedom against the aliens. *Mars Attacks!* provides a counterpoint, as Jack Nicholson’s James Dale attempts diplomacy with the Martians (who appear to engage almost solely with the United States, rather than any other nations, in the film), which fails spectacularly, ending in his own ignominious death in the White House. While this project has a literary focus, the relationship between the presidency and Hollywood will play a role in subsequent discussion, as the presidency and Hollywood have very directly crossed paths on one occasion, with the 1980 election of former movie idol Ronald Reagan to the White House, who would use imagery derived from his film career in his political weaponry.

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<sup>2</sup> Myron A. Levine. ‘The Transformed Presidency: The *Real* Presidency and Hollywood’s *Reel* Presidency’. In *Hollywood’s White House: The American Presidency in Film and History*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor. 351-79. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2003. 351.

<sup>3</sup> United States Office of Personnel Management. *OPM.gov*. 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2015.

Other films and television series delve into presidential biographies and characters, or events surrounding presidents. Entire dramatised series have been devoted to individual presidents (and their families), such as *John Adams* (HBO, 2008) and *The Kennedys* (History Television, 2011), while individual presidents have been represented on screen hundreds of times. Presidential figures are regarded as endlessly fascinating, as symbolic of the American citizenry, and as enigmas to be deconstructed and considered from every angle. Richard Ben Cramer's work of journalism *What It Takes*, an exhaustive account of the 1988 presidential primaries and the leading candidates of both parties, while not fictionalised, is indicative of this immense interest in the presidents, and even those who have merely been unsuccessful candidates for the office. Ben Cramer recounts at substantial length the backgrounds and life stories of each of the candidates covered (which include the 1988 election's eventual victor, George Bush, as well as Senator Joe Biden, who stood unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination that year, but would become Vice-President in 2009). There is, frequently, a strong implication that presidential lives in some way stand for American lives more generally, that the narrative of the presidency – into which the biographical narratives of individual presidents are subsumed – is equally the narrative of the nation itself. This figuration of the presidential narrative as a form of national epic is summated by the promotional description of PBS' *The American President*, which describes the story of the presidency as “one of great achievement and adversity. It is history on a scale that is both heroic and personal.”<sup>4</sup>

The presidency has also long been a subject of literary depiction and fascination. Early on in the nation's history, works featuring presidential characters were generally adulatory: George Washington was depicted in various nineteenth century works, often fairly sentimental, such as Parson Weems' stories, and William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Virginians* (1857-9). Walt Whitman's poetry includes heartfelt elegies for Abraham Lincoln, such as 'O Captain! My Captain!' and 'When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom'd'. Sean McCann, whose groundbreaking study on literary representation of the presidency, *A Pinnacle of Feeling* (2008), provides a key reference point for this project, describes how Whitman's “encounter with Abraham Lincoln led him to change his view of executive leadership”, which had previously been strongly sceptical.<sup>5</sup> The power of the presidency increased, however, in the twentieth century – having been comparatively subordinate to Congress before this – and thus works of literary fiction began to question the institution more. Thus, Sinclair Lewis explored a potential American dictatorship under Senator Buzz

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<sup>4</sup> *The American President*, introductory page. *PBS.org*. 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Sean McCann. *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008. ix-x.

Windrip, similar to that depicted by Philip Roth in *The Plot Against America* (2004), in *It Can't Happen Here* (1935). After World War II, novelists began to explore presidents as more ambivalent, flawed, but plausibly human, individual characters, as in Robert Coover's 1977 novel *The Public Burning*, which takes as its subject the Rosenberg trial and execution, and is narrated by Richard Nixon. Gore Vidal's *Lincoln: A Novel* (1984) utilises many contemporary accounts and documents concerning Abraham Lincoln to tell his life.

Others would make use of the presidency and presidential events in the service of expansive social novels, telling sprawling cultural histories. Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) has as its focal point the Kennedy assassination, though its central character is not Kennedy himself, but his assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. Writers usually associated with specific genres have published similar works with presidents and their lives serving as narrative touchstones. These include the crime writer James Ellroy's *Underworld USA* trilogy – *American Tabloid* (1995), *The Cold Six Thousand* (2001), and *Blood's A Rover* (2009) – which depicts the years from 1958 to 1973, and prominently features the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and the Nixon administration. Stephen King, too, explores the assassination of John F. Kennedy in *11/22/63* (2011) using a science fiction setting, with a time traveller attempting to prevent the incident. The presidency, and presidential figures, become a kind of keystone for American fictions, a lens through which to interrogatively represent the nation – its narratives, communal myths, and social conditions – and a common cultural and historical referent for texts and readers. Presidents have even themselves been and become writers, and indeed writers on the presidency: Barack Obama, president since 2009, published a memoir of his complicated family background, *Dreams From My Father*, in 1995, and would subsequently publish a children's book telling the stories of several prominent figures from American history, including George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, while serving as president in 2010, entitled *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters*.

These depictions and considerations of presidential figures all suggest a deep-seated fascination with the presidential office, the executive branch of the government, and more generally the federal government, in American society. The president, in all of these texts, has many meanings as a figure: a symbol of liberty, democracy, patriotism, and American strength; or a symbol of corruption, abuse of power, imperialism, arrogance, and inequality. This thesis will investigate a group of texts that construct the executive power in the United States as something considerably more potent and wired into the nation's consciousness than a mere symbol, as a force that shapes society and individual citizens' lives with pervasive and insidious effectiveness. This power does not always involve partisan philosophies, or engage with particular policies and political issues: it is a constant and

inescapable presence, and one that is not necessarily commensurate with the nature and personal power of the individuals that wield it. This point is of particular importance. The texts that will be investigated and interrogated by this thesis depict individuals holding executive power as generally weak, flawed, and of demonstrably limited power as characters and individuals. Where this is not the case, however, presidential and executive figures may appear in texts as remote, essentially godlike numens who have no active presence in the narrative, but operate upon the protagonists and antagonists of the texts in nevertheless significant ways. These depictions of the presidential and executive force in the United States make a common suggestion that the theoretical and imagined power of the executive branch is vast and frightening, and is generally irreconcilable with the nature of individual citizens involved in that branch of the government, and the requirements of a community across the nation comprised similarly of individuals. Individual citizens may serve as avatars of the executive force in these texts, but this force seems to operate *through* them: the web of consequence and effect that expands out from their actions, or even inactions, never really seems to be under their control, except in one instance of a figure who is terrifying precisely because he is both apparently human and able to effectively wield the full extent of governmental power.

### **Executive power in the United States**

It is necessary at this juncture to briefly outline the structure of American government and the executive branch. It is crucial to understanding the organisation of this government that the Constitution of the United States “was founded on the...principle of separation of power”, as presidential historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., emphasises.<sup>6</sup> The Founding Fathers wished to ensure that no one of the three branches of federal government – executive, judicial, and legislative – should have unchecked power, and to avoid the “centralisation of authority they perceived in the British monarchy”, intending to “fashion for themselves a Presidency that would be strong but still limited”.<sup>7</sup> The debates of the 1780s that would lead to the establishment of the presidency, however, came at a time when there was substantial interest in an American monarchy: “Americans had a stronger nostalgia for monarchy than they realised or would admit. Some, in fact, had begun to say so [...] Baron von Steuben...took it upon himself to write to Prince Henry of Prussia inviting him to become regent of America.”<sup>8</sup> Allegedly, Nathaniel Gorham, president of the Congress at the time,

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.. *The Imperial Presidency*. London: André Deutsch, 1974. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Forrest McDonald. *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History*. Lawrence, KS: U of Kansas P, 1994. 150-1. Baron von Steuben was, in McDonald’s description, “the European soldier of fortune whose main contribution to independence had been instilling Washington’s army with discipline”.

wrote a letter endorsing this invitation, a claim substantiated by Founding Father and fifth president James Monroe (although never definitely proven).<sup>9</sup> Thus, some form of compromise was needed: “even those who believed the establishment of an energetic executive was imperative understood that it was necessary to proceed cautiously.”<sup>10</sup>

It was consequently established that, unlike in Great Britain (and its successor state the United Kingdom), the United States federal government would have full separation of powers. No member of the federal executive could also be a member of the legislative or judicial branches; no individual could have membership in more than one branch.<sup>11</sup> The Constitution would set out checks and balances theoretically preventing any branch from acting without consulting the others, and assigning different powers to the executive and legislative branches particularly. This would create what James Madison termed a “partial mixture of powers”.<sup>12</sup> The executive branch, in theory constituted entirely in the person of the president, would not be an absolute monarchy or anything approaching it, requiring Senate approval for most cabinet and diplomatic appointments, and with powers only to enforce legislation, not to create it. The president is able to veto legislation passed by Congress, but this veto can be overridden with a two-thirds majority of each of the two chambers of Congress.<sup>13</sup> However, the “structural characteristics” Schlesinger ascribes the presidency – “unity, secrecy, decision, dispatch, superior sources of information” – would ensure its continuing potency.

It should also be noted that this structure, given the nature of the United States as a federal union, applies in turn to each of the states. Each of the fifty states has a governor – who functions as the executive branch as the president does at the federal level – a legislature, and a judicial branch, in addition to the federal legislature and judiciary. As in the federal government, the governor and legislature are elected separately in every state. Each state has extensive powers over its own governance. In theory, the Constitution reserves all powers not explicitly granted to the federal government to the states and the people, though

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<sup>9</sup> This claim is outlined in McDonald, *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History*, 151.

<sup>10</sup> McDonald, *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History*, 157.

<sup>11</sup> With the exception of the vice-president, whose sole constitutionally mandated duty besides succeeding to the presidency in the event of a president's death, resignation, or removal from office, is to preside over the Senate. They can only vote in the event of a tie, however. This is laid out in Article I, section three of the Constitution.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> This may be contrasted with the fusion of powers still present in the United Kingdom or ‘Westminster’ system, whereby the executive branch is formed by members of the political party that commands a majority in the House of Commons (or a coalition of parties so doing), and at most times all ministers in the government are either members of that house or the House of Lords. Consequently, the legislative branch provides less of a check on executive power in the Westminster system, as the executive branch is formed by those controlling the legislature.

as Coleman B. Ransone Jr. notes, the twentieth century saw “increasing federal participation in fields formerly thought to be reserved for the states”, while noting this has in fact “enhanced” the importance of state governments.<sup>14</sup> Many presidents, and defeated presidential candidates, have been former state governors: George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson are all twentieth and twenty-first century examples. Thus, it is apparent that state governors are very similar figures of executive power to the federal presidents. At both federal and state level, the executive branch also extends well beyond the person of the president or governor: the federal executive has fifteen departments, and a substantial number of other agencies and offices under its direct control.<sup>15</sup> This has nearly quadrupled from the four original departments established during the nation’s foundational period. Each state generally has similar departments and agencies, in addition to law enforcement officials such as sheriffs, who in some jurisdictions are elected (as we will see later in this thesis in relation to Texas). The executive power is therefore far greater than simply the person of the president himself, extending to thousands of employees in some sense empowered by the executive branch, each representing an avatar of the executive power, and by extension the apex of that power, the president. It is especially pertinent to consider the centrality of the presidential figure: as Thomas Preston outlines in his work on presidential leadership, a “common thread connecting [works on presidential leadership]...is the notion that *what individual presidents are like matters* and that their personal qualities can significantly affect decision making and policy.”<sup>16</sup> Schlesinger, who himself served as Special Assistant to John F. Kennedy during the latter’s presidency (1961-63), notes that the American federal government is a “chameleon, taking its colour from the character and personality of the president.”<sup>17</sup>

The power of the presidency and the executive branch would evolve significantly in the nearly two and a half centuries since its establishment. This has already been remarked upon in terms of the substantial increase in the size of the executive branch and number of areas in which the federal government has intervened. This is, in part, because – as Edward

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<sup>14</sup> Coleman B. Ransone Jr.. *The American Governorship*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982. 3. The Tenth Amendment to the Constitution outlines the reservation of powers to the states: “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” National Archives and Records Administration. *Archives.gov*. Web. 17<sup>th</sup> August 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Examples include the Federal Bureau of Investigation; the Central Intelligence Agency; the Environmental Protection Agency; the Small Business Administration; the Federal Emergency Management Agency; the Office of National Drug Control Policy; the Drug Enforcement Administration; the National Parks Service; and many others.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Preston. ‘The President’s Inner Circle: Personality and Leadership Style in Foreign Policy Decision-Making’. In *Presidential Power: Forging the Presidency for the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Robert Y. Shapiro, Martha Joynt Kumar, and Lawrence R. Jacobs. 105-55. New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2000. 107. Emphasis Preston’s.

<sup>17</sup> Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, 381.

S. Corwin remarks – “it is a common allegation that the terms in which the President’s powers are granted are the loosest and most unguarded of any part of the Constitution”.<sup>18</sup> (Although he argues that the situation is in fact more complex, with the Constitution reflecting “two conceptions of executive power”, one where it serves the legislature, “wherein resides the will of society”, and one where it is “autonomous and self-directory.”<sup>19</sup>) Corwin outlines the development of the presidency during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Andrew Jackson’s claims “to represent the American people...to the extent of claiming to embody them” and that “all his powers were autonomous”, to Abraham Lincoln’s eventual decision during the Civil War that “‘as President he had extraordinary legal resources which Congress lacked,’ and which it could not control.”<sup>20</sup> Eventually Corwin concludes that, by the time of his writing, in 1941 under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, the principles of separation of powers and of equality between Congress and the executive had been seriously undermined. Theodore Roosevelt – president from 1901 to 1909 – provides a useful commentary on this executive aggrandisement, arguing forcefully in his autobiography that “the executive power [is] limited only by specific restrictions and prohibitions appearing in the Constitution or imposed by the Congress under its constitutional powers”.<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt admits that “under this interpretation of executive power I did and caused to be done many things not previously done by the President and the heads of the departments. I did not usurp power, but I did greatly broaden the use of executive power.”<sup>22</sup>

Executive power would continue to grow throughout the twentieth century, so that by the time of Richard Nixon’s administration (1969-1974), Schlesinger observed an “unprecedented concentration of power in the White House...if this transformation were carried through, the President, instead of being accountable every day to Congress and public opinion, would be accountable every four years to the electorate. Between elections, the President would be accountable only through impeachment and would govern, as much as he could, by decree.”<sup>23</sup> Schlesinger further argues that “Nixon’s Presidency was not an aberration but a culmination. It carried to reckless extremes a compulsion towards presidential power rising out of deep-running changes in the foundations of society.”<sup>24</sup> Nixon’s administration will be one of those considered within this thesis, and importantly that of fellow Republican president, Ronald Reagan (president 1981-1989), an administration

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<sup>18</sup> Edward S. Corwin. ‘The Aggrandisement of Presidential Power.’ In *The Power of the Presidency: Concepts and Controversy*. Ed. Robert Hirschfield. 214-27. New York, NY: Atherton Press, 1968. 214.

<sup>19</sup> Corwin, ‘The Aggrandisement of Presidential Power’, 215.

<sup>20</sup> Corwin, ‘The Aggrandisement of Presidential Power’, 218-9. Emphasis Corwin’s. Jackson served as president from 1829 to 1837, and Abraham Lincoln from 1861 to 1865.

<sup>21</sup> Theodore Roosevelt. ‘The “Stewardship Theory”’. In Hirschfield, 82-4. 82.

<sup>22</sup> Roosevelt, T., ‘The “Stewardship Theory”’, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, 377.

<sup>24</sup> Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, 417.



that built in many ways on Nixon's executive aggrandisement, as will be discussed in later chapters. This evolution of presidential and executive power is of key importance to this project, beginning with the inauguration of the presidency under George Washington and continuing till the contemporary moment, as cultural works consider the administration and legacy of Bill Clinton (president 1993-2001) and George W. Bush (president 2001-2009), and increasingly the incumbent president, Barack Obama (serving since 2009).

### **McCarthy, Pynchon, and Roth: presidential texts and textual presidents**

As has been discussed above, many authors have written on the presidency and the executive branch, and both have been depicted extensively on the small and big screen. These authors and texts, clearly, range considerably in how they represent and construct the presidency, presidential power, and, more broadly speaking, executive power, in the United States of America. Often, texts (literary or cinematic) are primarily biographical, describing and discussing particular individuals who have held the presidential office (and other executive offices at federal, state, and local level). These texts may focus on the lives and personalities of these individuals, without especially interrogating the *nature* of the office, and the overall construction, functioning, and meaning of the structure of the American government.<sup>25</sup> As has been noted previously, these texts tend to formulate the "story" of the presidency, and of presidents, into chapters of an immense American epic. It is further to be noted that these biographical – or quasi-biographical – texts are more frequently located on the screen, whether cinematic or televisual, than in literature.

However, it is the argument of this thesis that the authors under discussion – amongst others – make use of the presidency and executive power as an important part of the structure of their texts, inextricably linked to the events depicted in the narrative and the characters operating within it. In these texts, American executive power is not what one might conceive of as the 'primary' subject of the novels, but it is constantly present, functioning as a ubiquitous influence – whether beneficial, or, much more often, malevolent or at best indirectly destructive – on the society being represented. In that sense, and in their depiction and imagining of executive and presidential figures, they present a challenge to, and explore, schematise, and problematise the substructure of the established epic national narrative of the presidency, and of American democracy. This thesis will examine the works of three postwar authors: Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy. All three writers engage regularly with figures of executive power, both fictional and historical, and

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<sup>25</sup> By "meaning" here, I mean to suggest the nexus of political, sociological, cultural, and philosophical foundations of the form and nature of American government.

construct executive power as a force both 'phantom' and embodied which extends far beyond the immediately apparent, express power and authority granted it by the nation's various constitutional and legal documents (particularly the federal Constitution, but extending also to state constitutions, legal codes, and other established frameworks for the operation of national government). It is a deeply troubling, intangible but also viscerally physical force which cannot be coherently reduced to one meaning or one nature, and is difficult to reconcile with the much more limited power that the individuals theoretically wielding it are capable of managing.

These three writers were each born in the 1930s – Roth and McCarthy within months of each other in March and July 1933 respectively, and Pynchon in 1937 – and each began publishing novels between 1959 (when Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* was published) and 1965 (when McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper* was published). They have all continued to write novels up until the present time: Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* was published in 2013, Roth's *Nemesis* in 2010, and McCarthy's *The Road* in 2006, although Roth now claims to have retired from writing fiction. McCarthy also wrote the screenplay for *The Counsellor*, a film released in 2013 and directed by Ridley Scott. The careers of the three have thus developed roughly in tandem, although they have reached critical and cultural prominence at different times (Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, released in 1969, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, released in 1973, and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, released in 1985, in each case marked the author's first work to attract wide academic and institutional attention – in McCarthy's case, this would not come in commercial terms till 1992's *All the Pretty Horses*).

Furthermore, the careers of all three authors evolved during a turbulent era in American and cultural politics. Each was born in the 1930s, during the years of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal following the Great Depression, and was consequently a child during World War II, attending university a little while after the end of the war.<sup>26</sup> They would all start writing at the end of the 1950s, the decade of Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration and Joseph McCarthy's zealous pursuit of alleged Communists within the upper levels of American society, one of the most significant abuses of governmental power in the nation's history, albeit originating in the legislature rather than the executive branch – which, in fact, was one of the prime targets of McCarthy's investigation. This was, also, of course, the decade of the evolution of rock and roll, and the beginning of the countercultural awakening that would

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Roth attended Bucknell University and the University of Chicago; both Pynchon and McCarthy had slightly disjointed university careers. Pynchon initially studied engineering physics at Cornell, but left to serve in the United States Navy, subsequently returning to study English. McCarthy studied at the University of Tennessee from 1951-2 and 1957-9, but never graduated. Pynchon and McCarthy both published short stories while attending their respective universities.

flourish in the 1960s, the decade that saw each writer start publishing in earnest. The 1960s also saw a number of important events in American history. These include the establishment of John F. Kennedy's 'Camelot' in Washington, D.C. and his subsequent assassination; major advances (and consequent reactions against them) in civil rights; and the beginning of the hugely controversial Vietnam War. The decade ended in the election of the right-wing Republican Richard Nixon.

Nixon's apotheosis would begin the paranoia, individualism, and neo-conservatism that would inform the next three or four decades of American politics, notably the Reagan administration in the 1980s, and the two George Bushes (the elder serving as president from 1989 to 1993, and the younger from 2001 to 2009). A sense of pervasive paranoia was already present in Pynchon's earlier works, hidden alternative communities and labyrinthine plots being present in *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), which would find full fruition in the multiple paranoid and opaque systems of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), published not long before the end of Nixon's presidency. Nixon was also the first, and thus far only, president of the United States to resign the office, given his almost certain impending conviction by Congress in the Watergate scandal. Nixon and Reagan are significant presences – often, again, as shadows of malign influence rather than active characters – in a group of texts by the authors under consideration, from Roth's *Our Gang* (1971) (which does feature Nixon, or an extremely thinly veiled parody thereof, as the protagonist), to Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* (1990), and McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men* (2005). These were also the years of the Cold War, furthering and deepening the general sense of paranoia and impending destruction, while suggesting the need for a forceful, empowered executive branch capable of responding to provocation from the Soviet Union.

A renewed sense of liberal optimism during Bill Clinton's presidency (1993-2001), with the Cold War now seemingly over, interrupted the two Bush administrations, but this is undermined in Roth's later works *The Human Stain* (2000) and *Exit Ghost* (2007). Between these works Roth also published *The Plot Against America*, a text which suggests, via a counterfactual history of the early 1940s, that the potential for sweeping abuse of executive power was always inherent in the American system. *The Plot Against America*, *Exit Ghost*, Roth's other late novels, McCarthy's *No Country* (2005) and *The Road* (2006), and Pynchon's *Against The Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) also followed the terrorist attacks on American soil of September 11, 2001, and the consequent 'war on terror' pursued by George W. Bush's administration, including military entanglements in Afghanistan and Iraq, and substantial – and divisive – changes to security legislation domestically. The consequences of September 11, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and

terrorism, the 'war on terror', increasing evidence of potentially catastrophic global climate change, and the economic collapse of 2007-8, the long-term effects of which are far from clear, punctured the theorised 'end of history', which imagined advanced capitalism and liberal democracy as the ideal condition for human society. In this context it is particularly salient that these writers continue to write about the nature of American executive power, and how it constructs and manipulates American society, even without the specific conscious agency of those who in theory direct it.

All three authors have commented on American social and political culture for a number of decades, and have been substantially influential on the nation's literary scene, increasing the canonical status of their works. They have all won major awards, and established a presence in pop culture. The Coen brothers' adaptation of *No Country for Old Men*, released in 2007, won a number of Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Director, and has consequently sparked a number of parodies, while John Hillcoat's 2009 adaptation of *The Road* was a critical success. Paul Thomas Anderson's adaptation of *Inherent Vice*, the first attempt to film a Pynchon novel, was released in 2014, itself receiving two Academy Award nominations. The notoriously reclusive Pynchon has appeared twice on *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989- ) voicing himself depicted with a paper bag, stamped with a question mark, over his head (*The Simpsons*, a series which itself has engaged at frequent intervals in commentary on presidential and executive politics in the United States, has also parodied *No Country for Old Men*). Roth, meanwhile, has published novels at a far greater rate than McCarthy or Pynchon, and has given many interviews; novels of his, such as *Portnoy's Complaint* and *The Human Stain*, have also been filmed. All three have been the subject of sustained and substantial critical attention for most of their careers. It is thus relevant and revealing to consider how this group of writers have depicted and constructed the American presidency, and executive power and authority more broadly, in their works, as this is a theme throughout their works which has not thus far attracted a significant amount of critical attention (this is true especially of McCarthy's writing).

The trio are substantively different in their literary styles, and in general terms have particular concerns and tropes that appear with frequency in their works. These tropes also differ quite widely – from Roth's concern with subjectivity, sexuality, and identity, to Pynchon's with entropy, complicity, resistance, and paranoia, and McCarthy's with fate, the meanings of the American West, and violence. These concerns, though, inform their respective depictions of the presidency, establishing sometimes contrasting views, and sometimes parallels, between their works. Thus, for example, Roth focuses on the political and the personal, the relationship of the individual to political, specifically executive, power and their subjective

experience thereof, whilst emphasising in *The Human Stain* the nature of the president as, himself, an individual, rather than an abstracted symbol. Pynchon's approach is somewhat more involved with the experience of the community, and the relationship of various communities to power, as can be seen especially in *Vineland*; however, he also seeks to humanise presidential figures at times, notably in his depiction of George Washington (*prior* to his rise to military and subsequently executive power) in *Mason & Dixon*. Gravity's *Rainbow* also depicts a Richard Nixon avatar – "Richard M. Zhubb" – in its conclusion, who is the night manager of the cinema in which the novel ends, seemingly with the arrival of an intercontinental missile. Nixon is thereby personally present in the implicit apocalypse that ends the novel, suggesting the nature of the president as some kind of manager of national destiny. By reducing him to a cinema manager – a night manager, at that – Pynchon implies that the president is an ultimately rather absurd, if malevolent and dangerous, figure.

McCarthy's work is set more substantially apart from that of the others. His texts do not directly employ presidents as characters, or even as absent agents. It must be emphasised that Roth and Pynchon do not make substantial use of presidential characters in their work either – indeed, it is germane to the argument of this thesis that they are not, and need not be, active protagonists or antagonists within the text – but presidential figures are named and their actions are expressly described, while elections and general political activities are explicit, substantial elements of the narrative fabric of the novels under discussion. McCarthy's texts do, though, often involve characters of executive power and authority, whose actions are of central importance to the work. Thus we have Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, who in some ways is both the antagonist and the true protagonist of the novel, is regularly referred to by his title, and does appear at points to carry some genuine authority. The novel also employs the historical governor of Chihuahua state in Mexico, Angel Trías, as a character. *No Country for Old Men*'s narrator, and one of its central three figures, Ed Tom Bell, is a county sheriff in Texas in 1980. The novel thus takes place against the backdrop of the year in which Ronald Reagan was elected president, and was written and published, saliently, during the presidency of George W. Bush. The executive branch consequently forms a phantom structure to McCarthy's novels: it is of considerable significance that his 1973 novel *Child of God* begins with the seizure and sale of Lester Ballard's family farm by the state, an action which implicitly leads fairly directly to Lester's increasing insanity and resulting depredations against the local population. This phantom structure provided by the executive is, I will argue, a key element, though often overlooked, in each of the works under discussion, deployed by each author to multivalent ends, but in each instance ultimately expressing the centrality of executive power to the direction and shaping of American society.

As has been remarked upon, Trías is a historical figure, and his description and behaviour in *Blood Meridian* match records of him closely. Judge Holden too, together with many of the characters and much of the plot in the novel, derives from the journal of Samuel Chamberlain. All three authors make extensive use of historical research, and details gleaned therefrom, in their novels. Pynchon's depiction of Washington is similarly informed by historical information, as is much of *Mason & Dixon*; Roth's *The Plot Against America* forms an alternative history, a counterfactual text, of the early 1940s in the United States. In some form, then, many of McCarthy's, Pynchon's, and Roth's texts are 'historical novels', literary representations of a specific time and place in America's past utilising the nation's historical records. In this, and in their consideration of the nation's political history and foundations, they are equally 'social novels' – "the novel that addresses contemporary social and political concerns more or less explicitly", in Colin Hutchinson's definition.<sup>27</sup> These are novels that are concerned with the structure of the nation that forms the United States of America, the archaeology and contemporary nature of that structure, and how individuals and communities operate in and are operated upon by it.

In this context, it is relevant furthermore to consider the political leanings of each writer. Pynchon and Roth operate within, broadly defined, a progressive, left-wing tradition. Roth's *Our Gang* is a savage satire on the Nixon administration, while Pynchon's concern with alternative communities, unionism, and opposition to the apparatus of the state (which is generally depicted as authoritarian and abusive) indicates his politics. Pynchon, further, engages throughout much of his work with anarchism and its history and operation. He notably depicts the anarchists of the early twentieth century in *Against the Day*, and frequently questions existing social and governmental structures. Alternative structures are symbolised in his early novel *The Crying of Lot 49* by the presence, and unspoken power, of the underground Tristero postal system, representing a community that operates wholly outside the sphere of mainstream society and governmental control.<sup>28</sup> Samuel Thomas has written on the complex politics, and politics of resistance, of Pynchon's work – whether it can be read as offering the "beginnings of a viable, legitimate alternative to the debased public face of politics".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Colin Hutchinson. *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Pynchon and McCarthy's respective relationships with anarchy will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Thomas. *Pynchon and the Political*. London: Routledge, 2007. 8.

The politics of postmodernism remain a subject of extensive debate, but it is additionally helpful to consider Pynchon's work in light of Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér's description: "those dwelling in the postmodern political condition feel themselves to be after the entire story with its sacred and mythological origin, strict causality, secret teleology, omniscient and transcendent narrator and its promise of a happy ending in a cosmic or historic sense."<sup>30</sup> Pynchon challenges this description: a narrator like Wicks Cherrycoke in *Mason & Dixon* appears initially omniscient, but is in fact deeply unreliable. The last section of 'The Counterforce', the final part of *Gravity's Rainbow*, collapses the preceding narrative of the novel as the text disintegrates. *Bleeding Edge* plays with conspiracy theories concerning the September 11 attacks and the Montauk project, among others, but provides no easy narrative conclusions about them. Characters such as Cherrycoke, Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Maxine Tarnow in *Bleeding Edge*, and Prairie Wheeler in *Vineland* may seek the "entire story", but they do not generally find it, not at least in complete form: this is most clearly symbolised by the ending of *Lot 49*, with Oedipa's narrative left without resolution, the novel terminating *in medias res*. Pynchon equally does not provide unambiguously happy endings: as noted, *Lot 49* ends without conclusion, while *Gravity's Rainbow* ends in an implied nuclear attack, and while *Vineland's* ending resolves the narrative, relatively happily for the characters, to a greater degree, there is an obvious unease in the indication that Prairie has inherited her mother's attraction to violent authority figures. In this context, considering Heller and Fehér's "cosmic sense", Pynchon's "cosmic fascist", whom *Vineland* postulates inserts a need for authority into human DNA, indicates a much more disturbing political condition in which the origin of the "entire story" and its eventual ending are bound up with authority and control, forces which may well have twisted historical narratives and kept others hidden, to their own sinister ends.

We may note that both Pynchon and Roth grew up in the northeast of the United States, traditionally the most left-liberal region of the country with the exception of California – which, of course, is where three of Pynchon's novels are predominantly set. McCarthy, though, is from the South – he was born in Rhode Island, not too far from Pynchon and Roth's childhood homes, but moved when very young to Tennessee, where he would grow up; as an adult, he has lived mostly in Texas and New Mexico. He has been described as a "radical conservative" in one of his very few interviews.<sup>31</sup> In the same interview, he proposes that "the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first

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<sup>30</sup> Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. *The Postmodern Political Condition*. Cambridge: Polity, 1988. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Richard B. Woodward. 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction.' *New York Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1992.

ones to give up their souls, their freedom.”<sup>32</sup> This claim indicates his difference from Pynchon and Roth, lacking the optimistic sense of potential for an alternative, more just world that their work hints at. His novels are not so overtly attuned to contemporary and historical politics as those of Pynchon and Roth, though their engagement and dialogue with the political is ambiguous and nuanced, forming only a part of wider investigations into the nature of individuals and communities which cannot be reduced to a definite political standpoint. His political views, in fact, remain a matter of debate, not least because of his public reticence.<sup>33</sup> McCarthy’s work deals, seemingly, more with ‘universal’ themes of fate, time, war, and violence – but these are frequently, in fact almost always, explored in his work through the prism of very specific times and places in American history. The nature of power, and where it is located, changes from *Blood Meridian* to *No Country for Old Men*, positing that no force is ultimately universal or eternal: the latter novel’s antagonist, Anton Chigurh, is demonstrably vulnerable, being injured moderately severely in a chance car crash towards the novel’s conclusion, unlike the apparently immortal judge in *Blood Meridian* who claims that he will never die. Robert Jarrett has usefully summarised David Holloway’s work on McCarthy’s historicity, noting that Holloway judges McCarthy’s work “to participate ‘in the history of its time’ rather than exhibiting a modernist separation from history.”<sup>34</sup> I intend to argue that McCarthy’s construction of government and executive power in his work is, similarly, in dialogue with the history of the times he depicts, particularly through its use of historical research. *No Country* specifically expands beyond these ‘universal’ themes to engage directly with the very question of government, asking via Ed Tom Bell’s narration if it is even possible to govern those who do not abide by the law.

Bob Pepperman Taylor proposes that Roth, too, is “not primarily a political writer”, while conceding the political nature of a number of his works, including several of those to be discussed in this thesis.<sup>35</sup> This argument does not wholly stand up to scrutiny, however. Novels such as *Our Gang*, *The Plot Against America*, *American Pastoral*, and *I Married A Communist* (all acknowledged by Pepperman Taylor, along with *The Human Stain*, which he accepts as “perhaps” being overtly political) have an expressly political tone and suggest

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction.’

<sup>33</sup> Woodward’s interview also reveals that “one of the few [writers McCarthy] acknowledges having known at all was the novelist and ecological crusader Edward Abbey. Shortly before Abbey’s death in 1989, they discussed a covert operation to reintroduce the wolf to southern Arizona.” As a figure connected with radical environmentalism and civil disobedience – and, notably, one associated also with anarchist views – his friendship with McCarthy reveals the difficulty of confidently ascribing to McCarthy a political position.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Jarrett. Rev. of *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, David Holloway. *Cormac McCarthy Journal* 3.1 (2003): 44-7. 46.

<sup>35</sup> Bob Pepperman Taylor. ‘Democracy and Excess: Philip Roth’s Democratic Citizens.’ *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 93.3/4 (2010): 313-40. 313.



political arguments. Even where a novel may not be *overtly* political, there are still, very frequently, political undertones. It is odd that Pepperman Taylor excludes *Exit Ghost* for one from his list of exceptions, a novel that is set against the 2004 presidential election – George W. Bush’s re-election – and engages at some length with the relationship of the individual citizen to the political activity and structures of the nation. Even in Roth’s most notorious work, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, the title character serves as “assistant commissioner for human opportunity” under John Lindsay, Mayor of New York from 1966 to 1973, and contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972.

While Roth’s primary concern is often with the private, subjective experiences of individuals and families, his work is in regular dialogue with the broader society in which those individuals exist, and how that society is governed and formed. One of his earliest short works, ‘Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue’, is, like *Our Gang*, a direct and sharp satire of a specific, Republican president, in this instance Dwight D. Eisenhower. It is therefore clear that Roth began his career as, at least in part, a strongly political writer, and with late works such as *The Plot Against America* and *Exit Ghost*, it is evident that this element of his writing has not disappeared or mellowed over the decades, although his political engagement in the latter works is less explicitly and angrily satirical than the earlier pieces.

Central to these authors’ engagement with executive power, particularly in the texts which I will discuss in this thesis, is their response to the evolution of that power over the course of American history, most importantly in the decades since the end of the Second World War. The aggrandisement of executive power throughout the twentieth – and into the twenty-first – century has been remarked upon already. The increasingly globalised nature of politics in the latter half of the last century and the first decade and a half of the new century, coupled with rapid advances in technology – in weaponry, communications, and industry especially – has been of fundamental importance in this evolution. Threats such as nuclear annihilation and climate change have given the United States government a direct role in the future of humanity, beyond its own borders. Internally, the rise of the internet has given the executive extensive surveillance powers previously unavailable to it, its substantial use of which was revealed by the whistleblower Edward Snowden.

The writers under consideration here approach the development of executive power in markedly different ways, the understanding of which is an important component of my project. Thomas Pynchon engages with conspiracy theories and the role of executive government from his early work, such as the ‘official’ postal system and its mysterious

shadow the Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and the vast paranoid monolith of 'They' in *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), a novel that interrogates the military-industrial-governmental complex around the end of World War Two. The executive branch constitutes, for Pynchon, a massive and vastly overpowered network of coercion and corruption, reaching a zenith in the Reagan era *Vineland* (1990) depicts, though *Bleeding Edge* (2013) suggests that the rise of new technologies in the 1990s and 2000s have provided opportunities for even greater executive interference in citizens' lives. McCarthy takes a noticeably different approach: in *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), the executive power consists mostly in the ability to unleash and legitimise chaos, while by the 1980 setting of *No Country for Old Men*, its practical power is virtually nil, and it is corporate, rather than government, power that seems to direct events and individuals.

Roth's attitude is somewhat complex. Dwight D. Eisenhower's equivalence of himself with God in 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue' (1957) and the quasi-dictatorship of Charles Lindbergh in *The Plot Against America* (2004) suggest a similar understanding of an executive endowed with too much power. However, *The Plot's* ultimate return to the course of American democratic history, and Nathan Zuckerman's abdication from political life in *Exit Ghost* (2007) imply, on the one hand, some level of faith in the United States' democratic government, and on the other, the ability of citizens to not engage in politics and live comparatively free from governmental interference (even suggesting an argument that this may be the most sensible approach). It is clear, therefore, that Pynchon, Roth, and McCarthy construct executive power in the United States in quite divergent manners; it is consequently illuminating to compare and contrast their varying engagements with this major facet of American society through their texts. We can thus, from an interrogation of these three major writers, open up new lines of sight within American literary studies concerning the significance of the presidency and the wider executive branch across the breadth of literary, and broadly speaking cultural production.

Within the works of these authors, I will explore seven novels in detail. These are Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* and *No Country for Old Men*; Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* and *Vineland*; and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*, *The Plot Against America*, and *Exit Ghost*, together with some consideration of 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue', 'The President Addresses the Nation', and *Our Gang*. These novels represent the three authors' most tangible important commentaries on the presidency and executive power from a range of perspectives, *Vineland* and *No Country for Old Men* also counterpointing one another as depictions of the Reagan era.

*Mason & Dixon* reflects on the foundation of the nation. It presents a chapter dedicated to Mason and Dixon (themselves historical figures of great importance in the foundations of the United States) meeting George and Martha Washington, and posits that the nation, and its very conception as a republic, was built on partly rotten foundations from its beginnings. This argument is closely related to Roth's concept of the nation's foundation as a traumatic event from which the nation has never recovered, *Exit Ghost* providing the thesis that the best course of action is to disengage from national political life. The novel propounds a view that engaging directly in politics – expressing significant concern about it, even – is an immature, almost ridiculous activity (though it is far from certain that this is Roth's *own* view, rather than belonging to his recurring character Nathan Zuckerman). In this, some degree of comparison can be drawn with the depiction of Washington in *Mason & Dixon*, who is a jovial, amicable character, but not one who appears to be especially philosophical or intellectual, being much more concerned about straightforward business and the politics involved with it. Political activity is not suggested to be childish here as it is in *Exit Ghost*, but still seems to be the preserve of men of shallow and mercenary concerns. *The Plot Against America* explores the fragilities of the American democratic system and the executive branch, as does, in a markedly different manner, *No Country for Old Men*, whose sheriff protagonist has near infinite authority but very little power. *Blood Meridian* and *Vineland*, again in very divergent ways, represent the terrifying power the executive branch can wield, even if, as in *Blood Meridian*, that power cannot be controlled once used. In all these works, the president (or presidential avatar) is generally either a remote figure of mythic qualities, or an ordinary, corrupted individual. In none of them is the president depicted with anything like the apparent sincerity or respect of such pop culture representations of recent years as *The West Wing*, *Lincoln*, or *Commander-in-Chief* (ABC, 2005-6).

By comparing these writers, we are able to interrogate several literary views of presidential and executive power, and its theoretical and practical dimensions. We can understand from these multiple approaches that executive power influences and directs these texts regardless of each writer's construction of that power. Whether it is enfeebled in practice despite vast theoretical potency, or actually interferes directly and constantly in citizens' lives, it nevertheless continually affects the characters' experience and the shape of the text. Ultimately, this affords further critical opportunities to consider the presence of executive power in other American literary texts.

## Critical contexts

The existing critical dialogue around each of these writers and their texts has mapped their cultural and political frameworks extensively, albeit – importantly – without generally considering at any substantial length their specific use of the presidency and the executive branch in their narratives. My project situates itself amongst these critical investigations, seeking to focus on the construction of the presidency and executive branch in these texts and how they in turn construct the texts.

Philip Roth's literary interest in the United States' national history is a key subject in critical commentary on his work. Aimee Pozorski, in *Roth and Trauma*, which investigates the "problem of history" in Roth's work, has referred to his "unique project of representing America stripped of the ideals and rhetorical fluff".<sup>36</sup> This description of Roth's work leads, eventually, to Pozorski's argument – alluded to above – that Roth explores the traumatic nature of the American nation's founding moment. I will explore Roth's work with this interpretation in mind: the seeming obsession of the American people with the presidency, presidential figures, and other holders of executive power, and the complicated nature of that power, are derived from that traumatic moment of birth. In terms of Roth's narrative project, I also note Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried's argument that, "on the margins of society, [Roth's] protagonists begin their careers as innocents but turn quickly into angry heroes and heroines. Thus, the sociological dimension of his fiction leads to the representation of the psychological dynamic of his characters' lives."<sup>37</sup> This sociological dimension – more specifically, a socio-political dimension – is of essential importance to my analysis of Roth, although it cannot be divorced from the subjective experience of the individual characters. This connection between the socio-political dimension and characters' subjective experiences is in fact vital to Roth's representation of presidential and executive power, as he explores how that power affects at a fundamental level the everyday lived experience of individual citizens. The proposition that Roth's work is fundamentally socio-political – that it is in continual dialogue with the political structures of the nation, and their manifestation within society – strongly informs my argument.

Although much critical analysis of Roth focuses on his depiction of individual experience, his humour, and use of autobiography and narrative, I wish to explore this socio-political dimension, and particularly the centrality of the political, and particularly the presidential,

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<sup>36</sup> Aimee Pozorski. *Roth and Trauma: the Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*. London: Continuum, 2011. viii.

<sup>37</sup> Murray Baumgarten and Barbara Gottfried. *Understanding Philip Roth*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 1990. 60.

within many of his novels, from the scabrous satire of Richard Nixon in *Our Gang* to Coleman Silk, an analogue of Bill Clinton, in *The Human Stain*. Elaine B. Safer concludes in her work on Roth, *Mocking the Age*, that *The Plot Against America* is “the strongest statement of a theme *that runs throughout Roth’s fiction*: be aware that under the influence of fear, people are capable of frenzied, violent actions that can destroy our democratic society.”<sup>38</sup> (My emphasis.) The democratic society of the United States is under constant threat in Roth’s work, and there is an inescapable implication that it is always already rotten, that a fully functioning, genuinely democratic nation is unthinkable and unattainable: hence Nathan Zuckerman’s desire to withdraw entirely from the socio-political life of the community, both regional and national, in *Exit Ghost*.

Sean McCann sees Roth’s work – specifically, *The Plot Against America* – as political in a more partisan manner, suggesting that “against the Republican revolution... *The Plot Against America* might be seen as an attempt at an epic justification for the rebirth of Blue America and for the recreation of the political leadership necessary to revitalise it.”<sup>39</sup> McCann further declares that *The Plot Against America* “can be seen to take its place...in the historical series of efforts to reimagine the role of executive power.”<sup>40</sup> I will argue that Roth’s work, more than being specifically partisan from a Democratic or ‘progressive’ perspective, is in regular dialogue with the role of executive and presidential power as a ubiquitous phantom force, and a totemic cultural obsession. It is certainly the case that Roth’s satire seems reserved primarily for Republican presidents such as Eisenhower and Nixon. However, works like *The Human Stain* and *Exit Ghost* – the latter text, while depicting the re-election of a controversial Republican president and the horrified liberal reaction to it, does not particularly satirise or investigate the Bush administration – indicate a broad interest in the phenomenon of the presidency, presidential power, and presidential characters. James Ivy summarises McCann’s argument as proposing that “Roth’s reimagining demonstrates that a critique of presidential power is not simply institutional. It matters who occupies the office”, concluding that “Roth provides a hopeful — and a political — reading of American culture”.<sup>41</sup> I will argue that Roth’s critique *is* institutional, even if his personal sympathies may be more with the left, and that his reading of American political culture is in fact generally pessimistic. It is in the context of these critical arguments that I will investigate the construction of executive power in Roth’s work.

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<sup>38</sup> Elaine B. Safer. *Mocking the Age: the Later Novels of Philip Roth*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2006. 167.

<sup>39</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 195.

<sup>40</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 195.

<sup>41</sup> James Ivy. Rev. of *A Pinnacle of Feeling*. *Philip Roth Studies* 6.2 (2010): 208-10. 210.

There has not yet been much critical work on the political element of Cormac McCarthy's fiction. Discussion has tended to focus more on the, broadly speaking, philosophical elements of his novels (and plays): the eternal nature of war, the operations of fate, the ubiquity of violence and transgression. Less has been said about his approach to the manner in which the United States – the nation in which all of his novels are set, besides trips into Mexico, and the unidentified post-apocalyptic wasteland of *The Road* (which nevertheless seems likely to be the former United States), and with which his work continually engages – is politically constituted and governed. Vince Brewton has identified in the Border Trilogy (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*) an “imaginative and thematic debt to the changing political and cultural landscape of America beginning in the 1980s, a landscape best evoked by the Reagan presidency and the Gulf War with Iraq in 1991”.<sup>42</sup> He cites particularly the nature of his work as part of a “larger cultural equation” involving “the arena of national media culture, the campaigns for president in 1980 and 1984, and the political discourse of the 1980s”.<sup>43</sup> Pierre Lagayette, similarly, has discussed the presence of the Cold War in the Border Trilogy and *The Road*, and the influences of both the Reagan and Clinton administrations on McCarthy's fiction. Other critics have interrogated the broader political implications of McCarthy's work: Daniel Butler has focussed on the use of outlaw figures and the apparent anarchy of the United States in *No Country for Old Men*, while Raymond Malewitz has written on McCarthy's “search for an alternative to late capitalism”, proposing a “renaturalising” of the West in his work.<sup>44</sup> These interpretations of McCarthy provide a useful framework for my thesis; however, I hope to extend and expand critical approaches to McCarthy by more closely exploring his specific deployment of governmental figures, terms, and images.

McCarthy's play with genre, narrative, and history is also of relevance to my analysis. Neil Campbell marks *Blood Meridian*, which will be the focus of substantial discussion in this thesis, as a revisionist and destabilising Western, using Judge Holden to provide an “ambivalent, contradictory version which cannot be easily or comfortably accommodated into

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<sup>42</sup> Vince Brewton. ‘The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy’. In *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. and introd. Harold Bloom: 63-83. New York, NY: Infobase, 2009. 63.

<sup>43</sup> Brewton, ‘The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy’, 64. The 1980 and 1984 presidential elections marked Ronald Reagan's election and re-election, against incumbent Democratic president Jimmy Carter in 1980, and against Carter's Vice-President, Walter Mondale, in 1984, who would only win one state out of fifty (and the District of Columbia) in the election.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Malewitz. ‘“Anything Can Be an Instrument”: Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*.’ *Contemporary Literature* 50.4 (2009): 721-41. 727.

the simple mythic sense of the West”.<sup>45</sup> His fictions seek to question and ultimately frequently undermine common popular understandings of American history. John Sepich’s thorough *Notes on Blood Meridian* lays out the extensive historical detail underpinning the novel, consequently indicating McCarthy’s careful research and his use of historical documentation to construct his “contradictory version” of the West. This project draws significantly on Sepich’s work. Rick Wallach, conversely, suggests that *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy are “built upon a...foundation of mythic (or mythologised) national/cultural nostalgia – in particular, for a vanished pioneer lifestyle once galvanised by the individualism of the pioneer ethos”.<sup>46</sup> McCarthy is evidently engaged in a contested dialogue with the American past, and mythic and nostalgic imaginings of it. Campbell’s description of McCarthy as “concerned with the stories his country tells him and how these stories can be exposed and retold” is clearly relevant here, and is salient to my argument concerning his work: I will propose that McCarthy’s novels take the ‘story’ of American democracy and heroic popular leadership and, as with the myths of the West, expose and destabilise it.<sup>47</sup> I will argue that the dawn of the Reagan era forms a vital background to *No Country for Old Men* and its conflict of executive, corporate, and unaligned forces, while the twin faces of executive power, the weak and passive and the terrifyingly strong, structure *Blood Meridian*.

Thus, McCarthy’s work in fact counterpoints Roth’s. McCann describes, on the one hand, the figure of Franklin D. Roosevelt in *The Plot Against America*, who is a “largely passive figure”, Roth “emphasising the fragility and insubstantiality of the reassurance provided by [him]...able to do little to protect the beleaguered supporters who have been targeted by a sudden explosion of state-led anti-Semitism”.<sup>48</sup> On the other, he suggests that the novel “demonstrates the continuing power of the presidential imagination to compel assent”, and that Roth “wishes us to recognise...the dangerous appeal of such reassuring political epics”.<sup>49</sup> This dichotomy of presidential, and executive, power is fundamental to McCarthy’s political construction too, who is not discussed by McCann; this thesis aims to position McCarthy as an author whose engagement with executive power is as extensive and significant as authors such as Roth, Pynchon, and other writers whose politics (defined as their general textual engagement with the political, rather than their individual partisan views) have been more thoroughly examined.

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<sup>45</sup> Neil Campbell. ‘Liberty beyond its proper bounds: Cormac McCarthy’s history of the West in *Blood Meridian*.’ In *Myth, legend, dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Rick Wallach. 217-26.. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 218.

<sup>46</sup> Rick Wallach. ‘Editor’s introduction: Cormac McCarthy’s canon as accidental artifact.’ In *Myth, legend, dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy*, xiv-xvi. xv.

<sup>47</sup> Campbell, ‘Liberty beyond its proper bounds: Cormac McCarthy’s history of the West in *Blood Meridian*’, 218.

<sup>48</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 194.

<sup>49</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 195-6.

Pynchon's work, finally, has been extensively considered in relation to its politics, and, indeed, specifically in relation to the presidency, in Sean McCann's essay ' "Down to the people": Pynchon and Schlesinger "after the imperial presidency" '.<sup>50</sup> McCann's essay considers *Gravity's Rainbow* in some detail, averring that "on at least one level, Thomas Pynchon's novel is organized by its evident disappointment in presidential leadership".<sup>51</sup> McCann concludes that the novel "does not so much reject the appeal of presidential leadership as seek to extend and realize what is ostensibly that vision's full democratic potential".<sup>52</sup> This thesis's analysis of Pynchon will focus on the later novels *Mason & Dixon* and *Vineland*, suggesting that they imply a more sceptical approach towards the presidency than McCann proposes is to be found in *Gravity's Rainbow*. These novels express not only disappointment in presidential leadership, but substantive misgivings about, and questioning of, the very nature of the presidency and the individuals who have held the office.

McCann argues that "*Gravity's Rainbow* aims to exhort us all to develop the admirable capacities of leaders", ultimately finding in the novel an "ambivalent fascination with the imperial presidency and the charismatic leadership Kennedy and his supporters glamorised".<sup>53</sup> Charles Hollander has also argued that *The Crying of Lot 49* is a response to the Kennedy assassination in 'Pynchon, JFK and the CIA: Magic Eye Views of The Crying of Lot 49'. These two analyses suggest that two of Pynchon's early, and critically important, novels are substantially informed by, and engaged with, the Kennedy administration. *Vineland* and *Mason & Dixon* problematise the institution of the presidency itself to a greater extent than the earlier novels. In *Mason & Dixon* especially, Pynchon returns to the traumatic foundational moments of the nation, similarly to Roth's work, using a metahistorical approach, drawing parallels between the 1760s and 1960s and locating past and (our) present in each other. While there is certainly democratic potential to be found in these novels – notably, in *Vineland's* alternative communities – it is, markedly, not to be found in the government as it has thus far in American history been constituted. Thus, this project aims to develop the work done by McCann in relation to *Gravity's Rainbow* to argue that Pynchon's approach to the presidency and its politics develops in later novels to become more complex, and more fundamentally sceptical of the institution of the executive branch of the federal government.

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<sup>50</sup> *Studies in American Fiction* 37.2 (2010): 247-72.

<sup>51</sup> McCann, 'Down to the people', 247.

<sup>52</sup> McCann, 'Down to the people', 266.

<sup>53</sup> McCann, 'Down to the people', 266-7.



This thesis is further situated alongside critics such as David Cowart, who identifies *Mason & Dixon* as a text in which Pynchon “anatomises this nation on the eve of its founding...he settles on the surveying of the Mason-Dixon Line as symbol of and index to the forces that would become America”, and Shawn Smith, who explores Pynchon’s use of figures such as Washington and Franklin (or indeed Reagan in *Vineland*) to undermine the “sanctioned histories” and their construction of American empire.<sup>54</sup> John Dugdale’s observation that *Gravity’s Rainbow* contains “a politicised vision of the past, countering official myths” is, equally, important.<sup>55</sup> This is, of course, similar to the argument Neil Campbell advances with regard to McCarthy and *Blood Meridian*; while Pynchon’s interest in the nation’s founding moment can be usefully compared to Roth’s. All three writers considered by this project express a deep interest in the historical narrative and evolution of the United States, from its birth to the modern (post-1945) period. Cowart further notes Pynchon’s aforementioned reading of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries alongside each other, particularly the 1760s of *Mason & Dixon* and the 1960s of the California trilogy, a reading which is germane to my understanding of Pynchon’s work as interrogating the presidency – the institution, its power, and individuals associated with it – across the span of American history.<sup>56</sup>

Pynchon’s depiction of specific historic individuals such as Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Kennedy, Nixon, and Reagan, is central to my argument. His uses of American cultural history, often drawing on detailed historical research, create a paradigm of hugely flawed executive power. These depictions, similarly to Roth’s use of subjective individual experience, extend beyond theoretical and political concerns about the nature of American government to descry both its interpolation into the mundane existence of ordinary citizens, and its inherent structural flaw of being comprised of ordinary, often not especially intelligent or salubrious, humans. The problem of self and society, and their reconciliation, in American culture comes into play here, as Cyrus Patell has discussed in *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology*: thus we see, for example, the federal agent Brock Vond, who always seems to act in the text as a deeply self-possessed individual, coming into conflict with the communities and families of citizens that populate *Vineland*.<sup>57</sup> N. Katherine Hayles has postulated a division between the “snitch system” of figures embedded in the executive branch system and the “kinship system” of family communities within

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<sup>54</sup> David Cowart. ‘*The Luddite Vision: Mason & Dixon*’. In *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Thomas Pynchon*, ed. and introd. Harold Bloom. 261-81. Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea House, 2003. 262. Shawn Smith. *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*. London: Routledge, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> John Dugdale. *Thomas Pynchon: Allusive Parables of Power*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1990. 189.

<sup>56</sup> David Cowart. ‘Pynchon and the Sixties’. *Critique* 41.1 (1999): 3-12.

<sup>57</sup> Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001.

*Vineland* in ‘ “Who Was Saved?”: Families, Snitches, and Recuperation in Pynchon’s *Vineland*’, adumbrating the harmful individualism of the executive branch and its incompatibility with mutually supportive familial social structures.<sup>58</sup> The embodied executive force is vested in one single person, the president; thus, presidential figures and presidential avatars such as Vond appear as isolated and/or egomaniacal characters, set against communal bodies such as *Vineland*’s Thanatoids and the Webb-Traverse family, or simply distanced from communal understanding and action, such as, in McCarthy’s work, Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men*. The executive force is, in fact, literally the ‘elect’, the privileged and powerful few Pynchon sets up against the hidden, unchosen ‘preterite’, but also those (supposedly) popularly elected by the nation to lead it. I intend to investigate Pynchon’s figuration of the presidency through his constellation of elect executive characters, historical and fictional, and the preterite citizens upon whom they act.<sup>59</sup>

Sean McCann’s *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, finally, provides as observed previously a key reference point for this project. McCann’s work investigates the notion of the “redeemer president”, of the “sacral image of presidential leadership” and Walt Whitman’s image of the “martyr chief”.<sup>60</sup> The combination in this presidential figure of substantial executive power and personal suffering and sacrifice (seen by Whitman in Abraham Lincoln) provides this “redemption”, leading the nation forward and binding it together in grief and inspiration after their death. This ideal of the presidency arose, as McCann outlines, from the general weakness of the office in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and the desire of both authors such as Whitman and politicians such as Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt for a stronger executive. McCann discusses the dialogue American writers have imagined with the president/presidency, the president as a “national poet”, and the analogy between writers’ literary ambitions and those of the liberal presidency.<sup>61</sup> His work considers the politics – and political projects – of a range of American authors mostly writing in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Henry Roth, Gertrude Stein, Norman Mailer, John Updike, and Philip Roth.

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<sup>58</sup> In *The Vineland Papers*. Ed. Geoffrey Green, Donald J. Greiner, and Larry McCaffery. 14-30. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994.

<sup>59</sup> Pynchon regularly uses the terms ‘elect’ and ‘preterite’, distinguishing between the “ruling technological class” (the elect) and the “dispossessed” (the preterite). Christopher Ames outlines how Pynchon “dramatically dichotomises the world of [*Gravity’s Rainbow*]” between various opposing pairs of forces and groups including the elect and preterite, and depicts the “dynamics of the privileged discourse of power”: this division between the powerful ruling class and the powerless is apparent throughout his fiction. Christopher Ames. ‘Power and the Obscene Word: Discourses of Extremity in Thomas Pynchon’s “Gravity’s Rainbow”’. *Contemporary Literature* 31.2 (1990): 191-207. 193.

<sup>60</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, xiii.

<sup>61</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 13.

*A Pinnacle of Feeling's* conclusion looks at Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, stating ultimately that "Roth reminds us of the lasting appeal of heroic leadership and its alleged indispensability to democratic government...not only does the image of the redeemer president survive; the mythology surrounding the figure remains deeply embedded in our political culture."<sup>62</sup> This project identifies a similarly embedded presidential mythology in American literary culture, but one that is less redemptive and more coercive. McCann acknowledges in his epilogue that a "doubtfulness of the mythology of presidential leadership" began to emerge in the fiction of the twentieth century, particularly in Roth's "elaborate and inventive...antimythic renditions of presidential power".<sup>63</sup> The writers and works I will investigate here are not so personally engaged with potentially redemptive presidential images and politics as the authors *A Pinnacle of Feeling* examines. In these texts, presidential and executive politics are more an inescapable part of the fabric of American society, and consequently narrative, whether for good or ill: the grand myth of presidential leadership casts a ubiquitous shadow over characters, events, and even settings. Such texts do not need to expressly take presidential politics as a major theme, or a subject of frequent, explicit comment. It is a continuous part of each narrative's construction, informing and directing how characters act and events proceed. This thesis will focus on the functions and implications of this ever-present phantom force, extending also beyond the presidential office itself to the sprawling executive branch of government operating in its name.

This project will thus interrogate how Roth, Pynchon, and McCarthy's "antimythic renditions" complicate and question the "sacral image" of presidential leadership (while interrogating the more insidious nature that the presidential myth also brings to bear on the nation), expanding upon the literary construction of the presidency explored by McCann. It will also build upon McCann's work by a more detailed consideration of Pynchon's fiction, whom McCann does not write on in *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, while the previously cited article, "Down to the people": Pynchon and Schlesinger "after the imperial presidency", focusses on *Gravity's Rainbow*. In this thesis I will broaden out an analysis of Pynchon's engagement with presidential and executive mythology and power by new readings of *Mason & Dixon* and *Vineland*, also briefly considering his most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*, in the conclusion. Pynchon's politics are a major part of his fiction, and his portrayals of politicians and characters wielding power within the vast executive branch are specifically significant: I hope therefore to build substantially on McCann's study of *Gravity's Rainbow*. I seek also to provide a new critical approach to Cormac McCarthy's novels: McCann does not mention

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<sup>62</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 196.

<sup>63</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 186-7.

McCarthy, and indeed there is fairly little critical dialogue on the political element of McCarthy's fiction. His work, as I will argue, is in fact deeply engaged with questions of governmental power, particularly that of the executive, which warrants careful analysis.

### **The phantom presidency**

This thesis will argue that the constant presence of the executive power throughout the texts to be discussed often works as a phantom, spectral influence, affecting and directing the events and characters of the narratives. It does not always operate through embodied, physically 'present' characters – figures such as Charles Lindbergh, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan do not appear 'in person' in the narrative – and even when it does, as with Angel Trías in *Blood Meridian*, its power very rapidly expands far beyond the control of that individual, in fact limiting the 'real' power of these representatives of the embodied executive force. It may operate through actions stemming from a presidential/executive figure (national anti-Semitism under Lindbergh's administration, or the wanton violence of the scalphunters spurred by Trías's hiring of them), or directly upon characters' psyches, as we see in *The Human Stain* and *Exit Ghost*. Consequently, through this "phantom" force, the executive/presidential power is regularly present without being present, exerting a forceful narrative agency even in the absence of any directly represented, or even named, figure of executive authority. We see this, for example, in the way in which the entire plot of *Vineland* is activated by the actions of federal agent Brock Vond, and indeed closes with his presumed death, although he is often not present even as a name referred to by other characters throughout the narrative of the novel. As will be seen, Vond himself, and his narrative, are ultimately controlled by Ronald Reagan, who does not appear as a directly represented character in the text at all.

I use the term phantom in the sense of something with "no material substance", reflecting a force that operates on characters within these texts without a necessarily tangible presence, while maintaining a constant unspoken narrative presence and agency.<sup>64</sup> My use of the term does not indicate a specifically 'hauntological' mode, being employed rather as a critical metaphor for the nature of the executive force I intend to discuss. The term also draws on other definitions: the medical sense of a "phantom limb, or other body part that is felt to be present after amputation", and as a "notion or idea which plays on the mind or haunts the

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<sup>64</sup> 'phantom'. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 20<sup>th</sup> August 2015.

imagination.”<sup>65</sup> The phantom executive force I refer to throughout this project is, as I have indicated, constantly present in the texts under discussion, regardless of the physical presence of any executive character; and we see most acutely in the damaged psyche of Lester Farley in *The Human Stain* the manner in which presidential and executive figures can invade and twist the imagination and mental processes of individual citizen characters. Broadly, this phantom force describes the extensive network of influence (cultural, political, psychological, economic, and so on) and control – at varying levels – the executive branch, and specifically the presidency, exerts over the nation and its citizenry. This force operates at a level beyond the embodied, manifest executive power, in some senses supporting the latter but often proving more potent, a shadow that can easily engulf the embodied elements of the executive.

In conceptualising this phantom power, and executive power generally, it is useful to draw on Michel Foucault’s description of a power relationship as a “mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions.”<sup>66</sup> Executive and specifically presidential power as engaged with in this project is, as described, a generally intangible form of control and influence, acting upon individual citizens’ actions – such as *Blood Meridian*’s scalphunters, Zoyd and Prairie Wheeler in *Vineland*, or Les Farley in *The Human Stain* – directing their lives in extensive and substantial ways, or recasting and constructing society in its own image, as we see in the Reaganite milieu in which the characters of *No Country for Old Men* operate. Power in these texts is thus “close to force or manipulation”, as one definition puts it.<sup>67</sup>

Beyond the phantom executive force, some characters in these texts who wield executive power – albeit in lower positions than the presidency – do serve more directly as protagonists and antagonists, notably Judge Holden and Ed Tom Bell in *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* respectively. It is this combination of indirect representation of the executive power, coupled with the presence of characters who serve in lower executive branch positions, that I wish to primarily explore.

The executive power exists in parallel in these texts. A division is established between the hypothetically vast power of the president and other authority figures across the executive

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<sup>65</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault. ‘The Subject and Power.’ In *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume Three*. Ed. James B. Faubion. Trans. Robert Hurley and others. 326-48. London: Allen Lane, 2000. 340.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Heywood. *Key Concepts in Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. 35.

branch – powers that can seem nearly godlike, as Ed Tom Bell expressly suggests in *No Country* – and the considerably weaker individual humans in which that power is embodied. These figures complicate the ‘phantom’ executive force, as its embodiment in them feeds back into it, so that, for example, Reagan’s career in Western films introduced a ‘cowboy’ dynamic to the operations of executive power in the 1980s. However, these figures are, as noted, usually unable to truly control the disembodied force they theoretically lead and represent. At other times, the literal *bodies* of presidential figures direct the effects of this force, as we see in the discussion of Bill Clinton’s sex life in *The Human Stain*. Only characters such as Judge Holden and Brock Vond, who seem either not quite human or psychopathic, are capable of consciously wielding both hypothetical and actual, physical power. Similarly, Anton Chigurh in *No Country* displays some of the characteristics of a psychopath while demonstrating tangible power not granted to many characters – he, however, acts as an agent of corporate power, which appears to have replaced the executive in all but name in the text.

I will consider a number of figures appearing in the works under discussion, both historically attested and fictional, in these terms. These figures range across the executive branch of government, from presidential figures (primarily historical presidents) to federal agents and more local officials, and executive figures from another nation. They include the aforementioned George Washington; the governor of Mexico’s Chihuahua state in *Blood Meridian*, Angel Trías; Judge Holden from the same novel, who apparently bears formal executive authority; Franklin D. Roosevelt and Charles Lindbergh, who are central to *The Plot Against America* despite their absence as characters directly present in the narrative; Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon (appearing as Trick E. Dixon), depicted much more directly by Roth; the sheriff Ed Tom Bell, and his extralegal antagonist, Anton Chigurh, in *No Country*; Ronald Reagan and his disembodied presence in both *No Country* and *Vineland*, and the federal Reagan administration agent Brock Vond from the latter; Coleman Silk, and his shadow Bill Clinton in *The Human Stain*; and George W. Bush, who is an unstated presence in *No Country* and an explicit (though still spectral) one in *Exit Ghost*, which is the most contemporarily set of the texts, taking place around the time of the 2004 presidential election.

This division between theoretical and embodied power is reflected in the varying representations of these characters. The figures who appear as active narrative agents in the texts, interacting with other characters, are depicted often as compromised individuals, subject to weaknesses and never represented as especially grand or heroic – perhaps not equal to the task of wielding the power they have been granted. This is expressed succinctly

in the lines from *The Human Stain*, “ ‘I myself dreamed of a mammoth banner, draped dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE.’ ”<sup>68</sup> These characters range from the jovial yet mercenary Washington in *Mason & Dixon*, to Ed Tom Bell, who muses constantly in the regular first person passages he is given in the text on the past and the problems of society and how to govern it, but is largely ineffectual as a law enforcement officer in the novel’s plot. These figures possess power, but are broadly incapable of *wielding* it, certainly effectively; they figure forth the problems inherent in attempting to grant individuals the means and force by which to control an entire community, whether local, regional, or national.

Contrastingly, those more remote figures who do not have an active role in the narratives of the novels to be discussed appear to wield vast power, and to function more as mythologised symbols, demonstrating semi-divine qualities. Thus, Ronald Reagan calls off the REX 84 operation at the conclusion of *Vineland*, an order which feeds all the way down to the specific individual scene the text presents, of Brock’s imminent abduction of Prairie Wheeler. Vond is carried off by the helicopter he is still hanging from, his power and agency as a character entirely neutralised by the edict of a physically far distant figure (Reagan, presumably, being in Washington, D.C., while Vond and Prairie are in California, separated by thousands of miles). In *The Plot Against America*, Charles Lindbergh – elected president in the novel’s counterfactual history – only appears directly once in the text, when his plane is seen flying over Washington, to the excitement of the populace below.

The symbolism of this scene is unmistakeable: as president, Lindbergh is far removed from the people he supposedly represents and leads, yet able to command their emotions by comparatively simple actions. Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom Lindbergh defeats in the novel’s version of the 1940 presidential election, and returns as president to bring the United States into World War II following Lindbergh’s disappearance and his administration’s overthrow, is no more active a presence in the text. He is posited as a heroic figure, the polar opposite of the isolationist, anti-Semitic Lindbergh. The text implies Lindbergh may also have largely been a puppet of other, more powerful figures, hinting briefly at the human complexities of the presidency and executive power that Roth depicts elsewhere. However, Roosevelt is equally distant from the population, and commands emotions remotely in much the same way as Lindbergh, although in both instances we are left unsure as to how much power the embodied individuals truly claim, as opposed to the power of the phantom force operating in

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<sup>68</sup> *The Human Stain*. Philip Roth. London: Vintage, 2001. 3.

their name. Both are contrasted by the journalist Walter Winchell, who begins a run for president campaigning against Lindbergh during the text, conducting a public speaking tour, which ends in his assassination.

This phantom executive presence extends throughout the texts, frequently forming a major part of the underlying substructure of the narrative and providing a substantial contextual reading strategy. Thus, the events of *Vineland* are driven by the activities of Brock Vond, acting partly as an avatar (though also ultimately frustrated subordinate) of Ronald Reagan and his authoritarian administration, and the characters and narrative are inextricably bound up with the transition from the optimism and liberalism of the 1960s to the right-wing, self-centred Reagan era. This transition is marked in the novel by the setting of the College of the Surf, home to the countercultural activities of Frenesi and the 24fps collective, which is physically proximal to Richard Nixon's Californian home (Nixon being a native of the state, and one of its senators prior to his vice-presidency). A colossal statue of Nixon is being constructed during some of the events at the college, overshadowing the campus. This visual image adumbrates the college's function as a central site of betrayal and complicity with power in the novel. Reagan, too, while not originally Californian, would move to the state owing to his film career, and became its governor. The cultural and socio-political transition that occurs from the 1960s to the 1980s is marked in *Vineland*, unmistakably, by the rise of first Nixon, and then Reagan. The immense power of the executive branch to affect the lives, inner and outer, of individual citizens is represented thereby in the novel: Frenesi's sexual involvement with Brock, and the disturbing implication at the novel's conclusion that her teenage daughter Prairie has inherited the same attraction to authority/authoritarian figures, introduce the executive uneasily into the most intimate and personal spheres of citizens' lives.

In other texts, notably McCarthy's, it is the failings of embodied executive power – and, correspondingly, the terrifying power the spectral force behind it wields – that assume significance in driving the narrative. The depredations of the scalphunter gang in *Blood Meridian* happen because they are granted executive authority by Angel Trías, a learned and erudite state governor, but a character who lacks any agency to terminate the gang's power once it becomes clear with what impunity they are acting. Trías's choice in contracting the gang causes widespread death and chaos across his state and even over the border, but his agency lies solely in these initial actions. He is contrasted, however, with the quasi-supernatural figure of Judge Holden, who seems to wield effectively unlimited power. While it might be assumed for much of the text that his title is not a formal, governmental one, towards the novel's conclusion, as has been observed above, he does appear to be invested



with some form of recognised authority that is respected by others. His power is without doubt greater than that of either Trías or the alcalde of San Diego, a governmental position borrowed from Mexican socio-political structures, also appearing in *Blood Meridian*, but who is a weak character, again invested with an authority that exists in theory, but appears to have little practical effect. There is an uncomfortable sense that these positions originating in Mexican government are very much inferior to that of the judge, whose position is, implicitly, an entirely American one. This border dynamic is developed in *No Country for Old Men*, a novel that in many ways can be considered as a more contemporary continuation of *Blood Meridian*.

In this text, even American executive power has failed. The novel's primary protagonist, Ed Tom Bell, is a Texan sheriff, with an office in the district courthouse, connecting him and his position to the same executive-judicial nexus of authority as Judge Holden in the earlier work. While he has the greatest presence in the text of the three central characters – Bell, Llewellyn Moss, and Anton Chigurh – owing in significant part to his regular first person narrations, he has very little agency. He is never even close to apprehending Chigurh, or saving Moss and his wife Carla Jean. The executive force, whether through its presence or its absence (as with Bell's inefficacy), is embodied in a different manner in the violence done to the bodies of characters such as Llewellyn, Carla Jean, the kid in *Blood Meridian*, and Seldon Wishnow's mother in *The Plot Against America*, revealing its power to inscribe itself in the flesh of citizens. In one of Bell's narrations, he admits the contradiction of his position, remarking on the godlike powers a sheriff is ascribed by the Texas state constitution, whilst noting simultaneously that no way has yet been found to govern those members of society who do not abide by social and legal codes. Chigurh, the novel's antagonist, for his part pays no heed to any such executive authority; the only power structure with which he concerns himself is the corporate hegemony. The novel's temporal setting in 1980 implies similar concerns to those expressed in *Vineland*: power in *No Country*, as American society transitions into the Reaganite Eighties, is transferred from the executive, and from government in general, to the corporations, and to the individual, paramount in Reaganite political philosophy.

There is, though, some sense of ambiguity, inasmuch as true power in *Blood Meridian* seems chiefly to lie in Holden as a particular, embodied individual, through his sheer force of will and character. He is, demonstrably, one of the ungovernable elements of society Sheriff Bell identifies in *No Country*, who so happens to bear executive authority. Through the historical setting of *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy consequently implies some kind of fundamental flaw in the foundations of American democracy, that, ultimately, its system of

carefully delineated and codified, popular, government is ineffectual in controlling a society which will always contain substantial elements that do not want to, and cannot easily, be controlled. McCarthy's work can be considered alongside Philip Roth's in this regard – returning to Pozorski's argument that Roth's novels are in constant dialogue with the traumatic foundational moment of the United States, not least through his frequent engagement with presidential figures and politics. Whilst he has been ascribed an essentially optimistic, liberal view of American society by some critics, and has himself insisted that the "point" of *The Plot Against America* is that the United States did not, in fact, ever elect a fascist or overtly anti-Semitic administration, American democracy is depicted in his work as, again, fundamentally flawed, co-opted by charismatic charlatans, engaged in by the immature, lacking in human sensitivity, and deeply vulnerable.

Again, the executive power bleeds into the lives of ordinary citizens throughout the novels of Roth that will be considered: *The Plot Against America* depicts the effects of the imagined Lindbergh administration on the (fictionalised) Roth family; *The Human Stain* draws parallels between the situation of its central character, Coleman Silk, and Bill Clinton, whose impeachment trial forms a backdrop to the novel, suggesting the insidious network of moralising encompassing society from the president downwards; in *Exit Ghost*, the 2004 re-election of George W. Bush, and liberal horror at this event, symbolises the sort of overwrought national socio-political community in which Nathan Zuckerman wants no membership. *Our Gang* and *The Human Stain* both also focus on one of the greatest flaws of the structure of American democratic government: the president, too, is an ordinary individual, who may, himself, be very significantly flawed, whether it be the paranoid, childish Nixon in *Our Gang*, or the sexually unfaithful Bill Clinton in *The Human Stain*. This is true as well of *Mason & Dixon*'s encounter with George Washington, who is certainly something less than 'presidential'. The events of the narratives in Roth's novels, the emotions and thoughts of the characters, are frequently related to and connected with the vast executive power, a force that operates on the citizenry continually and not always entirely consciously, as may be seen most clearly in the damaged psyche of Vietnam veteran Les Farley in *The Human Stain*. We see, again, through characters like Farley and the man he murders, Silk, the ways in which the executive force embodies itself inside the physical forms of its citizenry.

All three authors, as has been previously outlined, weave into their construction, and interrogation, of executive power, a considerable quantity of historical material, informing the depiction of characters and events in the narrative. The representation of George Washington in *Mason & Dixon* draws extensively on his biography and papers, recorded descriptions of him, and the pre-Revolutionary socio-political context. Similarly, Roth's

imagined history in *The Plot Against America* makes use of Charles Lindbergh's recorded political views and activities, together with historical evidence that the aviator was considered as a possible candidate for the 1940 Republican presidential nomination, while *Vineland's* REX 84, which could easily be misinterpreted as a flight of paranoid fancy, is again somewhat substantiated by contemporary evidence.

These texts can therefore, as noted, be identified as both social novels and historical novels (although *Our Gang* and *Exit Ghost* were both published very shortly after the period they describe, *Our Gang* emerging while Nixon was still in office), utilising the recorded history of executive power in the United States to address – sometimes expressly, sometimes more subtly – both contemporary and more longstanding concerns about the nature of American government and democracy. In Lukács's delineation of the historical novel, these texts successfully achieve the “specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age”.<sup>69</sup> This historical specificity is combined with a continuous social commentary, often looking backwards and forwards across time periods with a broader sense of historical narrative, in which executive power provides something of a constant, an evolving and shifting, but foundational, force. The narrative remains that of the individual protagonists, but they operate within a social and historical context that is fundamental to the construction of each text, a context which is referred back constantly to the form of executive power in the United States.

Lukács spoke of the historical novel of the first half of the twentieth century “developing amid the dawn of a new democracy” in the “midst of a heroic period” that, unlike previous such periods, would not be an “episode” resulting finally in “the replacement of one form of exploitation by another”.<sup>70</sup> The texts that I will study in this thesis substantially challenge this claim: they draw in detail on historical events to suggest that executive power – always held by a small, privileged minority – has in fact accreted over the century, and remains a very major threat to, and influence on, the individual citizen. Pynchon's dynamic of the elect and the preterite is germane here: as Linda Hutcheon argues, “postmodern fiction does not ‘aspire to tell the truth’...as much as to question *whose* truth gets told.”<sup>71</sup> The historical fictions Pynchon, Roth, and McCarthy write destabilise the “truth” of glorified presidential and political narratives that lionise presidents and emphasise the strength of American democracy by focussing on the “specificity and particularity of the past event.”<sup>72</sup> These texts

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<sup>69</sup> Georg Lukács. *The Historical Novel*. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1983. 19.

<sup>70</sup> Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 345-6.

<sup>71</sup> Linda Hutcheon. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988. 122.

<sup>72</sup> Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 121.

undo grand, nationalistic historical narratives through such narrative strategies as *Mason & Dixon*'s portrayal of George Washington as a cheerful, mercenary businessman, based in significant part on the evidence of his papers and his history prior to the presidency. Another such strategy is *The Plot Against America*'s depiction of the effects of the fictional Lindbergh administration on an ordinary working family rather than through direct portrayal of any of the historical figures involved – the particularities of their lives under a proto-fascist government foreground the lived experience of the citizenry in a nation in the grip of an executive branch with an abundance of both practical and intangible power. The use of detail gleaned from historical records – rather than, or mixed with, fictive detail – implies the inescapable nature of the executive force in American society, such that its history and evolution infect every narrative in these texts, even in specific localised temporal and physical settings removed from the centres of power, as much as the facts of the nation's geography.

Together, then, these texts suggest the constant, often disturbing and destructive, presence of the executive power in American society, manipulating its cultural understanding, directing the actions of its membership, and shaping the thoughts of citizens. This presence need not suggest true agency on the part of the individuals in positions of executive authority, the power they supposedly control being, as Bell describes, almost supernatural. Similarly, *Blood Meridian* refers to Trías being like a sorcerer's apprentice, able to make the "imp" do his will but not to stop its actions once begun; the impression given is of something beyond temporal human management, the power of the executive branch to unleash forces far beyond its subsequent competence and strength to rein in. One might also point to the figures of Lindbergh, and Nixon and Reagan, individuals who stand at the apex of American society, directing major cultural shifts in the nation, affecting the actions of each citizen, yet who do not always seem to be truly in command. Nixon in *Our Gang* does not seem like a character who is confidently in control of himself or his administration, while *The Plot Against America*, to reiterate, implies in its later stages that Lindbergh was a front for more truly fascistic forces, represented by Burton K. Wheeler, who briefly becomes an overtly dictatorial acting president after Lindbergh's disappearance. We also have Pynchon's Reagan, though, who *is* able to directly control a force like Brock Vond, implying the magnitude of effect the changing whim of the president may have.

The presidency, and the executive branch which it theoretically controls, are an incredibly complex institution for all the writers under consideration, symbolising the never-ending conflict between the individual and the wider national community in the 'liberal' democracy of the United States. This thesis will argue that Cormac McCarthy, Thomas Pynchon, and Philip Roth explore this conflict and the multiple fractures created by, and present within, the

monolithic executive branch in the American socio-political structure, and represent its centrality to American society, from its foundational moment to the present day. This encompasses historical presidents, imagined presidential figures, and other, subordinate members of the executive branch, often playing central roles in the narratives of the texts, but also playing secondary roles of major significance to the action and characters of the works, roles which often extend far beyond their intended actions. The executive branch of the government and the broader society of the nation are in a symbiotic relationship, though not necessarily beneficially so; the executive is empowered by the citizenry's willing engagement in often confused and artificial, insubstantive, political debate, this in turn affecting the entire culture, even psychology, of the nation, both the nation as it is and as it would like to be.

## Chapter One

### Two Sixties decades: Thomas Pynchon's counter-revolutionary presidents

Thomas Pynchon provides a direct representation of the first American president, George Washington, as a character whom the novel's protagonists meet in a fourteen-page chapter of his fifth novel, *Mason & Dixon*. The novel is a fictionalised account of the exploits of Jeremiah Dixon and Charles Mason (primarily, but not exclusively, their surveying of the Mason-Dixon Line, establishing borders between Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, and creating a long-lasting dividing line between the slaveholding South and the 'free' North in the United States). A work of nearly eight hundred pages with a sprawling cast of characters – like each of Pynchon's novels – it explores a plethora of concerns and themes. These prominently include science and the supernatural during the Age of Enlightenment, the foundational history of the United States and the longer history of the North American continent, and America's place in a global nexus of commerce, science, and politics. As ever with Pynchon, the novel also explores the various systems and sources of power that control individuals, communities, families, nations, and international commerce and exchange. In *Mason and Dixon* themselves, the novel also provides possibly Pynchon's most fully developed and realised characters, providing for each an overview of their whole lives and carefully revealing their respective personalities and concerns. It is pertinent that Pynchon's nuanced depiction of Washington appears in a work that displays such a concern for – amongst its many other projects – establishing intricate, personal portraits of historical figures.<sup>73</sup>

There have been two book-length critical studies devoted to the novel, *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*, edited by Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin, and Charles Clerc's *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon*, both of which provide substantial and useful contexts for, and analyses of, the novel. Clerc, in *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon*, makes some observations germane to my consideration of the work here. He notes that, in Cape Town (where Mason and Dixon spend an early part of the novel, prior to their departure for America, in order to observe the Transit of Venus for the Royal Society), "forces of dissatisfaction and revolt are at work".<sup>74</sup> Several groups of characters living in the city (churchgoers, slaves, policemen, and other officials, beside Dixon himself), in Clerc's description "pursue activities that go against the grain, that

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<sup>73</sup> There is something of a similarity to be remarked upon here with Philip Roth's investigation of subjective individual experience, though Roth does not, for the most part, use historical figures as primary protagonists. (*Our Gang* features "Trick E. Dixon" as the protagonist, who is a very obvious parody of Richard Nixon – the novel was written and published while Nixon was still in office as president.)

<sup>74</sup> Charles Clerc. *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2000. 127.

defy Establishment, that express needs for release.”<sup>75</sup> This sets the tone for the novel generally, and Pynchon’s project: as I intend to argue, his depiction of George Washington in the novel (and, much more briefly, Thomas Jefferson) seeks to go against the grain of traditionally heroic depictions of Washington and the other Founding Fathers, to defy ‘established’ histories both of Washington and, more broadly, of the American Revolution and the foundation of the United States.

In a similar manner, Clerc subsequently outlines Pynchon’s concern with the process of “discovering” America: “processes of discovery lead to absence, largesse to shrinkage, generosity to parsimony, and so on....Repressiveness, bureaucratization, enclaspment – in brief, control sought by government is assured.”<sup>76</sup> Donald J. Greiner expresses a similar interpretation of the novel, as a “treatise on America...lured by the promise of America, by an unsullied domain of fresh beginnings and tomorrow, both Mason and Dixon on the one hand and the reader on the other must reconnoitre the slips and slides of history, the twists and turns of the unexpected, the dark remains of the day.”<sup>77</sup> Evidently then, Pynchon provides a challenge in *Mason & Dixon* specifically to the established history and myth of the United States, and especially its origin legend. It is into this dynamic of anti-establishment thought, particularly interrogating the relationship between government, and the people and land being governed, that Pynchon introduces his portrayal of Washington.<sup>78</sup>

### **Washington the myth, Washington the man**

Pynchon’s introduction of Washington into the text is a telling narrative move for any consideration of Pynchon’s wider engagement with the presidency and executive power, and this foundational moment in both American history (particularly its political and governmental history). It is also clearly important to any analysis of Pynchon’s construction of the presidency.<sup>79</sup> Washington has become a semi-divine figure in American history and politics,

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<sup>75</sup> Charles Clerc, *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon*, 127-8.

<sup>76</sup> Clerc, *Mason & Dixon & Pynchon*, 130-1.

<sup>77</sup> Donald J. Greiner. ‘Thomas Pynchon and the Fault Lines of America.’ In *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon*, ed. Brooke Horvath and Irving Malin. 73-83. Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 2000. 74.

<sup>78</sup> It is worth quoting some of the passage Clerc is considering here, describing America as “...Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ’s Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur’d and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments – winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair.” Thomas Pynchon. *Mason & Dixon*. London: Vintage, 1998. 345. All references to *Mason & Dixon* are to this edition.

<sup>79</sup> *Mason & Dixon* was published in 1997, the fifth of his novels, so the chapter does not, of course, represent the beginning of Pynchon’s engagement with the presidency within the chronology of his own lifetime and body of work.

a great deal more than a simple political office-holder. John Adams, who would succeed him as President, said of him in a 1790 letter that

“The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod - and thenceforward these two conducted all the policies, negotiations, legislatures, and war.”<sup>80</sup>

Adams' prophecy has been borne out. Marcus Cunliffe states that Washington has “become entombed in his own myth”, whilst Gordon S. Wood calls him (or, rather, the representation of him in American culture) “more a monument than a man”.<sup>81 82</sup>

Pynchon, it seems, is making an informed attempt to render Washington as the man, not the monument. He inserts Washington into a narrative of complex, evidential history, rather than depicting the simplified myth that portrayals of Washington are often reduced to – an influential example is Parson Weems' sentimental fictions about such invented events as Washington chopping down his father's cherry tree. Beyond this, and *through* this approach, he uses Washington as a symbol and exemplar for the presidential figure and the complexities and flaws of the presidency through American history generally. Pynchon was not the first to portray Washington as a more ordinary man than the more mythologised depictions: William Makepeace Thackeray did something similar in *The Virginians*, for which he was lambasted by critics.<sup>83</sup> In a perhaps more Pynchonian spirit, Willard Sterne Randall reports that, in the 1840s, a tourist placed a cigar between the lips of a portentous statue of Washington by Horatio Greenough. It is not impossible Pynchon was aware of this story, as

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<sup>80</sup> Letter to Benjamin Rush, 4 April 1790, letterbook copy in Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, quoted in *George Washington: Man and Monument*. Marcus Cunliffe. London: Collins, 1959. 21.

<sup>81</sup> Cunliffe, *George Washington: Man and Monument*, 12.

<sup>82</sup> Gordon S. Wood. Foreword to *The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic*. John Rhodehamel. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1998. vii.

<sup>83</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray. *The Virginians: A Tale of the Last Century*. London: Smith, Elder, 1869. Thackeray presents Washington as a human character, albeit a different sort to Pynchon's portrayal. He is blamed by Madam Esmond in the novel for her son's apparent death, the text stating that “as an Esmond, she had a sense of honour, and Mr. Washington had forfeited his in letting her son out of his sight” (123). Elsewhere in the novel, the Warrington brothers believe that Washington has romantic designs on their mother, almost leading to a duel; Washington is depicted, in George Warrington's words, “billing and cooing” (88) with her, and subsequently berating Warrington and a companion as “infernal young jackanapes” (96). The portrayal is generally sympathetic, more so than Pynchon's, but the mere fact of its portraying Washington as an ordinary man subject to ordinary emotions upset many contemporary critics. Marcus Cunliffe cites a reviewer who complained, “this is the very essence of falsehood. Washington was not like other men; and to bring his lofty character down to the level of the vulgar passions of common life, is to give the lie to the grandest chapter in the uninspired annals of the human race.” Another claimed “Washington's character has come to us spotless”, threatening Thackeray with a visitation from Washington's spectre that would “freeze you into silence with his calm, reproachful gaze.” Quoted in Cunliffe, *George Washington: Man and Monument*, 19.



his portrayal of Washington is not only equally irreverent (in a literal sense), it does something very similar in its depiction of Washington as a smoker of cannabis. The dominant literary response to Washington's death indicates, though, the more standard reaction to the first president. Max Cavitch's essay on the poetic response to his death describes the vast outpouring of idolising verse, from

seasoned authors as well as one-time versifiers; by editors, lawyers, and politicians; by New England schoolmistresses and Masonic grandmasters; by Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Deists, and Quakers; by members of Washington's intimate circle and by strangers who had not always been well-wishers.<sup>84</sup>

He explains how Washington's effects, and by extension the details of his life (actual, exaggerated, or invented), "remain touchstones of national subjectivity for many who are otherwise unconscious of or repelled by vestiges of monarchical fetishism in their experience of democratic state sovereignty."<sup>85</sup> Washington was mythologised and beatified almost at the moment of death by his nation, a nation that, as Forrest McDonald reminds us, had just been founded and was in need of a myth and a symbol.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Max Cavitch. 'The Man That Was Used Up: Poetry, Particularity, and the Politics of Remembering George Washington'. *American Literature* 75.2 (2003): 247-74. 251.

<sup>85</sup> Cavitch, 'The Man That Was Used Up: Poetry, Particularity, and the Politics of Remembering George Washington', 248.

<sup>86</sup> Forrest McDonald. *The Presidency of George Washington*. Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 1974. McDonald describes how to be an American in the eighteenth century was to be alive at the "crucial myth-making time in the infancy of the Republic".



**Figure 1: Horatio Greenough's widely maligned grandiose statue of Washington<sup>87</sup>**

Pynchon's narrative recognises, however, this conventional mythologising narrative of Washington and the presidency, rather than simply undermining it. The visit to Washington has magical qualities that make him seem almost like a sorcerer set up in a remote castle. In order to reach Mount Vernon, Mason and Dixon are "led to a remote cross-roads north of the City", where they board a "Coach of peculiar design" (273-4). Mr. Tallioe refers to the road as perilous, and they must ride all night to reach the estate. This bears clear overtones of fairytale and legend, and arguably of the nineteenth century Gothic: the crossroads, the coach, the long and apparently dangerous journey, the secluded manor (America's nearest equivalent to the castles of Europe).<sup>88</sup> Chapter 28 is then self-contained, with the entire

<sup>87</sup> *MountVernon.org*. Web. 18<sup>th</sup> March 2015. The statue was ridiculed for its colossal size and exaggerated classical style: "Greenough had modelled his figure of Washington on a classical Greek statue of Zeus, but many Americans found the sight of a half-naked Washington offensive, even comical. After the statue was relocated to the east lawn of the Capitol in 1843, some joked that Washington was desperately reaching for his clothes, on exhibit at the Patent Office several blocks to the north." 'George Washington, sculpture by Horatio Greenough, 1840.' *Smithsonian Legacies*. Web. 18<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>88</sup> Simpson and Roud describe crossroads in English tradition as "traditionally felt to be uncanny places, likely to be haunted", perhaps because of their "ambiguous nature"; they were also places of burial and execution, and involved in magical cures. (Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud. A

Washington scene taking place within it – in Chapter 29 we are back in the main narrative, with no explanation of how their visit to Colonel Washington ended, as if it were a dream or voyage to another world, akin to European folk legends such as Thomas the Rhymer and Tam Lin. McDonald refers to the “mystical quality” of the presidential office, and Washington’s contribution to that: Pynchon invokes it here.<sup>89</sup> The narrative structure of the visit should not be dismissed, and so it seems appropriate to consider the quasi-magical nature of the trip, especially given its beginning at a crossroads. Certainly Washington seems to be set up as a figure who is more than an ordinary human – indeed Chapter 27 ends with Mason and Dixon beginning the “Ascent to Mount Vernon” (274), suggesting biblical (or Olympian) overtones. The man they then find is portrayed in a much more human, flawed manner, but Pynchon subtly recognises and satirises the tendency to mythologise and deify both Washington and the American President by his narrative presentation of the scene.

The Washington presented by the historical evidence is a much more prosaic figure. Pynchon does not present him as the heroic, self-sacrificing modern Cincinnatus that the stories make him. He instead portrays a Washington based to a large degree on the historical evidence of his person and character. We are told almost as soon as we meet him of his “rattling on, ever so jolly, about the whiz of enemy shot through the air” (275-6), likely a direct reference to Washington’s letter as a young officer in which he says, “I heard Bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound”.<sup>90</sup> Washington, as a young officer, was responsible for starting the Seven Years’ War, not a deed which is usually dwelled on (indeed, his record as a military commander is mediocre). Pynchon captures the naïve bravado, and also the apparent lust for violence, that the historical Washington

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*Dictionary of English Folklore*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 84-5.) Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* mentions numerous examples of the importance of crossroads as possessing magical power, a location where fairies and the Wild Hunt both assemble and are powerless; earth from crossroads is also magical. (Stith Thompson. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Vol. II: D-E. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1956. 318.) Frazer’s *Golden Bough* identifies crossroads as important ceremonial sites both in Asian and European traditions, as a location for offerings to devils, witch expulsion rituals, and Midsummer fires. (J.G. Frazer. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edition. London: Papermac, 1987. 557, 561, 625.) Stith Thompson refers to a number of instances in folk literature of houses at the borders of the otherworld (the supernatural realms beyond the everyday mortal world), and to fairy houses which disappear at dawn – it is notable that in the next chapter Mason and Dixon have returned from Mount Vernon without explanation and it, and the Washingtons, do not appear again. (Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Vol. II: D-E, 24, 39.) Many fairytales such as Hansel and Gretel, Sleeping Beauty, and Beauty and the Beast use the trope of a remotely located manor, house, or castle in their narratives. Mountains, too, are often on the borders between our world and the otherworld. (Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Vol. II: D-E, 24.) The name “Mount Vernon” is therefore also significant in this context.

<sup>89</sup> McDonald, *The Presidency of George Washington*, ix.

<sup>90</sup> Letter to John Augustine Washington, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1754. *The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series 1: 1748-August 1755*. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1983. 118.

evidently possessed. In the same sentence, Pynchon says Washington is not “quite the incompetent Fool depicted in the London press” (275), which might ring oddly to a reader accustomed to the idea of the glorious founder of the nation, but he was, in fact, mocked as a provincial fool at the time, because of his role in the Seven Years’ War. He had, as noted, effectively commenced the conflict, which Rhodehamel observes would cause the deaths of more than a million worldwide by its end, by fatally attacking a diplomatic mission from the French.<sup>91</sup> He was thus seen in Europe as inept and ignorant, especially following the publication of the above letter in the London press.

Pynchon does not make a major narrative point of this, but simply relates the scene as if he were a contemporary observer, who would, of course, be aware of Washington’s image as incompetent. His use of the present tense establishes the mode of a contemporary account. Pynchon’s temporality is important in his narratives; the present tense is also used in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, placing the reader into the text as, effectively, an invisible observer, rather than a future subject consuming a past narrative. This narrative device effects a removal of the enclosed, distant nature of a historical text, placing *both narrator and reader* in to the textual space-time, in a subtle method of ‘authenticating’ the text. The narrator is there, guiding the reader, rather than relating a story from (potentially) before his own lifetime, investing the text with more immediate authority. Of course, Pynchon problematises this by using both the unreliable narrator Cherrycoke, who admits that he has had to embellish and imagine parts of his story, and an omniscient narrator at a level above Cherrycoke – but the sense is still that of a present observation rather than a past, or imagined, story.

By this method of using historical material and detail, combined with the use of present tense, Pynchon rather confuses Hayden White’s distinction between the historical record and the historical narrative. The historical record, White argues, consists of the unprocessed documentary evidence of the time, such as eyewitness accounts, whilst the historical narrative is an imaginative representation of the evidence.<sup>92</sup> Pynchon, however, presents his narrative more or less as if it were the historical record, using the surviving historical evidence of the time. His use of the present tense renders it into the equivalent of a historical account, whilst his use of elements such as Mason’s journal (excerpts from which he presents unedited), and directly presented facts such as Washington’s being a surveyor himself, make the text frequently closer to the historical record in White’s formulation than to

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<sup>91</sup> Rhodehamel, *The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic*, 22.

<sup>92</sup> Hayden White. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973.

a fictive historical narrative. His depiction of Washington is more than a story: the use of such apparently throwaway observations as the line about Washington being more than the fool he is depicted as engages the reader in a deeper sense of the historical moment than a more blunt narrative might. Shawn Smith asserts in *Pynchon and History* that Pynchon's depiction of Washington and Benjamin Franklin "inverts the way in which sanctioned histories used these historical figures to legitimate the values of the budding American empire to foreground the metahistorical consciousness at work in the deceptively 'normative' texts of sanctioned historical discourse", a useful observation. Arguably, the presidential figure serves as a figure through which to channel this metahistorical consciousness, whether that be to create the myth of American exceptionalism or to undo it.<sup>93</sup>

### **Washington as eager capitalist**

The use of Washington here affords Pynchon the opportunity to implicitly unpick more than just the presidential myth, in precisely the way suggested above. Pynchon depicts Washington as a hard-headed man of mercantile interest, discussing property with Mason and Dixon, and in the hemp scene talking of potential profit to be made from the sale of the product. This is, again, entirely historical. Washington was first and foremost a businessman, dealing in property and agricultural products, and at that a very successful one – he is considered to have been probably the wealthiest man in America at the time, worth \$2,000,000 in today's money according to Randall.<sup>94</sup> His papers record a huge amount of correspondence about the price of hemp and tobacco, and that, at the very time he meets Mason and Dixon (which we can presume to be November 1763, as that is when the pair arrived in Philadelphia, and the narrative seems to indicate their visit to Washington takes place not long after arrival), he was engaged in a land deal in Dismal Swamp, Virginia. This would potentially explain why property is on his mind: he mentions a "parcel out past the South Mountain" (276) he would like the pair to look at, and mentions how much free surveying they are giving away by measuring the line. The parcel of land cannot be Dismal Swamp, which is nowhere near South Mountain, but it is clear Washington had many property interests. Notably, he himself was a trained surveyor, as Mr. Tallihoe notes, and indeed he offered to participate in surveying Dismal Swamp. Washington is thus directly and personally linked to the many concerns the novel raises about the mechanistic division of land, implicating the president *sine qua non* in the most emphasised criticism of American history in the novel.

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<sup>93</sup> Smith, S., *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, 152.

<sup>94</sup> Willard Sterne Randall. *George Washington: A Life*. New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1997. 499.

His discussion of the Ohio Company in the chapter also reflects the historical fact of Washington's involvement therein, and his abiding obsession with land and mercantile interests. Washington had inherited a substantial financial interest in the Ohio Company from his brother Lawrence Washington, and after the Seven Years' War was involved in reviving the company. In addition to this, and the Dismal Swamp deal, he was also a founder of the Mississippi Land Company, and it was in relation to this that he considered the Proclamation Line "unconstitutional, one more blunder by the postwar British cabinet".<sup>95</sup> <sup>96</sup> During the period that he meets Mason and Dixon, then, he was apparently almost obsessed with land and property deals. Pynchon has Dixon "become enmesh'd in Ohio Company history" in conversation with Washington, presenting the future president as a man who remains deeply concerned and embittered by his experience with the Company, enthusiastic about purchasing and dividing land, the most rapacious practitioner of such business depicted in the novel, tellingly. The historical Washington wrote to his land agent William Crawford that he could "never look upon that proclamation in any other light...than as a temporary expedient to quiet the minds of the Indians". Pynchon's Washington says, more succinctly, "Proclamation-Shmocklamation" (277), dismissing the boundary into insignificance.<sup>97</sup>

He goes on to complain that the "Bishop-of-Durham clause" was "like Iron Plate upon a Steam-Boiler for ev'ryone else...Ohio by precedent surely is entitl'd to one?" (282). As Dixon discusses, the Prince-Bishops of Durham had extensive temporal (in addition to spiritual) power because of the constant threat to the north of the Scots, Durham being a historical centre of religion, education, and power. What Washington seems to be wishing for is largely unrestricted power for a land company – a company, as Washington points out, that has its own army, which "alone had the coherence and discipline to see this land develop'd as it should be" (281). There is a clear philosophical dedication to capitalism and the free market here. Washington is arguing, effectively, for the restriction of regulation on the Company, and the supremacy of business. Given the context, he is, in fact, arguing for the direct and near-absolute power and authority of business over physical land and its occupants, a territory literally ruled by the market. Especially considering the historical context of the novel's writing – the unbridled capitalism of 1980s and 1990s America – it seems probable

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<sup>95</sup> Randall, *George Washington: A Life*, 218. 215-8 treat in general with Washington's Ohio Company dealings, as well as the Dismal Swamp deal and Mississippi Land Company.

<sup>96</sup> The Proclamation Line forbade all settlement past a line roughly following the Appalachian mountains, created following Great Britain's acquisition of French territory after the Seven Years' War.

<sup>97</sup> Letter to William Crawford, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1767. *The Papers of George Washington, Colonial Series 8: June 1767-December 1771*. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1993. 28- 9. Washington here refers to the Royal Proclamation of 1763, whereas in the novel he refers to British Army general Henry Bouquet's 1761 Proclamation; however, both established the Appalachian Mountains as the boundary of settlement.

that contemporary concerns about unregulated markets and the power of big business inform Pynchon's depiction here. Washington, the first president, is also in a sense here the first merchant baron, concerned to a far greater extent with the rights and powers of business than of ordinary citizens or democratic government. Whilst historical evidence attests that Washington did have some genuine concern for these issues, as seen in his reluctance to expand the office of the presidency, Pynchon's choice to focus on his mercantile interests, which are equally if not more thoroughly attested, implies that Washington's success may even have arisen from his experience in the world of business, and thus that the United States was founded on a capitalist base by an ardently capitalist man. This stands in sharp contrast to the more appealing narrative of America as the 'City on the Hill', an idealistic beacon of republicanism and democracy whose founding president was a humble farmer with no desire for power and a great concern for the rights of man.

If one considers Barbara Hinckley's thesis of the symbolic presidency, it is appropriate to view the Washington presented here as Pynchon's symbol of the American man – not deeply intellectual (it is rather notable that Thomas Jefferson said of Washington that his "colloquial talents were not above mediocrity", explaining perhaps his straightforward diction in the narrative), pragmatic, and capitalist.<sup>98 99</sup> Pynchon is arguably, considering Smith's argument again, using the figure of the president against its own myth, establishing a more realistic depiction of American historical development through the use of this symbolic figure. Rhodehamel describes this period as the happiest of Washington's life, suggesting that Pynchon's depiction is probably truer to the actual man than those focussing on his revolutionary command or his presidency, underlining the previous point.<sup>100</sup> These themes do, of course, raise the question of whether Pynchon is guilty of using historical narrative to his own ends as much as those he is challenging, setting up a specifically left-wing critique of the dominant historical narrative that, whether or not it may be more historically accurate, is still serving a particular narrative purpose, emplotting to present American history from the perspective of a contemporary liberal, sceptical of capitalism and patriotic mythmaking. It can be argued still that Pynchon is never didactic: his presentation of Washington does not explicitly labour any points, and indeed the characteristics and facts presented by the text are not presented in a tone or manner that clearly encourages a certain reading, rather allowing the reader to draw their own conclusions. After all, we are told that Washington is

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<sup>98</sup> Barbara Hinckley. *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1990. Hinckley argues that the president makes substantial use of symbolism to equate himself to the nation and to the people, and that this symbolism and equation is generally accepted by the public.

<sup>99</sup> Letter to Walter Jones. *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Volume IX: 1807-1815*. Ed. Paul Leicester Ford. London: G. P. Putnam, 1898. 449.

<sup>100</sup> Rhodehamel, *The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic*, 36.

not the incompetent fool he is portrayed as: a double-edged description, as it informs the reader that that is the image Washington has in the contemporary context of the novel's setting, but also questions that image.

Nevertheless, it is the facts that the narrative does present, or does not present, that are the issue. Pynchon chooses to depict Washington's land interests, but makes no reference to any political concerns he may have had. When Washington criticised the Proclamation Line to Crawford, he also required him to keep silent about the criticism, out of an entirely political concern that he not be censured, given his status as a bourgeois. Such subtleties to his character and political sensibilities are not present in Pynchon's presentation, and this may well be deliberate as they would alter the portrayal of the man as a blustery businessman. Pynchon's attempt to represent an apparently 'real' history as opposed to the rarefied moralistic narrative of the American myth and the symbolic presidency can therefore be read as, in itself, nearly didactic, presenting a certain image of a historical figure to suit a particular narrative chosen by the author, encouraging the reader to subscribe to this narrative. Equally, in terms of sheer historical didacticism of the kind the nineteenth century historical novelists were considered guilty of, such diversions as Washington's property interests and depiction in the London press are debatably only more artistically presented versions of the lists of facts and historical exposition that those texts used. Those novels sought both to present historical scholarship in narrative form (sometimes clumsily), and to present lessons using historical figures as examples. Certainly, elements of that tendency can be seen here, though Pynchon's text weaves these details in with considerably more skill.<sup>101</sup> Ultimately, we must simply be aware of this text's status, itself, as a historical narrative, and the complexities that ensue. Pynchon's deployment of this form of historical narrative is relevant here because of how it drives and informs his engagement with, and construction of, the presidency and the presidential figure.

Washington's mercantilism in the text goes beyond a simple presentation of the first president's less heroic and exemplary qualities. Pynchon uses it to indicate the uneasy ulterior motives and methods of the American pioneers and revolutionaries. Washington asks "what deters us?" with reference to expanding beyond the Proclamation Line, speaking of "new faces in ships arriving every day, nothing east of Susquehanna left to settle", and pointing out that the "French are out of the Ohio...the money is ready" (276), all implying that not only are there no practical barriers to expanding beyond the Proclamation Line, there are

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<sup>101</sup> James C. Simmons gives an account of these nineteenth-century novelists in *The Novelist as Historian* (Paris: Mouton, 1973). He describes, for example, how these writers "undertook extended researches [into historical material] and all too frequently their utilisation of such material degenerated into pedantic floutings of specialised knowledge gleaned from their investigations."



significant practical issues with not expanding. In a pointed line, he asks Mason, “did you imagine Bouquet, or the Penns, to be acting out of tender motives, towards the Indians?” (277).<sup>102</sup> Rhodehamel tells us Washington was “never given much regret” by the dispossession of native peoples, and had a “vision of a spacious Western destiny”, indicating his appetite for expansion and appropriation of more land.<sup>103</sup> Even more notably, Pynchon here uses Washington to indicate the real interests of many of the revolutionaries: mercantile and economic. Jeff Baker, in his discussion of *Mason & Dixon*, has discussed the mercantile interests of the American revolutionaries, and how these were probably more important to them than any genuine interest in democratic reform.<sup>104</sup>

This comes across not only in Washington’s expressed desire to expand settlement, but also when he states, “Americans will fight Indians whenever they please, which is whenever they can, – and Brits wherever they must, for we will be no more contain’d, than tax’d. The Grenville Ministry ignore these *Data*, at their Peril” (277, emphasis in text). Capitalist desire for property expansion and taxation considerations are first and foremost – noticeably, Washington as depicted here makes little reference to any democratic concern. Baker’s discussion concerns the revolutionaries Dixon encounters in New York, whose mercantile interests are not revealed, but Washington does explicitly display these concerns, indicating the motives of the most prominent and revered Founding Father. As Baker says, “the democratic rhetoric employed to stir public opinion during the Stamp Act and the Revolutionary period was, by and large, a smokescreen on the part of the ruling elites to mask their own proprietary self-interest in rebelling against the British and their taxation.”<sup>105</sup> Setting Washington’s concerns in the context of his depiction as a wealthy, expansionist merchant only serves to highlight the mercenary foundation to the Revolution.

Pynchon also indicates Washington’s own cynicism and, implicitly, his awareness of the use of historical narrative: here, Washington refers to the “cheerfully idiotic” (277) who believe sectarian passions to have been left behind by American society, and yet in his first inaugural address the historical Washington referred to God favouring “the American people with opportunities for deliberating in perfect tranquillity, and dispositions for deciding with unparalleled unanimity on a form of government for the security of their union and the

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<sup>102</sup> Again Washington refers to Bouquet’s 1761 Proclamation, and the Penns, owners of Pennsylvania.

<sup>103</sup> Rhodehamel, *The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic*, 14-15.

<sup>104</sup> Jeff Baker. ‘Plucking the American Albatross: Pynchon’s Irrealism in *Mason & Dixon*.’ In Horvath and Malin, 167-88.

<sup>105</sup> Baker, ‘Plucking the American Albatross: Pynchon’s Irrealism in *Mason & Dixon*’, 171.

advancement of their happiness”.<sup>106</sup> This is a presidential character who believes no more in the unanimity and tranquillity of American society than Pynchon does, a realist and, rather than an idealist, a cynic. His breed of realism is a capitalist realism too, where policy and goals are directed and dictated by those of the market. Perhaps Washington’s most significant line is, “ ’twas Business, more or less Plainly dealt” (277). For him, it appears, the determining factor in American geopolitics is firmly business and the profit motive. Indeed, Pynchon perhaps even suggests that the United States was rotten at the start: its first president was no hero, but a cynical businessman, positing the capitalist sale and division of the Edenic New World as the original sin, with Washington as one of many tempters.

### **Thomas Jefferson’s cameo**

Washington is not the only presidential figure to make an appearance in the narrative of *Mason & Dixon*. During Dixon’s travels later in the novel, he encounters in a Virginian tavern a “tall red-headed youth”, who hears Dixon’s chosen toast “To the pursuit of Happiness”, and asks if he may use the phrase (395). This figure is a young Thomas Jefferson (having been born in 1743, he would at this time only have been the age he is described), who would serve as the nation’s third president from 1801 to 1809, and was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence – which, famously, includes “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” as amongst man’s inalienable rights.<sup>107</sup> Jefferson’s cameo is much shorter than Washington’s appearance (which, as described, is afforded a whole chapter), but Pynchon makes use of a similar approach in his depiction. Rather than a grand, heroic figure, Jefferson is portrayed as a callow youth (he is referred to twice by the text as a, or the, “youth”), who borrows one of his – and American history’s – most famed phrases from a chance tavern encounter. Though his full identity is never explicitly mentioned, the landlord of the tavern does use the diminutive “Tom” in reference to him, further hinting at a lack of gravitas on Jefferson’s part.

Significantly, Jefferson, like Washington, is also linked with land surveying: he takes interest in Dixon on realising he is a surveyor, and the landlord remarks, “Tom takes a *Relative* interest in West Lines, his father having help’d run the one that forms our own southern border” (395). Thus, he too is expressly identified as part of the mercantile land economy system, and the division of the physical space of America by invisible lines. He furthermore provides a warning against “Joint Ventures. Particularly when half the Commissioners live

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<sup>106</sup> First inaugural speech. *The Writings of George Washington, Volume XII*. Ed. Jared Sparks. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1858. 5-6.

<sup>107</sup> *United States Declaration of Independence*. Library of Congress. Web.

north of the other half”, suggesting that the alleged defaults of the Carolinian Commissioners are “somehow owing to the difference in Latitude”. He then warns that the Pennsylvanians may feel similarly about their own southern neighbours, including Virginia – the Mason-Dixon Line in substantial part demarcates the boundary between Pennsylvania and Virginia. This is especially arresting as Jefferson thereby appears to be indicating that the states (which at the time this scene takes place had yet to be united) cannot necessarily work together, and may be as different in character and culture as separate national communities. Consequently, as in the Washington chapter, this scene presents us with a Founding Father and early president undermining the concept of the United States of America as a coherent, philosophically and politically unified nation.

Returning to the presentation of Washington, it is a salient point that whilst Washington is depicted here as an estate manager, Nixon is depicted in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a cinema manager, drawing a mercantile link between the two. Similarly, John Dugdale and Charles Hollander have both drawn parallels between *The Crying of Lot 49*’s Pierce Inverarity and John F. Kennedy: Inverarity is another mercantile figure, a real estate mogul in Los Angeles. As will be discussed in a later chapter, Cormac McCarthy also explores the intersection of mercantile/corporate power and executive/presidential power in *No Country for Old Men* – though McCarthy presents corporate power as having in some sense superseded executive power, whereas Pynchon suggests that the two have always been intertwined, from the moment of the nation’s foundation.

### **Failed revolutions: the 1760s and the 1960s**

In this context, it becomes evident that Pynchon’s Washington can also be connected with the characters of a different Pynchon novel, *Vineland*. John O. Stark has discussed Pynchon’s cyclical view of history, seeing it as a graph that “depicts history as a series of rising and falling periods that repeat the same movements but not the same content”.<sup>108</sup> It seems likely, then, that Pynchon is linking the 1760s to the 1960s (indeed this is frequently remarked upon) and that, therefore, he is connecting Washington with the revolutionaries of the 1960s depicted in his earlier novel. This is a theme that has been developed elsewhere, as David Cowart claims that

those small reflections in history’s distant mirror highlight a much larger congruence between the 1760s and the 1960s, for Pynchon ultimately reads the eighteenth century much as he reads the twentieth. As in one era the struggle to resist the

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<sup>108</sup> John O. Stark. *Pynchon’s Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1980. 113.

totalizing tide of reason manifested itself as a taste for Gothic, a nostalgia for magic, and an embattled spirituality, so, in the 1960s, enormous numbers of American citizens resisted the logical-yet-monstrous coercion of cold-war rationality as embodied in the military-industrial complex, the Vietnam war, the policy of Mutual Assured Destruction, and so forth.<sup>109</sup>

However, the revolutionaries of *Vineland* are in the end, essentially, failures, and a character like Frenesi Gates is a sellout to the state system. Washington seems to be a similar character in *Mason & Dixon*. He does have connections to the trope of the 1960s liberal: Mount Vernon comes across almost like a commune, Washington living side by side with a wisecracking black Jew, smoking hemp, and conducting singalongs with his wife. The last is fully documented historically – Washington, Randall states, enjoyed country fiddle music and the “eery sounds of the armonica” (Franklin’s invention), and would request anyone who could play music to do so at tea, and would then have group singalongs.<sup>110</sup> The parallels already drawn in the novel with modern rock and roll through Franklin and his dark glasses apply to Washington as well. His relationship with Martha serves a dual purpose here too; simultaneously reflecting the American ideal of the husband and rosy-cheeked housewife serving up great plates of food, but also suggesting the importance of the family (particularly given its potential as an anti-state unit), one of the more emotionally true moments of the novel being their duet.

Gershom’s inclusion as effectively a member of this family heightens this sense of the extended family commune, reminiscent of the vast family reunion at the end of *Vineland* (which clearly sets up family, in a broad sense, as an alternative to the state). Gershom does not seem to have a clear historical referent, other than that Washington owned slaves and had grown up with them. His inclusion as more of a servant than a slave, who has an apparently friendly and equal repartee with Washington, simultaneously implies this sense of family communities who may not be blood relations (similar to the underground communities of *The Crying of Lot 49*), and the uncomfortable history of race relations in America, given that Gershom is both a Jew and black, and remains in an inferior, servile capacity, however free to talk he may be. Given this, one can also infer the same sense of corrupted family that *Vineland* depicts (as in the Gates family’s tendency to be sexually attracted to violent, authoritarian figures – it is notable that Washington is referred to as “Colonel Washington”

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<sup>109</sup> Cowart, ‘Pynchon and the Sixties’, 5. Note also the reference to the taste for the Gothic and a nostalgia for magic, in relation to the earlier point about the magical/Gothic elements of the Washington chapter.

<sup>110</sup> Randall, *George Washington: A Life*, 223.

throughout the scene, emphasising his military background). Gershom indeed functions like a child here, given the Washingtons' (historical) lack of issue.

The text presents a subtle proposition, especially in light of the previously mentioned Edenic overtones, that this group represents the first family of America – and indeed, the presidential family is colloquially known now as the First Family. (Donald J. Greiner proposes Mason and Dixon as represented in the novel as “New World Adams who push westward yet who find not an Edenic paradise or a soiled hell but both – a potential garden trampled by the very humans who seek to cultivate it”, identifying the broad spirit of a warped American Genesis in the narrative.)<sup>111</sup> Washington is the military businessman patriarch, Martha the stereotype of the American housewife, and Gershom has overtones of the sarcastic teenager, given his proclivity for jokes and undermining Washington as he does in the Ohio Company discussion. Gershom's cultural/racial mix as a black Jew represents America's vast mixture of cultures – whilst the Washingtons, like every president (except the current incumbent, Barack Obama) and most figures who have ever held significant power in America, are monoracial and monocultural. This pseudo-family can be seen as setting a skewed pattern for all subsequent American families.

Most notably and most notoriously – and importantly for a consideration of the 1960s parallel, Washington is depicted smoking cannabis. There is some historical evidence for this. In a diary entry of 7<sup>th</sup> August 1765, Washington laments that he has separated the male and female hemp plants too late, a process that is associated with the psychoactive properties of the plant (as the female plant is considerably more potent). Some have refuted this, as there would be agricultural grounds for the process too relating to which plant is better for ropemaking, but it at least raises the possibility that Washington did smoke it. Such drug use would, of course, link him to the 1960s counterculture. Further, Washington calls the hemp patch an “Experiment” (278), a term the historical Washington used to describe the foundation of America, both instances suggesting a liberal, at least partly radical character. Pynchon thus posits Washington as another failed revolutionary, another eventual sellout, or indeed someone who was never really very revolutionary in the first place, rebelling only in trivial ways such as using hallucinogenic drugs; and of course we cannot ignore what has been discussed above, Washington's economic interests and concerns, and implication in the vicissitudes of dividing land. Pynchon provides just enough to suggest Washington as a historical antecedent to the 1960s revolutionaries for it to be noticeable, implying that America's failing lies in its failed revolutionaries, from its leaders down to its common citizens

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<sup>111</sup> Greiner, 'Thomas Pynchon and the Fault Lines of America', 75-6.

as shown in *Vineland*. Washington indeed evolves within the chapter from the hemp smoker to something closer to Brock Vond, as he says, “Report everything to the Lodge” (287), a line that has distinct overtones of the informant, the submission to authority. Not only this, but it also acknowledges the role of the Masons in the foundation of America, Washington himself having been one.

He then says, “somebody there can piece together a great many small items into a longer tale” (287), which has a great many implications: it suggests the creation of historical narrative itself, the creation of a false narrative to deceive people, the fabrication of patterns and propaganda. Coupled with his previously cited attraction to violence, Washington, so often put forward by mythologizing narrative as the culmination of American ideals, is here represented as the combination and culmination of the failed American revolutionary and their authoritarian antithesis. Indeed, as in *Vineland*, these two sides cancel each other out, leading to a stasis – or, given Pynchon’s frequent concern with the topic, an entropy, a heat death to American society. Naturally, the first president would serve as a representation of this. Pynchon’s interest in historical cycles makes the connection between the two periods, with the return diminishing each time: the 1760s at least achieve the American Revolution, while the 1960s achieves fairly little, as would befit an entropic reading. As will be discussed below, in *Vineland*, Pynchon suggests that the 1960s revolutionaries either actively sold out or lost any true power – except for that of the alternative communities – that they might have had, and therefore in fact achieved almost nothing, paving the way for the conservative, capitalist politics of the Nixon and Reagan administrations.

Alternatively, Simon de Bourcier’s reading of four-dimensional space-time in Pynchon’s works would allow for an interpretation of the 1760s and 1960s as possibly the same point experienced twice by America. De Bourcier argues that events coexist in the temporal totality of a four-dimensional block universe, and indeed posits the idea of humans as a collection of disparate personalities fragmented across time. By adopting this reading, the 1760s and 1960s can be viewed as the same point in the four-dimensional universe, and their inhabitants thus part of the same collection of personalities, like V and her many avatars in Pynchon’s eponymous first novel. To return to Pynchon’s use of the present tense, the immediacy of the narrative furthers this impression, as the events are not seen as ‘past’ within the narration of the novel, which begins after most of it occurs owing to the framing device of Wicks Cherrycoke’s narration. Pynchon’s texts (the argument applies not only to *Mason & Dixon*) suggest that the view of history as something that has happened is invalid: it is happening now, simultaneously with the present. Washington thus, under this radical reading, is present in the 1960s whilst the revolutionaries of the 1960s are present to

him in the 1760s, binding them together as to some significant degree the same personalities, and personifying the failures of American revolution in the Sixties in the conventionally idealised founding president.<sup>112</sup> Further small details in the text support this reading of the two 'sixties' decades being entwined – one notable example being a reference to the cult 1960s science fiction television series *Star Trek*. Dixon encounters the “Elect Cohens of Paris”, who use a salute involving “the Fingers spread two and two, and the Thumb held away from them likewise, said to represent the Hebrew letter *Shin*, and to signify, ‘Live long and prosper’ ” (485). This, of course, is the Vulcan salute and motto made famous by Leonard Nimoy’s Spock in the series.

### **Challenging America’s foundations**

Pynchon also undermines the sense of Washington as quintessentially American in the first place, linking him to Britain as much as to America. He is introduced as being “of a Wear Valley family”, and when he first appears Dixon jokes about hearing a trace of the accent. Again, this is true enough – Washington’s family originated from County Durham in England, where a town still bears their name, and Washington Old Hall, which his ancestors built, still stands there. A further connection to that region of Britain is made by the reference to the “Bishop-of-Durham clause”. Washington, as discussed, expresses frustration that the Company was not granted one; in addition to the capitalist discourse suggested above, this could be inferred as representing a desire for an aristocratic, authoritarian system deriving directly from the very nation he seeks liberty from. Another, more subtle connection comes when Washington suggests that “the next step will be to contract our Indian Wars out to Mercenaries, – preferably school’d in Prussian techniques, as it never hurts to get the best” (277). The British would hire Hessian mercenaries, from Prussia, to fight against the Americans in the War of Independence; given Pynchon’s historical scholarship, it seems likely that this is a deliberate reference. Pynchon thus ensures that Washington, and the American narrative he represents, including the presidential narrative, cannot be divorced from an ongoing historical narrative linking it back to England, and eventually further back into the past.

In the sense of political history, this is a narrative that countermands the dominant mythologised history and presents in its place the realities, political and human, of the 1760s, not through explicit didactic exegesis, but through a carefully and subtly constructed

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<sup>112</sup> Simon de Bourcier. ‘ “A Diagram in Four Dimensions”: Spatial Time in Pynchon's Early Novels.’ Opening Out into a Broader Highway. UK Pynchon Network. Durham University Department of English Studies. 1<sup>st</sup> Apr. 2011. Paper.

narrative resting on considerable historical documentation. Pynchon leaves us with Washington talking of keeping tabs on “these sinister intruders” (287), the Jesuits, suggesting at the last that enduring Pynchonian concern – paranoia, here present in the mind of the man who ‘founded America’. Thus, Pynchon uses its first president as a vessel for implying many of the underlying flaws and concerns that will afflict American society into the twentieth century and beyond (Greiner’s assessment of *Mason & Dixon* as “an appointment with the millennium...a *summa* of the American century at the end of the era” is to be recalled here).<sup>113</sup> Extensive use of material from and about the historical Washington establishes a complex mix of imaginative narrative and quasi-historical record in the textual encounter with the character.

Pynchon’s use of Washington here indicates the importance of the presidency and the presidential figure in his own work, and by extension we can understand the similar importance and use of the presidency and executive power by Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy. If the first president, Pynchon suggests, was not a heroic, philosophical figure – the figure he has been generally commemorated and commended as, as the historical record attests – but rather the bluff but hard-headed capitalist Mason and Dixon meet (as the historical record *also* attests), then the entire institution of the presidency comes under question. By implication, consequently, the vast socio-political project of the United States of America is challenged by Pynchon’s ‘anti-Establishment’ reading, to return to Clerc’s terms. The president’s role as a symbolic figurehead for and of the nation, as well as serving as its chief executive – a quasi-monarchical figure, imperial in Arthur J. Schlesinger’s nomenclature – ensures that the history and fabric of the presidency are inseparable from the history and fabric of the United States. *Mason & Dixon*’s presentation of Washington as a blunt capitalist is interconnected with the reality that the American Revolution was founded, in quite considerable part, on economic concerns, rather than more purely philosophical ideals of liberty and equality.

The institution of the presidency, and individual presidential figures, are consequently far more than merely a conduit for considering wider social and historical issues in texts such as *Mason & Dixon*. These texts interrogate the presidency as an integral part of the national foundations, and the gap between the high conceptual rhetoric of the institution, and the realities of the individuals who hold the office – such as Washington’s mercenary economic interests, or Jefferson’s borrowing a key part of the Declaration of Independence from a chance encounter in a tavern. While *Mason & Dixon* is concerned more with the origins of

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<sup>113</sup> Greiner, ‘Thomas Pynchon and the Fault Lines of America’, 74.



the presidency and its place in the broader origins of the nation, *Vineland* primarily takes Ronald Reagan as its presidential avatar (with Richard Nixon also playing a significant role in the text and the world it portrays). Through the setting of the Reaganite 1980s – and the Nixonian end of the 1960s – Pynchon develops his engagement with the presidency, and executive power in America more generally, to consider the immense power the institution would accrue over the course of history.

### **The cost of the 1960s failure: *Vineland* and Reagan**

*Vineland*, Pynchon's fourth novel, was published in 1990, after a seventeen-year gap following 1973's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and arrived to a mixed and somewhat confused reception.<sup>114</sup> As Geoffrey Green puts it, "where Pynchon's previous emphasis had been on the historical foundations of our twentieth-century world, *Vineland* situated itself obsessively in the countercultural realm of sixties popular culture. For many readers, Pynchon's single-minded emphasis on contemporary and sixties popular culture constituted a change from what might be termed a high literary style."<sup>115</sup> The novel – the middle text in his 'California trilogy' – is certainly considerably shorter, and less epic in scope, than its immediate predecessor. It is, though, even more concerned with the history and fabric of the United States, its action taking place almost entirely within the nation. N. Katherine Hayles proposes that the novel marks Pynchon's attempt to communicate with the "generations grown up after the sixties...in terms they will understand, while still recognizing the complexities of a past that for him (as for many of us) is still very much alive".<sup>116</sup> She describes the novel as "in some respects the wiser book [than *Gravity's Rainbow*], although not the more accomplished".<sup>117</sup>

David Cowart suggests that the novel is specifically concerned with American ahistorical thought, describing the text as the work in which "Pynchon denies himself much of the cultural and historical dimension of the previous novels and commits himself to imagining the relentlessly ahistorical consciousness of contemporary American society."<sup>118</sup> Beyond that, Cowart contends, *Vineland* contains an "implicit judgment of this shallowness".<sup>119</sup> This ahistorical sense relates very clearly to the ideals and values of the presidency it is set

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<sup>114</sup> Pynchon did publish *Slow Learner*, a collection of his short stories, during this gap, in 1984, though the stories themselves had been written in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

<sup>115</sup> Geoffrey Green. 'Introduction'. *The Vineland Papers*, vii-xi. ix.

<sup>116</sup> Hayles, ' "Who Was Saved?": Families, Snitches, and Recuperation in Pynchon's *Vineland*'. In *The Vineland Papers*, 30.

<sup>117</sup> Hayles, ' "Who Was Saved?": Families, Snitches, and Recuperation in Pynchon's *Vineland*', 28.

<sup>118</sup> David Cowart. 'Attenuated Postmodernism: Pynchon's *Vineland*'. In *The Vineland Papers*, 3-13. 8.

<sup>119</sup> Cowart, 'Attenuated Postmodernism', 8.

against and is in constant dialogue with: that of Ronald Reagan's 1981-1989 administration, the 'present day' of the novel's narrative being 1984.<sup>120</sup> *Vineland* offers an image of the presidency, and the vast executive branch working under it, nearly two hundred years after George Washington first assumed the office. If *Mason & Dixon* seeks to remind us of the problematic origins of the United States as a nation, the 'real' history that established narratives have forgotten, *Vineland* explores how this forgetting happened, and how the presidency continues to embody and shape the national consciousness.

One biographer, Edmund Morris, has said of Reagan that "there never was a politician less interested in the past."<sup>121</sup> Sean Wilentz explores Reagan's world view and value set in similar, though in some ways contrary terms. He argues that the "myths of Reaganism defied American history", and Reaganism – unlike previous conservative Republicanism – presented "no longer a crabby rejection of modern life...but an outgoing, energizing, even sensuous ideal of a bountiful, limitless American future".<sup>122</sup> It was, however, simultaneously nostalgic, "in the literal and original sense of the term, a longing to return to the homeland", something which Wilentz observes Reaganism shared in common with much American literature, citing *The Great Gatsby*, *Gone With The Wind*, and Zane Grey's stories. Pynchon's novel, however, stands in contrast to Reaganism, and bears a complex relationship with iconic American literary texts such as those cited. *Vineland* is a novel in which Pynchon looks back to the 1960s – his own first decade as a published novelist – and explores the flaws and cracks in the optimistic façade of 1960s activism, undermining, or at the very least deeply problematising, any nostalgia that might be expressed for that decade. For Pynchon in *Vineland*, the Reaganite 1980s were propagated in the 1960s. Margaret Lynd provides us with two questions that *Vineland* asks: "how does one act without becoming enmeshed in webs of corruption and deceit or, at best, dishonesty? How does one

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<sup>120</sup> The parallel with George Orwell's iconic work *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is obvious, and likely deliberate. Pynchon provided the introduction to the 2003 'Centennial' edition of the novel. Orwell's work focuses on a society under an oppressively powerful state, and the attempt of the individual (Winston Smith) to maintain a sense of identity and agency in the face of the state; *Vineland*, similarly, deals with a powerful, authoritarian government and resistance strategies against it. The semi-omnipotent Reagan in *Vineland* bears a not insubstantial resemblance to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s Big Brother, and the giant statue of Richard Nixon – to be discussed further below – equally parallels the dictatorial personality cult around Orwell's physically absent leader. This connection becomes explicitly apparent when DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) field agent Hector Zuñiga is watching television and briefly sees a strange interruption to normal broadcast that appears to presage a government security announcement. He wonders if this is the beginning of an executive takeover: "could it be that some silly-ass national-emergency exercise was finally coming true? As if the Tube were suddenly to stop showing pictures and instead announce, 'From now on, I'm watching you.'" The shades of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s "Big Brother is watching you" are unmistakable.

<sup>121</sup> Edmund Morris. *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*. New York, NY: Random House, 1999.

<sup>122</sup> Sean Wilentz. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*. London: Harper Perennial, 2009. 137.

avoid becoming either the direct purveyor of evil or the purveyor's loyal opposition?"<sup>123</sup> Nostalgia for a seemingly more idyllic past, *Vineland* implies, risks masking the processes and events whereby the nostalgic citizen became a part of the very system they claim to resist.

This is not to say, however, that *Vineland* itself, despite its opposition to Reagan, remains free of nostalgia. Its sense of communitarian, familial support systems – which are posited against the individualistic, self-centred values of Reaganite government, in the novel's most important dynamic, as explored by N. Katherine Hayles in her exploration of the snitch and kinship systems in the text – harks back to the early twentieth century, to organised labour, and to a Presidential politics more akin to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.<sup>124</sup> Eric Solomon describes the family reunion in *Vineland* as a place where “new generations gather to touch the older dream, to discover a safe harbour in Roosevelt's – not Nixon's, not Reagan's – ‘Vineland the Good’”, though my reading of the ending is ultimately far less optimistic than Solomon's, who does not comment on the many disquieting elements of the final paragraphs.<sup>125</sup> Through the Webb-Traverse-Becker family, Pynchon indicates a *direct* link back to the 1930s and its “Old Left spirits and rhetoric, even innocence” (as Solomon puts it), indeed. This will become much more evident in the 2006 novel *Against the Day*, where we meet earlier scions of that dynasty.<sup>126</sup>

### **Circular narrative: the novel's opening and conclusion**

The opening and closing moments of *Vineland* indicate the nostalgic miasma that still infuses the novel. In the very first paragraph of the novel, Zoyd Wheeler awakes and hears blue jays “stomping around on the roof” (3).<sup>127</sup> In the dream from which he has been awoken, he imagined these as “carrier pigeons from someplace far across the ocean, landing and taking off again one by one, each bearing a message for him, but none of whom, light pulsing in their wings, he could ever quite get to in time” (3). The novel mirrors

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<sup>123</sup> Margaret Lynd. ‘Situated Fictions. Reading the California Novels against Thomas Pynchon's Narrative World.’ In *Pynchon's California*, ed. Scott McClintock and John Miller. 15-33. Iowa City, IA: U of Iowa P, 2014. 27. Lynd's emphasis.

<sup>124</sup> Hayles explores the opposition in the novel between communitarian and family-based networks “that connect generations and overcome isolation” on the one hand, and “networks of government agents that seek to gain information, incarcerate dissidents, and control the population” on the other. In this analysis, she clearly establishes the novel's critique of executive power as one of its central themes. Her interrogation of the text does not significantly explore the particulars of the Reagan administration and the culture it inaugurated and propagated, however. Hayles, 15.

<sup>125</sup> ‘Argument by Anachronism: The Presence of the 1930s in *Vineland*.’ Eric Solomon. In *The Vineland Papers*. 161-7. 165.

<sup>126</sup> Solomon, ‘Argument by Anachronism: The Presence of the 1930s in *Vineland*’, 165.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas Pynchon. *Vineland*. London: Minerva, 1991. All references to *Vineland* are to this edition.

itself when, nearly four hundred pages later, in its final paragraph, Prairie, Zoyd's daughter, is awoken, "to a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other, the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home" (385). This can be read in a disturbing way: Desmond has, implicitly, killed the blue jays out of mindless frivolity, and now believes himself to be back at home, back where he started.<sup>128</sup> Beyond this, he is said to very closely resemble his grandmother. The sense of an ahistorical circle is expressed acutely by this conclusion. Desmond has destroyed some other set of blue jays (one presumes, as the setting here is at some remove from Zoyd's house at the novel's start) in a belief that he is at home, playing, when he has in fact visited harm and destruction elsewhere – specifically, in the heart of an almost implausible pastoral idyll, "with fog still in the hollows, deer and cows grazing together in the meadow, sun blinding in the cobwebs on the wet grass, a redtail hawk in an updraft soaring above the ridgeline, Sunday morning about to unfold" (385).<sup>129</sup>

We can read this passage, in the light of Cowart's argument and Reaganite values, as an allegory for American ahistorical consciousness and nostalgia: citizens in the present day yearn for a nostalgic past which was, in itself, flawed and violent (the opening's blue jays themselves are described as "a squadron...stomping around" (3)), and in the process cause further destruction and violence to their present situation by failing to remember the problems and mistakes of that historical past. Like the smiling, tail-wagging Desmond, the citizens may even be persuaded that they have, to some degree, attained that idyllic past for which they have hankered. Reagan's 1984 Presidential election campaign based on the phrase 'It's morning in America' did exactly this, in the year that *Vineland* is set, and won him every single state except Minnesota (his opponent's home state), giving him the highest number of electoral college votes ever recorded by a Presidential candidate and an 18.21% margin in the popular vote.<sup>130</sup> Desmond's resemblance to his grandmother – a detail Pynchon briefly lingers on, describing him as not only similar but "the spit and image" of Chloe – serves to deepen this impression, indicating a continuing cycle down the

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<sup>128</sup> Desmond is one of a series of significant Pynchonian dogs. *Mason & Dixon*, for example, presented us with Fang, the "Learnèd English Dog", who appears to present a challenge to rational Age of Reason thought, but denies that he does so, even stating, "' 'Tis the Age of Reason, rrrf? There is ever an Explanation at hand, and no such thing as a Talking Dog.' " (*M&D*, 22)

<sup>129</sup> As I have noted below, the blue jays at the novel's start are described as a "squadron", a militaristic term that could suggest a hint of the wartime setting of *Gravity's Rainbow*. However, there is nothing to suggest that the blue jays Desmond has implicitly killed at the novel's conclusion are similarly military; the context, as noted, is much more pastoral (the redtail hawk – a bird of prey – is described as part of this idyll), and so the dynamics of Desmond's face full of blue jay feathers are more unsettling.

<sup>130</sup> '1984 Presidential General Election Results.' *Dave Leip's Atlas of US Presidential Elections*. Web. 25<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

generations of this behaviour. Zoyd's dream of the blue jays as carrier pigeons attempting to deliver messages to him may suggest a historical spirit trying to inform the denizens of the present about past failings and mistakes; Desmond's apparent killing of the blue jays symbolically represents the termination of the possibility of the message successfully getting through.

The novel's epigraph can be read in tandem with this understanding of the ending. It quotes Texas blues musician Johnny Copeland, with the lines "Every dog has his day, and a good dog just might have two days." This could be read as a suggestion that the American people will be given another chance to overthrow the establishment and its control of the executive – having missed their opportunity in the 1960s – or, under the interpretation established here, as a patronising statement from the perspective of the executive, indicating that if the citizenry behaves itself it may be allowed another chance at establishing the lost American idyll it has been led to believe is attainable. After all, as we have seen from *Mason & Dixon*, the 1960s was not the first chance the American people had to establish a truly egalitarian state. The original American Revolution offered one such opportunity, and, as has been discussed, the first half of the twentieth century offered a second, even making significant strides towards it through Roosevelt's New Deal. The novel's epigraph self-evidently should be read alongside Desmond's appearance at the novel's end, given that he is literally a dog, his belief that he is home – Zoyd's home, where he, Prairie, and Desmond were under the control of Brock Vond and the state forces – implying that he has been given another chance to live in that situation, rather than any new, radical dispensation. In fact, there is a suggestion that they are locked into a cycle, a cycle that may well suit the system (and specifically the executive power that forms such a major part of it): there will always be squadrons of blue jays, and there will always be dogs that kill them. The system itself endures and is never forced to seriously change course.

The allegory of Desmond's concluding appearance is made considerably more potent by its juxtaposition with what precedes it in the final pages of the novel: Prairie meets her own grandmother, Sasha, and her mother, Frenesi, during the family reunion, Frenesi the former 1960s activist who betrayed her principles and comrades to become part of Hayles' "snitch system", working for the government, personified by the authoritarian, proto-fascist Brock Vond, who stands in to a significant extent for Reagan in the novel. While Reagan is the distant presidential figure whose phantom presence insinuates itself into every page of the narrative, Vond serves here as the embodiment of executive power, an active presence in the lives of the novel's characters. The executive branch thus exerts both a malign, near universal phantom power over the citizenry, and a more direct physical power through its

thousands of avatars – its many ‘federal agents’. These parallel forms of presidential power and presence recur in McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men*, except that in that novel it is Chigurh, as representative of corporate power (a power aided and abetted by Reaganite philosophy), who is the more powerful embodied presence, not Sheriff Ed Tom Bell.

Vond is described as a “U.S. Attorney” (58), in the same passage being labelled as Frenesi’s “charismatic little federal boyfriend”, identifying him clearly as a representative and integral part of the executive branch, to the extent in fact that ‘federal’ becomes his chief identifying feature. Vond tries shortly afterwards to abduct Prairie and convert her to his own uses as he did Frenesi, claiming meanwhile to be her father.<sup>131</sup> He is cut off by the sudden termination of the exercise his abduction forms a part of, by Reagan himself: “suddenly, some white male far away must have wakened from a dream, and just like that, the clambake was over. The message had just been relayed by radio from field headquarters down at the Vineland airport. Reagan had officially ended the ‘exercise’ known as REX 84...” (376). This alleged government ‘readiness’ exercise will be discussed further below.

This – and Vond’s subsequent apparent death – seem to create a form of ‘happy ending’, until, in the last moments of the novel, Prairie returns, “terrified but obliged, to the clearing where she’d had her visit from Brock Vond. He had left too suddenly. There should have been more” (384). She then whispers to the darkness, “ ‘You can come back....It’s OK, rilly. Come on, come in. I don’t care. Take me anyplace you want.’ ” (384). The scene is deeply uncomfortable – like her mother before her, Prairie seems to be giving in to the brutal authoritarian figure, and in the phrases “come on, come in” and “take me anyplace you want” there is an uneasy hint of innuendo, of her repeating her mother’s sexual desire for Brock

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<sup>131</sup> There is an echo of the *Star Wars* films here, specifically in the villain Darth Vader’s revelation at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* that he is hero Luke Skywalker’s father. *Star Wars*, in a parallel like that of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, features a deeply authoritarian regime run by an autocratic, near-omnipotent leader, Emperor Palpatine (again, Arthur J. Schlesinger’s “imperial presidency” comes to mind). Pynchon refers to George Lucas and *Return of the Jedi*, partly shot in the area of California the novel is set in, on page seven of *Vineland*. The original trilogy of films are also closely linked with the Reagan era: *The Empire Strikes Back* was released in 1980 (ironically, the year the conservative Reagan swept into power by defeating the Democrat Jimmy Carter, who had approached Washington politics from outside the establishment system, whereas Reagan had been closely involved with national politics for decades), and *Return of the Jedi* in 1983, a year before Reagan’s re-election. Reagan’s controversial missile defence system was also known as “Star Wars”. As David M. Barrett puts it, “despite the scepticism of most of the scientific community, the President convinced Congress to being spending hundreds of millions of dollars on the SDI [Strategic Defence Initiative] project, which many others simply called ‘Star Wars’.” (David M. Barrett. ‘Presidential foreign policy.’ In *The Making of US Foreign Policy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.. John Dumbrell. 54-87. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997. 74.) USSR leader Mikhail Gorbachev referred to Reagan’s pursuit of “SDI science fiction” in his memoirs (cited in Dumbrell, *The Making of US Foreign Policy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., 39.)

Vond.<sup>132</sup> Beyond the specific character concerns of the scene, however, there is a broader sense that this is, again, allegorical. It is unlikely to be coincidence that the novel is set in 1984: for the Orwellian reference, but also because, as mentioned, that was the year of Reagan's landslide re-election. The American electorate – composed, by 1984, in quite significant part by those who had grown up in the 1960s, who had been part of Frenesi and Zoyd's countercultural generation – welcomed Reagan in 1980, even after the depredations of the right-wing Nixon administration, and then, in 1984, returned him with huge support. *Vineland* suggests that much of the American electorate have not learned anything from the Nixon years, or Reagan's first term – or, more disturbingly, have learned to love authoritarian government again. Casey Shoop's observation that perhaps "Reagan's victory [in the 1966 California gubernatorial election] indicated that 'reality' had indeed ended in California" is pertinent: Reagan is first elected to major office in the 1960s, the voters choosing the former screen actor and his nostalgic, dreamlike vision over incumbent governor Pat Brown.<sup>133</sup>

### **The presence of Nixon and the misoneistic impulse**

That the seeds of the 1970s and 80s Republican administrations are planted even in the 1960s is made more evident in *Vineland* at the College of the Surf, where students are talking about "how the work was going on the new Nixon Monument, a hundred-foot colossus in black and white marble at the edge of the cliff, gazing not out to sea but inland, towering above the campus architecture, and above the highest treetops, dark-and-pale, a quizzical look on its face" (205). The College – the scene of the countercultural and revolutionary activities in which Frenesi is involved – is physically overshadowed by a gigantic statue of Nixon, the future president and former vice-president, already being effectively deified even as radical activism takes place in the statue's shadow. The scene takes place in "Dewey Weber Plaza", named after a real life surfer, but the name carries with it distinct overtones of *Dealey* Plaza – the words Dewey and Dealey being obviously very similar – which was the location of John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas in 1963.<sup>134</sup> The similarity in name coupled with the presence of the colossal statue brings an air of grim

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<sup>132</sup> Frenesi is said earlier in the novel to have felt since childhood a "helpless turn towards images of authority, especially uniformed men...she further believed that it could be passed on, as if some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control" (83). The suggestion of genetic attraction to authoritarian figures is one of the novel's most unsettling themes.

<sup>133</sup> Casey Shoop. 'Thomas Pynchon, Postmodernism, and the Rise of the New Right in California'. *Contemporary Literature* 53.1 (2012): 51-86. 51.

<sup>134</sup> Here it is important to recall Charles Hollander's argument that *The Crying of Lot 49*, the predecessor to *Vineland* within the 'California trilogy', is a subtly disguised response to the assassination of Kennedy. 'Pynchon, JFK and the CIA: Magic Eye Views of The Crying of Lot 49'. *Pynchon Notes* 40-41 (1997): 61-106.

foreboding to the scene, prefiguring the replacement of the idealistic 1960s – represented by the youthful, popular Kennedy – with the corruption and authoritarianism of the coming Nixon era. Kennedy had defeated Vice-President Nixon, very narrowly, in the 1960 presidential election, making this parallel even more remarkable.

Nixon is, in fact, nearly physically present: the inhabitants of the “two ultraconservative counties of Orange and San Diego” surrounding the College of the Surf are described as the sort of people who “would soon be dropping in on Dick Nixon, just over the county line in San Clemente”, the college described as one these same inhabitants had envisaged as a “private polytechnic for training the sorts of people who would work for them...enforcing a haircut and dress code that Nixon himself confessed to finding a little stodgy. It was the last place anybody expected to see any dissent from official reality” (204-5). The College is surrounded by “official reality”, intended as a training ground for obedient citizens who will serve the wealthy, conservative class, as symbolised by Nixon, its “lively beachhead of drugs, sex, and rock and roll, the strains of subversive music day and night” (204) threatened and fragile from the start.

It is even possible to read Vond in the final scenes as an avatar of Nixon instead of Reagan, removed from power by “white males waking from a dream”. This description brings to mind Congress, which was investigating Watergate and on the cusp of impeaching Nixon when he resigned – only for the electorate to invite him back in the form of Reagan. Reagan, like Nixon, hailed from California, the same state where *Vineland* takes place, notably. Reagan was its governor from 1967 to 1975, while Nixon was one of its Congressmen from 1947 to 1950, and one of its senators from 1950 to 1953. Wilentz observes that Reagan “quietly sought and took very seriously” Nixon’s advice, and he would appoint one of Nixon’s key lieutenants, Alexander Haig, as his Secretary of State: he was a different character to Nixon, but nevertheless represented a continuation from his administration.<sup>135</sup> Andrew Gordon refers to the “long arm of the Nixonian counterrevolution continuing under Reagan” in *Vineland*.<sup>136</sup> The novel implies a continuation even beyond this. At one juncture, it is suggested Reagan is involved in some kind of national drugs deal, and immediately afterwards that George H. W. Bush, his vice-president – and, by 1990, when *Vineland* was published, the president – is, if anything, more involved: “ ‘Harken unto me, read thou my lips, for verily I say that wheresoever the CIA putteth in its meathooks upon the world, there also are to be found those substances which God may have created but the U.S. Code hath

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<sup>135</sup> Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 139.

<sup>136</sup> ‘Smoking Dope with Thomas Pynchon: A Sixties Memoir’. Andrew Gordon. In *The Vineland Papers*. 167-79. 168.



decided to control. Get me? Now old Bush used to be head of CIA, so you figure it out.’ ” (354).<sup>137</sup> The CIA is invested with a quasi-divine, globally dominant force here, and Bush, its one time leader, is now almost at the apex of the executive branch, which he will finally reach in the 1988 election. The succession from Nixon to Reagan to Bush seems assured in this otherwise fairly throwaway scene.

The 1960s generation are firmly complicit in the creation of Reagan’s America, guilty of Cesare Lombroso’s theory of misoneism (supported by Brock Vond, a follower of Lombroso): “Radicals, militants, revolutionaries, however they styled themselves, all sinned against this deep organic human principle, which Lombroso had named after the Greek for ‘hatred of anything new’....Any sudden attempt to change things would be answered by an immediate misoneistic backlash, not only from the State but from the people themselves – Nixon’s election in ’68 seeming to Brock a perfect example of this” (272-3). Lombroso himself defined misoneism as “the most certain proof of the extension and of the predominance in the moral world of the law of inertia...which arises from the effort and the repugnance we experience when we have to substitute a new sensation for an old one”, considering misoneism a “law of nature” affecting the “great majority of men”.<sup>138</sup> Particularly germane to *Vineland* is Lombroso’s claim that “the past is so incorporated in our inward being that even the most refractory of us feel a powerful attraction towards it. Thus we may be as unbelieving as can be wished, and yet at every hour of the day we feel ourselves struck and attracted by the cajoleries of priests. We may be lovers of equality, but...we feel a secret veneration for the heirs of our barons.”<sup>139</sup> In the novel, however, these revolutionaries and radicals are eventually claimed by the governmental system, and fall into line with misoneistic principles, thus bringing about both the Nixon and Reagan administrations. Thomas H. Schaub considers *Vineland* to “perfectly capture that feeling after Nixon’s election of the nation having stepped back from the cusp of radical transformation.”<sup>140</sup> This is another of *Vineland*’s problematic suggestions: Vond is hardly a sympathetic character whose views we are encouraged to share, yet Pynchon suggests that he may in fact be partly right about the popular tendency towards “misonism” and the rejection of true revolutionary action. *Mason & Dixon* would subsequently establish, as noted, that the American Revolution itself was not necessarily as truly revolutionary as it is often viewed. *Inherent Vice* (Pynchon’s seventh novel, published in 2009), which is set in 1970, after

<sup>137</sup> The line is spoken by Roy Ibble, another federal agent.

<sup>138</sup> Cesare Lombroso. ‘Innovation and Inertia in the World of Psychology’. *The Monist* 1.3 (1891): 344-61. 344-5.

<sup>139</sup> Lombroso, ‘Innovation and Inertia in the World of Psychology’, 347.

<sup>140</sup> Thomas Hill Schaub. ‘*The Crying of Lot 49* and other California novels.’ In *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. Ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale. 30-44. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. 37.

Nixon's election, depicts a society – again, Californian society – in the more immediate aftermath of the turn back to conservative Republicanism after the progressive energy of the preceding decade.

Vond himself draws a link between the misoneist impulse and the previously discussed nostalgia and yearning for a tranquil, domestic national past: “while the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep...need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family”, describing the 1960s radical generation as “children longing for discipline” (269). This offers us a perverse, exploitable mirror image of Roth's “big, protective republic”, instilled in Philip, the narrator of *The Plot Against America*, by his “ferociously responsible parents”. Vond exploits this nostalgic, familial ideal to “recondition” the 1960s radicals he ensnares and imprisons. Reagan won his elections on the same ideals: “home, in Reaganite mythology, was a re-created bygone place of close-knit families and neighbours....Home, in this half-remembered, half-invented rendering was a simpler America, where folks never bothered to lock their doors and friends helped friends – where friends, in fact, formed one big happy family.”<sup>141</sup> Saliently, in Wilentz's description, “it was a land before a time of ghetto riots, flag-burners, and national leaders who broke the law or spoke of the country's malaise.”<sup>142</sup>

Quite clearly, then, Reagan could be said to have seen the same need to remain “safe inside some extended national Family”, and exploited it to his own ends in winning power. He certainly emphasised family's importance to the nation: one presidential proclamation of 1985 finds him stating “the basic unit of our society is the family. Families transmit the values and traditions of the past. They are the primary civilizing agent, preparing the young for good citizenship.”<sup>143</sup> A presidential order of Reagan's goes further, requiring all executive departments and agencies of the federal government to “ensure that the autonomy and rights of the family are considered in the formulation and implementation of policies”, specifically to ensure the “stability of the family and, particularly, the marital commitment”.<sup>144</sup> The order also requires executive departments and agencies to consider whether a given activity can “be carried out by a lower level of government or by the family itself”, and “what message, intended or otherwise, does this program send to the public concerning the status

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<sup>141</sup> Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 135.

<sup>142</sup> Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, 135.

<sup>143</sup> ‘Proclamation 5411 -- National Adoption Week, 1985’. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Web. 26<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Executive Order 12606 -- The Family.’ Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Web. 26<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

of the family?”.<sup>145</sup> The family is elevated above all else in this political discourse: the federal government is even supposedly subservient to the family as a unit, yet in an odd and unsettling way an extension of it, a vast power dedicated to the holistic support of the ideal of the family unit. Reagan’s eve of election address in 1980 concluded “visitors to that city on the Potomac do not come as white or black, red or yellow; they are not Jews or Christians; conservatives or liberals; or Democrats or Republicans. They are Americans awed by what has gone before, proud of what for them is still...a shining city on a hill.”<sup>146</sup> The sense of the harmonious national family is quite evident, and invoked on the eve of Reagan’s first election as he encourages people to vote for him.<sup>147</sup>

The closing scenes of *Vineland* take place in the aforementioned pastoral idyll, in California, the state Reagan had governed, still in 1984. Prairie’s willing invitation to Brock to “take her anyplace”, and Desmond’s belief that he is home, the blue jays of the novel’s opening sequence destroyed, therefore take on a deep and dark significance. Vond has been defeated, but largely through the presidential decree of Reagan, who still ultimately controls the nation. Prairie already wishes him back, while Desmond has quite literally destroyed the past – or signifiers of it in the form of the blue jays – and the messages it may have borne. It is also dawn: literally, morning in America. Thus, the ending seems to take place firmly in Reagan’s America. Reagan and his administration are still in power: Vond only represented one avatar of the executive force, his defeat therefore being comparatively trivial. The physical context of the scene – Reagan’s home state, in the year of his sweeping re-election, campaigning on the “it’s morning in America” slogan – seems inescapably pointed. Prairie and her extended family still live in a nation entirely under Reagan’s pervasive influence. Implicitly the messages the blue jays bore at the novel’s opening as “carrier pigeons” in Zoyd’s dream are now inaccessible, and whatever historical knowledge they included that Zoyd might have employed in the fight for an alternative to the authoritarian state. The warning they provided, whether in the dream or in the waking world where the noise of their “squadron” rouses Zoyd from sleep, is now silenced. For Desmond, believing himself to be home, the narrative appears to have come full circle, and we are left with the uneasy question of whether anything truly significant has changed.

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<sup>145</sup> ‘Executive Order 12606 -- The Family.’

<sup>146</sup> ‘Election Eve Address: “A Vision for America” ‘. *The American Presidency Project*. Web. 26<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>147</sup> Here, as below, it might be noted that Democratic presidents such as Barack Obama have also made use of the idea of one great, happy national community of Americans; but have not traditionally paired it in the same way with forceful political and executive support for the traditional family unit.

The concept of family is also problematic in this context: it evidently appeals to both the right-wing consciousness, as exemplified by Reagan's, and general conservative, use of the family image, and to left-wing community ideals. The ambiguities of the closing section of the novel, including both the joy and communal power of the Becker-Traverse family reunion, Prairie's invitation to Brock, and the suggestion that Reagan's America (a national community supposedly focussed on family values) is very much still in place, hint at this. The difference arguably lies in the sense that Pynchon's families are more broad networks of friends and distant relatives who are united towards a common ideal of a benevolent society acting collectively, whereas the conservative sense of family sees it as a smaller, exclusive unit tied by blood that should take precedence over collective social thought and action. However, there is clearly still a complex dynamic at work here; the sense of a greater national family to which every citizen owes patriotism is certainly part of the conservative view.

We may see the misoneistic impulse, considered together with cyclical views of history, as informing Pynchon's engagement with American democracy, and specifically presidential politics. Aimee Pozorski's analysis of Philip Roth's fiction invokes the sense – and Roth's use – of the United States' founding moment as a trauma from which the nation has never recovered; Pynchon does something similar. Accepting the misoneistic historical paradigm (which, as discussed above, is problematic, as the novel both seems to suggest it may be valid, but introduces the idea of misoneism through its primary antagonist, Vond), America's founding moment can easily be described as one of the most significant arrivals of something 'new' in the course of global history. It is plausible, then, to see this founding moment as inherently traumatic for America's people, all the more so taking into consideration the deeply flawed nature of this founding moment, as Pynchon will explore in *Mason & Dixon*, his next published novel after *Vineland*. Pynchon has often explored trauma in relation to national histories, not only that of the United States. South Africa and Namibia's past is visited in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*, while Argentina's history plays a significant role in Pynchon's oeuvre, notably in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*; the activities of Dutch colonialists, specifically the ecological violence they wrought in the extermination of the dodos, in Mauritius also feature in *Gravity's Rainbow*.<sup>148</sup>

Under this interpretation, the United States is stuck in a repeating pattern of turning to new ideas and leadership, only to react violently against them subsequently. This can be seen, arguably, in the Civil War, and the Confederacy's turn against the still fairly recently founded

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<sup>148</sup> Samuel Thomas has outlined Pynchon's interest in Argentina in 'The Gaucho Sells Out: Pynchon and Argentina'. *Studies in American Fiction* 40.1 (2013): 53-85.

Union; and, saliently for Pynchon, in the turn to conservative Republicanism both after the New Deal and activism of the 1930s (in Eisenhower's election in 1952) and in the turn to Nixon and Reagan after the hope of the 1960s. It is figured in microcosm in Prairie's turn away from her family towards Brock Vond in the conclusion, a scene that expresses an inescapable genetic drive to never remain loyal to the democratic forces for change, and always return to the paternalistic authority of the executive. In more recent presidential politics indeed, the misoneistic impulse has asserted itself with unusual rapidity and violence, as Barack Obama's 2008 electoral victory, as the first African-American president, on a platform of 'hope' and 'change', turned very swiftly to widespread disillusionment and anger with his policies, and defeat in the 2010 midterm elections.

Throughout *Vineland's* engagement with presidential politics, the authoritarianism of the Reagan administration, and the role of the people in supporting or acting against the government, Pynchon takes a different approach than Philip Roth, more pessimistic about America's history to date but calling for a greater engagement by the citizenry in the country's politics. In interviews around the publication of *The Plot Against America*, Roth promoted the idea that, despite the apparently pessimistic view of American democracy put forth by that novel's counterfactual creation by popular democratic means of a far-right American dictatorship, the point of the novel was that 'it didn't happen here' – it could have, but didn't, because of the strength of American democracy (and, indeed, even in the novel, the timeline rights itself with Franklin D. Roosevelt returned by overwhelming electoral support to the presidency). Pynchon, by contrast, argues that it shouldn't have happened here, but did, pointing to the promise and potential of the 1930s left, and again in the 1960s, in both instances betrayed by the people (acting at least in part under the sway of misoneism), who voted in successive right-wing Republican presidents. Even Roosevelt (and Kennedy), in fact, is included in the list of "old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia" (371-2) cited at the family reunion, listed alongside Hitler, Nixon, Hoover, Kissinger, and Reagan himself – a list David Porush describes as the "forces of...Evil" arrayed against the "forces of Good (left-wing labour: Wobbly, resistant, self-sacrificing, hardy, rugged, coalminers and lumberers, anti-scab)" in *Vineland*.<sup>149</sup>

In the same scene, just before this list, "other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they

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<sup>149</sup> David Porush. 'Purring into Transcendence: Pynchon's Puncutron Machine'. In *The Vineland Papers*. 31-46. 36.

saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same brightly-coloured shadows" (371). This strikes at the heart of the interpretation of *Vineland* – whether one reads it, and specifically its ending, as expressing some sense of hope, as Solomon does, or whether, as I have done here, one reads it as expressing the latter view, that the darkness has fallen. Pynchon's own view on this seems to be articulated quite clearly in his 1993 essay 'Nearer, My Couch, To Thee', wherein he states that, "in this century we have come to think of Sloth as primarily political, a failure of public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist ascendancy of the 1920's and 30's being perhaps Sloth's finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the Reagan-Bush years are not far behind."<sup>150</sup> The Reagan era – and the presidency of George H. W. Bush following it – are nearly equated with the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini by the author. Porush supports this in stating that, in Pynchon's argument in *Vineland*, "the years 1972 through 1984 are devoid of hope and even the possibility of transcendence". By Pynchon's argument, then, 'it' – if 'it' is defined here as the establishment of a proto-fascist regime – did very much happen in America, though it had many opportunities to turn away from this path (returning us, of course, to the idea of the "fork in the road America never took" from *Gravity's Rainbow*).

### **The authoritarian state**

David Thoreen provides useful support for Pynchon's interest in *Vineland* in representing the gradual establishment of a fascistic state. He complains that "there has yet to be a critic who...is able to see 'the whole shape at once,' the continuing pattern of executive aggrandisement that is the subtext of *Vineland*", arguing that the "malignant", "threatening", "sublime and demonic" force in *Vineland* (that contemporary reviewers of *Vineland* found lacking in the novel) had "simply gone unrecognised", and was, in fact, the executive branch of the American government.<sup>151</sup> Thoreen goes on to say that "Pynchon is aware of the steady encroachment in the twentieth century of the executive branch on the legislative...the scope of the novel is considerably larger than previously recognised, reaching back to arguments over the separation of powers made before and during the Constitutional Convention".<sup>152</sup> Martin S. Sheffer argues, in fact, that "constitutional dictatorship and constitutional democracy are not incompatible. Moreover, both Congress and the Supreme Court have generally accepted presidential leadership and dominance", suggesting the

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<sup>150</sup> Thomas Pynchon. 'Nearer, my Couch, To Thee'. *The New York Times Book Review*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1993.

<sup>151</sup> 'The Fourth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labour, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*.' David Thoreen. In *Thomas Pynchon: Reading from the Margins*. Ed. Niran Abbas. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003. 216.

<sup>152</sup> Thoreen, 'The Fourth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labour, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*', 217.

accuracy of this view of the relationship between the branches of the federal American government.<sup>153</sup>

Thoreen's argument, then, is persuasive and helpful here. The executive branch becomes *Vineland's* shadowy force, its They and its Tristero, controlling at every level the lives of the novel's characters often through dark and extralegal means. The parallel embodied and phantom power and presence of the presidency and executive branch is key here. The manner in which executive power inserts itself into almost every part of citizens' lives, whether at a remote distance or through the physical machinations and abuses of federal agents such as Brock Vond, is of central relevance. When Prairie investigates her mother's file in the Ninjetta Terminal Centre, the first material she is described as finding is "governmental, legal history with the DMV, letterhead memoranda from the FBI" (113). Frenesi's history is partly described in terms of her existence within the federal governmental system, the existence of her recorded history indeed partly relying on the existence of this material. The citizen becomes part of an official record thereby, reduced to a bureaucratic cipher; importantly, it is in the material from underground newspapers and magazines that she finds photographs of her mother, material that speaks to the actual existence and experiences of Frenesi as a human.

Later on, Frenesi and Flash are described as "content...to go along in a government-defined history without consequences", while other citizens are described as "destined losers whose only redemption would have to come through their usefulness to the State law-enforcement apparatus" (354). The American population here is controlled, wholesale, by the state, specifically the executive branch, their history – and, by implication, the broader history of the nation – subsumed into an official story, and their purpose and use as citizens defined by their use as tools for the executive. The executive is depicted as an implacable, omnipotent force, exerting more direct and total control over the lives of the population than almost any of Pynchon's other mysterious powers – and it is one that the citizens go along with, legitimise, are content, like Frenesi and Flash, to exist within. The "government-defined history without consequences" they are happy to inhabit is, pertinently, to "turn out to be only another Reaganite dream on the cheap" (354), reminding us of Reagan's nostalgic, domestic fantasy rhetoric, and prefiguring the novel's ending in a manner, suggesting quietly that the

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<sup>153</sup> Martin S. Sheffer. 'Does Absolute Power Corrupt Absolutely? – Part I – A Theoretical Review of Presidential War Powers'. *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 24.1 (1999): 233-303. 233. Sheffer goes on to note that Alexander Hamilton had argued for unlimited war powers for the executive in *The Federalist*, during the founding moment of the nation, and Abraham Lincoln had ensured presidential power was free from legislative authority during the Civil War, indicating that the executive branch was accorded special authority from the nation's inception.

rural idyll Prairie finds herself in and awakes to is, equally, only another Reaganite dream, a fallacious vision of a legendary America.

The Tube, a key theme and symbol throughout the novel, represents yet another interpolation of executive control. Joseph W. Slade notes how Congress effectively put an end to independent filmmaking on major television networks with its 1971 hearings on the documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon*, which led to “network crews closely monitored to ensure bland programming.”<sup>154</sup> He goes on to explain, “that Ronald Reagan was an important figure in the labour racketeering and corporate machinations that suppressed diversity in the movie industry allows Pynchon to suggest the dimensions of executive power.”<sup>155</sup> Eventually, television renders detention centres for radicals unnecessary, along with other forms of monitoring the populace. The Tube is a tool of executive power as well, its quasi-supernatural control over characters in the novel another tendril of the state apparatus, partly brought into being by the man who now heads that apparatus, Reagan. Even Prairie’s grandmother, Sasha, is affected by the Tube, recalling with fond nostalgia how Prairie would watch *Gilligan’s Island* as an infant and sing the theme tune, demanding that she sing it again in the present. Thus, the family’s history is interwoven with and shaped by televisual programming – presaging the previously heralded “timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube...” (222). This, once again, is “government-defined history”, the Reaganite vision of the nuclear family sitting around the television and doing nothing radical or threatening to the state.

Television programming, it is implied, also drives, or at least encourages, the desire of Americans such as Frenesi for figures of authority: turning on the television in one scene, Frenesi sees that a rerun of the “perennial motorcycle-cop favourite ‘ChiPS’ ” is about to air, and feels a “rising of blood, a premonitory dampness”, planning to “enjoy masturbating to Ponch and Jon reruns on the Tube, and so what?” (83). These programmes serve her “helpless turn toward images of authority, especially uniformed men, whether they were athletes live or on the Tube, actors in movies of war through the ages” (83). At the last, she wonders if “some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control” (83). Here the novel expresses its most potent representation of the authoritarian executive force: as not merely something that controls contemporary, Reagan-era American society, but as something more powerful and

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<sup>154</sup> Joseph W. Slade. ‘Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*.’ In *The Vineland Papers*. 68-89. 70.

<sup>155</sup> Slade, ‘Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*’, 70.



demonic even than that, a force driving people endlessly towards authority. Richard Burket contributes to the argument that television programming is complicit in the drive towards authority, observing that, in *Vineland*, “media offer innumerable spectacles of the law being forcefully applied, turning them into entertainment which provides pleasurable consolation to the emptiness of resignation [to law enforcement’s random targeting of citizens for its own ends], resulting in demand for more such spectacles”, which ultimately “facilitates the maintenance and extension of their domain and furthers their interests.”<sup>156</sup> Therefore, the seemingly anodyne, if distracting, omnipresent Tube is just as much of a tool of the state apparatus as Brock Vond is.

It should also be remarked upon that Ronald Reagan himself, during his acting career, acted in war films and in military roles, such as *International Squadron* (1941), *Desperate Journey* (1942), *The Voice of the Turtle* (1947), *The Last Outpost* (1951), and *Hellcats of the Navy* (1957). Consequently, Reagan represents simultaneously a figure who has portrayed roles of uniformed authority on screen, and a figure of actual immense authority in the real world, thus presenting a figure Frenesi and others like her would presumably be deeply attracted to. Gautam Dasgupta blames Reagan, again, for blurring ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’, the real figure of authority – the president – with the acted role of it, averring that “what Reagan has done is conflate two separate realms, the socio-political and the aesthetic, replacing politics with theatre.”<sup>157</sup> He further complains that Reagan has “aestheticized politics, with the attendant consequence of reducing politics to a virtually ineffective scenario”, concluding tellingly that “by so doing, he has...actually relieved himself of complicity in the lives of his character, which is that of the president. Just as we cannot attribute flaws or other traits of a character in a play to the actor portraying that role, we cannot attribute the blatant political misjudgements of the Reagan presidency to Reagan the actor.”<sup>158</sup> In *Vineland*’s ending, in a similar fashion, Reagan invokes his presidential authority to terminate REX 84, while avoiding personal complicity in it, the activities undertaken under the auspices of the exercise having been left to the likes of Brock Vond. Reagan remains aloof in the text, never in fact appearing directly as a character in the manner that George Washington does in *Mason & Dixon*. The constructed ‘role’ of the president is to retain the ultimate authorisations (recalling Brock’s effective neutering by the removal of his authorisations) at the apex of the executive apparatus, not getting involved in the dirty work the tools of the apparatus, such as Vond, carry out. In this way, Reagan functions in *Vineland* very much how Lindbergh

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<sup>156</sup> Richard E. Burket. ‘State Law Enforcement Apparatus as America: Authority, Arbitrariness, and the Force of Law in *Vineland*’. *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 24.3 (1999): 727-61. 761.

<sup>157</sup> Gautam Dasgupta. ‘The Theatricals of Politics’. *Performing Arts Journal* 11.2 (1988): 77-83. 78.

<sup>158</sup> Dasgupta, ‘The Theatricals of Politics’, 78.

functions in *The Plot Against America*, who also never appears in the novel as a speaking character, but exercises a powerful control over the American populace.

To return again to the very start of the novel, the force of the executive acts on the characters from the novel's opening: Zoyd's own immediate understanding of the carrier pigeons in his dream is that the vision is "another deep nudge from forces unseen, almost surely connected with the letter that had come along with his latest mental-disability check...", the text going on to explain that he will lose his benefits if he does perform "something publicly crazy" in the next week (3). These "forces unseen" are not explained, but appear to be bound up with the bizarre requirement placed on Zoyd by Brock Vond, the novel's chief symbol of unfettered executive power; whether these forces are 'good', attempting to encourage Zoyd to act against Vond and reclaim a radical past, or malevolent forces of governmental power, extending even into the individual subconscious (especially plausible given Vond's use of reconditioning), is entirely open to question. Thoreen reads their message as being that "Johnson is no longer in the White House, and it is time to start paying attention", connecting the unseen forces here with a warning concerning the nature of the executive force, but implicitly reading them as presumably benevolent, warning Zoyd to beware of Reagan's administration (under which interpretation, of course, Desmond's destruction of the blue jays at the novel's end is rendered more troubling).<sup>159</sup>

It is significant, though, that in another mirroring of the novel's opening in its conclusion, Vond is literally an unseen force when he descends on Prairie to abduct her: he plans to "lower himself to within centimetres of the girl's terrified body, where she could stare into the dim face, backlit by the helicopter lights" (376). When he actually descends on her, she sees that "even in the shadows his skin glowed unusually white" – he is visible, but only in shadow, and with an eerie, non-human 'glow' to him. Momentarily, he is simultaneously the embodied executive force, *and* a phantom presence, a visual symbol for the dichotomous power of the presidential-executive system. A supernatural, monstrous dimension to the executive power is unmistakably present. The entire manner of his descent from the sky to abduct her suggests the sort of demonic force Thoreen describes; and he is then called off by a message from an unseen person at the field headquarters, itself emanating, ultimately, from the unseen head of the executive force, Reagan. Importantly, Vond's 'defeat' comes not at the hands of the 'good' forces in the novel – Prairie herself, the Traverse-Beckers, and so on – but through betrayal by his own side, the president ending the exercise of which Prairie's abduction was to be a part. The power of the executive force in *Vineland* is

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<sup>159</sup> Thoreen, 'The Fourth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labour, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*', 218.

immense, compelling Zoyd to commit annual stunts to retain his benefits, abducting and reconditioning citizens, ensnaring previously 'good' characters and driving them to betray their allies, and through the use of immense technological resources, having the ability to quite literally drop out of the sky and disappear people. The president retains ultimate power over this force, a godlike authority to simply immediately terminate operations: here, unlike in *Blood Meridian*, the president *can* return the genie to the bottle, having both the power to unleash such a sprawling, malevolent force as Vond and his men represent, and to rein it back in.

### **It almost happened here: the REX 84 allegations**

Pynchon's engagement with the accretion of power to the executive here is not entirely literary hyperbole or invention, in general terms at least. Reagan's administration did, according to reports in the late 1980s, plan to activate gigantic prison camps for civilians, and according to the *Miami Herald* of July 5, 1987, the Federal Emergency Management Agency "had drafted a contingency plan providing for the suspension of the Constitution, the imposition of martial law, and the appointment of military commanders to head state and local governments...in the event of a national crisis".<sup>160</sup> This plan was REX 84 (Readiness Exercise 1984), the exercise cited in *Vineland* which Reagan terminates, leading to Vond's failure to abduct Prairie. Thoreen asks what would have happened if National Security Decision Directive #52, authorising REX 84, had not been "predicated on, but accompanied by, a declaration of a state of national emergency?...As Pynchon illustrates it, the U.S. was one auto-pen signature away from martial law."<sup>161</sup> Vond, in the novel, has already put elements of these plans into practice, through his Political Re-Education Program and its camp: "his gamble on a career coup, his thin-ice special, just about to be put in as a rider to what would be the Crime Control Act of 1970 by a not-so-neo fascist congressman from Trasero County". The law is referred to as "the law, *his* law", having already been described as "Brock's own baby" (Vond lacking any real family, of course, which is significant) (268). Burket's commentary is useful again: "the clichéd rhetoric that the United States is governed by the rule of law, rather than the rule of men, is shown to be a farce. The fact that law is made by and, more crucially, enforced by human beings shows this opposition to be a false one that...at worst, is an intentional deception built into American ideology to mask the real

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<sup>160</sup> *Miami Herald*, 5 July 1987, quoted in Thoreen, 231.

<sup>161</sup> Thoreen, 'The Fourth Amendment and Other Modern Inconveniences: Undeclared War, Organized Labour, and the Abrogation of Civil Rights in *Vineland*', 223. Thoreen explores in some detail the alleged plans established by Reagan's administration and the sources for these.

operations of power involved in maintaining order.”<sup>162</sup> Pynchon makes this deception very clear in this brief description of Vond’s planned legislation, representing it as an almost entirely personal project legitimising one individual’s proto-fascist plans.

The legislative branch is essentially a joke, an irrelevance here: this sweeping, deeply authoritarian and illiberal law is to be passed quietly as an attachment to a broader bill, inserted by a fascist representative who is clearly corrupt as well (“a friend of friends in returning whose several kindnesses this solon had more that once found himself creeping within squinting range of the chain-link perimeters of Allenwood, Pa.”) (268). The law is Vond’s, his personal project and desire, and he has already in fact begun carrying out the activities that it will legalise, treating the legislative branch’s approval of the law as a rubber stamp he need not bother to wait for.

This is arguably borne out in the real history of the REX 84 allegations: when Congressman Jack Brooks attempted to question Oliver North, the supposed author of the plan, about it during the 1987 Iran-Contra scandal hearings, asking “Colonel North, in your work at the N.S.C. were you not assigned, at one time, to work on plans for the continuity of government in the event of a major disaster?”, the panel’s Chairman, Senator Daniel Inouye, closed off the line of questioning, privileging the executive branch’s power in responding, “I believe that question touches upon a highly sensitive and classified area so may I request that you not touch upon that?”.<sup>163</sup> In the actions he takes, Vond symbolises the contempt of the executive branch for democracy and the legislature. This symbolisation is rendered far more potent by how close it may cleave – depending on the exact truth of the REX 84 allegations – to the truth of what Reagan’s administration was secretly planning. It is important that Vond motivates the entire plot of the novel, causing Frenesi to betray her 1960s allies, forcing Zoyd to commit his stunts with which the novel commences and subsequently forcing Zoyd and Prairie from their house, all leading to Prairie’s investigation of her mother’s past. His control over the characters’ lives, even when it is not so explicit as actually abducting them, is near omnipotent, animating the narrative throughout, and consequently making the aggrandisement of executive power into the subterranean dynamo of the plot at almost all times.

That this symbol of the executive – the novel’s stand-in for the presidential figure for the most part – in fact remains a junior cog in a machine, eventually frustrated and defeated by

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<sup>162</sup> Burket, ‘State Law Enforcement Apparatus as America: Authority, Arbitrariness, and the Force of Law in *Vineland*’, 729.

<sup>163</sup> Transcript from the House Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran. *New York Times*, July 14, 1987.

the still-powerful President, is a terrifying denouement, despite Vond's failure to kidnap Prairie and subsequent death being, in the characters' context, a seeming victory. In Reagan's termination of the exercise, Pynchon reminds us with comparative subtlety that the executive branch remains, with the same power it has been gradually accruing to itself, only the individual Vond having had his "authorisations withdrawn" (376). Indeed, the text refers to the termination of REX 84 and "what had lain silent, undocumented, forever deniable, embedded inside" (376). The government has, to put it simply, got away with it. The exercise has taken place, and has had all the effects that we have seen throughout the novel upon the significant number of affected citizens, but is here ended in one quick stroke, with no evidence left that it happened, given the extralegal nature of what was happening. It remains "forever deniable": Pynchon, presumably, is referring fairly directly to the real-life allegations concerning REX 84, and its denial by the government, in a faintly metafictional moment. There is a latent warning in the novel's conclusion, then, that this could so easily happen again, exacerbated by Prairie's rapid conversion from violently dismissing Brock to inviting him back, and the previously discussed circular nature of the novel's opening and conclusion.

There is in fact a scene (previously noted for its Orwellian reference) that suggests the executive coup hinted at by REX 84 may have very nearly come to pass, again towards the novel's conclusion. Hector Zuñiga, himself a federal agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration, is watching television, specifically a film entitled *The G. Gordon Liddy Story*, starring Sean Connery. Connery is of course best known for playing British spy James Bond – the United Kingdom's equivalent of a federal agent. In this fictional film, he is playing the controversial Liddy, a former FBI agent, lawyer, failed politician (he lost a Congressional election in 1968), and ultimately White House operative who was one of those successfully convicted in the Watergate scandal. David Turton has identified the historical referent for this film, which was in fact titled *Will: (The Autobiography of) G. Gordon Liddy*, and starred Robert Conrad rather than Sean Connery. Turton describes the film as "thinly veiled right-wing propaganda", providing an "uncritical, even patriotic, treatment of Liddy's lifelong admiration of Hitler, his ruthless far-right politics, and his unrepentant attitude towards his involvement in the Watergate burglaries".<sup>164</sup> This film showing is then interrupted by an apparently military broadcast, presumably accidental, in which a man is sitting at a desk talking to another off-screen figure. He then reads to the camera: " 'As commanding officer of state defence forces in this sector, pursuant to the President's NSDD #52 of 6 April 1984

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<sup>164</sup> David Turton. ' "Feel like we been in a movie of the week!": The Politics of Television in Pynchon's *Vineland*.' In *Writing America into the Twenty-First Century: Essays on the American Novel*, ed. Elizabeth Boyle and Anne-Marie Evans. 94-110. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010. 103.

as amended, I am authorised – what?’ ” (339-40). He then opens the desk drawer and the film resumes without further interruption.

Zuñiga wonders what is happening, thinking “there was a weirdness here...like the weeks running up to the Bay of Pigs in ‘61. Was Reagan about to invade Nicaragua at last, getting the home front all nailed down, ready to process folks by the tens of thousands into detention, arm local ‘Defence Forces,’ fire everybody in the Army and then deputize them in order to get around the Posse Comitatus Act?” (340).<sup>165</sup> This scene is tangled in a nexus of executive power. Zuñiga is watching a film about a notorious employee of the federal government who was involved in an incident synonymous with executive, and presidential, overreach, a film which seems likely to be propaganda in support of this figure. The military interruption to the broadcast seems to strongly suggest that REX 84 was, in fact, about to fully commence, but the announcement was called off at the last minute for some unidentified reason (in a proleptic moment, foreshadowing the exercise’s full termination just as Vond is about to abduct Prairie shortly before the novel ends). Zuñiga is reminded of the Bay of Pigs, another moment of executive overreach, when the Kennedy administration attempted in 1961 to overthrow Fidel Castro’s Communist government in Cuba through a paramilitary group trained and funded by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). He wonders if Reagan was about to invade Nicaragua and proceed with the plans that REX 84 allegedly set out: “copies of these contingency plans had been circulating all summer, it wasn’t much of a secret” (340).

Whilst, of course, the Bay of Pigs invasion failed, and the Watergate scandal brought down an entire presidency, the true extent of executive control and arrogance is made evident by this passage. The film Zuñiga is watching is, as noted, most probably propaganda, an attempt to rewrite Liddy as a patriotic hero, and consequently, more broadly, the Watergate scandal as a well-intentioned, equally patriotic, plan to ensure the nation’s security (presumably by working for the re-election of Nixon, rather than the election of liberal George McGovern, the Democratic candidate in the 1972 presidential election). Liddy is portrayed by an actor best known for appearing as another government’s covert agent. The film is showing on television, one of *Vineland’s* major themes, as noted, being the all-pervasive influence and power of television. It is, indeed, very relevant that the first indication of the

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<sup>165</sup> The Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, signed by President Rutherford B. Hayes, prevents the federal government from using the armed forces for domestic law enforcement. The relevant legislation reads: “Whoever, except in cases and under circumstances expressly authorized by the Constitution or Act of Congress, wilfully uses any part of the Army or the Air Force as a posse comitatus or otherwise to execute the laws shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than two years, or both.” ‘18 U.S. Code § 1385 - Use of Army and Air Force as posse comitatus’. *U.S. Code. Legal Information Institute*. Web. 26<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

national emergency, had it gone ahead properly, would have been on television. Thus, the executive's desire to control the citizenry through any means possible becomes clear, whether through films designed to encourage viewers to view incidents of executive overreach, and their instigators, sympathetically, or through the suspension of civil liberties and constitutional government. The arrogance of the American executive branch does not even stop there: we are reminded of Kennedy's attempt to overthrow the government of Cuba, and it is suggested that Reagan may be planning to invade Nicaragua, a nation that does not even directly border the United States.<sup>166</sup> The reminder of the Bay of Pigs also serves to emphasise that even Kennedy, a comparatively liberal Democratic president whose election was a key factor in progressive Sixties optimism, was entirely guilty of trying to step beyond the bounds of reasonable presidential power.

Finally, Zuñiga *himself* is a federal agent, like Vond, albeit a much more sympathetic character. The phantom executive force appears almost omnipresent as well as omnipotent here. Every part of this scene is driven by that force: Zuñiga, Liddy, the film about Liddy, the truncated military broadcast, Zuñiga's suspicions as to what is about to happen, his memories of previous similar incidents. It is undoubtedly complicated by the knowledge that the Bay of Pigs and Watergate both failed in their goals in public and substantial fashion – compounded by the apparently imminent declaration of national emergency being cut off – which suggests that perhaps the executive force is not quite as powerful as it believes itself to be, and may bring about its own destruction by trying to overextend its strength. However, there is no easy answer: the conclusion of the novel makes clear that Ronald Reagan is still very much in power, and remains silent as to why REX 84 was terminated. There may yet be hope for resistance, Pynchon suggests, but its success is very far from guaranteed. The ominous final sentence of the passage – “as if the Tube were suddenly to stop showing pictures and instead announce, ‘From now on, I’m watching you’ ” – indicates the continuing presence of the executive power, in the familiar domestic space of the home, in the seemingly innocuous and mundane, but ubiquitous, form of a television.

### **Political engagement and the hope for resistance**

In considering the chances for resistance against the current executive system, Pynchon differs from Roth, or at least the Roth of later novels, in a significant manner that is indicative here of his broader approach. As has been observed, Pynchon seems to much more clearly support engagement with politics, and an active citizenry, where in *Exit Ghost* Nathan

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<sup>166</sup> Cuba, being an island, of course shares no land border with the United States either, but does share a maritime border.

Zuckerman regards political engagement and passion as essentially childish and purposeless, wishing to be in America but not a part of American society. According to Schaub, this is effectively an impossibility for the citizen in Pynchon's world: "the three novels set in California consistently portray the United States as a system from which there is no escape."<sup>167</sup> This view inherently implies a kind of imprisonment within the nation, a sense that Pynchon's view is not so different from Roth's, but Schaub continues to observe that Pynchon's politics in his later works are informed by a "comic and melancholy realisation that the narrow self-interest of the nation's citizenry guarantees the enduring depredations of 'late capitalism' ".<sup>168</sup> This view does admit the possibility of the citizenry acting differently, in a more communitarian fashion. Pynchon's approach to the issue – which does not reach a definitive conclusion – remains uncertain, however. The countercultural generation is linked with childishness by both Hector Zúñiga and Brock Vond ("children longing for discipline", as Vond sees them), and Vond's successful conversion of Frenesi to the snitch system, and Prairie's subsequent invitation to him to return, provides a discomfiting implication that this view may not be entirely inaccurate. Thus, there is still some sense, as in Roth, that political activism is linked to juvenility. By contrast, at the family reunion it is the "grandfolks" who are discussing politics, engaging in debate about political figures past, who are depicted as figures of greater respect and integrity than the younger generations. Whether this implies that this sense of political juvenility does not necessarily depart with physical age, or that the younger generations *specifically* of the post-war era do not properly comprehend effective political activism, is open to debate. It is again informative to recall the greater successes of the pre-war Roosevelt administration and the New Deal, and the suggestion that Pynchon's alternative communities hark back to that era.

*Vineland* still contains some measure of hope for American democracy, however small and fragile it may be, then. Cowart observes that Pynchon "refuses to surrender the myth of American promise, which he seems to construe in terms of some continuing, provisional validity of a leftist political alternative to contemporaneous conservatism."<sup>169</sup> Hayles, similarly, states that "[24fps]" credo implies a basic faith in the American public", with a "good public separate from a bad government".<sup>170</sup> Pynchon, then, supports the ideal of an engaged citizenry that takes active part in the running and direction of the nation, even as he implicitly blames the 1960s generation for electing Nixon and Reagan – or at least doing too little to prevent their election, and eventually being drawn in by the allure of the philosophy Nixon, Reagan, and the Republican Party espoused.

<sup>167</sup> Schaub, 'The Crying of Lot 49 and other California novels', 40.

<sup>168</sup> Schaub, 'The Crying of Lot 49 and other California novels', 40.

<sup>169</sup> Cowart, 'Attenuated Postmodernism: Pynchon's *Vineland*', 9.

<sup>170</sup> Hayles, ' "Who Was Saved?": Families, Snitches, and Recuperation in Pynchon's *Vineland*', 21.



Despite this failure, and despite Prairie's invitation to Brock to return – and the consequent uneasy sense at the novel's conclusion that history will simply repeat itself – there is still some sense of hope in the Becker-Traverse reunion, of the past glories of the 1930s workers still surviving and possibly being passed on to a new generation if it will only listen. Jeff Baker sets Pynchon's politics squarely in the centre of an "oppositional discourse surrounding 'Emersonian self-reliance' characterised either as the rugged individualism of laissez-faire capitalism, or as democratic communitarianism", and the debate between these "two Emersonian selves, and how each in turn might come to define the nature of America's singularity...at the heart of Pynchon's politics."<sup>171</sup> We might also connect this to Amy J. Elias' analysis of Pynchon's approach to history, averring that his fiction "...values *openness* as an approach to the world, and self-reflexively undermines its own authority and pretence to revelation or historical truth", ultimately "valuing ethical human relations over utopian political schemas."<sup>172</sup> This is expressed in the previously cited scene at the reunion, as the family debate about past political figures while others discuss blackberries, carry out mechanical work, and "send up gusts of laughter like ritual smoke cast to an unappeasable wind" (371).

This stands in stark opposition to the individual figure of Brock Vond, outlined against the helicopter lights, a few paragraphs later, whose own support system – the executive branch, as ultimately represented by the president – fails entirely to support him. His own scheme – his law, to return to the novel's earlier phrasing – is rejected in the end, and leaves him, literally, hanging, REX 84 and its secrets, such as Vond's re-education camp, left "silent, undocumented, forever deniable", effectively as if it had never existed. His presence and power as a phantom presidential-executive figure is terminated decisively as a consequence; his presence and power as a physical, embodied representation of that power will be terminated by Blood and Vato shortly afterwards. The Becker-Traverses, meanwhile, can continue debating with and in various senses supporting each other, "spinning and catching strands of memory" in a way that is cut off to Vond (who, as he is ushered by Blood and Vato into some sort of afterlife, will disappear from memory).

The novel strongly affirms the communitarian side of the Emersonian self, the polyvocal, familial historical narrative opposed to the monovocal, monolithic schemes of the self-absorbed individual Vond, and his frustration by the unexpected decision of another isolated individual figure in Reagan. Vond ultimately, implicitly, meets his death in crazed pursuit of the goal he obsesses over (and, more simply his selfish lust), returning to the helicopter after

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<sup>171</sup> Jeff Baker. 'Politics'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. 136-46. 136.

<sup>172</sup> Amy J. Elias. 'History'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*. 123-36. 129.

pulling a gun at the field headquarters to attempt to go back to Vineland and presumably abduct Prairie after all. When we next meet him, he seems to have transitioned into a limbo state, having perhaps crashed the helicopter; whatever power he had is entirely gone, and he feels “detached, unable to focus, or oddly to remember much...” (378). There is a hint here of the sudden loss of power any president faces on leaving office, both authority (Vond’s authorisation for his activities had previously been explicitly specified as gone, of course) and power wholly departed in a sense that the individual who is part of a community, such as the Becker-Traverses, does not experience.

It is deeply significant, then, that in the midst of this reunion Pynchon actually has Jess Traverse quote Emerson, in an apparently annual reading: “in his carrying, pure voice, Jess reminded them, ‘ ‘secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar.’ ’ ” (369). This quotation provides a counterbalance to the encroaching, omnipresent executive force that overshadows and structures most of *Vineland*, suggesting that, ultimately, no such force can overcome some deeper sense of justice. That claim is borne out to at least some degree by the episode of Zuñiga’s television watching, where we are reminded of both Watergate and the Bay of Pigs invasion, and their respective failures. Pynchon, however, leaves the ending open. There is, certainly, hope to be found in Jess’ reading of Emerson, and in the comparatively happy ending for most of the characters at the family reunion. Equally, as has been discussed above, we have Prairie falling victim to her apparently genetic attraction to authoritarian men, and the discomfort that can be read into the somewhat overly idyllic setting of the conclusion and Desmond’s reappearance. Similarly, the Zuñiga passage falls far short of suggesting the current administration will suffer failures like Kennedy’s and Nixon’s, and it should be noted that, by the time *Vineland* was published, Reagan had left office having served two full terms, succeeded by his Vice-President, George Bush. The choice, in the end, is offered to Prairie, and the reader, between the individualistic self and the undemocratic, monovocal executive branch represented by Vond, and the democratic community of the Becker-Traverse family: America is offered another fork in the road by the novel.

Pynchon’s interest, as explored by Thoreen, in the aggrandisement of the executive branch, and at the pinnacle of this the awesome powers assumed by the presidency, comes to full fruition here, therefore. The choice presented is between true communal democracy – of the sort supported by earlier twentieth century activists such as the Wobblies (International Workers of the World), who pursued full workplace democracy, supporters of whom appear in *Against The Day* – and the unfettered power of individual representatives of the executive,

overly self-possessed men like Vond and Reagan, a man who was “supremely confident he could run America, Inc.”.<sup>173 174</sup>

Pynchon himself, in line with Elias’ construction of his approach to history and narrative, does not presume to guarantee us an outcome or provide a sure maxim based on a carefully directed and constructed history concerning what fork America will take in the future, refusing himself to assume ultimate individual authority to prophesy. *Vineland* can be read as Pynchon’s most direct and sustained commentary on the American governmental system, though it is again, a phantom animating force in the text, controlling the lives, activities, and even thoughts of the characters. The novel’s fundamental opposition is between the self-obsessed, omnipotent individual-as-authority, represented by the unfettered power of individuals with authorisation within the executive branch, from Vond up to the president, and the communitarian kinship system, to borrow Hayles’ term, provided by the family, both in the sense of the biological family and the family provided by activist groups. As has been observed, the novel is set in 1984, the year of Reagan’s second presidential election, and the year of Orwell’s *Big Brother*, the ultimate example of the dominating individual personality as authority: the nation, symbolised by Prairie, a young character and therefore one with significant power to shape the nation’s future, is given the choice, as much as between differing senses of history and national narrative, between these political systems. The audience of *Vineland*, published in 1990, knows that the electorate chose Reagan and authoritarianism again; the novel is perhaps then a dark expression of yet another opportunity for American democracy wasted.

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<sup>173</sup> The Wobblies’ support for industrial democracy is outlined in *The Dictionary of Alternatives* as follows: “Anarcho-syndicalist trade unions or guild socialists such as the US ‘Industrial Workers of the World’ (IWW, or ‘Wobblies’) and the Spanish ‘Confederación Nacional del Trabajo’ sponsor a vision of radical industrial democracy based on overthrowing the capitalist system through a general strike and establishing an industrial form of communism. The IWW’s ‘wobbly shop’ model presumes the election of managers by workers, and the ending of the ‘wage system’.” Martin Parker, Valérie Fournier, and Patrick Reedy. ‘Industrial Democracy.’ *The Dictionary of Alternatives*. London: Zed Books, 2007. *Credo Reference*. Web. 26<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>174</sup> Nigel Hamilton. *American Caesars: Lives of the U.S. Presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush*. London: Vintage, 2010. 350.

## Chapter Two

### The public and the private: Philip Roth's presidential fictions

Philip Roth has displayed a particular interest in the American presidency throughout his writing, though especially in later works. This becomes apparent from two texts at nearly opposite ends of his literary career, one from fairly early in his work, the other in his 'late period': *Our Gang* (1971), and *The Plot Against America* (2004). However, he has used presidential figures and engaged with a dialogue about forms of authority and power, and their role in and relation to the formation of a national history, throughout his work, with differing levels of explicitness. *The Great American Novel* (1973), for example, contains significant commentary on themes such as figures of authority and the personality cult in American life. Some short pieces, including a short parody of Dwight D. Eisenhower – 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue' – that represents one of Roth's earliest works, make use of these issues as well. *Our Gang* and *The Plot Against America* represent his most direct engagement with the specific theme of the presidency, but it is a presence in much of his work. As will be illustrated, the 2000 novel *The Human Stain*, set against the Monica Lewinsky scandal of Bill Clinton's second term, also represents a substantial commentary on aspects of the presidency and the social reaction to it, whilst his late novel *Exit Ghost*, published in 2007, considers the nature of engagement by citizens with presidential politics. A concern with executive power, the presidency, and the relationship between the political and the personal, forms a substantial element of Roth's literary concerns. We can track a development from the biting satirical anger of *Our Gang* through to Nathan Zuckerman's consideration, in comparatively old age, of whether political engagement is even worthwhile. *The Plot Against America*, *The Human Stain*, and *Exit Ghost* all interrogate the cost to the individual citizen of political activity, whether they are directly involved in it or affected by the consequences of others' acts.

Critics have noted this theme, if not terribly often: Catherine Morley refers to it in her article on *The Plot Against America*, commenting that, in the novel, "Roth re-ignites his preoccupation with the American presidency which readers first encounter with *Our Gang* (1971) and later in the American Trilogy with the many overt allusions to John F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, and Bill Clinton, respectively".<sup>175</sup> Sean McCann, meanwhile, in his work on the presidency in American literature, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, dedicates his last chapter to Roth. Therein, he proposes that Roth's creative outburst represented by the series of novels he wrote in the late nineties seems to be "stimulated at least in part by the sense...that the

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<sup>175</sup> Catherine Morley. 'Memories of the Lindbergh Administration: Plotting, Genre, and the Splitting of the Self in *The Plot Against America*'. *Philip Roth Studies* 4.2 (2008): 137-52. 151.

era of U.S. power that gave rise to the visions of presidential grandeur had drawn to a close".<sup>176</sup> Subsequently, he directly links Roth's exploration of the "parochial fancy" of nostalgia for the "humble dignity" of lower middle-class neighbourhoods in industrial cities in mid-twentieth-century America to a "repudiation of the myth of presidential leadership".<sup>177</sup> Roth himself discusses the presidency in 'On *Our Gang*', a self-arranged interview to explore his thoughts on the novel, discussing how presidents were ridiculed far more in the nineteenth century, and the 'double-talk' style of presidential rhetoric.<sup>178</sup> Alan Cooper comments on Roth's tendency to depict presidents in *Philip Roth and the Jews*: "Over the years Roth would satirize the Republican presidents and vice presidents – almost, one sometimes felt, for the cleanliness he derived from dissociation. In these pieces he often used the tone of voice as most telling of the particular president's convictions, usually assumptions so deeply held that the speaker himself was oblivious of what he was revealing in his style."<sup>179</sup> This raises a significant point about Roth's engagement with the presidency – he deals differently with Democratic and Republican presidents. Republicans Richard Nixon and George W. Bush, alongside counterfactual Republican president (and real life Republican, at least) Charles Lindbergh are treated fairly savagely by *Our Gang* and 'The President Addresses the Nation', *Exit Ghost*, and *The Plot Against America*; Democrats Franklin D. Roosevelt and Bill Clinton are, respectively, a heroic though remote symbol of democracy and an unfairly demonised victim of moralising in *The Plot* and *The Human Stain*.

It is apparent that Roth has a considerable interest in the concept, construction, and reality of the presidency. Exactly how he pursues this interest, and how his fiction is itself constructed by national governmental politics, requires examination. It can effectively be argued that Roth uses the presidency as a symbol, just as it bears so much symbolic power in the general culture of America. McCann's claim that he connects the destruction of the mythic presidency with the destruction of the mythic America of humble, good-hearted lower-middle-class families can be extended across Roth's engagement with the presidency and with the American government. It is not merely commentary on the presidency *itself*, but also often provides or furthers a commentary on American culture and society. Roth's own relationship to that mythologised "presidential grandeur" is complicated, given, for example, his apparent support for Franklin D. Roosevelt, and reversion to established history at the end of *The Plot Against America*. Debra Shostak argues that Roth's "book of voices" – his body of literary work, which contains in her estimation "some of the most significant ideological scripts of twentieth-century American experience" – speaks by "Roth's *listening* to

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<sup>176</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 187.

<sup>177</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 188.

<sup>178</sup> Philip Roth. *Reading Myself and Others*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975. 43-58.

<sup>179</sup> Alan Cooper. *Philip Roth and the Jews*. Albany, NY: SU of New York P, 1996. 165.

the local rhetoric, the various discourses in their evolving inflections that have constructed the cultural experience of twentieth-century America".<sup>180</sup> The discourse of the presidency and government is of course amongst the most fundamental of those constructing discourses, part of the greater national myth that Roth so often challenges.

It should be noted at this stage, however, that Roth's engagement with the presidency, and indeed that national myth, is not so straightforward as unambiguous criticism, or at least negative construction, such as one might find in McCarthy, or to a somewhat greater degree in Pynchon. Christopher Vials points out that Roth sees *The Plot Against America* as "as an illustration of American exceptionalism", given Roth's insistence on saying that the novel's point is that "it *didn't* happen here", i.e. the United States never did elect a fascist/Nazi government (or at least one that had sympathies that way).<sup>181</sup> <sup>182</sup> This is further evidenced by Roth's hasty return to the normal course of history at the novel's end, with Franklin D. Roosevelt returning to the White House and entering America into World War II following Pearl Harbour. Dan Shiffman critiques this ending, contending that "the haste with which Roth unravels the Lindbergh Presidency somewhat undercuts the sense of legitimacy he gives to the rest of the novel's imaginings".<sup>183</sup> We should also note Brian J. McDonald's description of "the affirmative impulse of the political sensibility at work in Roth's fiction, the effort he also makes to register the costs of yielding too much to an overly cynical or disillusioned view of the American experience."<sup>184</sup> There is a tension in Roth's fiction between faith in American democracy and the historical record, and potential for that faith to be abused. In this dialogue, *Our Gang* and *The Plot Against America* represent this tension, given the ferocious mockery and implicit criticism of a historical president in the former, and the apparent emphasis on the unreality of a president who never was in the latter, coupled with the seeming subservience to quasi-deifying imaginings of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Sean McCann's observation that "it may be that in telling such a tale Roth really is true to a maxim that he claims runs consistently through all his fiction, and that, in giving us a child's view of the heroism of this narrative, he wishes us to recognise...the dangerous appeal of such

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<sup>180</sup> Debra Shostak. *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2004. 4.

<sup>181</sup> Christopher Vials. 'What Can Happen Here?: Philip Roth, Sinclair Lewis, and the Lessons of Fascism in the American Liberal Imagination'. *Philip Roth Studies* 7.1 (2011): 9-26. 21.

<sup>182</sup> This is in contrast to Thomas Pynchon, who suggests that a proto-fascistic government *did* come to power in the United States, through the elections of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, which *Bleeding Edge* implies continues in the administration of George W. Bush.

<sup>183</sup> Dan Shiffman. 'The Plot Against America and History Post-9/11'. *Philip Roth Studies* 5.1 (2009): 61-73. 72.

<sup>184</sup> Brian J. McDonald. Rev. of *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*. *Philip Roth Studies* 11.2 (2012): 209-13. 211.

reassuring political epics” is, finally, of substantial note here.<sup>185</sup> It is after all possible, in Roth’s world of countertexts, that his “affirmative impulse” does have a much more pessimistic countercontext hidden beneath it. *The Human Stain* introduces another complexity: the private individuals who hold the office of president, and how the public community of the United States treat the president as a symbol whose personal flaws are exaggerated into, as the novel puts it, the cause of the citizens’ own “spiritual death”.<sup>186</sup>

### **‘Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue’: the president as God’s equal**

‘Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue’ represents Roth’s first engagement with the presidency, being in fact one of his earliest published works altogether. It is a brief response to a story that had been recounted in the national press of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s wife, Mamie, explaining to a White House guest the president’s nocturnal prayers. (The story is necessarily somewhat obscured, being a press report of an explanation of an absent president’s activity, suggesting in itself the part-gossip, part-mythic narrative that tends to be erected around presidential figures.) In this short piece, Roth illuminates themes and concerns about the nature of the presidency that would recur in later writing. The piece’s suggestion that Eisenhower saw himself as an equal partner to God, and concluding comedic suggestion that he identifies himself with God in some sense, in fact mirrors intriguingly Richard Nixon’s campaigning speech whilst standing to be the new Devil in Hell at the end of *Our Gang*, establishing a paradigm of the president as supernatural, biblical force. The image of Charles Lindbergh high above Washington, D.C., in his plane in *The Plot Against America*, exciting and distracting the populace on the ground below, belongs to this set of images as well. The imagined president appears in a celestial guise: when his plane is identified flying overhead, one man “raises his arms to the sky” in a seemingly near-religious gesture, and eventually the plane “climbs steeply with tremendous force before disappearing into the sky”, as if it were escaping the bounds of mere terrestrial power.<sup>187</sup> According to the First Lady’s account, Eisenhower ended his prayers with “you take over from here. Good night, lord, I’m going to sleep.”<sup>188</sup> Roth comments, “The President’s tone is clear: if one were to substitute the word ‘James’ for ‘Lord’ one might hear the voice of a man calling not to his God, but to his valet. [...] The President addresses his valet as he does his God, as an equal. Where the theologian, Martin Buber, has suggested that man is related to his God as

<sup>185</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 195.

<sup>186</sup> Philip Roth. *The Human Stain*. London: Vintage, 2005. 154. All references to *The Human Stain* are to this edition.

<sup>187</sup> Philip Roth. *The Plot Against America*. London: Vintage, 2005. 71-2. All references to *The Plot Against America* are to this edition.

<sup>188</sup> Quoted in ‘Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue’. Philip Roth. *Chicago Review* 11:1 (1957): 21-24. 21.

an 'I' to a 'Thou', Mr. Eisenhower's tone would seem to suggest that the I and Thou of Buber's thinking be converted into the more democratic You and Me."<sup>189</sup> He goes on to observe that "the President leaves no doubt as to how the decisions are formulated: it is a bi-partisan set-up, the President and God working together right down the line" (22).

Eisenhower, Roth suggests, identifies himself as a coequal colleague of God's, working together to make decisions for the nation and world. Thereby, he implicitly ascribes to himself the powers of a deity, and perhaps, in spite of his seeming faith, questions the true power and authority of God, euhemerising the Judaeo-Christian deity into just another politician with executive power. There is, even, a darker suggestion that faith, and apparent belief in God, is only one of the many support systems a politician – particularly, a president – uses to maintain power. Roth introduces the idea of 'democracy' to the story: Eisenhower ascribes deific powers to himself, but he does this through appropriating the language and means of egalitarian democracy, "You and Me", reducing God, to whom he is presumably praying, to simply another citizen, working with him for the good of the nation. As Roth remarks, though, this apparent democratisation in fact serves to make God sound more like a valet, a subservient helper of the president who takes the blame for failures but no credit for successes. As Roth explains it, "what seems unusual about the procedure is that while both share the responsibility for the successful ventures ('the ones we did all right'), the burden of failure falls rather singly upon the Shoulders of the Lord" (22). The relationship Eisenhower expresses to God here is, we can deduce, not dissimilar to his relationship as president to the people of the United States, as is made clear by the introduction of the concept of 'democracy' to the dialogue. The motto of the United States – *e pluribus unum*, a phrase and philosophical construct which will come under significant scrutiny in *The Human Stain* – establishes the foundational idea of the American people working together as one, an egalitarian and popular democracy. Within this construct, the president operates only as the chosen leader, the "tribune of the people" as William E. Leuchtenburg puts it, a voice and a chairman. However, the reality, Roth suggests is distinctly different, with the president making a *pretence* of this equal democracy whilst in fact considering himself, and acting, superior.<sup>190</sup>

In the following lines from 'Positive Thinking', one could easily substitute "the Lord" with "the people": "though the Lord is addressed as *an equal*, and functions as *a helper*, His ultimate powers, Mr. Eisenhower well knows, are those of *a superior*. Surely the President would be

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<sup>189</sup> 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue', 22.

<sup>190</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg. 'Franklin D. Roosevelt: The First Modern President.' In *Leadership in the Modern Presidency*. Ed. Fred L. Greenstein. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988. 15.



the first to remind us that he himself is in the service of the Lord, as are we all. The vital question then is not the responsibility of partner to partner but of subordinate to superior, worker to boss" (23). The underlying suggestion of the piece is that, if the president considers himself a superior to God, albeit under a veneer of 'democracy', then he must consider himself even more superior to the people who, ultimately, placed him in office. There also enters into this an echo of capitalist labour hierarchy, a suggestion that Eisenhower regards himself as the ultimate "boss", and the people (and seemingly God) as his subordinates, there to follow his instructions and vision – not to mention the vexed issue of division of labour, and who is *really* carrying out the hard work necessary for the nation to function and succeed. As a company's manager needs employees for the business to run, so the president needs citizens to elect him and carry out their duties, but here Eisenhower displays a patronising arrogance towards them. The ribald sexual reference at the piece's conclusion suggests Eisenhower's self-identification with the deity: "he removes his gaze from the ceiling of the White House bedroom, pauses for a moment, and then looking upwards again, says, 'and now, Lord, Mrs. Eisenhower would like a few words with You.' And then with that grin of his he turns to the First Lady and whispers, 'Mamie, He's ready....'" (24). There is, of course, a level of implicit wordplay at work here, but given Eisenhower's position as the agent of sexual power here, one cannot help but read the line as implying some degree of deity assumed by Eisenhower in himself, were this not already sufficiently evident from his treatment of God as analysed by Roth. Demonstrably therefore, his democratic sense of "You and Me" seems to focus to a rather greater extent on "Me".

Roth does not explicitly criticise the president for his approach here, merely providing an analysis of Eisenhower's reported prayers: the title, 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue', provides a subtly comic mockery, suggesting how Eisenhower's cheerful, apparently religious approach in fact belies an arrogance and somewhat disturbing attitude to the nature of his relationship with God.<sup>191</sup> Alan Cooper identifies the piece as Roth criticising complacent, establishment WASP attitudes, wherein "Ike and God – a God who knows his station – have rightful places", observing that, "in an ease he cannot share, Roth sees establishment complacency he cannot trust."<sup>192</sup> Significantly, the piece provoked critical response when republished in *The New Republic*, Roth's answer to which introduces a

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<sup>191</sup> Roth here works in the vein of earlier, nineteenth-century American political satire, which was regularly targeted "at the democratic institutions that arose after the Revolution...yet, American satire also frequently relies on comic exaggeration [...] Finally, because satire, to be at all relevant, must be topical and timely, its fine points and even some of its broader strokes may be lost upon modern readers." Unlike in his later work, Roth here writes in a much more topical, directly parodic mode, using a specific contemporary political figure and an incident involving them. Linda A. Morris. 'American Satire: Beginnings through Mark Twain.' In *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Ruben Quintero. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. *Blackwell Reference Online*. 30<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>192</sup> Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 165-6.

different side to his dialogue with the presidency, the aforementioned concern with the private individual in the office of president that would not subsequently resurface again until *The Human Stain*. Roth was told in a letter to *The New Republic* that Eisenhower's prayers were private, and Roth should not be making them public. Roth's response was to point out that Norman Vincent Peale – a minister and author who frequently intervened in national politics, amongst other actions attacking John F. Kennedy for his Catholicism, supporting Nixon, and campaigning against Eisenhower's two-time Democrat opponent Adlai Stevenson, and also the author of *The Power of Positive Thinking* – had publicised Eisenhower's prayers through relating Mamie Eisenhower's story in a newsletter sent to thousands, and that he agreed that this was "not only bad taste but a blasphemy".<sup>193</sup>

This suggests that, from his youth as a writer, being twenty-four at the time of the piece's publication, Roth's conception of the presidency did include a significant belief in the privacy of the individual president, though, as Cooper puts it, he still felt "constrained to examine" the Republican presidents.<sup>194</sup> Roth's attitude to the presidency is, clearly, nuanced and ambiguous: his work evidences a compulsion to interrogate the institution and its holders, yet he remains simultaneously at a remove from them. 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue' is his sole direct depiction of a historical president as an active character. Other works would either use parody, as in *Our Gang* (albeit an exceedingly thinly veiled one), impersonators, as in *I Married a Communist*, or presidential characters who do not appear interacting with protagonists of his novels, serving more as remote symbolic presences, as in *The Human Stain*, *The Plot Against America*, and *Exit Ghost*. It is, arguably, the public office that interests Roth: the President of the United States of America, more than the specific lives of the individuals who have served in the office. There is also, of course, the important concept, central to this thesis, of the presidency – whoever holds it – as a phantom force controlling the nation, down to citizens' individual lives, which extends to its possession of those who serve as president. Roth's deep literary concern with subjective individual experience prevents his work from entirely ignoring the particular historical figures who have served as president. This dichotomy between the public presidency and the private individual serving as president is brought to our attention from Roth's portrayal, and discussion, of Eisenhower's prayers at the beginning of his career.

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<sup>193</sup> Quoted in Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 166.

<sup>194</sup> Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 166.

## Nixonian satires

Roth's first novel-length treatment of the presidency was published in 1971. *Our Gang* is an exaggerated satire of Richard Nixon, then still in office, as "Trick E. Dixon", less a novel than a burlesque – Roth himself refers to it as a "baggy-pants burlesque skit", which seemed to him "more appropriate" for mocking Nixon, a figure he describes as "very regal".<sup>195</sup> <sup>196</sup> In commenting on the novel, Roth rhetorically asks, "why have I turned to political satire?", answering his own question with "in a word: Nixon".<sup>197</sup> The novel is not a subtle satire, nor one that is conducted in a particularly realist mode, which is entirely purposeful, as Roth explains in his commentary on the work through his view of satire: "[satirical works] are shocking – just in order to dislocate the reader and get him to view a familiar subject in ways he may be unwilling or unaccustomed to...distortion is a dye dropped onto the specimen to make vivid traits and qualities otherwise only faintly visible to the naked eye."<sup>198</sup> This is certainly the case in *Our Gang*, which concludes with Dixon being assassinated by being enclosed in a giant water-filled plastic sac, in an obvious abortion joke, Dixon having argued for the rights of the unborn throughout the novel – Nixon himself having been publicly critical of abortion.<sup>199</sup> He is then depicted campaigning in Hell to become the new Devil. Roth's commentary on the presidency here is nothing short of savage and unabated, and for partly

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<sup>195</sup> *Reading Myself and Others*, 47.

<sup>196</sup> There is a parallel here with Pynchon's Richard M. Zhlubb in *Gravity's Rainbow*, another thinly disguised parody of Nixon. Zhlubb is a less expressly 'burlesque' character than Dixon, but equally degrading to Nixon's 'regality', as he serves as the night manager of a cinema. Both suggest that there is something about Nixon, who has also been portrayed in exaggerated form in shows such as *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*, that almost *requires* a form of parody, that a scrupulously 'realistic' portrayal, insofar as one is possible, would be unable to represent him accurately. Stephen J. Whitfield has explored precisely this issue, observing that "it is doubtful whether any postwar American politician, or even any chief executive in our history, ever evoked so much mirth – much of it angry – as [Nixon]. Perhaps no other figure in our two centuries of experimentation in self-government tickled so extensively and so intensely the funny bones of the electorate." Stephen J. Whitfield. 'Richard Nixon as a Comic Figure.' *American Quarterly* 37.1 (1985): 114-32. 114.

<sup>197</sup> *Reading Myself and Others*, 50.

<sup>198</sup> *Reading Myself and Others*, 48-9.

<sup>199</sup> Nixon was privately ambivalent about abortion. Secret recordings from the Oval Office released in 2009 reveal that he "worried that greater access to abortions would foster 'permissiveness,' and said that 'it breaks the family.' But he also saw a need for abortion in some cases — like interracial pregnancies, he said. 'There are times when an abortion is necessary. I know that. When you have a black and a white,' he told an aide, before adding, 'Or a rape.'" Charlie Savage. 'On Nixon Tapes, Ambivalence Over Abortion, Not Watergate'. *New York Times*. Web. 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015. However, in public, he was much more critical, stating in 1971 (as president) that "from personal and religious beliefs I consider abortion an unacceptable form of population control. Further, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life — including the life of the yet unborn. For, surely, the unborn have rights also, recognized in law, recognized even in principles expounded by the United Nations." In fact, he went so far as to link the saving of children that might otherwise have been aborted with the origins of the nation as a community of immigrants: "[the United States] will open its hearts and homes to the unwanted children of its own, as it has done for the unwanted millions of other lands." 'Statement About Policy on Abortions at Military Base Hospitals in the United States'. *American Presidency Project*. Web. 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015.

that reason it is not always his best-regarded work, Shostak referring to its “sophomoric humour” and claiming that it has “not aged especially well, perhaps because of its topicality but also because it is so unfettered.”<sup>200</sup> It is, as Shostak says, full of “exaggeration and moral outrage”. Whilst it is compared to Swift, not least by Roth himself, who invokes *A Modest Proposal* in his aforementioned discussion of satire, it is considerably less deadpan and more linguistically extreme than Swift’s classic work.<sup>201 202</sup>

Nonetheless, it remains notable for its approach to the presidency, especially in the light of Roth’s commentary. There is the complaint previously referenced about the dying off of presidential satire and mockery in the American media since the nineteenth century, but also his direct comment on the office itself later in the same interview: “There is this shibboleth, ‘respect for the office of the presidency’ – as though there were no distinction between the man who holds and degrades the office and the office itself. And why all the piety about the office anyway? A President happens to be in *our* employ”, going on to say of the journalist authors of *Nixon Agonistes* that “they don’t seem to consider it a setback to the species to point up how utterly bizarre this guy is”.<sup>203</sup> Whitfield notes that “beginning in the 1960s, satire [in the United States] could become more direct, more savage, and more explicitly cruel, without fear of censorship, stigma, or punishment”, suggesting that, in fact, Roth was writing at a time when such sharply satirical writing was being resurrected.<sup>204</sup> Not long after the publication of *Our Gang*, Hunter S. Thompson would publish the series of articles in *Rolling Stone* that later became the book *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* (published in early 1973), covering the 1972 presidential primaries in a similarly scabrous, darkly comic manner to his novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972), indicating the rise of a new form of political journalism. The young Roth appears to fit in with these shifting journalistic paradigms and forms: he evidently considered the presidency to be an office that should not be free from scorn, ridicule, and critical satire, nor did he have any regard for the mythology attached to it. It is significant, certainly, that he draws, again, a distinction between the president and the presidency – indicating that the office itself does bear some grandeur,

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<sup>200</sup> Shostak, *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*, 195-6.

<sup>201</sup> Shostak, *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*, 196.

<sup>202</sup> It must be noted here that Nixon himself was very much aware of the novel, and discussed it in the Oval Office, as recorded on the White House tapes. He discussed it with his Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, and his Special Counsel, Charles Colson: how the public might react, how the administration might respond, and whether the novel was guilty of incitement to assassinate the president via its satirical despatch of Trick E. Dixon. Jon Wiener remarks: “Charging Philip Roth with inciting an assassination attempt on Nixon, with a satirical novel? And a White House response timed to the anniversary of the Kennedy assassination? Not even Trick E. Dixon could have come up with that.” Jon Wiener. ‘When Nixon asked Haldeman about Philip Roth.’ *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2014. Web. 28<sup>th</sup> April 2015.

<sup>203</sup> *Reading Myself and Others*, 52.

<sup>204</sup> Whitfield, ‘Richard Nixon as a Comic Figure’, 114.

though it may be occupied by near-criminal, clownlike figures – but he then proceeds to question why the office itself should be regarded so highly, suggesting that he ultimately does not attach very much mythological greatness to the office either. This is clearly closely connected to the division Roth presents between the public presidency – the office – and the private individuals who serve as president.

However, this is a useful critical paradigm in which to view his later work; as will come to be seen, *The Plot Against America* arguably does invoke that difference, retaining the mythology and symbolism of the office whilst accepting its potential occupancy by poorly suited men. Even then, as has been noted already above, Roth took pains to emphasise that such an election as the imagined one of 1940 that puts Charles Lindbergh in the Oval Office in the novel did not actually happen, and has Roosevelt return by the end. Shostak makes much of Roth's focus on countertexts and counterlives, and the conversations between Roth's works, averring that his books converse with one another in a "mutually illuminating fashion", making it possible to "trace changes and continuities in his thinking".<sup>205</sup> In the arguably fairly sharp difference in the treatment of the presidential office between the early and late texts under discussion, it is unclear whether Roth is deliberately setting up two different positions on the theme, or indicating a modulation of his approach to the issue over the course of three decades. The shift likely also reflects, of course, changes in the socio-political fabric of the nation itself.

Elaine B. Safer connects Roth's deployment of argument in *Operation Shylock* to Talmudic scholarship, and the "endlessness of the interpretation of the law" – Smilesburger in the novel itself stating that "all of life [is] a vicious debate" – which allows us to understand that his work may admit many entirely contradictory interpretations, so we must regard his dealings with the presidency and related issues in the light of his focus on subjectivity and shifting interpretations, rather than positing a clear, one directional argument running through all his work.<sup>206</sup> Shostak, again, provides an argument that Roth does not "work through varied viewpoints through a dialectical process towards a synthesis", suggesting that "the reader is not directed toward a 'real' story that renders the other versions secondary fantasies."<sup>207</sup> Roth has referred to an "increasing distrust of 'positions' ", as Shostak cites, which has relevance not only for considering his construction of the presidency in terms of his varying representations thereof, but also in terms of his attitude to it.<sup>208</sup> <sup>209</sup> Presidential

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<sup>205</sup> Shostak, *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*, vii.

<sup>206</sup> Elaine B. Safer. 'The Double, Comic Irony, and Postmodernism in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*'. *MELUS* 21.4 (1996): 157-72. 168.

<sup>207</sup> Shostak, *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*, 6.

<sup>208</sup> *Conversations with Philip Roth*, 71.

rhetoric necessarily tends to take firm positions on most important issues of the day, a tendency which Roth evidently has significant suspicion towards, especially given the often substantive gap between this rhetoric and presidents' private opinions – as, for example, with Nixon's private and public comments on abortion.

To return to *Our Gang*, the novel/satire's engagement with the presidency is, as commented, firmly at an extremely negative end of the critical spectrum. The concluding section, in Hell, seems to draw a parallel, not necessarily between the American presidency and the regency of the underworld as such, but between the nature of campaigning for them, indicating that the methods and modes adapted to campaign for the former, terrestrial office would translate effectively to those needed for the latter, infernal office. Annie Proulx does something not entirely dissimilar in her 2008 short story collection *Fine Just The Way It Is*, which contains a number of stories featuring the Devil as a very human figure with a personal assistant who, amongst other things, tampers with people's emails (which, given, contemporary concerns about civil liberties in the US, concerns Roth is also very aware of, seems pertinent to the connection of the American government and the 'government' of Hell), though of course Roth is to some extent cribbing from and skewing the romantic rebel leader Satan of *Paradise Lost*. Here, however, Dixon is the rebel against Satan, except that 'rebel' now means 'opposition candidate', and is reduced to rhetoric and platitudes, rather than the heroic revolutionary idealism often ascribed to Milton's Satan, a revolutionary idealism also frequently ascribed to earlier historical national leaders. Given the tradition in which Roth here seems to be working, there is a hinted suggestion that the modern discourse of presidential politics – the ultimate apex of American politics – reflects a degeneration from more heartfelt, idealistic argument of decades and centuries past.

This is a point Roth himself has made in his important essay 'Writing American Fiction': he refers to the reality of mid-twentieth-century America as something that "stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meagre imagination".<sup>210</sup> He goes on to say of the television debates between Nixon and Kennedy in the 1960 presidential election (the first televised presidential candidate debates): "all the machinations over make-up and rebuttal time, all the business over whether Mr. Nixon

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<sup>209</sup> We can also see this distrust of 'positions' in the other authors under consideration. Pynchon's vast, multiplying narratives and textual possibilities admit a huge array of positions, such as the multiple lines of conspiracy theory involving the September 11 attacks in *Bleeding Edge*, the avatars of V in his eponymous first novel, and the open-ended narrative of *The Crying of Lot 49*. McCarthy carefully avoids overt politicisation or moralising in his novels, with such 'positions' being expressed only through voices clearly belonging to his characters, such as Ed Tom Bell's monologues in *No Country for Old Men*.

<sup>210</sup> *Reading Myself and Others*, 120.

should look at Mr. Kennedy when he replied, or should look away – all of it was so beside the point, so fantastic, so weird and astonishing, that I found myself beginning to wish I had invented it...there seems to be, said [Benjamin] DeMott, a kind of ‘universal descent into unreality’ ”.<sup>211</sup> Roth indicates that the 1960 election – with the first entry of Nixon onto the presidential stage, and its mediation through television, setting the stage for contemporary presidential politics – represented the beginning of this “descent into unreality”. It is not surprising, then, that Roth should depict such an unreal scene – although somehow still credible in its parody of presidential and Nixonian rhetoric – as that of a figure based on Richard Nixon campaigning to be the devil. This modern pastiche of Satan’s rallying speech to the assembled devils of Hell in *Paradise Lost* suggests Roth’s view of the “stupefying, sickening” fall of public affairs and governance, leadership and inspirational speechmaking, reducing them to an empty rhetorical game. There is an implicit critique of contemporary American politics in the idea that a newly arrived member of Hell – assuming that Dixon’s speech in the underworld is supposed to take place fairly shortly after his death, an implication which is certainly not explicitly undermined anywhere – could run to dislodge Satan, a venerable and powerful leader, suggesting the opportunistic and dishonourable nature of the national political scene. Beyond this, there is the more obviously scathing suggestion that a man who had been President of the United States of America could so effortlessly adapt himself to run to be the devil – indeed, be in Hell at all, a concept that the presidential myth would not be likely to admit.

It must also be said that another tension in Roth’s construction of the presidency is hereby generated. On the one hand, Dixon is clearly unfit for office, incompetent and immoral, thus undermining the grand narrative and symbol of the presidency; on the other, his successful translation to Hell suggests a disturbing omnipotence of the American presidential figure, as not only leader of the free – mortal, terrestrial – world, but of the eternal world beneath it. Roth’s distinction between the public presidency and the private individual presidents has already been remarked upon: this distinction can be seen to go further here, implying an insurmountable gap between the power, authority, and symbolism of the office, and the necessity for it to be held by a single, flawed individual. It is revealing, in light of this distinction, to read Aimee Pozorski’s commentary in *Roth and Trauma*, where she discusses the death of the “fantasy of omnipotence...of a government that recognises equality, of the trust in human empowerment over all” after America’s “centuries-long experiment with democracy with an eye towards human rights” in Roth’s currently most recent novel,

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<sup>211</sup> *Reading Myself and Others*, 121.

*Nemesis* (2010).<sup>212</sup> This novel, which may be Roth's last, "ends without a sense of futurity: it's not that God is dead simply, in this vision, but that all the children are dead and God has killed them."<sup>213</sup> It is a text obsessed with death, and Pozorski proposes that what is fundamentally being killed in it is this "fantasy of omnipotence" and of a "government that recognises equality", individual citizens murdered by God – a supernatural, disembodied force. This spectral power is incommensurate with the survival of the individual, and with human agency.

Roth's work, then, indicates that the institution of the presidency is not correlative to the skills and abilities of any individual president – that, in fact, a number of presidents have been particularly unqualified for the office – but that the institution *itself* carries superhuman power. In this regard, and considering Pozorski's analysis, we have another pair of bookends for Roth's career. *Our Gang* is again one of them, indicating the seemingly boundless power of a figure such as Nixon, extending even into the afterlife (here one should also remember that throughout the novel, Dixon has also focussed on the rights of the unborn, extending his power to *before* life as well). *Nemesis* is the other, suggesting the termination of omnipotent human power.<sup>214</sup> Again, this represents a shifting attitude on Roth's part to human power, parallel to the shift in his work from the surging political anger of his youth to the weary resignation from political life Zuckerman performs in *Exit Ghost*. This particular trope also connects *Our Gang* relatively closely to *Blood Meridian's* engagement with human power. Judge Holden appears to be some kind of infernal, eternal figure of great power, whilst capricious, amoral, and yet seemingly human. However, where the judge is an almost godlike figure of rhetorical terror and immense knowledge, Trick E. Dixon, as his name suggests, is a trickster, and an insecure, paranoid one at that – more of a Loki figure, perhaps, than a truly Satanic one.

*Our Gang* would be followed twenty months later, during the Watergate hearings, with a short piece entitled 'The President Addresses the Nation', again satirising Nixon, giving a speech where he refuses to step down after being impeached and convicted by Congress, and strongly implying he means to now begin a police state (this time it is in fact Richard Nixon, and not Trick E. Dixon).<sup>215</sup> The piece is heavily suffused with the mythology of the presidency, referring frequently to lauded former presidents and the title and office itself, and eventually speaking of a "great tradition of a president of the United States" to justify, essentially, a dictatorship (63). Early in the piece, Nixon subtly implies the presidential power

<sup>212</sup> Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*, 153.

<sup>213</sup> Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*, 152.

<sup>214</sup> Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma: The Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*, 153.

<sup>215</sup> *Reading Myself and Others*, 59-64.



he is invoking, and abusing horrifically, is the American way: “according to the doctrine of the separation of powers, the Executive branch has an equal voice in the management of government, along with the Legislative and the Judicial branches. That, after all, is only fair. It is what is meant by the ‘American Way.’ ” (59-60). He goes on to talk about the president’s “sole responsibility for safeguarding the security of the nation” (60). In this way, Roth’s Nixon – without explicitly stating the superiority of the presidency and executive power above all else – implies that it would be somehow un-American to allow the impeachment to be enacted, that the “American Way” dictates that it is ultimately the president who is defender of the nation, as the British monarch is defender of the faith. At the piece’s conclusion, he emphasises his position as leader and symbol of the people and of the popular will: “I give you every assurance that the President you, the American people, elected for a second four-year term will not permit the votes you cast so overwhelmingly in his favour to have been cast in vain” (64).

Here we can see the truth of Richard Schur’s statement, writing about Roth’s 1997 novel *American Pastoral*, that “Roth envisions America as a completed but ultimately unachievable experiment in democracy”.<sup>216</sup> Nixon invokes the democracy of his election, the expression of the popular will (and Nixon *had* won a barnstorming victory in 1972, his liberal Democrat opponent George McGovern winning only one state in the electoral college), in order to justify the quite obvious commencement of a slide towards a totalitarian state, with the Armed Forces placed on a “stand-by alert” around the nation, whilst the “Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have also been advised to take all necessary steps to ensure domestic tranquillity”, the National Guard has been mobilised, and state and local police “encouraged” to request “whatever assistance they require” in maintaining law and order (63). The implications are clear, that American democracy is fundamentally flawed, inasmuch as, firstly, issues may arise when one group of popularly elected officials (Congress) attempt to remove another (the President), and, secondly, the President’s power over the apparatus of law and order can be used to assert his ultimate authority, aided by seemingly logical appeals to democracy. The title of the piece is significant, in addition: it is not ‘Richard Nixon’, an individual man, who addresses the nation, but “the President”, a people being spoken to by its leader.

Considering the dialogue about American democracy, one interpretation Sean McCann puts forward of *The Plot Against America* posits another theme that the later novel may pose that would contradict those of *Our Gang* and to a degree its successor piece: he refers to Roth’s

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<sup>216</sup> Richard Schur. ‘Dream or Nightmare?: Roth, Morrison, and America’. *Philip Roth Studies* 1.1 (2005): 19-36. 20.

novel taking its place in “the historical series of efforts to reimagine the role of executive power”, and then describes the consequent “reformulation of the concept of presidential leadership” as one that “looks forward to the further growth of intense mobilization and party competition”.<sup>217</sup> Both *Our Gang* and ‘The President Addresses the Nation’ imply a criticism of partisan leadership, as Trick E. Dixon plots election strategy and campaign rhetoric, while Nixon in the latter piece refers to “us Republicans” (61), a brief aside but one that does clearly establish his administration, the one he is at great pains to emphasise has been popularly elected, is a Republican one, and lying underneath is the fact that the 1970s Congress that impeached him (and would likely have removed him from office had he not resigned first) was a Democrat-controlled one. Partisan leadership and conflict does not seem to be a positive force in these early works; if McCann’s assessment of *The Plot* is accurate, this provides further evidence of a conflict between the younger and the older Roth, or at least a conflict across his works, in approaching the presidency. McCann suggests that Roth may simply have found himself “so outraged by the Republican revolution that he is eager to imagine a redefined Democratic party that will emulate the intense partisan organization and the pursuit of political dominance that has served to bolster the power of the radical right”, an intriguing line of argument, as it would suggest, if there is any contemporary relevance to *The Plot Against America* (a debatable subject to be further discussed below), that Roth may suggest that a time does come when partisanship and intense campaigning within the established system is necessary – which would fit with McDonald’s conception of Roth’s ultimately affirmative view of American political society.<sup>218</sup> It would also contrast with Zuckerman’s approach to, or rather retreat from, political activity in *Exit Ghost*, implying a complex political dynamic in Roth’s later work that admits both the necessity for political engagement, and the serious problems that accompany such engagement.

‘The President Addresses the Nation’, though much shorter than its predecessor, is perhaps more powerful than *Our Gang* because of its credibility, sounding entirely plausible as a speech from an American president, reflecting indeed the initial popular election and gradual encroachment on democracy of the Nazis in Germany.<sup>219</sup> In this, the piece clearly

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<sup>217</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 195.

<sup>218</sup> McCann, *A Pinnacle of Feeling*, 196.

<sup>219</sup> Nazi Germany has a deep significance for Roth and Pynchon alike. Roth’s most substantial engagement with this history is in *The Plot Against America*, though *The Ghost Writer* features a character that is suggested to be Anne Frank, having survived the Holocaust, a character who recurs in *Exit Ghost* (albeit this suggestion is shown to be a fictional thought of Nathan Zuckerman’s). *Gravity’s Rainbow* takes place against the backdrop of World War II, much of it in Nazi Germany shortly after the end of the war, and features extensive appearances by characters involved with the Nazi regime. Concerns about the potential for such a regime to come to power in the United States

foreshadows the novel Roth would publish thirty-three years later: *The Plot Against America*. Not much seems to have been made, critically, of this genealogy, despite the clear link; McCann fails to mention it.<sup>220</sup> Nixon's speech resembles more Burton K. Wheeler's dictatorship as acting president towards the end of *The Plot* than Lindbergh's more gradual, seemingly benign moves towards fascism; where Wheeler is swiftly deposed (though, interestingly, pardoned by the re-elected Roosevelt as Nixon was by his unelected successor Gerald Ford), we are left at the end of 'The President Addresses the Nation' with no knowledge of where things will go from here. Unlike *The Plot*, 'The President' also addresses a situation that nearly did happen: of course we cannot know how Nixon would have reacted to Congress voting to remove him from office, but the situation did nearly come to pass. Considering Nixon's stubborn refusal to depart for months prior to his eventual resignation, Roth's piece does not exaggerate real events greatly, and in this way it is arguably more terrifying than the later novel. As a contemporary reaction written *in medias res*, rather than the essentially historical nature of *The Plot*, written sixty-plus years after the period in which it was set, it represents a more immediate, unmediated response to potential abuses of presidential power. In *The Plot*, a fairly long novel, Roth evidently decides that such a dictatorship cannot happen in America (perhaps bolstered by the fact that what 'The President' prophesied in 1973 did not actually come to pass in 1974), but in the context of Roth's focus on subjectivity and lived experience it is of considerable significance that this is not his conclusion when writing a short response to active events. There is an implication that an inherent mistrust of the presidency should perhaps be part of one's armour during the events of one's own day, as Henry Roth immediately distrusts Lindbergh in *The Plot*, despite the eventually positive resolution, more or less, of the narrative. Roth insists that the point of *The Plot* is not that 'it can happen here' but that 'it didn't happen here'; however, 'The President Addresses the Nation', not least with its total focus on Nixon, being his speech, where *The Plot* focuses on the Roth family and not all that much on the exact machinations of Lindbergh's constitutional desecrations, makes the argument that 'it *nearly* did happen here'.

### **"A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE": the private presidential figure in *The Human Stain***

*The Human Stain* provides another significant window into Roth's conception of the presidency, and how it is conceived of and related to by the general American populace. The novel's narrative both takes place against the backdrop of Bill Clinton's impeachment

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significantly inform both authors' work, Pynchon particularly suggesting that a version of it *did* attain power there.

<sup>220</sup> As a short, satirical piece – more in the vein of *Our Gang* than *The Human Stain* or *The Plot Against America* – rather than a fully developed novel, it has likely attracted less attention.

following the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and mirrors it. The novel's protagonist, Coleman Silk, having prior to the events of the novel been embroiled in a scandal concerning an alleged racist remark, then becomes swept up in a titillating sex scandal that reflects the Lewinsky scandal to a significant degree. This connection is deepened by his position as a, relatively speaking, public figure, as dean of a small college. Throughout the novel, references to Clinton's ongoing impeachment are made, never becoming a substantial part of the narrative, but acting as a macrocosmic background reflection of the central plot, contributing to the extensive supporting discourse throughout the novel of how the public engages with 'the public'- that is, how the general population of the United States conceives of and reacts to events and figures in public life, particularly specific individual authority figures.

The nature of the local community's response to Silk's supposed immorality is summed up by the title of the novel's first part, 'Everyone Knows'. These two simple words form the emphatically judgemental phrase used in an anonymous note from a former academic colleague of Silk's to indicate the broad public knowledge that he is conducting a sexual affair with a supposedly illiterate manual worker from the college he had been dean of. A public figure, such, implicitly, as the president of the United States, cannot be a private individual, but is rather the property and knowledge of "everyone". José Carlos del Ama identifies Silk's rebelliousness, and consequently his ultimate inevitable tragic downfall, with his determined individualism: "He prefers to assert his individuality over any social or political cause; and therefore, his rebelliousness is deeper and more radical".<sup>221</sup> In Silk's decision to, as del Ama puts it, reconstruct himself as white and Jewish rather than his true genetic identity as an African-American, he places his individuality over the civil rights causes advanced by other African-Americans such as his brother. This same individuality also drives him to assert swiftly his authority and power on taking over the management of Athena College, and to fight aggressively against the (false) accusations of racism, eventually resigning rather than remain at the college, disgraced; and, eventually, to begin an affair with the poor, relatively uneducated Faunia Farley, in the interests of his own reconstructed life, irrespective of what might be expected of him by supposed public moral standards.

This individuality, it seems to be suggested, leads to his undoing: his refusal to conform and to accept the strictures of public life seem to render inevitable his eventual deconstruction by 'everyone', almost literally given the effect on his mental health. The president, the ultimate

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<sup>221</sup> José Carlos del Ama. 'Everyone Knows: Public Opinion in Philip Roth's Contemporary Tragedy *The Human Stain*'. *Philip Roth Studies* 5.1 (2009): 93-110.

exemplar of the public figure, cannot have an individuality in this way, as he must conform to established expectations and public constructions of the president and the presidency. The text illustrates the quasi-traumatic response of the public to the transgressions of President Clinton:

It was the summer in America when the nausea returned [...] when some kind of demon had been unleashed in the nation and, on both sides, people wondered “Why are we so crazy?,” when men and women alike, upon awakening in the morning, discovered that during the night, in a state of sleep that transported them beyond envy or loathing, they had dreamed of the brazenness of Bill Clinton (3).

Clinton’s sexual offences are depicted here as having such a potent effect on the nation’s minds that he invades their dreams, encroaches on their most internal, subjective space to proclaim and enact his shameless debauching of the standards of decency expected of a president. Roth refers to “some kind of demon...unleashed in the nation”, reminiscent of McCarthy’s imp in *Blood Meridian*: like that novel’s Angel Trías, helpless to prevent the derelictions of the scalp hunters, here Clinton’s *own* debaucheries release a different demonic sprite that sweeps the nation.<sup>222</sup> Silk, a miniature of the president as the leader (former, at the time of both the racism incident and the affair with Farley) and authority figure of a community, here Athena College, engenders a similar emotional response in the community and a similarly exaggerated response institutionally, creating a “pervasive sense of unreality” (12), providing a discursive link to the American public’s traumatised dreams of Bill Clinton.

Silk’s even more literal physical destruction comes ultimately at the hands of another individual driven by personal motive, rather than the amorphous public “anonymous collective” described by del Ama.<sup>223</sup> However, Les Farley’s identity in the text centres on his status as a Vietnam veteran, and his evident profound disillusion with governmental figures, networked to his wider psychological disintegration resulting from his wartime experiences. His life has been consumed by the experiences of a war prosecuted by more than one presidential administration, and his rage at the failings and perceived immorality of subsequent administrations (specifically Bill Clinton’s). Thus, we can hardly divorce his murderous act entirely from Roth’s depiction of the engagement of the individual subjective

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<sup>222</sup> Roth introduces religious overtones more broadly, in citing William F. Buckley’s reference to the mediaeval story of Abelard and Heloise, and consequent implication that Clinton should be castrated, as Abelard is. Roth describes Buckley’s comments as “prompted by a spirit no less exacting than the ayatollah’s...and in behalf of no less exalted ideals” (referring to Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa against Salman Rushdie), implying both a fanaticism in public response to the Lewinsky scandal and quasi-supernatural forces at play (3).

<sup>223</sup> Del Ama, ‘Everyone Knows: Public Opinion in Philip Roth’s Contemporary Tragedy *The Human Stain*’, 94.

experience with the projected influence and phantom presence of public individual personalities, whether the presidents who sent him to war or the contemporary president who fails to look after veterans and who avoided military service himself. These individual presidents, and their governments, have heavily impinged on, and seemingly warped, his psyche. Farley explicitly addresses this in terms of a broad concept of “the government” close to the novel’s conclusion: “the subconscious mind. You can’t control it. It’s like the government. It is the government. It’s the government all over again. It gets you to do what you don’t want to do” (355). The government is likened by Farley to the insidiously controlling and uncontrollable subconscious, the often invisible support network driving much of what the individual does. Farley’s psychological damage derives primarily from his experiences in Vietnam, a war prosecuted by the American government – specifically associated with certain presidents, such as Lyndon Johnson’s fateful decision to continue to fight the war in the mid-1960s, and Richard Nixon’s arguably treasonous actions to ensure North Vietnam’s continuance of the fight as he was running for president for his own benefit. This damage is, at least, a very significant factor in Lester’s behaviour towards Faunia and his eventual apparent murder of her and Silk.

Clinton’s misconduct only exacerbates his anger with and dissociation from his community: “how come there were veterans sleeping in the street while that draft dodger was sleeping in the White House? Slick Willie, commander in chief. Son of a bitch. Squeezing that Jew girl’s fat tits while the VA budget goes down the drain. Lying about sex? Shit. The goddamn government lies about *everything*. No, the U.S. government had already played enough bad jokes on Lester Farley without adding on the joke of Veterans Day.” (247-8) Clinton here functions both as a type of personal scapegoat, and furthermore as a symbol of the ultimate cause, seemingly, of Lester Farley’s problems, the government. Farley’s thoughts here – as we can assume these lines to be, though the narrative structure of *The Human Stain* is slightly complex, mixing the first-person narration of Nathan Zuckerman with apparent reported internal monologues from other characters – are strikingly personal and vitriolic in nature. Clinton here is not ‘the president’, ‘President Clinton’, or even ‘Bill Clinton’. He is “that draft dodger” (the second time this phrase is used – earlier in the novel, we are told Lester has sworn never to set foot in Washington, D.C., “because of his hatred for the government, and, since ’92, because of his contempt for that draft dodger sleeping in the White House” (213-4)), “Slick Willie”, “son of a bitch”. He is referred to by one of the President’s alternative honorifics, “commander in chief”, but only, it would seem evident, for the purposes of the juxtaposition with “draft dodger” and “Slick Willie”, underscoring the strength of Lester’s anger that such a man should be nominally in charge of America’s military forces. We may further note a common obsession with presidential carnality, from the innuendo in ‘Positive

Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue' to the vulgar description of Clinton and Lewinsky's sexual activity here – and presidential obsession *with* carnality, and sexuality, as evidenced by Dixon's opposition to abortion in *Our Gang*. Here, the embodied executive force is expressed most powerfully: the national interest in presidents' bodies, the power the executive attempts to (and often does) wield over citizens' bodies.

Clinton's identity as a "draft dodger" is linked with the image of "veterans sleeping in the street". There is an implicit causal connection here via the ambiguous word "while", which may imply simple correlation, or more significant causation. Lester seemingly connects the government's lack of concern for military veterans like himself with the individual identity of the president: if the president himself never served, in fact actively avoided serving, then it would surely follow that he would not care as leader of the nation about those who did. Even if "while" is merely correlative, Lester passes judgement on a nation that would elevate a "draft dodger" to commander in chief whilst failing miserably to take care of its veterans. This is the negative image of the "big, protective republic" described by young Philip in *The Plot Against America*; for Lester Farley, the republic may be big but it is far from protective. The juxtaposition of Clinton-as-draft-dodger and Clinton-as-commander-in-chief is precisely one of the bad jokes that the US government has played on Lester, "Slick Willie, commander in chief" carrying a tone of savage irony. Taken together with the earlier description of his refusal to ever visit Washington, Lester seems almost obsessed with the government as the root of his and society's problems, crystallised in the figure of "Slick Willie" Clinton. Both here and in *The Plot*, the president functions as an embodiment of the nation, and the figurehead of an intangible executive force. Clinton's own 'draft dodging' is emblematic of a broader lack of care for those who have served by the United States government; again, the embodied and disembodied executive forces are tangled up in a complex symbiotic network with each other and with the nation as a whole.

It should also be noted that Lester's aversion to visiting Washington is, again, the negative double of the Roths' enthusiasm about visiting the capital in *The Plot Against America* – though both that visit and Philip's sense of a "big, protective republic" are undermined by the events of the novel, owing to Lindbergh's presidency, Mr. Roth blaming Lindbergh explicitly for much of what happens to them there. Both novels emphasise the twin power of the president as a real influence and force in people's lives, and as a symbolic power in citizens' imagination, a modern-day iteration of the Fisher King legend, where the health of the nation itself is affected by the health of its leader – here moral, rather than physical, health, though

the obsession with Clinton's body through his sexual activity is again germane as well.<sup>224</sup> As Alan Lupack describes the legend, "the basic premise of the theory...is that the king and the land are bound together and the fate of one is dependent on the other, a wounded king means a wounded land."<sup>225</sup> The Fisher King legend has been appropriated frequently in American culture, from the novel and film *The Natural* to the Terry Gilliam film *The Fisher King*, while Kennedy's administration was famously known as 'Camelot'.<sup>226</sup> It seems appropriate, then, to view Roth's engagement with the presidency in *The Human Stain*, *The Plot Against America*, and indeed other works such as *Exit Ghost*, set against the 2004 re-election of George W. Bush, as reflecting another, indirect iteration of the myth. This can be seen to apply, though in a somewhat different fashion, to Coleman Silk, who functions as a quasi-presidential figure, in the novel; Zuckerman describes how his tenure as dean at Athena College changed the entire community of Athena: "...over time, he'd wound up changing the community no less than he had shaken up the college. [...] The 'revolution of quality' that he had once been credited with imposing on the Athena faculty and curriculum, he had, albeit inadvertently, bestowed on Town Street as well" (83). Silk's leadership and emphasis on quality spreads beyond the college to affect the town, such that a list of various inferior establishments (described as "moribund", "bad", "provincial", "hick-town", "dark", and "depressing", amongst other epithets) is replaced with "establishments where you could eat a decent meal and get a good cup of coffee and have a prescription filled and buy a good bottle of wine and find a book about something other than the Berkshires and also find something other than long underwear to keep you warm in wintertime" (83). Some of these do, indeed, relate directly to concepts of health – "moribund" and "subsistence-level" as negative descriptions, on the positive side terms and concepts such as "decent meal", filled prescriptions, and protection against winter – indicating a sense of the community's health and general condition improving in tandem with the quality of its leadership. Whilst this is, of course, a fairly natural relationship, Roth emphasises the manner in which Silk's personal leadership of the college leads to a broader increase in the quality of life, in various arenas, throughout the town of Athena.<sup>227</sup> Furthermore, the embodied executive force appears again here: the physical health of the town is ameliorated by Silk's strong leadership.

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<sup>224</sup> We may also think of the Oedipus legend and its own representation of sexually deviant activity by a national leader and its relation to national suffering, given that a quotation from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* provides the novel's epigraph: Oedipus asks "what is the rite of purification? How shall it be done?"; Creon responds "by banishing a man, or expiation of blood by blood."

<sup>225</sup> Alan Lupack. *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 264.

<sup>226</sup> The Fisher King enters into Arthurian legend as the "guardian of the Grail...who can be healed only by the Grail knight", featuring prominently in Chrétien's *Perceval*. Lupack, *Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*, 444.

<sup>227</sup> The town's name is, of course, infused with echoes of Ancient Greece and the origins of popular democracy – but, as the novel depicts, the 'democracy' of Athena is deeply flawed and problematic.



At the opposite end of the spectrum, we have Lester's seriously disaffected view of society and its leadership. His obsessive anger at the government, specifically targeted at the figure of Clinton, is, as has been discussed, most potently clarified when he links the government with the subconscious, *his* subconscious: the government, in Lester's construction, is so deeply wired into the wellbeing and individualities of its citizenry that it effectively forms part of their mind. Thus, when the president is – as Lester would have it – a dishonest, sexually immoral, draft dodger who is not concerned for the welfare of all his 'subjects', as the head of the government, his attitude and individual consciousness in some sense filter down into the minds of the citizens. This is a paradigm that has already been explored much earlier in the novel discussing Coleman's previously noted individuality: "not the tyranny of the we and its we-talk and everything that the we wants to pile on your head. Never for him the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in, the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral we with its insidious *e pluribus unum*. [...] Instead the raw I with all its agility" (108). Roth invokes the grand motto of the United States – literally translated as "out of many, one" – to criticise the homogenising communal impulse of the public discourse, the same insidious collective subconscious that Lester describes.

Roth's use of the phrase is arguably complicated, given his engagement with the presidency in general and in *The Human Stain* in particular. Beyond this, the concern he displays throughout his work for the individual's subjective experience cannot be easily reconciled with the concept of a national singularity of citizenry, the "unum"- the last word of the motto – privileged over the "pluribus". The president himself is, literally, one chosen to lead the nation out of many, an individual – an "I with all its agility" – brought out from the mass of the citizenry and made its quasi-monarchical, quasi-sacerdotal symbol and leader, an I whose individuality must simultaneously be subsumed in the national discourse and narrative whilst also, paradoxically, forcing itself *on* the national narrative and discourse, a contradiction that seems impossible to endure. Thus, perhaps, we encounter Zuckerman's own dream of Clinton at the novel's outset: "I myself dreamed of a mammoth banner, draped dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE" (3).

The dream, and its capitalised banner legend, serve as a reminder of the humanity of the president, of the – bizarrely subaltern – individual narrative that must go alongside the narrative of immense presidential power, belonging to the individual who holds the office of the presidency. The Fisher King legend focuses on his wounding and suffering, and need for individual salvation, and so we can therefore return to the relevance of that myth to the literary conception of the presidency. It is not the only example in the text where Zuckerman

emphasises the humanity of the presidential figure: using the presidency and presidential experience as a comparison for Coleman Silk, he describes the former dean thus: “the great man brought low and suffering still the shame of failure. Something like what you might have seen had you dropped in on Nixon at San Clemente or on Jimmy Carter, down in Georgia, before he began doing penance for his defeat by becoming a carpenter. Something very sad” (18). Considering afresh the complexities of Roth’s attitude to American politics and to the presidency – his “affirmative impulse”, and shying away from an unambiguous condemnation of the system – it is certainly significant and arresting that he includes such sympathetic references to individual figures who have held the presidency. Zuckerman is not damnatory in his language here: he does not judge Carter’s failures as a president, or Nixon’s moral slips (omitting any reference to the nature of his departure from office), referring only to “the great man brought low and suffering still the shame of failure”, finally summarising this succinctly as “something very sad”. This is especially notable in the reference to Nixon: there is no sign here of the vitriolic parody and implicit criticism hurled at Nixon in *Our Gang* and ‘The President Addresses the Nation’. It is, admittedly, a very passing reference, but nevertheless Nixon is included here as another tragic figure of a great man who failed. The decision to use examples here solely from the ranks of American presidents provides substantial support for the argument that Roth uses *The Human Stain*, in part at least, to engage with the figure and symbol of the president, and more broadly American leadership, in addition to extending his career-long interest in the presidency. Specifically, he uses two presidents often viewed by popular culture as, to some degree, disgraced: Nixon by the Watergate scandal, his impeachment, and status as the only president ever to resign; Carter by a presidency generally seen as weak, his handling of the Iran hostage crisis, and his ignominious defeat in 1980 by Ronald Reagan.

Here, then, Roth significantly extends and finesses his dialogue with the presidency. He deepens the critique at play in the substructure of several of his novels by quietly examining a flaw in presidential mythology that is not always so commonly illustrated as the terrifying and insidiously ubiquitous power it holds (the flaws that *The Plot Against America* and works such as *Blood Meridian* depict): the individual that must assume the mantle of that myth. *The Human Stain* as a work can, indeed, be interpreted as dealing with this problem, even so far as the title of the work. “The human stain” describes, thereby, what could be viewed as the greatest flaw in the symbolic national myth of the presidency, that the president *himself*, not the symbol or myth – and various classes of subordinate leaders such as state governors and mayors, down to college leaders such as Coleman Silk – is, inevitably, human, and therefore cannot be treated as a totalised symbol without the complexities of the subjective individual experience that each president has. Another meaning is the literal physical semen

stain on Monica Lewinsky's dress, of course, an embodiment of the 'humanity' – the capacity for error and weakness – of the individual president, bringing to the fore again the concept of the embodied presidency and the subjective individuality it introduces into the greater, disembodied executive power, a "human stain" upon that force. This, of course, can equally be linked with Roth's aforementioned overarching concern with subjective experience throughout his work. That Roth in fact resists presenting us directly with the individual experience of presidential figures – whether Clinton here, or Lindbergh and Roosevelt in *The Plot Against America* – suggests the unknowability of this experience, and the consequent presumptuousness of those who claim to understand, or pass judgement on, the personalities of presidents.<sup>228</sup>

The unspoken example in Zuckerman's list of tragically downfallen presidents is, obviously, the president whose impeachment forms the historical backdrop to the novel, Bill Clinton. To some extent, this presumably derives from Clinton's survival (*The Human Stain* being published in 2000, by which time Clinton had been found not guilty by the Senate, and would eventually complete his second term), but Roth also implies, given Zuckerman's dream only a few pages earlier in the text, that Clinton belongs in this list too. The connections between Silk and Clinton in the novel draw attention to this sense of the president as individual: as has been discussed, when Zuckerman comments on Silk's refusal to be subsumed in the "coercive...inescapable moral we" of *e pluribus unum*, there is a subtle suggestion, especially taking into account the continuous background of the Lewinsky scandal, that Clinton, as a referent for Silk, should also be considered as a "raw I with all its agility". This becomes more apparent with the opening of chapter three of the novel, where a group of young academics discuss Clinton's actions in grotesquely personal detail: " 'if Clinton had fucked her in the ass, she might have shut her mouth. Bill Clinton is not the man they say he is. Had he turned her over in the Oval Office and fucked her in the ass, none of this would have happened.' " (146). This discussion continues to discuss Clinton's ability to dominate women and why he was attracted to Lewinsky. It is, patently, a conversation about deeply personal issues, conducted by a group of people who have no personal knowledge of the man whom they are discussing. The dichotomy between the public presidency and private president, introduced in Roth's remarks on 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue', informs this scene too, in the emphasis on Clinton's private affairs, the assumption that, as president, he as an individual in some sense belongs to public discourse, and to the public.

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<sup>228</sup> In *The Plot Against America*, Lindbergh and Roosevelt's absence as directly represented characters is also related to other issues, such as how much real power either holds, and their distance from the citizenry they supposedly represent.

The academics, then, form in this scene, the “inescapable moral we”, dissecting and analysing the personal life of a man unknown to them. Clinton, who by his actions indicated a similar incapacity to Silk’s for subsuming himself into this we, is the wantonly individual “I”, who like Silk is doomed to fall. Shortly after this scene in the narrative, the concept of the “inescapably moral we” is extended via a discussion on the idea of “American propriety”:

The *tyranny* of propriety. It was hard, halfway through 1998, for even him to believe in American propriety’s enduring power, and he was the one who considered himself tyrannized: the bridle it still is on public rhetoric, the inspiration it provides for personal posturing, the persistence just about everywhere of this de-virilizing pulpit virtue-mongering that H. L. Mencken identified with boobism, that Philip Wylie thought of as Momism, that the Europeans unhistorically called American Puritanism, that the likes of a Ronald Reagan call America’s core values, and that maintains widespread jurisdiction by masquerading itself as something else – as *everything* else. [...] ...all the terrible touchstones presented by this century, and here they are up in arms about Faunia Farley. Here in America either it’s Faunia Farley or it’s Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of these lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk! *This*, in 1998, is their torture, their torment, and their spiritual death. Their source of greatest moral despair, Faunia blowing me and me fucking Faunia (153-4, emphasis Roth’s).

The tortured relationship of the American public, the “we”, to the individual, particularly those individuals in positions of power, is summated by this passage. Silk exposes the illogic of this situation by a fairly lengthy, rhetorical deconstruction of the attitude taken by the American public to his and Clinton’s supposed moral failings, listing at length all the more serious issues faced by the world in 1998, before culminating in the incredulous “*this...is* their torture, their torment, and their spiritual death.” “Their source of greatest moral despair”, contextualised already by “the terrible touchstones presented by this century”, is juxtaposed immediately with “Faunia blowing me and me fucking Faunia”. The description is coarse and terse, but manages through the simple use of “Faunia” and “me”, and the clearly intimate, casual, and implicitly consensual nature of the acts, to indicate a definitely and defiantly personal tone, removing any serious sense of degradation or abuse from the situation despite the nature of the terminology, and thus exacerbating the disproportionate response of the American “we” to it.

Yet, while Clinton is here included alongside Silk as a victim of American propriety, he is not the only president name-checked: Ronald Reagan appears, as an archetype (given the use of the indefinite article – “a” Ronald Reagan) dictating “American core values”, supporting if not indeed actively constructing the monolith of American propriety. The duality of the

presidency and its symbolic potencies – affirmative and corruptive, the latter especially visible in the idea of the “spiritual death” exacted on Americans by Clinton’s actions – are woven inextricably into Silk’s quasi-soliloquy. Writing on Clinton, Nigel Hamilton identifies the root of this alleged feeling of “spiritual death” on the part of the American public following Clinton’s perceived moral decline: “in a nation where the president is the embodiment not only of American power but also of self-respect, this was a grave shortcoming that could only have been addressed by his resignation – which he refused to concede.”<sup>229</sup> This returns us to the concept of the great American ‘we’, the implied connection of all American citizens and their unification in the person of the president: if the president literally *embodies* America, then any immoral action he may take rebounds on his citizenry. When that action is sexual, there is a sense that actions taken by and upon his body – the degrading sexual acts discussed in such vivid detail by the professors at Athena whom Coleman Silk overhears – are taken also by and upon the American body, and thus when the president acts in a certain manner, it can be said in some way, by this symbolic incorporation, that America has acted thus.

James P. Pfiffner comments in his work on the ‘character factor’ in American presidential politics that “the American political system, perhaps more than a parliamentary system, is dependent upon the fundamental makeup of the individuals who are chosen to be its chief executive.”<sup>230</sup> This can be said to apply beyond merely the political system to the wider country: as William E. Leuchtenburg has it in discussing Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency, “millions of Americans came to view the president as one who was intimately concerned with their welfare”, while Roosevelt himself referred to the presidency as “not merely an administrative office. That is the least of it. It is pre-eminently a place of moral leadership.”<sup>231</sup> <sup>232</sup> The moral role of the president and the importance of the individual holding the office is paramount, and ensures the correlation between the president’s moral health and the nation’s; it is, ultimately, not necessarily surprising that the citizenry should respond to Clinton’s actions as dramatically as Silk describes, the correlation arguably only encouraged by the conception and construction of the presidency placed upon it by presidents themselves.

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<sup>229</sup> Hamilton, *American Caesars: Lives of the U.S. Presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush*, 466.

<sup>230</sup> James P. Pfiffner. *The Character Factor: How We Judge American Presidents*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP, 2004. 6.

<sup>231</sup> Leuchtenburg, ‘Franklin D. Roosevelt: The First Modern President’, 15.

<sup>232</sup> Quoted in Leuchtenburg, ‘Franklin D. Roosevelt: The First Modern President’, 16.

As in *Blood Meridian*, and its cast of more minor governmental figures, *The Human Stain* illustrates how issues surrounding the American presidency can be expanded to a greater or lesser degree to less significant figures of power in America, such as revolutionary college deans: Silk has been a sufficiently major authority and influence in the community of Athena that its inhabitants have a similar reaction to his supposed misdeeds as the wider nation does to Clinton. The vexed question of body and identity is deeply pertinent in *The Human Stain* through the figure of Silk separate from his sexual activities: the ambiguity of his racial and religious identity, caused and allowed by his skin's light tone, is a major element of his narrative in the novel, and central to his actions and decisions. Towards the novel's conclusion, Zuckerman discovers the truth of Coleman Silk's racial identity from his sister, Ernestine, where Silk is referred to as "her self-declared white brother". Ernestine emphasises again his dogged individuality, Zuckerman reporting "her point was that Coleman was *not* one of those ex-GIs fighting for integration and equality and civil rights; in Walt's opinion, he was never fighting for anything other than himself. Silky Silk. That's who he fought as, who he fought for, and that's why Walt could never stand Coleman, even when Coleman was a boy. In it for himself, Walt used to say. In it always for Coleman alone. All he ever wanted was out" (324). While, ironically, this sense of independent individuality falls soundly within certain American traditions of self-determination, it is clear that Coleman Silk's racial ambiguity allows him – possibly drives him – to dissociate himself from his familial/racial community.<sup>233</sup> This self-determined identity, however, backfires on him when his apparent whiteness enables detractors to plausibly accuse him of racism against black students in the "spooks" incident, as his body has allowed him to reconstruct his identity to one that removes him from the racial community he is accused of insulting. The disgust at his sleeping with a much younger woman then sparks the second scandal: his physical and individual makeup, instincts, and self-construction, as described by Pfiffner, are instrumental in the community's development, and following public response to him and consequent moral sensibility.

Such an identity and individuality will also tend to be totalised by society: Zuckerman observes, "it was strange to think, while seated there with all his colleagues, that people so well educated and professionally civil should have fallen so willingly for the venerable human dream of a situation in which one man can embody evil. Yet there is this need, and it is undying and it is profound" (307). This observation, coming towards the novel's conclusion, itself serves as something of a conclusion to Zuckerman's opening observations about the historical backdrop to Silk's undoing, the summer of 1998, "in America the summer of an

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<sup>233</sup> Silk's ability to "pass" as white also hints at issues of race and power in America: had he been more obviously African-American, he might not have been appointed to his position.

enormous piety binge, a purity binge, when [...] a virile, youthful middle-aged president and a brash, smitten twenty-one-year-old employee carrying on in the Oval Office like two teenage kids in a parking lot revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony", subsequently referring to "the righteous grandstanding creeps, crazy to blame, deplore, and punish" (2). The president, as a symbol and as the nation's leader, becomes an easy cipher onto which the need to embody certain values in one man can be mapped, whether they be good or bad – the quiet, democratic heroism ascribed to George Washington, or Clinton's sexual depravity.

The allegorical identification of Silk with the presidential figure is established fairly firmly not much further into the text: "[Silk] found a provision in the college constitution that said there were to be no executive committees, and arguing that those stodgy impediments to serious change had grown up only by convention and tradition, he abolished them and ruled these faculty meetings by fiat", referring subsequently to his "brand of bulldozing vanity and autocratic ego" (9). This description is not dissimilar to Leuchtenburg's of Franklin D. Roosevelt: "supremely confident in his own powers, he could imbue others with a similar confidence. [...] He loved the majesty of the position, relished its powers, and rejoiced in the opportunity it offered for achievement."<sup>234</sup> Hamilton's description of Clinton, equally, matches Silk closely: "Clinton's hubris had since his student years made it impossible for him to play second fiddle to another human being, let alone multiple beings. He *had* to shine, to wow, to win over, to seduce, lest the demons in his psyche take him over and bring him down."<sup>235</sup> It is noteworthy that both Leuchtenburg and Hamilton describe presidential figures in these terms, focussing on their personality and apparent character flaws (or, at least, complexities), and especially emphasising their egotism: that Roth does the same with Silk suggests a form of 'presidential' narrative. Much of the text's account of Silk connects together in the text's substrata to make him a quasi-presidential cipher: he has the character (and ego), influence on his community, and leadership abilities, that one would expect to see in a president according to common pseudo-psychological evaluations of historical presidents. It is demonstrably valid therefore to argue that *The Human Stain* represents, in several substantial ways, Roth's most developed and sustained engagement with the complexities of the presidency, and presidents themselves, prior to *The Plot Against America*.

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<sup>234</sup> Leuchtenburg, 'Franklin D. Roosevelt: The First Modern President', 14.

<sup>235</sup> Hamilton, *American Caesars: Lives of the U.S. Presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush*, 452.

## Could it happen here? *The Plot Against America's* complicated relationship with presidential democracy

*The Plot Against America* is Roth's first novel (of more standard novelistic qualities than *Our Gang*) to focus, to some degree, on the American presidency. It would, of course, be inaccurate to claim that is its entire subject, as Roth, displaying once more his interest in subjective personal experience and the family, explores the effects of the Lindbergh administration on one New Jersey family – a fictionalised version of his own, interlinking his own experience with his engagement with the presidency in the novel. The very first paragraph of the novel – indeed, the very first line – makes clear the importance of the theme to the narrative:

Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear. Of course no childhood is without its terrors, yet I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president or if I hadn't been the offspring of Jews (1).

The second word of the entire novel is “presides”; the fictional president is mentioned, as president, within the second line; the first line of the next paragraph refers to “the first shock”, implicitly the first in a terrifying chain that will nearly lead to the mutation of the United States into a fascist state, which is “the nomination for the presidency of Charles A. Lindbergh, America's international aviation hero, by the Republican Convention at Philadelphia” (1). It is noteworthy that here he is referred to as Charles A. Lindbergh, rather than the standard Charles Lindbergh, or simply Lindbergh, as he is usually named in the novel – it suggests the tradition of formalised presidential names, often with middle initials emphasised, stretching from James K. Polk through James A. Garfield and Chester A. Arthur to John F. Kennedy and, president at the time of *The Plot's* writing, George W. Bush. The formalities of and, as Roth puts it earlier in his career, the piety surrounding the office of president is hinted at thereby, as is the celebrity and mythmaking involved when Lindbergh is lauded as “America's international aviation hero”, more than simply the aviation pioneer, or even ‘great pilot’ – a hero, America's hero, an international hero. A subtle genealogical connection may be established with past presidents who were elected for their heroism more than for any particular political skill: considering the use of the initial, one thinks of Ulysses S. Grant, President 1869-77, the Union's successful Civil War military leader, who was an inferior president, or other generals such as Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, and William Henry Harrison (the ‘hero of Tippecanoe’) before him, going back, in fact, to the revolutionary hero, George Washington.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> This would be a particularly apposite allusion; as discussed above, *Mason & Dixon* establishes that the historical Washington, like the historical Lindbergh, was far from being straightforwardly heroic, and, in fact, was not necessarily even an especially talented military commander.



Meanwhile, the use of the verb “presides”, linked with “fear”, suggests that the phantom force of fear truly presided over the country, rather than the individual that was Charles Lindbergh, who functions primarily as the symbol of that fear – the embodiment of the power, the force of fear, exerted by the executive branch. Again the presidency is used as a symbol and a construct. Here, it can be seen, Lindbergh as president represents the genuine fear of war – and, in parts of society, the Jews – that presided in the early years of World War II before the United States joined it. In nearly the same breath, we are introduced to Lindbergh’s opposite, the man he ousts and is eventually succeeded by, Franklin D. Roosevelt: “I [Philip], a third-grader a term ahead of himself – and an embryonic stamp-collector inspired like millions of kids by the country’s foremost philatelist, President Roosevelt” (1). Once more the formality of the office is on display – it is *President Roosevelt*, not Franklin D. Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, or even President Franklin D. Roosevelt – and Roosevelt is immediately held up as the antithesis of Lindbergh. A benign, avuncular image is put forth immediately; we are unlikely to associate philately with evil, although stamps are themselves symbolic of a form of government control over communication.<sup>237</sup> Roosevelt has “inspired...millions of kids”, whereas Lindbergh has only made Philip a “frightened child”. One president symbolises a ‘positive’ sense of the phantom executive force, providing inspiration and hope, while the other symbolises something more like the force as it appears in Pynchon’s *Vineland*, inspiring only terror.

It should further be noted that the front cover of most editions of *The Plot* displays prominently a stamp of Yosemite National Park overprinted with a swastika. This refers to an incident well into the novel where Philip dreams his National Park stamp collection has all been thusly defaced, but to the new reader, the image suggests the stamp – with its portrayal of Yosemite National Park – as a symbol of the great, mythic America, desecrated by the Nazi symbol. Consequently, Roosevelt is associated with the same American symbol, and connected to the same American greatness. While stamps are part of a nexus of governmental and corporate power, as a crucial element in the national communication network (especially in the era before internet communication became commonplace), Daniel Grausam has also argued that, in *The Plot Against America*, they “represent and symbolize a shared (if flawed) national history, and thus play a crucial role.”<sup>238</sup> This is an adulterated version of national history, however, as Grausam proposes: “the culture that stamps

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<sup>237</sup> The intertwining of postal services with both governmental and corporate power are a major part of the narrative of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, which features a shadow, underground postal system – the Tristero – and its often violent challenge to established, “official” postal services, notably the nineteenth century European Thurn und Taxis Post.

<sup>238</sup> Daniel Grausam. ‘After the Post(al).’ *American Literary History* 23.3 (2011): 625-42. 625.

represent is, obviously, hugely problematic, given that they tell a sanitised version of American history in which suffering and injustice are easily replaced by commemoration”.<sup>239</sup> This “sanitised”, established history is not necessarily any less false than the counter-history Roth is providing us with in the novel: the image of the swastika overprinted on the Yosemite stamp, consequently, operates both as a challenge to recorded American history, and, at a level above it, American history as it is commemorated into myth. Roosevelt’s identification as a keen philatelist is thus problematised: stamps are clearly not neutral artefacts in national culture.

What Roth is doing here exactly is complicated, then. Is Roosevelt actually being held up as a paragon of presidential virtue, following the affirmative impulse McDonald ascribes to Roth, or is the author sticking to the maxim McCann mentions, and in fact aiming to warn us of the dangers of heroic narratives? Roosevelt himself was by no means a universally beloved, successful president without any stain on his character. That said, to a young boy such as Philip in the novel (though we must remember the voice of the boy is mediated through the narrator, his presumably considerably older self, who is in some sense connected to, but not identical with, Philip Roth, the author of *The Plot Against America*), the president may well seem a paternal figure to look up to – especially coming from a liberal Jewish background, a community that overwhelmingly supported Roosevelt and the Democrats. Roth’s intention, or one of his intentions, is evidently in part to express the view a child has of the president (especially given the mythologizing of the office) – when he makes the reference to Roosevelt and his philately, the sentence structure does place his image of Roosevelt in the imagination of his seven-year-old self, coming as it does after he refers to his being a “third-grader a term ahead of himself”, and before the concluding clause “was seven”.

Returning again to Roth’s consistent focus on subjectivity, we may note this evident placing of the Roosevelt image in the specific experience of the narrator’s seven-year-old self. Resulting from this, we must also consider the possibility that Roosevelt’s speedy return to power towards the end of the novel may also be romanticised by a young mind, occurring as it does in an almost throwaway line simply mentioning “the landslide victory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt for a third presidential term”. Roth’s use of a child’s voice here also introduces an uneasy power relation, especially as it presages Philip’s brother Sandy’s indoctrination by the Lindbergh administration. Presidential images – whether the avuncular Roosevelt or the heroic Lindbergh – can hold sway in juvenile minds, and thus help perpetuate executive power, another tendril of the phantom force it wields. *Exit Ghost’s*

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<sup>239</sup> Grausam, ‘After the Post(al)’, 631.

suggestion that *all* political engagement, even by adults, is essentially juvenile, complicates this dynamic, as does the use of burlesque, as the only rational way to represent a figure like Nixon, in *Our Gang*. Presidential politics in Roth's work seems to be simultaneously something of a joke, a subject for arch humour that cannot be treated with as a fully mature activity, and deadly serious. The nature of the section of the novel narrating the collapse of the Lindbergh/Wheeler administration – written as a factual history rather than the subjective experience of a novel, supposedly “drawn from the archives of Newark's Newsreel Theatre” – suggests that the older Philip does not especially recall these details, and relies therefore on historical archives for them, further implying the unreliability of this particular part of the narrative. As with the “sanitised” narrative presented by the stamps Roosevelt collects, this history mediated through cinematic newsreel must be inherently untrustworthy, and again advances the supremacy of ‘established’ histories – particularly salient given the problematic reversion to the precise course of recorded history the novel presents us with after Lindbergh's disappearance. We are not presented with any other details of this return to history, nor are we presented with alternative readings (unlike Pynchon's fissiparous histories and conspiracy theories), but we are left unsure of the provided narrative. Importantly, this narrative ensures the textual resurrection of Franklin D. Roosevelt as the great wartime president.

The title of the novel must also be considered, a title that can be read in a variety of ways, of which only the most obvious is the ‘plot’ of the Lindbergh administration and its cronies to turn America into a Nazi-allied, fascist state. This is the immediately apparent interpretation, utilising one of the commonest senses of the word ‘plot’ in popular discourse: the conspiracy, generally hidden, the secret plan to achieve desired ends by foul means.<sup>240</sup> Even in this interpretation, the title cuts two ways, of course, reflecting both the Lindbergh administration plot, and the plot that they ascribe to America's Jews and *their* allies – such as the Roosevelt administration – to take America into World War II, and govern in the interests of the Jewish people. In both instances, a political minority is set up against the mythic vastness invoked by ‘America’. In this context, it is of note that this plot manifests itself, arguably on both sides though more on that of the Republicans and Lindbergh supporters, in the presidency, the symbolic figurehead of America. The isolationists seek to manoeuvre Lindbergh – whose own agency in the plot always seems somewhat limited, being something of a puppet – into the presidency, while the Democrats (and indeed the Jewish community, as evidenced by the above discussed passage) idolise Roosevelt, who returns in triumph at novel's end.

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<sup>240</sup> Etymologically, the word “plot” in the sense of a conspiracy or plan is “probably a blend of French *peloter*, ‘to wind into a ball’, and *complot* ‘conspiracy’, itself a back formation from *comp(e)loter*, ‘to roll into a ball’ ”. ‘plot.’ Ernest Klein. *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. London: Elsevier, 1971. 569.

This connection of the presidency and America – and the “plot against” it by the Lindbergh supporters – is underscored very early in the text, as Philip speaks of his patriotic activities, such as reciting the pledge of allegiance and celebrating the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, concluding:

Our homeland was America.

Then the Republicans nominated Lindbergh and everything changed (5).

Christopher Vials draws attention to these lines, going on to explore ideas of nationality and government: “the trauma of the book...is that of never affectively regaining one’s nationality after having experienced its loss.”<sup>241</sup> Vials cites Philip’s line, “Lindbergh was gone and we were safe, though never would I be able to revive that unfazed sense of security first fostered in a little child by a big, protective republic and his ferociously responsible parents” (301). The Lindbergh administration has sought to undermine that “big, protective republic”, of the sort represented by Roosevelt and his New Deal programmes. Gurumurthy Neelakantan explores the connections between Jewish ideals and the New Deal, referring to Roth’s “unmistakably conflating the *yiddishkayt* ideals of the Jews with the New Deal values of the Roosevelt era...the complex cultural politics of *yiddishkayt* has an analogue in the New Deal idealism of Roosevelt that has had such a significant effect on the socio-cultural life of the United States in the twentieth century”.<sup>242</sup> Taking Neelankantan’s study into account, we can see that the Lindbergh administration is very directly set up against the Roosevelt administration, with the former adopting a political philosophy (or strong elements thereof) directly antithetical to Jewish interests, and the latter adopting one that mirrors closely Jewish ideals, in the process rendering the latter an ideal symbol of America for a young Jewish American child such as Philip. Lindbergh’s presidency is, in the most direct and painful way possible, therefore a “plot against America”. Yet the presidency’s power to *define* America is also hinted at, as we can see in Vials’ commentary: Philip feels his nationality is lost after the Lindbergh administration, even when it has collapsed. America has been reconfigured; the plot, to some degree, has succeeded.

Beyond this, though, there is still more meaning to be found in the novel’s title. The other primary sense of the word ‘plot’ – the literary sense – cannot be forgotten. The novel is *Roth’s* plot against America too, inasmuch as the plot of his novel runs counter both to the actual course of American history, and to American exceptionalist values – the idea that such an administration could never come to pass in the United States. Roth’s own denial

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<sup>241</sup> Vials, ‘What Can Happen Here?: Philip Roth, Sinclair Lewis, and the Lessons of Fascism in the American Liberal Imagination’, 21.

<sup>242</sup> Gurumurthy Neelakantan. ‘Philip Roth’s Nostalgia for the *Yiddishkayt* and the New Deal Idealisms in *The Plot Against America*’. *Philip Roth Studies* 4.2 (2008): 125-36. 125-6.

that his novel suggests that ‘it could happen here’, that it is instead meant to be emphasising that it did not, only underlines this interpretation – it is a possibility that Roth means to suggest that there are those who *wish* to see America take the route Lindbergh’s administration does, and that any such desire – any such plot that may be in motion – is not only un-American, but doomed to failure through its un-Americanness. Interpreting the novel, however, as a warning against the possibility of encroaching fascism in the United States, or of its potential to achieve power at least, and certainly imagining that it did, in fact, happen, most certainly represents something contrary to exceptionalist values and beliefs. Indeed, the novel’s playing with history can and has been interpreted as a “plot against America”. Bill Kauffman, a critic for *The American Conservative*, described it thus: “this is a repellent novel, bigoted and libellous of the dead, dripping with hatred of rural America, of Catholics, of any Middle American who has ever dared stand against the war machine. All that is left, I suppose, is for the author to collect his Presidential Medal of Freedom.”<sup>243</sup> Kauffman implies that Roth’s reimagining of history is itself prejudiced and un-American, though interestingly suggests that the author is likely to be rewarded by the president himself for his work, indicating a belief that the presidential system in actuality applauds those who question it, which would in fact be in tune with Roth’s ‘affirmative impulse’ concerning the American political system (Roth has not, to date, received the honour, however).<sup>244</sup> Kauffman’s response indicates, though, one sort of reception the novel has had that reflects its “plot against America”, its subversion and questioning of the American myth.

Much of the power of that questioning derives from the nature of the novel as the personal narrative of the young Philip. Debra Shostak has described Roth’s “consistent subject and consistent method” of subjectivity: she contends that “[Roth’s work] repeatedly explores such features of subjectivity as masculinity, embodiment...the subject’s embeddedness in history”, further discussing how “characters talk to themselves to learn who they are, what they think, what multiple positions they occupy...[they] talk to each other in order to tease out as convincingly as possible the many positions on a given subject matter”.<sup>245</sup> Her notion of the countertext and counterlife as highly significant driving forces in Roth’s work (one of his novels is expressly titled *The Counterlife*) is also useful here. Roth expresses the trope of the presidency, and the wider government of the United States, as it intertwines with the life of an individual subject, and of other individuals around him. The sense of the connection

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<sup>243</sup> Bill Kauffman. ‘Heil to the Chief.’ Rev. of *The Plot Against America*. *The American Conservative*. 27 Sept. 2004.

<sup>244</sup> Of course, it likely also implies right-wing suspicion of the federal government’s activities and philosophy, ironically given the patriotism and nationalism that tends to inform much American conservative discourse.

<sup>245</sup> Shostak, *Philip Roth – Countertexts, Counterlives*, 3.

between the remote, symbolic president, and the everyday life of an ordinary American child and his family, is made very clear by the narrative and the text of Philip's narration. Beyond this, we can also read hints at the subjectivity of the presidential figure into the text, and the subjective identities that make up America itself; in this, it is helpful to return to Shostak's aforementioned description of Roth's "listening to the local rhetoric, the various discourses...of twentieth-century America". In *The Plot Against America*, Roth engages with these discourses and conversations of characters to construct a recognisable American society under the imagined Lindbergh administration.

The administration itself remains a somewhat shadowy force at some remove from the narrative: Lindbergh is not in any real sense an active character in the novel, nor Burton K. Wheeler or Franklin D. Roosevelt. The gossip columnist Walter Winchell has arguably more significance within the narrative, despite not having historically been an elected politician, unlike Wheeler and Roosevelt, or an active campaigner as Lindbergh was with America First (though he was a highly politicised writer). The focus is decidedly not on the actualities of the administration and the figures that make it up, but rather on the citizenry and how their lives become directly subsumed into the network of cause and effect that is generated, ultimately, from the Oval Office. In this one can read a fairly different approach than in a work like *Blood Meridian*; in that work, whilst governmental figures are almost as remote, and when appearing are mostly weak and ineffectual other than in ways they do not intend (*vide* Angel Trías and the alcalde of San Diego), the citizens whose lives are deeply affected by their actions (or inactions) are for the most part faceless victims, even the members of Glanton's gang being mostly enigmas. Roth's approach, by contrast, emphatically places ordinary citizens of the republic front and centre, and demonstrates, from the novel's opening salvo, their subjection to the forces of the presidency. The "big, protective republic" to which Philip refers is evidently regarded- before the events of the novel- by the child as an almost parental, comforting concept/symbol, and its destruction therefore could naturally be expected to have the same effect as would the removal of, or significant change in the character of, a parent.

The American president is akin to a national parent, though (historically, the native Americans referred to the president as the 'Great Father'), and so matters to all citizens of whatever age. Early in the novel, a scene occurs which underlines the supreme significance of the presidency to the Roth family and other families of their community:

"No!" was the word that awakened us, "No!" being shouted in a man's loud voice from every house on the block. It can't be. No. Not for president of the United States.

Within seconds, my brother and I were once more at the radio with the rest of the family, and nobody bothered telling us to go back to bed. [...] Entire families known to me previously only fully dressed in daytime clothing were wearing pajamas and nightdresses under their bathrobes and milling around in their slippers at dawn as if driven from their homes by an earthquake. But what shocked me as a child most was the anger, the anger of men whom I knew as lighthearted kibbutzers or silent, dutiful breadwinners who all day long unclogged drainpipes or serviced furnaces or sold apples by the pound... (16).

The scene refers to Lindbergh's nomination for the presidency at the Republican national convention. Its first paragraph contains the instinctive, immediate reaction: "No. Not for president of the United States." This community cannot believe that such a man as Lindbergh could even be *nominated* for the presidency, which is all that has thus far happened. The lines have a childlike simplicity, perhaps reflecting the mediation of the event through a child's consciousness, albeit recalled years later by his adult self. The text indicates a denial that what has occurred can have occurred: this event is, for the characters, fundamentally at odds with how the world is supposed to be. We can also read Philip's own voice and participation in this denial. The passage proceeds into a family scene as the Roths gather round the radio together (the boys arriving "within seconds", underscoring the urgency and drama of the event), the late hour forgotten, listening to Lindbergh speak. This expands into a community scene as families emerge from their houses in shock and anger, as if someone has died: this is a communal event, the description of which narrates the collective consciousness of the Newark neighbourhood as the news of Lindbergh's success sinks in. Towards the end of this section of the narrative, Philip comments: "there was nothing that these bewildered elders of ours didn't think and nothing that they didn't say aloud, within our hearing, before they started to drift back to their houses..." (17). The social structure collapses, as parents, "elders", are confused and panicked, speaking aloud their anxieties and concerns as the children look on. All this is triggered, directly and in the narrative, by Lindbergh's nomination.

The response of the community is, essentially, a traumatic one; so great is the affront to their democratic ideals of the American republic that they cannot process the seemingly impossible nomination of a man they despise – not that they disagree with, but despise – to the republic's highest office. This dovetails with Aimee Pozorski's claim that Roth's novels explore a traumatic response to the moment of America's founding: "although the events of the second half of the twentieth century lie at the heart of these later novels, they seem to be looking back to another missed encounter – an encounter with the nation's founding- as if in spite of themselves...Roth's later novels are 'stuck' in the originary moment, which, for

Freud, is as traumatic as death itself.”<sup>246</sup> In the moment of Lindbergh’s nomination, the Newark Jewish community arguably looks back to that encounter, the fusion of revolutionary ideals with the inherent flaws that American democracy and idealism would bring, the failure indeed of the founding fathers to entirely live up to the subsequent myth surrounding them – in this, Roth is in similar territory to Pynchon in *Mason & Dixon*, and its portrayal of George Washington and questioning of the driving forces behind the revolution in the depiction of some of its footsoldiers in New York.<sup>247</sup> Again, we must return to that line, “No. Not for president of the United States”, the sheer unadorned bluntness of the words indicating a disconnect, a mental or logical failure to understand the trauma that is Lindbergh’s nomination. The title is spelled out, not just as ‘president’, but “president of the United States”, with all the historic and mythological weight that the title and the name of the nation carries, the importance of the union of the country, against the division that Lindbergh represents, especially to a Jewish community. The “no!” is a communal one, “shouted...from every house on the block”, representing the collective denial of the event, the only instinctive defence that the community can muster.

This is neatly contrasted with Roosevelt’s immediate reaction of dismissing the threat posed by Lindbergh, apparently predicting that, “ ‘by the time this is over, the young man will be sorry not only that he entered politics but that he ever learned to fly.’ ” (18). Roosevelt, who will go on to be defeated by Lindbergh, reacts at the opposite extreme, denying any risk and treating Lindbergh as a child. Although Philip describes this “robust response” as “raising everyone’s spirits”, and Roosevelt as a “bulwark...against oppression”, “oddly forgotten” by people in the moment of Lindbergh’s nomination (18), there is a suggestion of arrogance and complacency on the part of the beloved Roosevelt. Given that we know from the very beginning of the novel that Lindbergh *will* become president, we also read these lines with a sense of disturbing irony, aware that Roosevelt is not so much of a bulwark as he might appear, that this is part of the myth of the Great Father, of the “big, protective republic”. That much is, in fact, made clear by Philip’s reporting of the story of Roosevelt’s reaction: the president is “said to have predicted”, after his prediction he “fell immediately back into a sound sleep – or so went the story that brought us such solace the next day” (18). There is no clear veracity to the tale, no indication even of where the story originates; it is a “story”, not a report such as those that appear elsewhere in the text, or even clearly identified as a White House statement. The text is not explicit about it, but this whole section is clearly engaged with the myth of the presidency, the return to the comforting ideal that was

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<sup>246</sup> Pozorski, *Roth and Trauma: the Problem of History in the Later Works (1995-2010)*, 3.

<sup>247</sup> Pynchon’s “fork in the road America never took” from *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a similar reference point here, as is his question in *The Crying of Lot 49*, “how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?”.



traumatically fractured the previous night by Lindbergh's nomination – that the incumbent president will, of course, prevail, that he is not worried and therefore citizens should not be either.

The subjective experience of both individual and community is expressed here, and how it is shaped and directed by an intangible executive power. Their terrified, confused reaction to the nomination, and reassurance by a reassertion of the presidential myth, effected by communication through media and gossip within the network of discourses of which Shostak speaks, underline this. The effect is, naturally, clearest from Philip's narration. His whole world is disordered, as he sees families dressed in night clothes, and men he is used to seeing going quietly and cheerfully about their business shouting angrily in the street, his community thrown into literal disarray – hence the phrase “what shocked a child most”. He is not, in fact, most taken aback by the nomination itself, but by its effect on the social world of which he is a part, disturbed by the sudden change in the communal fabric. Philip comments on a subsequent thought process about the Jews' “irrevocable commitment to America”, but says, “if I could have thought through the meaning of the moment in so many words, this is probably what I would have been thinking” (17). He cannot, either through his youth or the traumatic nature of the moment, or a combination of both, properly think through its significance, reduced instead to a mostly impressionistic experience of high emotion. It is only his own community on which Philip focuses, but this too is important, as this is *his* world and *his* society, and thus his individual experience is communicated, rather than a broader overview of national reaction. The character is placed at the front of the text, not only by first-person narration but by the communication of his remembered experience, and the immediate effect on that character. The antagonist and his actions are placed more in the background, literally remote from the character and his community, yet exercising a phantom control over them – as does Roosevelt, at an even greater, phantasmal remove through the “story” of his response the next day.

This sense of the remote president controlling the nation through an intangible control partly based in the office's mythology is furthered notably by a scene in the novel's second chapter, ‘Loudmouth Jew’, coming as one jarring interruption into perhaps the novel's most mythic segment. In this chapter, the Roths go on a family holiday to Washington, D.C., although only after briefly considering visiting Canada and specifically its capital, Ottawa, instead, owing to Lindbergh's election, a man considered a “treacherous enemy” (44). An image is subtly introduced of Canada as a somewhat mysterious other, a mirror of America where, should the great republic fall, the Roths can find a new safe haven. It is noteworthy that they consider visiting Ottawa in this context, with no mention made of the larger cities of

Toronto and Montréal, Ottawa being the seat of government and thus direct equivalent to Washington, indicating that the penetration of the presidential/executive myth is such that the Roths need to visit Canada's capital in order to consider a full removal (or defection, in the political context) to America's northern neighbour. Philip notes at this juncture that his cousin Alvin has already left for Canada to fight against Hitler; this entire, however brief, passage, hints at the attraction of an alternative America, similar enough and near enough to the United States to not be an inconceivable upheaval, but retaining the ideals and myths shattered in America by Lindbergh's election.<sup>248</sup> Again, the experience of the family, their consideration of their trip and loss of a relative already to Canada, is important in expressing the effect of Lindbergh's election. This is "just six months after Lindbergh's inauguration" with references to Jewish community members speaking of a move to Canada "*should* the Lindbergh administration openly turn against the Jews" (44; my emphasis). It is evident that thus far the administration has not effected much significant action or policy. Merely the *election* of Lindbergh is enough to provoke discussion of such drastic moves, the nation disjoined and defamiliarised by the sudden rupture of an important originary myth about the republic and its leadership.

When they reach Washington D.C., the traumatic experience of Lindbergh's nomination and election is deepened by prejudice the Roths face, in the nation's capital and ultimate home of, and monument to, many of those American myths (with the subjunctive shadow hanging over the text of the alternative trip they might have taken to Ottawa, the "potential haven from persecution" Philip describes (44)).<sup>249</sup> This experience is heightened by their initial introduction to the city, as their guide Mr. Taylor repeatedly promotes and focuses on these myths. He begins his tour with the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial: "Washington and Lincoln. Our two greatest presidents – that's how I always like to begin" (60), a phrase that neatly summarises the presidential myth, the president as the American alpha. Taylor boasts of how Washington, D.C. is unique, as "of all the existing capitals in the Western world, this city alone was developed to provide a home for the national government" (61). Henry Roth then underscores this claim by asking his wife and children if they have heard Taylor's explanation of "why Washington is so special", according the city a unique and superlative place in the global order because of what it represents as a city purposely

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<sup>248</sup> Canada was also significant during the Vietnam War as a destination for draft dodgers. While no exact figure has been agreed, "tens of thousands" of draft dodgers and deserters are estimated to have fled to Canada between 1965 and 1975. See Renée Goldsmith Kasinsky, 'The Continental Channelling of American Vietnam War Refugees.' *Crime and Social Justice* 6 (1976): 28-40.

<sup>249</sup> There is an echo here of *Mason & Dixon's* "changing all from subjunctive to declarative" passage. Washington, D.C. represents the ultimate reification of the American, and specifically presidential, myth (being named after the first president), the declarative path the United States took rather than the other "forks in the road" it could have pursued – Canada representing a physical manifestation of those other possibilities, but remaining a distant land of promise in the narrative.

dedicated to the government of the nation, implying the importance and status placed on the proper setting and context for national leadership in the United States. Taylor proceeds to invoke the standard commemoration of Washington, “our first president, and in the opinion of most, our best president alongside President Lincoln”, Henry Roth responding by saying he would include Franklin D. Roosevelt in the tally of “best” presidents and complaining about his election defeat and Lindbergh’s election. Philip comments, “Mr. Taylor listened courteously, but offered no response”, suggesting a disapproval of relating these past mythic presidents to contemporary partisan concerns, or indeed the insult to the incumbent president Henry offers with the phrase, “and just look what we got instead” (62), not (necessarily) because of political support for the president but because of the respect Taylor evidently has for the office.

In the midst of this scene, Philip himself engages in an abstracting of presidential names into a form of legend: he refers to how unbelievable it is that he is in the nation’s capital, “being chauffeured in our own automobile by a stranger called by the same surname as the twelfth president of the United States, whose profile adorned the twelve-cent red-violet stamp in the album in my lap, hinged between the blue eleven-cent Polk and the green thirteen-cent Fillmore” (61). There is a remote suggestion of the tour guide as a presidential phantasm himself, with the surname of a president and knowledge about the holders of the office. For the young Philip, Taylor appears to be something not quite credible, being with his serious manner and refusal to engage in discussion something of a phantom, not quite a realised character with an individual human consciousness. This is a trait noted by Philip when he describes Taylor as “like a hidden person, except there was nothing to hide, everything impersonal about him being plainly visible” (describing him also as having “something decidedly military about his efficiency and his bearing”, linking him to his presidential namesake, as Zachary Taylor was a successful general who entered the presidency with no experience of political office). It is of considerable significance that Philip makes this observation, especially placed as it is in the text in the midst of Taylor’s presidentially-focussed tour; Catherine Morley’s observation on Roth’s “preoccupation with the presidency” is supported by this scene, as the author depicts a fictionalised version of his childhood self apparently very much preoccupied with the office and its holders. Philip also displays with his stamp collection, the security of which he is principally concerned with throughout the stay in Washington, a near-fetishisation of the presidents as portrayed on these stamps, another indication of the relevance of stamps within the text as symbol and carrier of established, “sanitised” national history. They stand as a physical and visual manifestation of the monolith of the official national history, and the use of presidential figures within that structure.

This dramatisation of national history reaches its zenith as the family visit the Lincoln Memorial: here Philip describes the sculpted face of Abraham Lincoln as “the most hallowed possible amalgamation – the face of God and the face of America all in one...what ordinarily passed for great just paled away, and there was no defence, for either an adult or a child, against the solemn atmosphere of hyperbole” (63). Philip seems to acknowledge the exaggeration, the myth, by that final phrase, but only after he himself has engaged in it, finding in the statue of Lincoln America and God combined, a potent expression of the myth and symbolism of the presidency, America seeming almost a facet of God in his description. Between those lines, however, in an isolated one-sentence paragraph, Henry comments, “‘and they shot him, the dirty dogs’ ”, which will lead into a diatribe about the fates of America’s “greatest presidents”. That comes only after the “solemn atmosphere of hyperbole”, however; Henry’s observation is uncomfortably sandwiched in the midst of Philip’s awed description of the Memorial, literally destabilising the structure of the text as the myth is destabilised by his comment. The scene finally ends as they exit the Memorial following a near-altercation between Henry and a Lindbergh supporter (whose description of Henry gives the chapter its title): “it was the most beautiful panorama I’d ever seen, a patriotic paradise, the American Garden of Eden spread before us, and we stood huddled together there, the family expelled” (66). Here Roth explicitly expresses the American myth, referring back to the earlier conflation of the face of God and the face of America in the visage of Abraham Lincoln, the inclusion of the word “American” emphasising the importance of the nation in the scene, suggesting that Eden itself is to be found in America, specifically. The alliterative “patriotic paradise” indicates the nature of the National Mall in Washington as a dramatic symbol of the myth and power of the United States, though the hard ‘p’ sounds also hint at a darker undercurrent, a suggestion that the words are being sarcastically spat out, given what has happened to the Roths and how this scene itself ends, with “the family expelled”.

The use of the word “huddled” is deeply significant: the Statue of Liberty famously bears an inscription of Emma Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus”, including the lines, “Give me your tired, your poor/ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”, welcoming new immigrants to America. The statue is, itself, another important national symbol forming part of the American myth, particularly the idea of the country as the land of the free and home for persecuted peoples from the world over. Roth neatly, though subtly, turns this on its head – the Roths are here “huddled together” in sight of another statue of national import, another American symbol, looking out at the “patriotic paradise” of Washington, and yet “expelled” within their own land, despite Philip’s insistence at the start of the novel that he and his

community are fully American. It is also salient that the statue in the background of this scene, the setting for the Roths' confrontation with and implicit expulsion from the American community (or that part of it supporting Lindbergh, at least), is Abraham Lincoln, a common choice for America's greatest president, and the man who supposedly kept the Union together and fought for equality – here, Lincoln only serves as a catalyst for disagreement, aggression, and prejudice, affording no protection to the Roths, implying the ultimate feebleness of the presidential symbol. Lincoln's power was temporal and limited, not eternally enforced and unassailable. This theme is made evident by Philip's description of his feelings as they leave the Memorial:

My mother was directly beside me on the stairs, trying to act like someone whose panic wasn't running wild within her, and suddenly I felt that it had fallen to me to hold her together, to become all at once a courageous new creature with something of Lincoln himself clinging to him. But all I could do when she offered me a hand was to take it and clutch it like the unripened being I was, a boy whose stamp collection still represented nine-tenths of his knowledge of the world (66-67).

The potent concept of the benevolent power of the presidency works upon the young Philip: he feels that he should somehow be inspired by seeing Lincoln's statue to some new height of courage and strength, but instead he remains merely a timid boy. All he knows is his stamp collection, an important comment, as we know his stamp collection contains all the presidents and is where much of his presidential knowledge derives from. The implication here is that all Philip knows is, literally, the symbols of the presidents – their images, names, dates – and the attached myths, whilst he lacks any real understanding of the presidency in reality, the truth of its failure to protect its citizens when it is actually necessary and the consequent hollowness of the dramatic rhetoric and fetishised narrative of presidential history.

Swiftly following on this scene the Roths are more literally expelled, from their hotel, by an implicitly anti-Semitic manager who calls the police; as they exit the hotel, the aforementioned scene suggesting the phantom control of the president occurs, and here we can see a similar dichotomy in the text's approach to the executive power as can be seen in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. The Roths hear the "loud roar of a low-flying plane passing over Washington", and it transpires that it is the Lockheed Interceptor, being flown by none other than President Lindbergh (as Mr. Taylor describes, according him the formal title of the office and the reverence for it that implies again); everyone on the street looks up, and Philip describes how the "people out walking burst into applause, somebody shouted 'Hurray for

Lindy!’ ” (72), and the general excitement generated by the plane’s appearance.<sup>250</sup> This scene occurs not long after Henry Roth names Lindbergh as the reason for the family’s expulsion from the hotel: “ ‘This is that goddamn Lindbergh!’ my father said. ‘All you little fascists are in the saddle now’ ” (68). The combination of the two scenes creates a potent sense of the remote power of the presidency, even where events are not directly caused by the president. Lindbergh’s policies and attitude towards the Jews, it is suggested, encourage and abet ordinary citizens in any position of power, however trivial, to act similarly and further the prejudice endured by the oppressed minority group, while his mere appearance, flying high in the sky, can arrest and enchant groups of citizens, enthralled by the symbol of Lindbergh.

Hence, the tension between forms of presidential power is asserted again, as it is in *Blood Meridian*: the president (and other figures of government) can exert huge negative power, the power to license aggression and hostility, but can exert little power to protect the citizenry. The same tension is visible in *Blood Meridian* between Governor Angel Trías’ power to commission and legitimate the scalphunters, and total lack of power to protect the citizens of Chihuahua against their subsequent depredations, or put an end to their slaughter. Elements and forms of that tension are observable at several levels in *The Plot Against America*. The *embodied* executive force – Trías, Lindbergh, Roosevelt – wields great theoretical power, but this power is provided to it by the *phantom* executive force operating beyond the means of the individual human, a force which cannot be controlled. Even in *Vineland*, Reagan remains a remote character who is not directly represented in the text, as an avatar of the phantom force.

To explore the complex nature of this tension in the concept of the presidency, possibly the most fundamental pillar in its conceptual construction in literature, we must also consider Roosevelt’s relationship with his citizens, which is of immense significance to this discussion. Franklin D. Roosevelt has been acknowledged by historians as a president who

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<sup>250</sup> The presence of the Lockheed Interceptor in the text here, being flown by Lindbergh, is informative, suggesting the complex intersection of corporate, military, and executive power. Lockheed was suspected of having deep links with the government. Anthony Sampson remarks that, in the immediate postwar period, “Lockheed...had a special aura, as the biggest defence company, with close links with intelligence: it had built the spectacular U2 spy plane at the special behest of Allen Dulles, the director of the CIA in the ‘fifties [...] There were some suspicions that Lockheed’s links with the CIA might go much deeper, into their operations and agents abroad.” Sampson explores in depth the extensive links between the executive branch, particularly the Kennedy and Johnson administrations under Robert S. McNamara’s tenure as Secretary of Defence, and the arms sales business. “With [McNamara’s] Ford Motor background, he was determined that the Pentagon must be run on business-like lines, in selling arms as any in every other department.” Anthony Sampson. *The Arms Bazaar: The Companies, The Dealers, The Bribes: From Vickers to Lockheed*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977. 114-24.

fundamentally changed the role of the federal government, and the presidency itself, and how the American citizenship's relationship with them was constructed. Lawrence and Cornelia Levine draw attention to this in their work on the millions of letters sent to Roosevelt throughout his presidency by ordinary citizens, *The People and the President*:

Though millions of Americans – then and since – were to remain deeply ambivalent about their dependence upon institutions, Franklin Roosevelt accustomed them to look to Washington, D.C., and the federal government both as a protector from forces they could not control, and often could not even identify, and as a provider in moments of dire need...FDR transformed the role of the federal government and the nature of the presidency. He was more exposed to and better known by the American people than any of his predecessors...he presided over...a revolution in the pattern of communication between Americans and their Chief Executive.<sup>251</sup>

Roth's choice to engage with Roosevelt's presidency specifically is thus important, given how Roosevelt developed and expanded the office. Roosevelt was a president who, more than any other before him, engaged with his fellow citizens, spoke to them as a paternal figure from his "fireside chats", and was engaged with in turn by them: as Levine and Levine observe, Roosevelt received a vast number of letters from American citizens, so many that those archived in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library alone number fifteen million. Citizens seemed to view him almost as a friend or relative in whom they could confide and to whom they could impart advice: one letter to him opens, "Dear Friend; And I address you thus in all sincerity, as I feel you are the people's friend".<sup>252</sup> Others talk of their support for him and shame at not having voted for him, ask for his continued favour as an engaging leader, or chastise him in a personal manner for perceived flawed decision-making. Roosevelt, then, inaugurated a new age of personal communication and relation to the president, a development that has continued into the present political era as Barack Obama is shown on the White House's website replying to individual citizens' messages on Twitter. As has already been discussed, in *The Plot Against America*, we see the positive side of this relationship, the "big, protective republic" – within the first few lines, we are introduced to a sense of the president as an avuncular, influential presence in the nation (Philip is "inspired like millions of kids" (1)), a paternal and benevolent figure providing more than mere political leadership. Roosevelt's presentation in the novel is resultantly complicated. Philip's inspiration by him, and the Jewish community's image of him as a form of guardian figure, suggests the extensive effect of his communication with citizens. However, he is a largely

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<sup>251</sup> Lawrence W. and Cornelia R. Levine. *The People and the President*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002. X.

<sup>252</sup> *The People and the President*, 49.

passive force in the text – unlike Walter Winchell, he is not out campaigning against Lindbergh – eventually returning to reset history to the ‘right’ course of events at the novel’s conclusion. The citizenry of *The Plot Against America* perhaps place too much trust in a figure who is ultimately powerless to help them without the aura and authority of the presidency, and may not even be that concerned to help them in any case.

In the same breath, we are introduced to the other side of this figure, its dark reflection: Lindbergh. Before Roosevelt is mentioned, Lindbergh intrudes on the narrative in a similar, yet considerably more disturbing, way. The narrator Roth comments, “I wonder if I would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn’t been president”, going on to mention “the nomination of...America’s international aviation hero” (1). This can be seen as the alternate of Roosevelt’s benevolent father figure: Lindbergh is cast in opposition as an abusive father, who turns Philip (and, by implication, other Jewish children) into a “frightened little boy”. Considering the discourse of helping Jews by activities that in fact victimise them later in the novel – the euphemistically terrifying “Office of American Absorption” for one, or Mr. Roth’s company letter informing him of his relocation under Homestead 42, which is directly connected with an American and indeed uniquely American pioneer tradition – the image of Lindbergh as a paternal figure like Roosevelt, only far more malevolent, is persuasive. Lindbergh, like Roosevelt, is also cast as more than a simple politician. Where Roosevelt is “the country’s foremost philatelist”, Lindbergh is “America’s international aviation hero”. They are, in many ways, two sides of the same coin, as introduced here, at the novel’s very beginning.

The figuring is further complicated: Lindbergh is an “international hero”, in the challenging field of aviation, one also important to defence (again introducing the spectre of the military-industrial-governmental complex), where Roosevelt is simply the nation’s most famous stamp collector, a harmless but ultimately trivial hobby. Lindbergh is postulated as the courageous, athletic hero, where Roosevelt is the benevolent hobbyist. Lindbergh is thus perhaps more obviously a leader (Roosevelt in this dichotomy seems more an endearing figurehead, again inviting a debate as to how much power he actually wielded, or chose to wield), but athleticism and technological prowess are often hallmarks of fascist thought. He is the “hero” carrying all the mythic qualities that come with that, and yet clearly the more dangerous man (and, as we will see as the novel progresses, not an especially strong leader even if one sets aside the nature of his policies). It is telling that this heroic image, in fact, even ensnared Roosevelt, who, while still Governor of New York, asked for an autographed



picture of the young Lindbergh.<sup>253</sup> Beyond the much more explicitly apparent exploration of leadership contained in the novel, from its very outset we are led into an implicit debate about what sort of man is suited to be president (especially taking into regard Roth's aforementioned ultimately positive view of Roosevelt and the American political system).

Lindbergh's athletic, heroic image does not, however, divorce him from the paternalistic elements of Roosevelt's image; he is merely a different sort of father. He is described by the narrator Roth as he starts his campaign as "Lindy all over again, straight-talking Lindy, who had never to look or to sound superior, who simply was superior – fearless Lindy, at once youthful and gravely mature, the rugged individualist, the legendary American man's man" (30). Where Roosevelt is depicted as – in fact – more of a grandfatherly figure, Lindbergh is the honest, brave, talented young father. The nation obsessed over the historical Lindbergh's fatherhood: before the infamous disappearance of his son, when the birth was announced, Lindbergh's biographer notes that "telegrams and letters and flowers and presents and poems and songs poured in from all over the world – mostly from complete strangers".<sup>254</sup> It is immediately noticeable how closely this reflects the copious mail received by Roosevelt, again supporting the suggestion of the two as distorted mirror images of each other. The narrator in the novel states,

what Charles A. Lindbergh represented was normalcy raised to heroic proportions, a decent man with an honest face and an undistinguished voice who had resoundingly demonstrated to the entire planet the courage to take charge and the fortitude to shape history and, of course, the power to transcend personal tragedy (53).

Aside from Lindbergh's representation as an ordinary American man, the note of his personal tragedy links him to Roosevelt, given the latter's struggles with polio (ironically mentioned just prior to this passage as a negative for Roosevelt given the contrast with Lindbergh's athleticism), and also reminds us of his murdered child and the consequently tragic nature of his fatherhood.

The sense advanced of Lindbergh as the nation's protector – "if Lindbergh promised no war, then there would be no war – for the great majority it was as simple as that" – underscores his image as a benevolent father figure in a different, but equally potent, sense to Roosevelt. Indeed, his Vice-President, Burton K. Wheeler, is actively differentiated from him by reference to Lindbergh's benevolence: "Wheeler had been chosen...to have on the ticket a combative, un-Lindbergh-like candidate" (175). Lindbergh is frequently identified, explicitly or by implication, as a thoughtful, gentle man, never a savage demagogue in Hitler's mould, or

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<sup>253</sup> A. Scott Berg, *Lindbergh*. Oxford: Pan, 1999. 218.

<sup>254</sup> Berg, *Lindbergh*, 217.

even that of American politicians such as Wheeler's. He, like Roosevelt, is a father figure, protecting and supporting the nation, only in his case, that protection and apparent benevolence is harmful. The contrast with actual history is informative, as Roth does not choose to elect the Republicans' historical 1940 nominee, Wendell Willkie, in his fiction, even though, as a note in Roosevelt's collected letters states, "the reckless appeals to isolationism and appeasement made by the Republicans in the closing days of the campaign caused many liberals to fear that a Willkie victory would mean the end of democracy in the United States".<sup>255</sup> Roosevelt himself muses in the letter that "those newspapers of the nation which most loudly cried dictatorship against me would have been the first to justify the beginnings of dictatorship by somebody else".<sup>256</sup> Willkie has been described as "forceful" and "experienced as an executive", and so might seem a more obvious candidate for a fictional American dictatorship than Lindbergh.<sup>257 258</sup>

It is remarkable, and deeply significant, then, that Roth chooses instead to invoke the figure of Lindbergh. There were "whisperings of drafting him to run for President (even though he was constitutionally underage)" as early as 1930, but he was never in serious contention, his biographer notably mentioning the possibility only in passing.<sup>259</sup> Roth, it seems demonstrable, purposely chooses Lindbergh for the qualities he possessed as a cultural figure, as outlined above. He was a heroic emblem of American progress and power, an 'ordinary' everyman to whom citizens could relate, a tragic figure as a bereaved father, and an object of huge public interest and communication just as Roosevelt was, where Willkie was a successful businessman-cum-politician who, prior to the 1940 Republican convention, was not even particularly noted as a presidential candidate, the *New Republic* stating that on

<sup>255</sup> Elliott Roosevelt, ed.. *The Roosevelt Letters, Volume III [1928-1945]*. London: Harrap, 1952. 339.

<sup>256</sup> *The Roosevelt Letters*, 339.

<sup>257</sup> Hugh Ross. 'Was the Nomination of Wendell Willkie a Political Miracle?'. *Indiana Magazine of History*, 58.2 (1962): 79-100. 81.

<sup>258</sup> Donald Bruce Johnson describes Willkie as a "dynamic and argumentative outsider", although it must also be noted that, when younger, he was "active in the Democratic party", "repeatedly spoke for civil liberties", and "consistently urged membership in the League of Nations". However, later, he would argue against the New Deal publicly, and became a "critic of Franklin Roosevelt's right to be the President at all." He argued that "Britain and France were America's first line of defence, which the United States had to strengthen by all means short of war." Donald Bruce Johnson. *The Republican Party and Wendell Willkie*. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1960. Willkie is also referenced by David Foster Wallace in 'The Suffering Channel': "nearly every Indiana community has some street, lane, drive, or easement named for Wendell L. Willkie, b. 1892, GOP, favourite son." In *The David Foster Wallace Reader*. 456-533. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014. 470. Olivia Banner describes Willkie's function in Wallace's story as a "loser", a symbol of the failure of "paternal authority...in the Midwest", and as a "favourite son", a "regional favourite", distinguishing between a "rural Midwest...and a metropolitan, sophisticated, culturally productive East Coast". ' "They're literally shit": Masculinity and the Work of Art in an Age of Waste Recycling.' *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/11 (2009): 74-90. 79. Willkie's identity as a "loser" and a somewhat parochial figure – though Lindbergh too was born in the Midwest and lived parts of his life there – may provide some of the reason for Roth's use of Lindbergh, a figure who connected with the national public in a much greater way.

<sup>259</sup> Berg, *Lindbergh*, 218.

Willkie's arrival in Philadelphia for the convention, "his delegate strength could have been mustered in a medium-sized hotel room".<sup>260</sup> Lindbergh functions as both a candidate and an actual presidential figure in a way Willkie could not for the purposes of the text. Given real contemporary concerns, Willkie could likely function effectively and credibly in the text as a typical, Hitler-like dictator, but Lindbergh, in his all-American heroism, introduces the considerably more nuanced image of the American dictator – a patriotic, familiar and familial, benevolent, and democratically elected president, "a selfless ruler and a strong, silent saint" (304) in the sarcastic words of Fiorello La Guardia, Mayor of New York, in the novel, whose views and actions tend just slightly to the right of historical reality. In some ways, Lindbergh even epitomises the *ideal* of the president, the "incorruptible test pilot" full of "very gleaming virtue demonstrated daily" (304), to again quote La Guardia, as opposed to someone like Walter Winchell, "one more doozy of a specimen of the imperfect man" (304), a specimen which, by implication, represents most presidential and political candidates – La Guardia himself being a partisan demagogue, indulging in "snarling peroration" and "red-faced" (305) as the narrator Roth describes him, and yet endorsed by Roosevelt as Winchell's successor.

Lindbergh, in fact, is near enough the antithesis of *Our Gang's* malevolent, cynical, ignorant Trick E. Dixon – and yet both run undemocratic, ultimately despotic and absolutist governments, and both come to bad ends. The construction of the presidency here is layered and subtle. Roth suggests that both Dixon and Lindbergh represent different forms of authoritarian threats, one an outright and unashamed tyrant, the other a "strong, silent saint" whose heroism, masking the true nature of his policies and ideals, attracts ordinary citizens into prejudice and violence. Both are plausible (Dixon representing only an exaggeration of the historic Nixon), and both represent the potential for something like the Nazi regime in the United States. Complicating this discussion is the figure of Roosevelt, who is left effectively untouched by the novel as a beloved and respected figure (himself, however, functioning more or less as a "strong, silent saint") – but he is powerless against the adoration of Lindbergh, who has all of Roosevelt's endearing qualities alongside heroics, physical perfection, and an ordinary sense that the aristocratic Roosevelt could not possess.

We can further understand the nature of Roth's engagement with the presidency and his imagining of it under Lindbergh if we consider Vials' observation on the novel: "emerging this time out of the Republican Party, Lindbergh's America is more subtly fascist than that of Windrip: it does not abolish political parties nor erect concentration camps on US soil."<sup>261</sup>

<sup>260</sup> Jonathan Ross. 'How They Won with Willkie'. *New Republic*, CIII (July 8, 1940). 49.

<sup>261</sup> Vials, 'What Can Happen Here?: Philip Roth, Sinclair Lewis, and the Lessons of Fascism in the American Liberal Imagination', 18.

“This time” is in reference to Vials’ comparative text, Sinclair Lewis’ 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here*, whose dictatorial figure, Berzelius Windrip, emerges from the Democratic party. While Vials focuses on liberal anti-fascism and Roth’s relationship with it, his comparison is also salient in considering how Roth constructs the presidency and its abuse in *The Plot Against America*. He chooses to go against one of his novel’s most obvious literary forerunners by utilising a Republican candidate. His use of Lindbergh over the historical nominee Willkie is again significant here, as, although Lindbergh did have well-known political views, since he was never in fact a candidate for political office and therefore was never forced to expressly adopt the “Democrat” or “Republican” label, he is not generally connected in the cultural consciousness with either party, being “America’s national aviation hero”, a figure of non-partisan unity.<sup>262</sup> His Vice-President, Burton K. Wheeler, was, in fact, both historically and in the novel, a Democrat, and it is as – nominally, at least – a Democrat, that Wheeler ascends to the acting presidency and briefly becomes a much more genuinely dictatorial figure than Lindbergh.

Thus, in spite of McCann’s suggestion of Roth’s renewed support for partisanship in his later years, in *The Plot Against America* he seems to, to a degree, implicate both parties, on both sides (that is, for and against Lindbergh) in fact, since La Guardia, the anointed unity candidate against Lindbergh near the novel’s end, is a Republican. Historically, we should also note the fact that Willkie argued that *Roosevelt* was a potential dictator in the making: “he declared that the President had lost faith in the American people and predicted that if Roosevelt obtained re-election, the nation would be placed under a totalitarian regime before 1944.”<sup>263</sup> Roth’s construction of the presidency is therefore clearly not based in a partisan context with designs to attack the Republican party, in spite of the near beatification of Roosevelt – which may well reflect a veiled warning that Roosevelt may not have been so very far from being a figure like Lindbergh’s presentation in the novel. Having considered this, Roth’s protestations that the novel was not a thinly veiled commentary on the Bush administration contemporary to its publication are perhaps more credible.

The second part of Vials’ observation is of equal importance. Lindbergh’s America is “subtly fascist”, and does not involve explicit abolition of democratic systems or concentration camps (it is worth noting here that, historically, Roosevelt’s administration *did* run internment camps on American soil, those set up to hold Japanese American citizens during World War II). Lindbergh does not, under normative definitions, fit the concept of a dictator, having been

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<sup>262</sup> As has been noted, Willkie by contrast had been active within both the Democratic and Republican parties.

<sup>263</sup> Johnson, *The Republican Party and Wendell Willkie*, 137.

popularly mandated in an apparently free and fair general election, nor does he explicitly seek to overturn any element of the United States' complex system of checks and balances, or the Constitution. James Malloy provides a broad definition of modern authoritarian regimes as "defined first as negatives of the positive characterisation of procedurally bound constitutional democratic regimes...lacking legal, procedural, or democratic checks, authoritarian regimes are command systems (usually executive decree) in which governmental power is exercised in an essentially arbitrary and therefore unpredictable pattern".<sup>264</sup> Lindbergh's administration generally does not fit this definition: he is elected constitutionally, democratically, and according to procedure, and until Wheeler's ascension, his government operates within constitutional boundaries (or, at least, does not commit any actions that very clearly contravene the Constitution and laws of the land, as bodies and policies such as the Office of American Absorption and Homestead 42 operate by encouragement and apparent choice, rather than actually forcing any citizen to move). Lindbergh's election is expressed in terms that are quite explicit about the democratic nature of his elevation to power: "the November election hadn't even been close. Lindbergh got fifty-seven percent of the popular vote and, in an electoral sweep, carried forty-six states...what had happened, they explained, was that Americans had shown themselves unwilling to break the tradition of the two-term presidency that George Washington had instituted and that no president before Roosevelt had dared to challenge" (52-3). Although there is a minor hint at something awry in the observation that "after the election, disbelief prevailed, especially amongst the pollsters" (53), this is never revisited: there is no suggestion that Lindbergh and the Republicans committed electoral fraud. Much later in the text, Mr. Roth discusses the election and confirms its popular democratic nature: "and so what do the voters do in nineteen hundred and forty? They elect a fascist instead" (285).

Lindbergh attains the presidency by the appropriate constitutional procedures; it is in fact Roosevelt who is implicitly aligned with dictatorship here, for attempting to win an unprecedented third term, the great name of Washington being invoked to suggest his anti-democratic aim. Washington, of course, had been praised as a modern Cincinnatus precisely for his insistence on only serving two terms. Historically, the Twenty-Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, passed by Congress in 1947 and ratified by the necessary majority of states in 1951, only six years after Roosevelt's death, would in fact codify the idea that a President should only be elected twice.<sup>265</sup> Roth shrewdly and subtly

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<sup>264</sup> James Malloy, 'Contemporary Authoritarian Regimes'. *Encyclopaedia of Government and Politics*, Vol. 1. Ed. Mary Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan. London: Routledge, 1992. 237.

<sup>265</sup> The amendment reads: "no person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice, and no person who has held the office of President, or acted as President, for more than two years of a term to which some other person was elected President shall be elected to the office of the

uses this element of presidential theory to outline how Lindbergh's campaign and supporters could have identified Roosevelt as the autocrat – attempting to bypass understood, if not yet formally codified, procedures for establishing America's leadership – while Lindbergh was a popularly supported 'national hero'. Mr. Roth's unambiguous aligning of agency in the appointment of Lindbergh to the presidency to the voting citizens is made very evident by his use of the phrase "what do the voters do...they elect a fascist", ascribing responsibility for his administration forcefully to the American electorate via the simple, accusatory verb 'do', the use of the rhetorical question followed by the pronoun 'they' locking the enfranchised citizenry inextricably into responsibility for the election. This has the important side-effect of absolving Lindbergh and his political supporters from any suggestion of undemocratic action.

The significance of the novel's underscoring of Lindbergh's use of democratic procedures is in its consequent rejection of the idea that America falls under a brutal dictatorship brought to power and supported by military force: its own mythologised system of popular democracy, particularly as expressed through the institution of the presidency, creates its "perpetual fear". Returning to theories of government and power, Max Weber's construction of patriarchal power is useful here. Weber distinguishes between bureaucratic domination and patriarchal domination, averring that "both ultimately find their inner support in the subjects' compliance with norms", and that, under the former, these are "established rationally" and "appeal to the sense of abstract legality", whilst in the latter they derive from tradition, "the belief in the inviolability of that which has existed from time out of mind".<sup>266</sup> Bureaucratic domination involves the person in power having authority to make decrees and issue rulings, whilst patriarchal domination involves legitimation of decrees by personal authority; ultimately, Weber states, "the two basic elements of patriarchal authority then are piety towards tradition and toward the master".<sup>267</sup>

I would argue that Roth's construction of the presidency in fact combines these two forms of domination. Lindbergh gains power by the processes of bureaucratic domination: constitutional and legal processes legitimised by rational ideals. That is made clear by the narrator Roth's summary of the 1940 election, more than anything in his reference to the 'popular vote' (advancing the concept of popular democracy, an ancient form of rational

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President more than once. But this Article shall not apply to any person holding the office of President when this Article was proposed by the Congress, and shall not prevent any person who may be holding the office of President, or acting as President, during the term within which this Article becomes operative from holding the office of President or acting as President during the remainder of such term." National Archives and Records Administration. *Archives.gov*. 7<sup>th</sup> April 2015.

<sup>266</sup> Max Weber. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Vol. 3. New York, NY: Bedminster, 1968. 1006.

<sup>267</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 1008.

governmental process). It is further emphasised by Mr. Roth's monologue about elections towards the novel's conclusion, wherein he mentions each presidential election since 1924, his vote in each, and the outcome of each, and he speaks of his love of the process: " 'You know what I love, Cucuzza? Election Day. I love to vote. Since I was old enough, I have not missed an election.' " (285). Wheeler's ascension to the presidency occurs, explicitly, via the Constitution: "Burton K. Wheeler announces that, after consulting with the First Lady and the majority leaders of the House and the Senate and the chief justice of the Supreme Court, he has deemed it in the country's best interest to assume the duties of acting president in accordance with Article II, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution" (308).<sup>268</sup> Again, historically, the ability of the Vice-President to succeed to the presidency would be clearly codified in 1967 as the Twenty-Fifth Amendment (Article II being ambiguous on the matter).<sup>269</sup> Rational, abstract legal process is again paramount here, and continues to be invoked by the increasingly dictatorial Wheeler as he announces events to Congress and makes use of his power as Commander-in-Chief to keep law and order using the United States forces.

However, whilst the Lindbergh-Wheeler ticket may win by constitutional process, how they win is another matter. This is much more through the personal loyalty and tradition of which Weber speaks, in accordance with "patriarchal domination". Lindbergh is "America's international hero", one of "strait-laced, old-fashioned demeanour", "normalcy raised to heroic proportions, a decent man with an honest face". As has been discussed, he was historically the target of a vast amount of personal communication and adoration. His appearance in the skies over Washington DC (if it is Charles and not Ann) as the Roths visit establishes that firmly in the novel, people shouting, "Hurray for Lindy!" at the plane (75). Whilst Roth does not overplay it, there is a firm sense of personal support for Lindbergh, going beyond his policies. As has been discussed, it is of great note that Roth chooses the popular 'hero' Lindbergh over the historical nominee, Willkie the businessman-politician, as Lindbergh's personal popularity is important in the continuing support of his administration's increasingly insidious policies, returning us to Weber's definition of patriarchal domination,

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<sup>268</sup> The relevant lines in the Constitution read: "in Case of the Removal of the President from Office, or of his Death, Resignation, or Inability to discharge the Powers and Duties of the said Office, the Same shall devolve on the Vice President". *Archives.gov*.

<sup>269</sup> Section 1 of the Amendment reads "in case of the removal of the President from office or of his death or resignation, the Vice President shall become President." This clarified an ambiguity as to whether the *office* of president devolved on the vice-president, or merely its powers and duties. *Archives.gov*. Seven years after the amendment was passed, its provisions were activated when Richard Nixon resigned the presidency, and Gerald Ford assumed the office – who had ascended to the vice-presidency also under the provisions of the amendment rather than being elected by the nation. He was nominated by President Nixon after the resignation in 1973 of the elected vice-president, Spiro Agnew, and confirmed by Congress. The Twenty-Fifth Amendment established this process for replacing a vice-president who died, resigned, or assumed the presidency; previously, the office would remain vacant until the next presidential election, which had in fact happened sixteen times before the amendment was passed.

where legitimacy derives from personal support. The citizens even in the same breath show piety to tradition, if we are to believe the pollsters' analysis that they reject Roosevelt because of his attempt to break the convention of two presidential terms: patriarchal domination thus is very much part of the presidential system as negotiated in *The Plot Against America*, alongside major elements of bureaucratic domination.

It is, of course, to be noted that the historical result of the 1940 election did, in fact, return Roosevelt for a third term in office, and the 1944 election would return him for a fourth, perhaps suggesting that Roth's point that 'it didn't happen here' is in play, as by explicitly making the connection to the two-term convention Roth draws attention to the historical breaking of the convention for Roosevelt in 1940. In the Postscript's 'True Chronology of the Major Figures', Roth does note this under the entry for Roosevelt: "NOVEMBER 1940. Denounced by right-wing Republicans as a 'war-monger,' and campaigning as an avowed enemy of Hitler and fascism pledged to do everything possible to keep America out of the European war, Roosevelt wins unprecedented third term, by 449 to 82 electoral votes" (367). The inclusion of the Postscript and the 'True Chronology' is a critically important element of the text, as it addresses its counterfactual nature and actively demonstrates the fictiveness of Roth's imagined regime: it ensures the complication of any potential narrative about the nature of American democracy, and indeed any hypothesised connections to the 2001-2009 Bush administration. *The Plot Against America*, therefore, functions in some sense as a political experiment in narrative form, exploring the potentialities latent in the American system deriving from its traditions and philosophy and displaying the credible ease by which it could slip into the early stages of authoritarianism, even while set against historical evidence that so far it has not. It presents a complicated view of how presidential and executive power, both embodied and disembodied (the 'phantom' force), work in the nation at large, and itself embodies the conflicting perspectives that 'it could happen here' and 'it didn't happen here'. The novel provides no conclusion by which we might divine a final argument about the nature of American democracy and government.

### ***Exit Ghost* and the departure from political engagement**

The latest novel in Roth's oeuvre to deal with the presidency as a significant theme is 2007's *Exit Ghost*, the final Zuckerman novel and, in theory, sequel to *The Human Stain*, being the next in the Zuckerman sequence. As *The Human Stain* took place against the backdrop of the Lewinsky scandal, so *Exit Ghost* takes place against the backdrop of the 2004 presidential election, when George W. Bush was re-elected over John Kerry after his controversial 2000 victory and first term. As in the earlier novel with Clinton's woes, the



election provides both a significant contextual setting for the narrative's events, and commentary on the relationship of the public to the presidency. An early reference, indeed, grants a noteworthy illumination of the events of *The Human Stain*. At Zuckerman's first meeting with the young couple who will precipitate the events of the novel, the husband, Billy Davidoff, asks if Zuckerman knows about the election, eliciting the response, " 'Practically nothing,' I said. 'People don't talk openly about politics in the hick town where I live, certainly never to an outsider like me. I don't turn on the TV much. No, I don't know a thing.' " <sup>270</sup>

That town, of course, is Athena. Zuckerman's comment here provides a further dimension to the events of the previous novel. Firstly, we remember that Clinton's scandal *was* talked about in Athena in *The Human Stain*, albeit by young university professors; secondly, Coleman Silk's life and actions became the subject of a great deal of open discussion. In a sense, we can consequently understand Silk as fulfilling a presidential-like role for Athena, given its aversion to open discussion of national politics: his involvement in improving the town's fortunes and quality of life via his actions at the college make him, as has been argued, into a presidential – almost Founding-Father-like – figure. Zuckerman's description of Athena here introduces a subtle implication that, in a "hick town" that does not pay attention to broader political events – where only the 'outsider' academics employed at the college discuss the president's misdeeds – a more local community leader figure such as Silk will be forced to enact a role akin to the presidential. There is even a suggestion hinted at across the two novels, between the events of *The Human Stain* and the emphasis placed on Athena's apparent isolation from national life in *Exit Ghost*, that there may be a profound *need* for such a figure, and for the extremity of public reaction to that figure, in American society.

Beyond this, this exchange also introduces the sense that, by divorcing himself from any involvement in, or even awareness of, national politics, Zuckerman has withdrawn from life, even from reality. After confirming that he has not followed the war in Iraq or "Bush's lies", which Billy responds to with incredulity based on Zuckerman's novels, Zuckerman says, " 'I've served my tour as exasperated liberal and indignant citizen [...] I don't wish to register an opinion, I don't want to express myself on 'the issues' – I don't even want to know what they are. It no longer suits me to know, and what doesn't suit me, I expunge.' " (37). Zuckerman connects the motive for this speech with an implied reawakening of some kind of physical desire (Zuckerman being impotent at this stage in his life), given the presence of the young woman Jamie Logan, again indicating a correlation between engagement in social

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<sup>270</sup> Philip Roth. *Exit Ghost*. London: Vintage, 2008. 36. All references to *Exit Ghost* are to this edition.

life, even in sexual desire, and engagement in political life. Billy's references to the monosyllabically named "Bush", as a totem of national disintegration and disgrace, his disbelief that Zuckerman should not have been following closely the actions of "Bush", and Zuckerman's response, his re-engagement with political discussion, and through the novel with a more social life away from the isolation of his rural Berkshires house, all speak once more to the sense of a *need* both to have a presidential figure, whether it be Clinton, Bush, or Silk, and to engage with that figure in order to take a full part in society. We are again reminded of the epigraph to *The Human Stain*: the president is, as has been observed, in some sense a paternal figure, against whom American citizens struggle, but with whom they retain a perverse obsession, a compulsion to gravitate towards such figures, and in some sense define themselves by their reaction to them.<sup>271</sup> Consequently, Zuckerman's expressed desire to simply not be involved – to *not* have a reaction to the president or national politics generally – is shocking, unfamiliar, to Billy.

It is significant that subsequently, when Zuckerman muses to himself about the election on the way to watch the results with Billy and Jamie, he refers to it as "the election results of a campaign that, for the first time since I was made aware of electoral politics – when Roosevelt defeated Willkie in 1940 – I knew barely anything about" (68). The last period of time in which Zuckerman was as unaware of presidential politics as he is in 2004 was his childhood, when he could not have taken a full part in society, having not yet reached maturity. This expands the demonstrable dialogue in the text between social and political engagement; Zuckerman's unawareness of Bush and the politics of the early 2000s stands as a symptom, and mirror, of his withdrawal from any real community, being an 'outsider' even in Athena (which he lives eight miles away from). It is also especially notable that the first election he refers to having been aware of was the 1940 election, as this is, of course, the election that Roth reimagines in *The Plot Against America*. Indeed, Zuckerman's very brief potted history of his engagement with presidential elections is equally in part a potted history of Roth's coverage of presidents: "I had campaigned for Stevenson as a college student and had my juvenile expectations dismantled when Eisenhower trounced him, first in '52 and then again in '56; and I could not believe what I saw when a creature so rooted in his ruthless pathology, so transparently fraudulent and malicious as Nixon, defeated Humphrey in '68" (68-9). Roth returns to an opposition to Eisenhower, reaching back forty-seven years to 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue', and, through Zuckerman's voice at least, the anger expressed at Nixon seems not to have abated from *Our Gang*. The relationship between Zuckerman, the fictional character, and Roth, the real-world writer, is certainly

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<sup>271</sup> Barbara Hinckley states that "adults, in childlike fashion, place the president in a parental role". *The Symbolic Presidency*, 10.

close; as Cooper describes it, “in almost a decade of inhabiting Nathan Zuckerman, Roth had turned the practice of impersonation inside out. Nathan was not only a writer, he was *the* writer whose public history was closest to Roth’s own.”<sup>272</sup> Zuckerman’s engagement with the presidency in these novels is thus intertwined with Roth’s more personally direct engagement in ‘Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue’, *Our Gang*, ‘The President Addresses the Nation’, and *The Plot Against America*. *The Human Stain* and *Exit Ghost* represent Roth’s final significant engagements with the presidency as well as Zuckerman’s (Roth claims he has now retired from writing altogether); how far the fictional writer’s words here can also be applied to Roth is a matter of debate.<sup>273</sup>

Zuckerman proceeds, however, to undermine the notion of political engagement being a requisite for the mature, socially active adult, instead explicitly identifying emotional engagement in presidential politics with childlike emotions: “having lived enthralled by America for nearly three-quarters of a century, I had decided no longer to be overtaken every four years by the emotions of a child – the emotions of a child and the pain of an adult” (69). This description complicates the dynamic noticeably. He identifies the emotional response to presidential elections with an immature, sentimental mind. This harks back, seemingly, to the much younger Billy’s emotive mention of “Bush’s lies”, but identifies the consequent pain when an undesired candidate is elected – Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan, Bush – with the more profound and severe pain of an adult (this also hints again at the Oedipal overtones of conflict with the president as a paternal figure). This illustrates a developing thesis that public engagement with the president and presidency may often be reductive and juvenile – the young Philip’s implicit trust in the “big, protective republic” and heroic view of Franklin D. Roosevelt in *The Plot Against America*, for example, or the professors’ coarse discussion of Clinton’s sexual mores and character in *The Human Stain* – but the actual consequences of presidential elections, and of presidential actions, are deeply serious. Thus, while Roth may have depicted Nixon with burlesque comedic abandon in *Our Gang*, we are reminded here of his “fraudulence” and “malice”.

Zuckerman goes on to observe that, by remaining in his remote cabin, “I could manage to remain in America without America’s ever again being absorbed in me” (69). This returns to themes from *The Human Stain* again, the conceptual issues underlying *e pluribus unum*, and

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<sup>272</sup> Cooper, *Philip Roth and the Jews*, 210.

<sup>273</sup> “On the computer in Philip Roth’s Upper West Side apartment these days is a Post-it note that reads, “The struggle with writing is over.” It’s a reminder to himself that Mr. Roth, who will be 80 in March and who has enjoyed one of the longest and most celebrated careers in American letters, has retired from writing fiction — 31 books since he started in 1959.” Charles McGrath. ‘Goodbye, Frustration: Pen Put Aside, Roth Talks’. Interview with Philip Roth. *New York Times*, 17<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2012.

the sense of the insidiousness of America, and the government – very much included here by the electoral context – invading the subconscious of the citizen and affecting the subjective individual mind. A divorce is created between the physical reality of America as a country, a land mass, in which one can live, and America, a socio-political construct, which can intrude on and alter the citizen; a construct expressed, in part, through the symbolic figure of the president and the rite of electoral process.

That impression is deepened by Zuckerman's further commentary, his desire to avoid becoming the

exemplary letter-to-the-editor madman...roaring indignantly about the pernicious profitability for which a wounded nation's authentic patriotism was about to be exploited by an imbecilic king, and in a republic, a king in a free country with all the slogans of freedom with which American children are raised. The despising without remission that constitutes being a conscientious citizen in the reign of George W. Bush was not for one who had developed a strong interest in surviving as reasonably serene (70).<sup>274</sup>

Zuckerman refers to the inculcation of the values of the socio-political construct of America in its citizens from childhood, and the inevitable anger, and indeed hatred, that inevitably then arises when that construct is perverted and abused. That perversion is sharply indicated by the tricolon of "king", "king", and "reign", culminating in the reference to George W. Bush by name; delaying his name until this juncture in the paragraph invests it with a somewhat totemic power. The phrase "in the reign of George W. Bush" – the use of the word "in", rather than "during" – implies a sense of spatial as well as temporal reality to the Bush administration, a territory and construct in which Americans exist as much as they do in the physical territory that comprises the United States. "The reign of George W. Bush" darkly hints, too, at an absolute monarchy, a totalitarian regime. Zuckerman has, however, already referred to the "wounded nation", the "free country", the "republic", all terms clearly indicating America, particularly through the emotive terms of "free country" and "republic", "wounded nation" providing a reminder of the country's recent trauma in the form of the September 11 attacks.

Thus the imposition of the Bush administration upon the American nation is expressed by Zuckerman's use of language; again, the sense of the pervasive psychological effect on the individual citizen and their life is demonstrated by Zuckerman's descriptions of the

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<sup>274</sup> There is perhaps some sense of irony in the fact that Zuckerman appears to be consciously writing here, and more widely in Roth's often politicised (if not necessarily specifically partisan) writing: the impotence of literary interrogations of the presidency and national politics in actual political discourse is apparent as an undercurrent here.

individual's relationship with the government of the nation. As mentioned, he makes reference to the "slogans of freedom with which American children are raised", emphasising the belief in the nation and the nature of its government instilled from a young age – similar, once again, to the "big, protective republic" of young Philip's imagination in *The Plot Against America* – before describing the "despising without remission" that continuing in maturity as a "conscientious citizen" entails during such an administration as George W. Bush's. We can read into these lines a disturbing implication that such an early, juvenile belief leads fairly directly to psychological torment and desperate rage in adulthood – the term "slogans of freedom" is used, focussing on simplistic rallying cries rather than substantive actions and events confirming the prevalence of democracy and liberty, suggesting an inherent immaturity to such mythologised and apparently worthy views of the nation and its administration. This thus develops the earlier passages discussed above, extending and expanding the connection of enthusiastic political engagement with a juvenile outlook, and of a more complete understanding of the serious consequences of political leadership with mature pain.

Zuckerman goes on to say that this "despising" cannot be indulged in by anyone wishing to be comparatively serene, and so he began to cease reading newspapers, and paying attention to any media that might include political news. This terminates in his stating that "I had banished my country, been myself banished from erotic contact with women, and was lost through battle fatigue to the world of love. I had issued an admonition. I was out from under my life and times" (70). The divide between the physical and socio-political constructs of America is again visible: by exiling all connection and engagement with political life, Zuckerman has "banished his country", although he still lives, physically, within its borders. He then says that he was "out from under his life and times", suggesting that by breaking off engagement with the nation's socio-political life, he has broken off from his own life as it is generally understood, and removed himself from the flow of time, now merely existing in an isolated rural area of the (physical) country. It seems from this passage that involvement – even the passive involvement of following the news – in the nation's political events is considered requisite to be fully involved in life, though in an unpleasant dilemma full involvement of that sort can be severely disruptive and torturous.

The vital importance of the president in this is underscored by Zuckerman's initial catalogue of past presidents (and presidential contenders), his reference to the "reign" of Bush, and the hope placed subsequent to this passage by the much younger, and more callow, Billy and Jamie in John Kerry, Bush's 2004 Democratic opponent. On Zuckerman's arrival at their flat, Billy "assures" him that the "election is in the bag" thanks to a contact he has at Democratic

headquarters; Zuckerman calls him “expansively agreeable and [he] exuded a jovial softness, as though he weren’t yet and probably never would be expert at wielding authority” (70-1). Leadership and authority are connected by implication with disagreeableness and hardness, a telling echo of the profound pain and despair Zuckerman earlier associates with an understanding of and engagement with presidential politics. Billy’s immaturity is on display throughout the succeeding passage, such as when he responds to a phone call again indicating Kerry’s impending triumph (which the reader knows is entirely false) by saying “so we live in a liberal democracy after all”, before toasting the “mounting thrill” with large glasses of wine (72). He continues to expand upon the presidents and Bush’s place therein, calling him “the bottom” even from some “bad presidents”, inciting Shakespeare’s Hecate to call Bush “spiteful and wrathful”, and finally calling Bush’s allies “terrible, evil guys” (72).

His simplistic, almost childlike language – “bad”, “terrible”, “evil”, even the casual “guys” – and naïve statement that “we live in a liberal democracy after all” add further ballast to the connection of political engagement with immaturity. There is a particular naïveté here given the immediately previous presidential election, which is referenced shortly beforehand by Zuckerman: “and was there ever an election like Gore versus Bush, resolved in the treacherous ways that it was, so perfectly calculated to quash the last shameful vestige of a law-abiding citizen’s naïveté?” (69). Billy has evidently retained this immaturity, having seemingly not learned anything from the controversies of the 2000 election and its final settlement by the Supreme Court. His vocabulary also expresses a purposeful irony insofar as this is the same variety of juvenile language for which Bush himself was mocked, and *is* mocked by Billy here when he refers to him as a “tremendously limited ignoramus” (72). That irony carries a more considerable weight than simple political satire; given the accusations against Bush of ignorance and stupidity, Billy’s own use of unmeasured, immature terminology implies that this is a virtually inevitable part of American political dialogue. However, Zuckerman’s earlier discussion of the “despising without remission” necessary to be a good citizen under Bush’s administration makes quite clear that, as adolescent as political dialogue may be, the reality is nevertheless deeply serious. Indeed, Zuckerman’s earlier reference to the nation’s “authentic patriotism” reminds us of Roth’s belief in the American experience and avoiding overly cynical views thereof; while his conception of presidential politics and public engagement with it is at best ambivalent and generally very critical, there remains an underlying faith in the American nation, a sense that it has been perverted and led astray rather than being rotten from birth.

The potency of the presidential election on individual and social life is expressed by Jamie's horrified reaction to Bush's eventual victory. This is presaged when Jamie returns from a shopping trip saying that she has been told by someone that "Ohio doesn't look good" (81) (being immediately reassured by Billy that he, too, has spoken to a friend on the phone who says Kerry will win Ohio – in the event, Ohio was the state on which the election hinged, being won by Bush), leading into her saying that she does not know what she will do if Bush is re-elected, that his re-election would mean the end of a political way of life and the liberal society, eventually concluding, "it'll be terrible. I don't think I could live with it" (82). Again, the connection of political life with life in general is made: Jamie thinks she would be unable to "live with" a second term Bush administration. There is a distinctly terminal, suicidal tone to this statement, an emphatic implication that Bush's re-election would literally destroy her life. Zuckerman refers slightly later on in this passage to Jamie being "too agitated by the menacing world she lived in to stop herself" (82). Once more, Zuckerman suggests that the world of political life is a world apart, a world you can choose to divorce yourself from, though only with the consequence of being somewhat apart from life – it should be noted that Jamie talks about being unable to live with Bush's re-election whilst planning to abandon the city for Zuckerman's isolated rural retreat, which would entail the same withdrawal from life Zuckerman has undergone.

Within the same passage, however, we are also afforded a glimpse of the penetration of presidential imagery and symbolism into the heart of individual life, even for Zuckerman, who has made such an effort to withdraw from political life. Describing Jamie, with whom he is significantly infatuated, he compares her accent to both President Bushes: "it wasn't the kind of twang that's harsh on the ear – not the Wild West Texas accent that George W. Bush took on but the well-bred Texas accent belonging more to the South that his Yankee father picked up" (83-4). His given reference points for Jamie's accent are this father-son pair of presidents, rather than a figure from pop culture, and he uses these references rather than a simple description of the accent without reference to high-profile individuals. The performativity of the presidency is suggested by this line, too; Zuckerman refers to the accent the younger Bush "took on", identifying it with the mythic Wild West (portrayed primarily in film and television), whilst his father's accent was "picked up", Zuckerman specifying Bush senior's "Yankee" origins. Zuckerman's reference suggests that the idea of something like a regional accent derives, at least in part, from figures such as presidents. His withdrawal from socio-political life, and from the life of the country, is still not sufficiently total to avoid utilising such reference points – his use of George W. Bush, particularly, indicates that he has not entirely escaped contemporary presidential politics.

The extremity of the Logans' response to the confirmation of Bush's re-election is equally expressed in this passage of the text. Zuckerman comments that Jamie "didn't want words anyway. She wanted murder. She wanted to wake up the morning after George Bush had been shot" (86).<sup>275</sup> These phrases are brief, emphatic, and stark. Her desperate response relates directly to the personal figure of Bush, a wish to end his life (paralleling her own implicit desire to end her life alluded to earlier in the passage). Rather than wishing for some less violent change – electoral defeat in other elections around the nation, failures by the Bush administration to achieve its aims, even simply a wish for the American public to understand the flaws of the Bush presidency and oppose it – she wishes him dead, at the hands of an assassin rather than by natural means. Zuckerman describes Jamie as an inherently intense and emotional person – "I wondered if she was someone who didn't ever know how to say anything unseriously, or if the election overrode everything and for now I could have no idea what Jamie was like without an ordeal and whether her response to the great world was ever anything but painfully intense" (84) – and this passage suggests that that nature expresses itself through an overwhelmingly passionate engagement with presidential politics and the figures of the presidents.

This is also evident in a totemic reference to Franklin D. Roosevelt when Zuckerman describes the Logans' "hard realization that they could not will this country back into being the Roosevelt stronghold it had been some forty years before they were born" (84-5). His emphasis on the "Roosevelt stronghold" (the stronghold depicted and, ultimately, underscored by *The Plot Against America*) having existed forty years before the Logans' birth indicates the mythic, nostalgic quality of their desire for the iconic Democrat president, as they did not live during his administration and cannot therefore base this emotion on actual, lived experience of it. Zuckerman himself refers to his childhood impressions of Roosevelt later in the novel: "not a representative of either class or caste but rather a politician and statesman unique unto himself, a democratic hero perceived by the preponderance of America's Jews, including my large extended family, as a blessing and a gift" (243-4). Notably, this is in a passage that mirrors Zuckerman's judging of Jamie's accent by the Bushes' accents: he says that, prior to meeting George Plimpton (whom the given passage is primarily about) and his colleagues, he had "no idea what such people looked like other than from hearing FDR over the radio and in the newsreels as a child" (243), "such people" here being the wealthy, old families of New England. Again, a presidential figure serves as his reference point for a social group, a cultural and social symbol and prism through which to comprehend the nation as well as a figure of actual executive authority.

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<sup>275</sup> Again, the weakness of "words" is referenced, and the implications this carries with it for the text itself.



Zuckerman proceeds to explicitly vocalise the capacity his rural home provides for divorcing oneself from the socio-political world of America: “learn instead to relinquish caring about America in 2004 – to live and not be on the rack because of how stupid and corrupt it all is – by looking for fulfilment to your books, your music, your mate, and your garden” (87). Reiterated here is the idea of “America” as a construct aside from the physical land of the United States, with which you may choose to engage or disengage – but engagement requires participation in political life, which has become, according to voices like Zuckerman’s at least, “stupid and corrupt”, something that is not worth engaging in. There is also a more disturbing suggestion that only by such extreme physical isolation can you, in fact, achieve this disengagement, however; Zuckerman specifies that this ability to withdraw from “America” and look instead to simpler pursuits for fulfilment stems from living in such a place as his house. The Roths in *The Plot Against America* have no such ability, as the activities and policies of the Lindbergh administration directly intrude on their physical space. Indeed, in that novel, the “Just Folks” programme sends Jewish families to rural communities not vastly different to Zuckerman’s (though in the Midwest rather than New England), complicating the system presented by *Exit Ghost*.

Both *Exit Ghost* and *The Plot Against America* also explore the effects of the presidency upon individual families. In *The Plot* it is through Aunt Evelyn, who is complicit with the Lindbergh administration and marries an important figure in it. In *Exit Ghost* Billy Logan learns that his father voted for Bush, and Zuckerman describes his reaction to the news as being “as surprised as if he’d discovered that his father had robbed a bank”, also describing Billy as “at sea” (89). His father’s vote appears as a traumatic event, a dark revelation about a close family member that Billy seems unable to process. The intrusion into individual lives and experiences of national – specifically presidential – politics is once more emphasised, the sharp impact it can have even within family units. This event brings a conclusion to the election night passage, highlighting the final drama of Billy’s father’s vote. He votes as he does, apparently, as he “did it for Israel”, another firm indicator of the complex emotive engagement of individuals with the presidency. Billy’s father votes out of a strong personal loyalty to his community, which he believes Bush will support, also believing Bush’s administration would eventually find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, implying a degree of personal faith in Bush. He votes, however, against the wishes of his son, intimating the ways in which political engagement can create emotional division within private spheres.

Bush equally serves as an antithesis for the community in which the Logans and another significant character in the novel, journalist Richard Kliman, a friend of Jamie’s who is

attempting to write a biography of E. I. Lonoff and consequently hounding Zuckerman, are members. Later in the text, at one of Zuckerman's meetings with Kliman, after the election, Zuckerman observes, "they were some six to eight years out of college, I thought, and so Kerry's loss to Bush was taking a prominent place in the cluster of extreme historical shocks that would mentally shape their American kinship" (97). Zuckerman's analysis here arises clearly from the dialogue that has been shaped throughout the text (and, more broadly, Roth's work in general) to this juncture. Again, the presidency has a direct effect on the minds of the citizenry, intruding on their mental development and frameworks, returning us to Les Farley's description of the government's invasion of the mind in *The Human Stain*. Zuckerman does not refer to the presidential election, the Republican victory, or any such phrase, but to "Kerry's loss to Bush", invoking the sense of a personal fight between the two candidates, and the support for and engagement with those individuals by the public. His commentary here, and the depiction of the Logans earlier in the text, is in fact noticeably similar to the Roths' reaction to Lindbergh's election in *The Plot Against America*. One can easily posit the depiction of the real-life 2004 presidential election in *Exit Ghost* as counterpart to the earlier novel's imagined 1940 election: at the start of *The Plot*, young Philip wonders if he "would have been a less frightened boy if Lindbergh hadn't been president", suggesting that the fictional election "mentally shapes his American kinship" as the 2004 election does for the Logans and Kliman. Philip is depicted as a child, the Logans and Kliman as recent college graduates at the start of their professional lives, in both instances obviously formative phases of life. Zuckerman, who grows up under Roosevelt's administration and then lives through the Eisenhower, Nixon, and Reagan administrations, has his "juvenile expectations dismantled" by the experience, leading to his eventual decision to remove himself from engagement with political life – and with "America", which he no longer wants in himself. The nature of American citizenship and social experience, from the formative years onwards, is emphatically connected thereby with the experience of presidential politics. *Exit Ghost* thus provides a concluding commentary within Roth's work on the inextricable and inevitable involvement a citizen of "America" must have with the presidency and with the politics surrounding it in order to take a valid part in American life.

### Chapter Three

#### Cormac McCarthy: the “imp” of governmental force and the rise of corporate power

Cormac McCarthy's 1985 Western epic *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*, seems a less obvious text than those of DeLillo, Pynchon, and Roth, for consideration in regard to the representation of history through the presidency and, more broadly, the American government. Indeed, criticism on the novel thus far has generally neglected to discuss McCarthy's engagement with issues around government and individuals in authority. However, I intend to argue in this chapter that one of the novel's hidden structures is that of government, both American and Mexican. Whilst it is not an issue *directly* commented on and engaged with in *Blood Meridian*, as it is in *Mason & Dixon*, *The Plot Against America*, and other works discussed in this thesis, it is one that flavours the entire novel. The depredations of the scalp hunters led by John Joel Glanton are permitted and initiated by the actions of Angel Trías, governor of Chihuahua state in Mexico, who will be discussed below. Most obviously, the terrifying figure of Judge Holden surely represents – amongst many other things – a figure of authority and of government, and particularly the idea of the individual figure invested with power.

While the novel is set historically, similarly to *Mason & Dixon*, its salience to contemporary society and considerations about American government is evident in its general consideration of government, power, democracy, and other related concepts. However, McCarthy's choice of setting, both temporal and physical, is also important in this regard. Jaime Javier Rodríguez argues in his work on the literature of the US-Mexican War that the war, taking place in the 1840s, a conflict which the main action of the novel follows shortly on from (though it is mostly only mentioned tangentially in the text), was a “destabilizing event” with “possible linkages to the ongoing psychosocial anxieties about national meanings in the global moment of the early twenty-first century.”<sup>276</sup> *Blood Meridian* was written and published in the 1980s, but especially given the various conflicts then ongoing in which America was involved, and particularly involvement in Latin America (as will be discussed below), the point also stands for discussion of the novel. Rodríguez further states that “observations made about the openly declared war in the 1840s can come to seem not only relevant but urgent and crucial to our contemporary moment”. It was a period when, as he argues, the (supposedly very different) governments and societies of the United States and Mexico were blurred and confused, especially with regard to territory.

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<sup>276</sup> Jaime Javier Rodríguez. *The Literatures of the U.S.-Mexican War*. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2010. 1.

This therefore seems an appropriate historical context for a text considering the complications of government throughout American history, and a broader discourse of power and authority. I aim to demonstrate here that such a discourse provides an important substructure to McCarthy's novel. It is important to note that the theme is as subtle as it is, indicating the somewhat hidden role that it plays in the text. The discourse of government is only one strand among many thematic concerns in the novel. Government is, again, an often phantom force, though its power is of a deeply complicated nature that does not necessarily accord individual office holders very much agency. In many ways it is the power of the individual, or the lack thereof and desire for it, that comes to the fore in terms of visible discussions and acts of power, again particularly in the figure of the judge. Towards the end of the novel, when the judge meets the kid for one final time, the former points out another man at the bar and describes his worldview:

Yet his complaint that a man's life is no bargain masks the actual case with him. Which is that men will not do as he wishes them to. Have never done, never will do. That's the way of things with him and his life is so balked about by difficulty and become so altered of its intended architecture that he is little more than a walking hovel hardly fit to house the human spirit at all.<sup>277</sup>

The judge here appears to link power over others with a sense of humanity itself, making the desire for power of paramount importance in society and in human life generally, connecting it even to the "human spirit".

The judge himself, needless to say, displays this desire to great extent. One of the novel's more famous scenes has the judge discussing the concept of suzerainty:

...Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.

What's a suzerain?

A keeper. A keeper or overlord.

Why not say keeper then?

Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements (198).

Holden desires to be such a suzerain; the exact choice of words by McCarthy here seems noticeably close to the governmental set-up of the United States, whereby the president could be described as a suzerain over the 'local rulers', that is to say the state governors.

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<sup>277</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West*. London: Picador, 1985. 330. All references to *Blood Meridian* are to this edition.

His authority can indeed countermand local judgements.<sup>278</sup> For that matter, this is *very* precisely what the federal courts and, ultimately, the Supreme Court do, which given Holden's identity as "the judge" is salient. Whilst this passage, and Holden's general commentary on man's rule over earth, has usually been treated in philosophical and psychological terms, its commentary on government and power in terrestrial political terms should not be ignored. Marcus Cunliffe specifically refers to the American presidents as "sovereigns" (albeit "for a day") and remarks on their status as "*both* monarch and prime minister", descriptions which are very useful here.<sup>279</sup>

As will be further discussed below, it is significant in this regard that Holden is primarily referred to and considered as "the judge" throughout the novel, clearly marking him out as some sort of governmental figure. It is worth noting that Zachary Taylor, who was president at the time the bulk of *Blood Meridian* is set, had said in his inaugural address that "his guide would be the Constitution, and for its interpretation he would look to the decisions of the judiciary", clearly marking the power of the judge in contemporary American government and politics. This is a power, it must be noted, that continues to this day in the authority of the Supreme Court, adumbrating the contemporary saliences of McCarthy's historical narrative. The judge, though bearing a judicial rather than executive title, functions as a leader in the novel, a figure of authority and political bearing, and thus stands in at least some sense as a representative and representation of the federal government.

### **Mexican authority and American power**

William Franklin's observation that "frontier life trained Americans in the processes of democratic self-government" is also useful to consider when addressing the novel's setting.<sup>280</sup> Glanton's gang is, in some ways, a societal microcosm, containing an African-American, Indian guides at various points, at least one young person, and others (though, of course, no women). The simmering contest between the judge and Glanton for the gang's leadership reflects the struggles of political personalities, and of the leadership of men, in a variety of ways. A scene fairly early in the novel just before Glanton's gang rides out for the scalp hunt illustrates this succinctly and subtly, as a group of Mexican soldiers appears following an episode of casual shooting by Glanton. As the scene begins, the text notes that

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<sup>278</sup> To give one famous example, John F. Kennedy federalised the Alabama National Guard in 1963 to enforce desegregation at the University of Alabama against the wishes of George Wallace, the then Governor of Alabama.

<sup>279</sup> Marcus Cunliffe. *The Presidency*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987. 385-6. The American Heritage Library.

<sup>280</sup> William E. Franklin. 'Peter H. Burnett and the Provisional Government Movement.' *California Historical Society Quarterly* 40.2 (1961): 123-36. 124.

“the sergeant stepped forward and assumed a posture of authority” (84). This, in itself, is a significant phrase, as is the physical construction of the scene. The Mexican sergeant is said to “assume a posture of authority”, implicitly a physical attitude.

Yet the text makes no reference to actual authority: the sergeant merely takes on its appearance, rather than truly possessing it. Immediately following on is the simple phrase “Glanton spat” (84). The total disdain of Americans for Mexican authority and government is cast by this brief scene. The United States in the nineteenth century did not see Mexico or Mexicans as capable of governing themselves: the Texan Declaration of Independence, in fact, contains the American Texans’ claim that “we are, therefore, forced to the melancholy conclusion, that the Mexican people have acquiesced in the destruction of their liberty, and the substitution therfor of a military government; that they are unfit to be free, and incapable of self government.”<sup>281</sup> Glanton himself, though originally from North Carolina, would subsequently move to Texas, where he served as a Texas Ranger (supposedly becoming a Ranger captain at sixteen) and fought in the Mexican-American War. It is, then, entirely fitting and historically credible that Glanton would react as such.

Further to this, we should consider Julie A. Erfani’s observation in *The Paradox of the Mexican State* that “British and U.S. government respect for Mexico’s legal sovereignty waxed and waned depending on whether respect for the Mexican state’s legal authority served U.S. and British governmental and commercial interests.”<sup>282</sup> American respect for Mexican executive authority and power was thus entirely contingent on their own interests. Even another nation’s own authority is secondary to American executive power – and economic, corporate power, a distinction McCarthy explores in greater depth in *No Country for Old Men*. Accordingly, Glanton respects Angel Trías long enough to be commissioned and paid, but other than this accords no authority or respect to Mexican leaders and officials.

After Glanton’s contemptuous spit – an action which the text accords no specific emotion or motive, but which is clearly pregnant with the aforementioned concerns – we then see the judge, much more the master of people, taking the sergeant aside, where he is then said to speak “warmly and gesture with a great expansiveness of spirit”. Despite Glanton’s demand that he “give that son of a bitch no money”, with the same dismissiveness already displayed by the spit, the judge brings the sergeant forward “for a formal presentation”. This then becomes a pantomime of formal diplomatic presentations, the judge beginning, “le presento

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<sup>281</sup> *Texas Declaration of Independence. The Avalon Project. Web. 9<sup>th</sup> April 2015.*

<sup>282</sup> Julie A. Erfani. *The Paradox of the Mexican State: Rereading Sovereignty from Independence to NAFTA*. London: Lynne Rienner, 1995. 15.

al sargento Aguilar”, before proceeding to introduce him to each of Glanton’s ragged gang, the sergeant holding his hand out “quite gravely” in a near-farce of pretended respect for authority. The judge even talks of a “slight to his office”, though admittedly calling it a “secondary concern”. There is a somewhat ridiculous political formality to the entire scene (84-5).

This is accompanied by the early illustration of contested leadership of the group: Glanton’s ill-mannered, rough gang leader who wishes to have no truck with the Mexican soldiers, and the judge’s careful, diplomatic display of respect for the soldiers. That this respect is, in point of fact, utterly feigned, as we will come to discover later in the novel, contributes to an extensive, if nuanced and subtle, discourse with authority, government, and power throughout *Blood Meridian*. The judge displays no more respect overall for the Mexican people or their government than does Glanton, but makes a far more skilled display of political niceties than the gang’s supposed leader. At this relatively early juncture in the novel, then, McCarthy engages with a detailed portrayal of shades of authority and leadership, positing a brutal military leader against a leader of great erudition, learning and apparent civilisation. However, all of the judge’s civilisation is a sham, a disguise for a man and leader more violent, depraved, and brutal than Glanton ever appears in the text. The judge himself comments on this general dichotomy towards the very end of the novel, when he refers to the kid dancing “at the governor’s ball when you were a hero anointed with the blood of the enemies of the republic you’d elected to defend” – a comment laden with sarcasm, since the scalphunters were anointed at least as much in the blood of the citizens of the republic they were contracted to defend as its enemies (331). The reference to the governor’s ball, a performance of political pageantry and power that survives in the present day in the United States, only reminds us of the legitimization of the scalphunters’ brutality by the authorities of Mexico.

At the end of the scene with the Mexican soldiers the judge ascribes authority to words over and above the authority of any human figure (“the words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning”) (85). McCarthy provides a commentary here on the true nature of authority, from the “position of authority” assumed pompously by the sergeant to this claim for the authority of words: the authority of each figure in this scene, and indeed in the entire novel, is temporal and superseded by the words that are written about them. The discourse of power – the spectral, phantom executive force that I have identified previously – is, then, perhaps granted more authority and power than the actual, practical authority. When the judge says later in the text that “whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent”, he again privileges a

discourse of power (“consent” implying an empowerment and legitimation, and thereby increased authority and power, flowing therefrom) over the actualities of the world (198). At the same time, the judge also indicates the totalising nature of executive authority, the deep need to know and control everything. McCarthy’s engagement with government and figures of power thus opens out into theoretical discussions of the nature of authority in the text.

### Historical context and detail

As with Pynchon and Washington, McCarthy’s use of attestable historical evidence for *Blood Meridian* is another relevant element here. As John Sepich adduces in his work *Notes on Blood Meridian*, McCarthy undertook staggering amounts of research for his work, a great many scenes being based on those described in various historical records. This of course includes various figures of government: most notably Governor Trías, but others such as Peter Burnett, the first American governor of California, and Bennet Riddells, American consul in Chihuahua, also make appearances. The critique of government that I will argue informs much of *Blood Meridian* is, once again, grounded in historical research and evidence. Beyond these lesser known figures, there are occasional references to other, more famous historical personages as well. Some scenes in the novel suggest that the entire American conception of the nation’s history and society is structured around the presidency and the government. This is a subtle thread throughout the text, but an unmistakable one.

Before considering any of these issues and scenes, it is worth noting the commentary of John Sepich on the nature of the text itself. Sepich points out that “McCarthy’s detailed chapter headings emulate a nineteenth-century book format”, and observes that the novel seems to fulfil Alessandro Manzoni’s suggestion that the purpose of a historical novelist is to “as much as possible, make the subject and all the action so verisimilar with respect to the time in which they are set that they would have seemed probable even to people of that time”.<sup>283</sup> McCarthy’s text is substantively informed and structured by close engagement with the historical milieu of the mid-nineteenth century, and given the consequent nature of the narrative it is thus particularly revealing to consider how the novel is in dialogue with governmental power. It is designed to represent more than a late twentieth century view of the period: the role played by figures of government in the text, whether through action or reference, is to a considerable degree historical.

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<sup>283</sup> John Sepich. *Notes on Blood Meridian*, revised and expanded edn.. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2008. 2. Alessandro Manzoni. *On the Historical Novel*. Trans. Sandra Bermann. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1984. 125.



The scene in *Blood Meridian* that engages most directly with government and, indeed, the presidency, occurs fairly early in the novel. This is the kid's interview with the ill-fated Captain White. White's words provide intriguing commentary on the role of the federal government of the United States, which allow for a deeper exploration of the issue. White complains about the termination of the Mexican-American war and the role of the American government therein. He refers to soldiers who fought in the war: "they were sold out. Fought and died down there in that desert and then they were sold out by their own country" (33). This follows his pointed question to the kid, "what do you think of the treaty?" (33). White's question refers to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, and had recently been agreed at the time the novel is set (1849-1850). Subsequently, he says,

Unless Americans act, people like you and me who take their country seriously while those mollicoddles in Washington sit on their hindsides, unless we act, Mexico – and I mean the whole of the country – will one day fly a European flag. Monroe Doctrine or no (35).

This, however, seems at least somewhat contrary to his earlier dismissal of Mexico:

...a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favour will admit have no least notion in God's earth of honour or justice or *the meaning of republican government* (33, my emphasis).

Simultaneously, White dismisses the American, republican, government as lazy and feeble, whilst berating the Mexicans, and even dismissing them as a race, precisely for not having such a government. Here the novel's temporal setting is important: it begins in the spring of 1849, just as Zachary Taylor had been inaugurated as president. Following the active James K. Polk, who had pursued war with Mexico and successfully claimed half its territory for America, there was a succession of presidents whose authority was relatively weak, and were not so active in making effective use of executive force as Polk had been. These began with Taylor (who died in office only a year into his term), who was then succeeded by Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan, the last of whom is particularly blamed for doing nothing in the run up to the American Civil War, which would start within months of his replacement in office by Abraham Lincoln.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Taylor took office in March 1849, and died in July 1850; Fillmore succeeded him and served as president till 1853; Pierce served one full term from 1853 to 1857, and Buchanan did the same from 1857 to 1861, when Lincoln took office. Pierce, for example, has been described as "unable, in the eyes both of many of his contemporaries and of historians since, to prevent [conflicts over slavery] worsening, or to manage them effectively once they did. He was to become better remembered for his lack of grip in a very difficult situation than for anything else....an affable weakling, afraid of confrontation and unwilling to take strong stands against powerful colleagues". Alan Brinkley and Davis Dyer, eds., *The Reader's Companion to the American Presidency*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 169-75. Buchanan, similarly, is said to have been "remarkably hesitant to lead or

From this we can explore the contradictory views of government that emerge in the novel, and which would have been expressed at the time – in fact, McCarthy's exact choice of timing is especially suited to this, positioning the novel's events as it does between the strength of Polk and the feebleness of his immediate successors, and in the light of the destabilisation caused by the US-Mexican War which Rodríguez identifies. The historical date of the Yuma ferry massacre and accounts of Glanton's actions are the principal determining factor in this, presumably, but nevertheless it is noteworthy. Polk, as discussed, massively increased his country's territory in his one term as president: David Reynolds refers to his "clear but blinkered vision of American greatness...Mexico had been brutally stripped of half its territory, engendering lasting enmity against America, and the vast new conquests of Polk's war reopened the debate...about how to govern the West."<sup>285</sup> *Blood Meridian* takes place very much in the shadow of the Mexican-American war and its aftermath, and White's aggressive pursuit of the Mexican question indicates much the same vision of American superiority that Reynolds ascribes to Polk.

He also invokes the Monroe Doctrine – promulgated by President James Monroe (who served from 1817 to 1825), the doctrine declared that European nations could no longer interfere in the affairs of the Americas (not simply the United States of America), and that the States would act to prevent this if necessary.<sup>286</sup> This is a small moment, a passing reference, but the line brings another forceful presidential action into the text. Again the narrative is informed by the actions of the American government, and its ultimate leader the president. The use of the phrase implies the semi-divine nature of the presidency once more, according the president's doctrine the status almost of an article of faith – though in the same breath arguing that, under the current government, it will be of no account. This introduces the other side of the coin, the weak and powerless government, seen both in the "mollycoddles in Washington" at the time White is speaking, and the Mexican government, implicitly dismissed as any sort of power by White, stating, "there is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico" (34).

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forcefully voice his opinion....a lame duck, he had little personal prestige or political power." Brinkley and Dyer, *The Reader's Companion to the American Presidency*, 179-85.

<sup>285</sup> David Reynolds. *America: Empire of Liberty*. London: Penguin, 2010. 161.

<sup>286</sup> The doctrine stated that the United States would regard any attempt on the part of European powers "to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety", regarding any effort to intervene in a nation in the Americas whose independence the United States had acknowledged as "the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States". Quoted in *The Presidency of James Monroe*. Noble E. Cunningham. Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 1996. 160.

White here equates government with godliness, as the judge equates the desire to have power over others with the human spirit. This equation of government with godliness creates the faint suggestion that the apparent godlessness of *Blood Meridian*, at least in White's own terms, derives from the lack of strong government either American or Mexican in the time and territory through which they are moving. The narrator observes towards the novel's end that "in those uncertain times men toasted the ascension of rulers already deposed and hailed the coronation of kings murdered and in their graves", directly commenting on the chaos of American governance at the time, and the effect on the general populace (312). Government, and the figures in whom it is represented, are figured in *Blood Meridian* as a bizarre but awful Janus, both weak and powerless, leaving the nation to the leadership of amoral savage criminals such as Glanton, and yet also terrifyingly powerful.

### **The "imp": government as legitimising force**

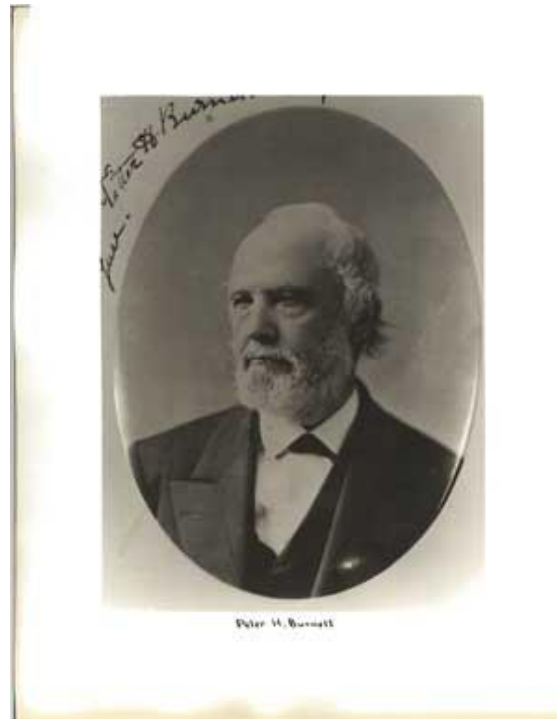
White also refers to the aforementioned Peter Burnett saying "we have the tacit support of Governor Burnett of California" (34). This is made to seem a blessing, a necessary official encouragement to make their move. Historically, Burnett talked of a "war of extermination" against Indians in California, as noted by Jesse Alemán.<sup>287</sup> This may be another brief reference to a historical character, but it appears to be an accurate portrayal of the belligerence and encouragement of Burnett in such wars, again adumbrating the role of governing figures in the violent history of the west. Franklin, in fact, refers to Burnett as an "authority on provisional government" and an "oracle on the rights of people beyond the limits of organised government": he was instrumental in establishing the territorial government in California after Mexico ceded it to America.<sup>288</sup> Franklin refers to the residents of Sacramento "missing governmental organisation", something that Burnett then set about giving them.<sup>289</sup> McCarthy's reference to Burnett is only a short one, but of significance for this discussion, especially given Burnett's historical background. His role as a named legitimator of White's raid is important, and evidences *Blood Meridian's* hidden structural discourse of government and power.

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<sup>287</sup> Jesse Alemán. 'Historical Amnesia and the Vanishing Mestiza: The Problem of Race in *The Squatter and the Don* and *Ramona*.' *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. 27: 1 (2002): 59-93. 65.

<sup>288</sup> Franklin, 'Peter H. Burnett and the Provisional Government Movement', 124.

<sup>289</sup> Franklin, 'Peter H. Burnett and the Provisional Government Movement', 125.



**Figure 2: Peter H. Burnett, first governor of California**

A vital line in the text during Angel Trías' celebratory dinner for the scalphunters alerts us to this discourse of government acting as a legitimising force: "the citizenry made address to the governor but he was much like the sorcerer's apprentice who could indeed provoke the imp to do his will but could in no way make him cease again" (171). This analogy emphasises the power of the governor (and, by extension, government in America and Mexico generally), likening it to something mystical and awful (as White seemed to connect government with divinity), but also the powerlessness he holds *post factum*. Once his power has been invoked, it cannot be undone. This has already been seen at this juncture in the novel with Burnett's support for Captain White's raid: Burnett's legitimising of the raid clearly acts as an encouraging force therefore, given White's caution to explicitly inform the kid of it, but he has no further power. The resulting bloodshed cannot be altered by Burnett, and had the raid been more successful and led to a wider conflict with Mexico, he again would not have had power to arrest it. The passage in question ends with the consequences of the scalphunters' visit and an indication of their continuing depredations:

Stores began to close. Charcoal scrawls appeared on the limewashed walls. Mejor los indios. The evening streets stood empty and there were no paseos and the young girls of the city were boarded up and seen no more.

On the fifteenth of August they rode out. A week later a company of drovers reported them investing the town of Coyame eighty miles to the northeast (171).

The ensuing scene briefly depicts the gang laying waste to Coyame as they have just done to Chihuahua. McCarthy's description suggests economic blight, the effects of governmental fallacy and its unstoppable consequences, the scene coming as it does shortly after the description of Trías' impotence against the gang. The detail that Coyame is "eighty miles to the northeast" indicates how far away the town is from Chihuahua, and yet the effects of Trías' action reach there too, with the same consequences. In all of this, it should be remembered that McCarthy refers to Trías as being like the "sorcerer's apprentice". This is of course a reference to the tale of that name, but the line would carry much the same potency and significance were he referred to simply as a sorcerer, so the use of this detail seems to underscore the fragility and immaturity of governmental power as depicted in the text. He is merely an apprentice, not a figure of the immense power the judge truly seems to enjoy, though this is a complicating factor, clearly, considering the judge's role as a figure and symbol of government himself. One could argue that Trías and the judge represent two poles of government as it is constructed by the text: the fearful power held by the judge, and the weakness of Trías beyond his power to unleash a force he cannot control or seemingly comprehend.

Beyond this, the dichotomy of the incarnated, embodied executive force – Trías – and the more spectral, phantom force, represented by the imp, comes to the fore. The quasi-supernatural disembodied power released by Trías, in the form of the scalphunter gang, bears comparison to the sprawling executive machine represented by Brock Vond in *Vineland*, or the wave of national anti-Semitism triggered by Lindbergh's election in *The Plot Against America*. The executive force appears as something that cannot be controlled by individual human agency, a phantom power that operates at a higher level than any specific person theoretically wielding authority within it. The judge, then, is partly so terrifying because he represents a fusion of the embodied and phantom parts of the executive force, a physically manifest figure who wields *and controls* the full extent of this power.

It should be remarked upon that this legitimising role of contemporary government, both in America and Mexico, was remarked upon at the time, and not necessarily favourably. The American government seemed to in fact be allowing the Indians, specifically the Apaches, to invade and plunder northern Mexican states, in the hopes that this would then force the Mexican settlers further south and leave the territory open for American settlement. As Sylvester Mowry put it at a speech before the Geographical Society, "the Apache Indian is preparing Sonora for the rule of a higher civilization than the Mexican. It is every day retreating further south, leaving to us (when the time is ripe for our own possession) the

territory without the population.”<sup>290</sup> Joseph F. Park provides this description of Fort Buchanan, the American fort supposedly controlling the Apaches near the Sonoran border: “the post hardly justified its designation, being a collection of scattered adobe buildings, through which Apaches prowled at night...the troops neither exerted themselves to recover stolen stock nor were they inclined to pursue and punish the Indians for stealing.”<sup>291</sup> Thus, as the Mexican government (or its state governments) were legitimising deeply damaging raids by Americans into its territory to rid them of the Indians, the American government was legitimising the depredations of the Indians, indicating the complicated dance of governmental complicity in the brutalities of the US-Mexican border at the time.

Contemporary American media commented on the situation as well. The editor of a regional paper, the *Weekly Arizonian*, argued that the Apache raids were “in fact, nothing more or less than legalized piracy upon a weak and defenceless State, encouraged and abetted by the United States government; and mark the consequences: The Mexicans retaliate upon us...”.<sup>292</sup> In terms of actions by the government over the border, the *New York Daily Tribune* reported on the selfsame Mexican state that appears in *Blood Meridian*:

the government of Chihuahua has made a bloody contract with an individual named Chevallie, stipulating to give him a bounty of so much per head for every Indian, dead or alive, whom he may secure. The terms of this atrocious bargain are published in the Mexican papers, which, to their credit be it said, denounce them as inhumane and revolting. The Chihuahuans themselves are disgusted with the treaty.<sup>293</sup>

Exactly as in the novel, Chihuahua’s state government clearly sanctioned, authorised, and triggered brutality in the name of protecting its citizens, though this report indicates even the citizens of Chihuahua were opposed to such actions, raising questions about democratic government once more. Again, the image of the imp released by the sorcerer’s apprentice of government seems very apposite in the context of the evident chaos unleashed by the governments of both nations. The novel reflects a clear historical problem with governmental actions, though it also introduces a contradiction that would have been apparent at the time as well. On the one hand, a character like Captain White complains that the “mollycoddles in Washington” will not do anything, that is to say will not officially authorise actions such as the one he proposes, filibustering in Mexico; on the other, when a government does act, as Angel Trías does to try and protect his state from the attacks of the Indians, it could

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<sup>290</sup> Quoted in ‘The Apaches in Mexican-American Relations, 1848-1861.’ Joseph F. Park. In *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Oscar J. Martínez. 50-7. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1997. 54.

<sup>291</sup> Park, ‘The Apaches in Mexican-American Relations, 1848-1861’, 54.

<sup>292</sup> Quoted in Park, ‘The Apaches in Mexican-American Relations, 1848-1861’, 54.

<sup>293</sup> Quoted in Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, revised and expanded edn., 7.

obviously cause seriously negative consequences for the people it is representing and leading. *Blood Meridian's* discourse of government implies that a government of any kind faces a perhaps insurmountable problem in having theoretical authority and control over great power(s), but having in practice very little control or ability to direct that power, only to unleash it. Considering the 1980s context of the novel's writing and publication, a faint echo of the Cold War governments' power of uncontrollably destructive nuclear weaponry is potentially discernible.

It is very useful here to consider Jonathan Imber Shaw's contention that *Blood Meridian* offers commentary not merely on the time in which it is set, but also on the time in which it was written and published. He directly invokes Ronald Reagan, and the American government's involvement in El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s. He avers that "*Blood Meridian's* depictions of violence and use of prolepsis delineate the form and function of narratorial omniscience in McCarthy's novel; and this delineation has consequences for our understanding of the Reagan administration's political philosophy."<sup>294</sup> He argues that the use of violence and the contention of absolute good and evil, and action by Americans and America in other nations to support what is seen by it as civilisation and the side of good – elements of Reagan's philosophy – are reflected in the events of *Blood Meridian*, the novel ultimately representing the inherent flaws in such a policy. Shaw claims that "the novel suggests that the mobilization of violence as an ultimate form capable of delineating the divide between good and evil, between those delivering justice and those deserving eradication, is rife with contradiction and mortal danger."<sup>295</sup> The proposition that one of *Blood Meridian's* fundamental dynamics is, in fact, the role of the government and of the president is supported by Shaw's contention, especially when viewed alongside White's invocation of Monroe and hints at Polk's vision of American superiority.

### **Textual figures of government**

Shaw also draws an explicit comparison between the El Salvadorian government's complicity in the massacre of their own people by sanctioning the formation of the brutal, American-trained Atlacatl brigade, and the role of Angel Trías in sanctioning the scalp hunters' expeditions, which lead to the widespread killing of Mexicans who sufficiently resemble Indians for their scalps to be brought back for financial reward. Trías is a central figure here, the only character who is explicitly a leader of government with a substantive,

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<sup>294</sup> Jonathan Imber Shaw. 'Evil Empires: *Blood Meridian*, War in El Salvador, and the Burdens of Omniscience.' *Southern Literary Journal* 40.2 (2008): 207-31. 209.

<sup>295</sup> Shaw, 'Evil Empires: *Blood Meridian*, War in El Salvador, and the Burdens of Omniscience', 226-7.

active role in the novel. As with Washington's portrayal by Pynchon, McCarthy depicts Trías according largely to the contemporary historical record, thereby further underscoring his key role in the narrative and suggesting the centrality of such governmental figures to the understanding of American history. Most notably, Trías is described by Ralph A. Smith as "one of Chihuahua's most outstanding governors", whilst W. H. Timmons emphasises his popularity owing to his "dedication to the interests of his state", referencing a historian who said that his appointment was the first time public opinion had had a significant role in determining the selection of Chihuahua's governor.<sup>296</sup> <sup>297</sup> Smith is cited by Sepich as a historian whose work McCarthy was aware of, calling him "the authority of choice" for many of the novel's events and historical details.<sup>298</sup>

Thus, Trías seems a particularly relevant historical character to make use of. Again, his role in the Glanton gang's actions is historically attested, but McCarthy's choice to depict the governor and emphasise his role is pointed. The scene at the start of chapter XIII, where the returning scalp hunters are feted on arrival in Chihuahua City, has a clear historical referent. Amongst other noted elements of the festivities, McCarthy refers to "a pair of drummers" and a "trumpeter who marched with one arm raised above his head in a martial gesture and playing the while" (166). Historically, Trías "brought musicians to the gates of the city to greet his returning warriors".<sup>299</sup> The naïveté of the Chihuahuan governor in celebrating these brutal killers is entirely based in historical truth, as is the terror he inadvertently inflicted on his people, the people to whom he was apparently so dedicated. Beyond this, Trías was apparently a man of learning and culture. McCarthy makes this clear:

This Angel Trías who was governor had been sent abroad as a young man for his education and was widely read in the classics and was a student of languages. He was also a man amongst men and the rough warriors he'd hired for the protection of the state seemed to warm something in him (168).

This, again, is attestable in the historical record, John Russell Bartlett (one of McCarthy's many sources) describing him much as the novel does above and adding that he was very fond of English literature: "he considered that no native appreciated the beauties of Shakespeare and Milton better than he".<sup>300</sup> In this, Trías is markedly different to the relatively plain-speaking businessman Washington, as depicted in *Mason & Dixon*; he was, evidently,

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<sup>296</sup> Ralph A. Smith. 'Indians in Mexican-American Relations before the War of 1846.' *Hispanic American Historical Review* 43.1 (1963): 34-64. 57.

<sup>297</sup> W. H. Timmons. 'The El Paso Area in the Mexican Period, 1821-1848.' *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 84.1 (1980): 1-28. 15. Timmons does not cite the historian's name or work.

<sup>298</sup> Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, revised and expanded edn., 5.

<sup>299</sup> Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, revised and expanded edn., 37.

<sup>300</sup> John Russell Bartlett. *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Chihuahua*, vol. 2. New York, NY: Appleton, 1856. 426.



the epitome of culture and education, and beyond that a man's man, a strong leader and soldier. Yet, he was responsible for a particularly tragic and sordid episode in the history not just of his state but of Mexico as a nation, and McCarthy takes at least some pain to illustrate both his refinement and his responsibility in *Blood Meridian*. Here, the critique of government and governors (of any level) goes beyond merely the American president to a wider questioning of the role of such executive leaders. At the same time, Trías' background marks him as being more similar to American presidents – generally wealthy and educated – than other contemporary Latin American leaders, making him suitable for a comparison.

Saliently, Trías toasts Washington and Franklin in the same scene, acknowledging the beatified status of the founding fathers once more, and also indicating perhaps a respect for and aspiration to the status of Washington, one sadly at odds with the horror around him, and for that matter the sordidness into which the celebratory feast soon descends. Again though, as with White, the reference is to named individuals and to a president (Franklin, whilst not a president, remains one of only two non-presidents to feature on standard American banknotes, being thereby elevated to the same pantheon and status), rather than to concepts, ideas, policies, or even God. The shadow of the presidents may be a faint one in *Blood Meridian*, but it does fall substantially over the text. The contrast between Washington and the criminals being feted in this scene is likely deliberate, suggesting the remote and entirely impossible, if not literally incredible, ideal of the great Washington once more. This scene thus works with the earlier quoted passage wherein White referenced Monroe, as White's illegal and bloodthirsty raid equally somewhat violated the supposed spirit of Monroe's declaration.

There is one other instance of a presidential name in the text: Lincoln, the doctor who initially runs the Yuma ferry crossing. This is not as tenuous a link as it may first appear: J. M. Guinn's *History of California*, a work Sepich cites that McCarthy may well have consulted, claims Dr. Lincoln was a relative of Abraham Lincoln.<sup>301</sup> This seems to not, in fact, be true of the historical doctor, but McCarthy does choose to use the "Lincoln" name over the frequent Langdon variant present in the records, and indeed to use the character at all, who is not present in all the records. Given the associations of the name for most Americans, this seems worthy of note. There is perhaps a suggestion that even the supposedly great Lincoln would have been helpless in the savagery of the west, or indeed that he would simply have abandoned post, as the doctor does here. Abraham Lincoln, after all, would have preferred to avoid the civil war, stating that "if I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would

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<sup>301</sup> J. M. Guinn. *A History of California and an Extended History of its Southern Coast Counties*, vol. 1. Los Angeles: Historical Record, 1907. 258.

do it”.<sup>302</sup> The ideal represented by the mythical presidents is not here undermined as it was in *Mason & Dixon* by the presidents themselves, but by the actions of characters invoking them. Meanwhile governing figures in general, such as Trías, standing for the ultimate governing figure of the president, are illustrated and damned by their own verifiable history.

Trías is not the only governmental figure to appear in *Blood Meridian*. One of Glanton’s gang, Marcus ‘Long’ Webster, would later serve as Mayor of Whitesboro.<sup>303</sup> This is not explicitly referred to in the text, and we cannot be certain whether or not McCarthy was aware of this fact when writing the novel, but given his broad historical research it is at least a possibility, and it is certainly worth noting that McCarthy does make use of Webster as a significant supporting character – given that, from the records of Glanton’s gang, there are many other names and figures he could have chosen to focus on.

More notably, McCarthy depicts the alcalde of San Diego towards the novel’s close, where he deals with David Brown and subsequently Glanton. The alcalde was a governmental figure, part judicial and part administrative, sometimes being referred to as the “alcalde-mayor”, so his inclusion here is significant. This particular alcalde has very little power, other than to eventually aid Glanton’s queries after his men, foregrounding again the weaker side of government where violent pioneers are concerned. William E. Franklin’s explanation of the role and context of the alcalde is useful: “the military governors [of California]...made no effort to initiate the customary American forms of government. Instead, they attempted to govern with only a governor...and an officer borrowed from the Mexicans – the alcalde. An alcalde appointed for each major community attempted to handle all governmental problems in his area.”<sup>304</sup> Thus we can see that the alcalde was in fact a figure from the Mexican form of government, and as Franklin goes on to explain the Californians resented anything to do with Mexican forms of government, unsurprisingly given the general American belief of the time that Mexicans were not fit to govern and their forms of government were deeply flawed. Glanton’s actions against the alcalde of San Diego therefore serve a double purpose: they indicate the weakness of theoretically very powerful figures of government against the aggression and violence of individuals, but also reflect the American opposition to Mexican government in any form once more.

Though it does not seem to have been remarked upon by critics thus far, it is additionally remarkable that the key source for the Yuma ferry massacre – William Carr’s deposition on

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<sup>302</sup> Letter to Horace Greeley, July 9, 1864.

<sup>303</sup> Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, revised and expanded edn., 14, quoting a letter from Ralph A. Smith to him.

<sup>304</sup> Franklin, ‘Peter H. Burnett and the Provisional Government Movement’, 124.

the matter in 1850 – was made to Abel Stearns, the alcalde of Los Angeles, and is specifically signed as such: “signed before me. Abel Stearns, 1<sup>st</sup> Alcalde de Los Angeles.”<sup>305</sup> One of the other witnesses to the massacre and the deposition is, in fact, Marcus L. Webster. These are two different alcaldes, but the depiction of the alcalde of San Diego by McCarthy may well have been influenced by the deposition. He hints both at the untrustworthiness of the deposition, and the lack of power of the alcalde, who ultimately can only take an account of the massacre and accept it in the historical record, and in the novel can do very little against the savagery of the scalp hunters, being almost killed by Glanton and then left with his wife and a grocer “lying in their own excrement in an abandoned hut at the edge of the ocean eight miles south of the settlement” (271). The failure of government in the lawlessness of the old west informs and often structures *Blood Meridian*, and is reflected here. Echoes of the “godlessness” of a land without government rebound. This is all in spite of the great American ideal of “republican government” as espoused by White near the novel’s opening, a scene which seems increasingly like a purposeful hint to take note of this issue in the text.

### **“Suzerain of the earth”: the judge**

However, by far the most notable figure yet to be considered is the character who expresses the desire for suzerainty over the earth: the judge. Judge Holden has not generally been analysed as a representative of temporal government: discussion of the character, who is effectively the novel’s central one if not the actual protagonist, has tended to focus on his role as something supernatural and devilish. The kid’s question as to of what Holden is a judge certainly does not bring forth any suggestion to do with his role as an actual judge of the United States. McCarthy does, however, include elements in his portrayal of the judge which hint at some sort of governmental role. First and foremost, he primarily refers to him as “the judge”, rather than Holden, identifying him consistently by this occupation. The only historical account that provides evidence for the character, Samuel Chamberlain’s *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, introduces him as “Judge Holden of Texas”, but Chamberlain remarks “who or what he was, no one knew”; there is certainly no indication that he held an actual formal position.<sup>306</sup> McCarthy not only avoids ever placing the word in such speech marks, he emphasises the “judge” part of the name. Beyond that, the character seems to hold some sort of legal influence. We can presume that, in the novel’s final

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<sup>305</sup> ‘Depredations by the Yumas: Declarations Taken in Relation to the Massacre of Dr. Lincoln and His Party on the Colorado River.-Deposition of William Carr.’ *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* (1903): 52-6.

<sup>306</sup> Samuel Chamberlain. *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*. Ed. William H. Goetzmann. Austin, TX: Texas State Historical Association, 1996. 306.

chapter, it is the judge who is responsible for the kid's arrest, and then for his mysterious release and he visits him in jail, at which point he is "dressed in a suit of gray linen and he wore new polished boots"; he also wears a waistcoat and carries a watchchain, stickpin, and "silvermounted derringer" (305). This all suggests that he has some standing in society, that he is not merely a well-educated thug as he might otherwise have been depicted. Not only that, but in the conversation he has with the kid, he says "they wanted to know from me if you were always crazy" and makes ridiculous claims, evidently believed, that the idiot James Robert Bell had been a Doctor of Divinity at Harvard (305). From this – and the fact that the judge is evidently allowed to enter the jail and talk privately with the kid – there is some indication that he is treated by the authorities in San Diego as a trustworthy man. It cannot be stated with certainty that the novel's Judge Holden is, in fact, an actual judge, but there is certainly some suggestion to that end.

There is at least one historically evidenced referent for a judge *like* Holden other than Holden himself that should be noted, separate from the Chamberlain text. Indeed, this was in a governmental report, to the president, in Mexico – the *Informe de la Comisión Pesquisadora de la Frontera del Norte al Ejecutivo de la Unión*, a commission established by the Mexican government to look into the causes of frontier violence akin to that perpetrated by Glanton's gang in *Blood Meridian*. The report gives account of Americans joining revolutionary Mexican brigades and being generally hostile to Mexico. Many Mexicans objected strongly to this and saw it thus as "not a revolution but an invasion", reminding us again of the Americans' lack of regard for Mexican government, and the role of the American government in encouraging and legitimising these actions.<sup>307</sup> It makes reference additionally to "some companies of Texan volunteers (Rangers)" being involved in these expeditions, providing further historical attestation for the likes of Glanton taking part, under the auspices of serving the government of Texas, in the "invasions".<sup>308</sup> Most significantly, though, it makes reference to one N. P. Norton, in the midst of describing governmental involvement in the raids:

In these cases the enlistment, the gathering of the people, the camping, all was done publicly. The authorities of Starr county, which was the base for the organization, took a most active part. N. P. Norton, the district judge of the county, headed the last expedition of this kind in March, 1853. At this time no political principles were invoked; it was purely and simply acts of vandalism and robbery.

On the twenty-fifth of March, 1853, N. P. Norton crossed from the Texas side into Mexico, at Reynosa Biejo. He was accompanied by forty Americans and ten

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<sup>307</sup> *Comisión Pesquisadora de la Frontera del Norte: Report to the President*. In Martínez, *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 58-65. 59.

<sup>308</sup> *Comisión Pesquisadora de la Frontera del Norte*, 59.

Texan Mexicans. He reached Reynosa on the 26<sup>th</sup>, where he arrested the alcalde and Francisco Garcia Treviño, whom he threatened to shoot if within two hours they did not deliver thirty thousand dollars. The former he shut up and kept a prisoner; his force disseminated itself through the town, plundered various houses, stole all the horses, mules, and arms which they could find. [...] The only purpose of his expedition was robbery, and this was done by the first authority of the county. He and two of his accomplices were indicted at Brownsville for a violation of the United States neutrality laws; in June of 1855, that is two years after the indictment, a “*nolle prosequi*” was entered in the case.<sup>309</sup>

The similarities to *Blood Meridian* are striking. The involvement of a judge – here a bona fide county judge – is only the most obvious. He arrests and keeps prisoner an alcalde, exactly as occurs in *Blood Meridian* (though Glanton is responsible for this action in the novel). His gang lays waste to the town he invades, just as the scalphunter gang do to Chihuahua and other settlements. He is acting under the pretext of opposition to Mexico’s allegedly ineffectual government, supporting the revolutionary forces of José María Carbajal, who sought to expel the oppressive Mexican army and governmental duties and prohibitions from the frontier, and with the full support of local government in America. This is directly analogous to Captain White’s raid, with its support from Governor Burnett, and in the broader sense of a violent, chaotic raid being authorised by government, analogous to the actions of the scalphunters too. Sepich does not identify the report as a source for McCarthy, but it certainly provides clear historical comparisons for the characters and actions depicted in the text of *Blood Meridian*, over and above the historical evidence for those characters and actions themselves. It is certainly a possibility that McCarthy was aware of the report, as it offers very useful historical context, confirming the engagement of governmental figures in these sorts of raids in the mid-nineteenth century. One further point of comparison would be that the raid the report describes is dated to 1853, exactly in the timeframe of the novel. The complex of historical sources interweaves with the text in such a manner as to make it very difficult to extrapolate them one from another, augmenting the broader engagement of the text and its concerns with recorded history.

To return to the judge, his role as a leader, or some sort of authority, has been the subject of a certain amount of critical reflection. John Sepich focuses on the scenes with the judge leading the idiot Bell, contending that through this McCarthy “creates a saddening, chilling

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<sup>309</sup> *Comisión Pesquisadora de la Frontera del Norte*, 60-1.

double of the idiotic world mass following leaders they cannot possibly comprehend”.<sup>310</sup> He links this further to the scene at the very start of the novel where we first meet the judge: the Reverend Green’s revival meeting, which had been “playing to a full house daily” (5). The congregation appears to be rapt, as no disturbance from them prior to the judge’s entrance is noted. The historical Green was, in fact, “excluded for drunkenness” from the Baptist church of Nacogdoches, and was subsequently described as a “moral wreck”.<sup>311 312</sup> Though the exact truth of Green’s position is never made clear by *Blood Meridian*, wherein the judge states that he had entirely invented his charges against Green and had never in fact seen him before, he is still brought into disrepute by him, and the underlying historical truth coupled with the congregation’s reaction indicate the transience and flawed character of community leaders.

More notably, as soon as the judge – presumably not a man the congregation has seen before – makes his accusations, they credulously follow him, persuaded by his confidence and rhetoric. There is some hint of the power of the government, indeed of the president, to undo a person by malicious accusation. There is perhaps even an underlying reference to a different McCarthy and his witch hunts against alleged Communists, frequently on no evidence.<sup>313</sup> Certainly, for a figure of obvious authority and power, the judge abuses it hugely. Adrian Fielder also draws attention to the judge’s authority over the characters: “the judge assigns to the ‘principals’ involved a specific use-value within a scriptural economy of which they are not the authors, and he maintains that each individual has no agency or identity outside of that designation.”<sup>314</sup> The tendency to designate or assign people to particular roles and identities is one that generally attends government, and this is another function the judge fulfils in the text that connects him with the machinery, processes, and nature of government.

The judge’s speeches further augment his position as a leader and representative of government, not least inasmuch as they can be interpreted as parodies of Congressional speeches of the period in which *Blood Meridian* is set. These speeches were often dramatic

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<sup>310</sup> Sepich, *Notes on Blood Meridian*, revised and expanded edn., 138.

<sup>311</sup> J. S. Newman. *History of the Primitive Baptists in Texas, Oklahoma, and Indian Territory: Southwest Texas Association. Primitive Baptist Online*. Web. 9<sup>th</sup> April 2015.

<sup>312</sup> J. M. Carroll. *A History of Texas Baptists, Comprising a Detailed Account of their Activities, Their Progress, and Their Achievements*. Ed. J. B. Cranfill. Dallas: Baptist Standard, 1923. 113.

<sup>313</sup> This would place the novel in a broad tradition in American literature: texts such as Miller’s *The Crucible* and Fred Zinnemann’s film *High Noon* have indirectly represented the McCarthy era (*High Noon* also taking place in the Old West), while Roth’s *I Married A Communist* expressly engages with it.

<sup>314</sup> Adrian Fielder. ‘Historical Representation and the Scriptural Economy of Imperialism: Assia Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia* and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*.’ *Comparative Literary Studies* 37.1 (2000): 18-44. 37.

and bombastic, suffused with what Rodríguez refers to as “jeremiadic crescendo” in a very similar vein to the judge’s.<sup>315</sup> Rodríguez quotes one such speech by Senator Thomas Corwin, a speech which begins with “oh, Mr. President, it does seem to me, if Hell itself could yawn and vomit up the fiends that inhabit its penal abodes...” before going on to describe how Hell would seek to stir up civil war within the United States.<sup>316</sup> The judge’s speeches often have a remarkably similar tone and language, of equally biblical nature, such as his address to the kid in the jail at San Diego:

Hear me, man. I spoke in the desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf ear to me. If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay. [...] What joins men together is not the sharing of bread but the sharing of enemies (307).<sup>317</sup>

His final speeches at the end of the novel, concerning such ideas as “malign things set against” man and “gods of vengeance and of compassion”, are equally expressed in this sort of language (330). Similarly, in a scene previously discussed, the meeting with the Mexican soldiers and the judge’s presentation thereof, he is said therein to “adduce for their consideration references to the lost children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, certain passages from the Greek poets...” (84). His obvious education and consequent ability to use high-flown rhetoric are wholly in keeping with that used by contemporary politicians and members of the American government. Chamberlain refers to him as “by far the best educated man in northern Mexico...in short another Admirable Crichton”, and refers to him as an “intellectual beast” who lectured him on “the immorality of my conduct in drinking and gambling”.<sup>318</sup> Given that McCarthy’s source for the judge, since it is the only source for him existing, is Chamberlain’s journal, this depiction is noteworthy. Chamberlain’s judge’s education and erudition carry over into McCarthy’s judge, establishing him as a character capable, and fond, of the style of learned rhetoric used by politicians of the time such as Corwin. Indeed, it connects him with the other significant learned character in the text – Angel Trías, who as described above was a man of great culture and education, and a politician.

If we consider Fielder’s reading that “the kid functions as a *diapositif* (or photographic negative) of the judge”, we can understand the kid in this context as the voiceless people (given the kid’s almost total silence during the course of the novel) with the judge as the

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<sup>315</sup> Rodríguez, *The Literatures of the U.S.-Mexican War*, 70.

<sup>316</sup> Quoted in Rodríguez, *The Literatures of the U.S.-Mexican War*, 70.

<sup>317</sup> The phrase “I spoke in the desert for you” carries overtones of Christ’s temptation by the Devil in the desert: the judge presumably here being the Devil, the speaker in the desert who is not listened to.

<sup>318</sup> Chamberlain, *My Confession: Recollections of a Rogue*, 309.

articulate, forceful leader.<sup>319</sup> This reading seems especially appropriate given the judge's ever-changing attitude towards the kid, one minute helping him, the next hindering him, much as a politician will alternate between appealing to the electorate with invocations of their patriotism and faith, and removing services from the electorate or threatening parts of it that are somehow seen as inferior. The caprice of the judge, if we assume his agency in the trials of the kid in the penultimate chapter, in committing the kid to custody and then returning him his liberty, can also be read as commentary on the caprice not simply of fate, a theme often present in McCarthy's work, but as commentary on the frightening power of government to chain and free citizens on a whim. His persistent identity as "the judge" only becomes more important when considered in this light. Neil Campbell has referred to the judge as "America in extremis, challenging the Gods, nature, time itself" in a particularly significant description.<sup>320</sup> It is the president who is usually seen as the symbol of America, "the common father of the citizens" as Barbara Hinckley puts it (borrowing a phrase from an 1898 textbook), and thus some sort of association between the judge and a spectral presidency can be made here, as he exercises the powers of knowledge, salvation, rhetoric, destruction, judgement, and leadership usually associated with the president.<sup>321</sup> As previously discussed, the judge fuses the embodied and phantom executive force in himself: he wields actual temporal authority and power, while also giving voice to the intangible but totalising force that shadows the manifest executive power, both supporting and overwhelming it.

If *Blood Meridian* can be said to be a novel about America and its development and society, then the judge, at its centre, seems a likely symbol for America's supposedly omnipotent leader. McCarthy ends the novel (epilogue aside) with the lines, "he never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (335). The lines draw attention to the character's role by separating "the judge" with a comma, rather than simply saying "the judge never sleeps", providing an emphatic reminder of this governmental association. That he will "never die" is true of the president, for there is always a president, thanks to presidential succession legislation (security protocol in fact ensures that the entire succession line is never in the same place at the same time). Hinckley reminds us that "we use the singular – the president – in describing what all presidents do, thereby creating the impression of specialness and incomparability. Symbolically speaking, presidents cannot even be

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<sup>319</sup> Fielder, 'Historical Representation and the Scriptural Economy of Imperialism: Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*', 37.

<sup>320</sup> Campbell, 'Liberty beyond its proper bounds: Cormac McCarthy's history of the West in *Blood Meridian*', 221.

<sup>321</sup> Hinckley, *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves*, 55.



compared with their predecessors.”<sup>322</sup> Similarly, McCarthy uses “the judge” here, not “Holden” or any other personal name. The eternal nature of the government – however terrifying that may be – is an undercurrent in the text, even if individual “kings” and “rulers” may pass swiftly into their graves.

### ***Blood Meridian’s* Gothicism and the frontier myth**

The theme of government and dominion/power is related to the argument that *Blood Meridian* is, in a sense, an American Gothic novel, and uses the tropes and tools thereof towards its exploration of this discourse. Pattie Cowell refers to early American Gothics (that is, around the beginning of the nineteenth century) as “particularly well-suited for open-ended investigation of social institutions”, going on to ask, “was a new nation of readers debating models of familial and national government in works which opened social frontiers unavailable in other, more acceptable, genres?”.<sup>323</sup> It could be argued that Glanton’s gang is a form of family, albeit a dysfunctional and violent one, especially given that the protagonist of the novel is known as “the kid”. Whether or not one agrees with this, the novel certainly engages with models of national government, in both the United States and Mexico. In addition to this, Irving Malin’s consideration of the American Gothic can be used to explore *Blood Meridian’s* connections to the genre, and how it relates to its governmental discourse. Malin states that “New American Gothic uses grotesques who love themselves so much that they cannot enter the social world except to dominate their neighbours”.<sup>324</sup> This describes the judge fairly exactly: he is certainly a grotesque, physically so quite apart from his character qualities, being massive in size and apparently entirely hairless (“no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them”) (6). Malin, similarly, concludes his work by referring to the “need to destroy community” in American Gothic works, a theme which is, again, evident in *Blood Meridian*, as the scalphunters ravage several communities, whether Mexican, Indian, or even American if one takes the Gila River ferry crossing into account.<sup>325</sup>

If the novel is regarded as an American Gothic novel, or at least a variety thereof, we can understand the judge – as a symbol of government – as having only the desire to dominate others, rather than to stand for progress and democracy as a leader supposedly should (as displayed by Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore’s approaches to the presidential role,

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<sup>322</sup> Hinckley, *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves*, 2.

<sup>323</sup> Pattie Cowell. ‘Class, Gender, and Genre: Deconstructing Social Formulas on The Gothic Frontier.’ In *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*. Ed. David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski. 126-39. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1993. 127.

<sup>324</sup> Irving Malin. *New American Gothic*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1962. 6.

<sup>325</sup> Malin, *New American Gothic*, 161.

described below). The judge's statement that anything existing on the earth without his knowledge exists without his consent seems entirely in accordance with this idea of the American Gothic: his self-love extends to privileging himself above all other things on earth, wishing to be an absolute "suzerain". If the judge functions as an embodiment in the text of political leadership, government, and, ultimately, the presidential figure, the use of Gothic tropes in the text offers a further contribution to its engagement with the problems of government.<sup>326</sup> The most prominent figure in it associated with government in some form can be understood as a Gothic narcissist with the will to total domination, hinting at the nature of the single-man presidency that leads the United States. We are also reminded of the scene discussed above, where the judge connects dominion over others with the human spirit itself: that scene especially carries undertones of the American Gothic as it is described by Malin. The theme of the need to destroy community, evidenced by the judge but also by the gang in general, who, as will be discussed below, can be seen as the true power and rightful inheritors of America, suggests an inherent contradiction between the republican, democratic ideal of American society, and the power and dominion of the individual. Government becomes a faintly ridiculous construction antithetical to the nature of society in this context. Considering *Blood Meridian* as an American Gothic text allows us to explore these concerns and the novel's engagement thereby with a wider literary and socio-political milieu.

The aforementioned engagement with government is linked, beyond a sense of American Gothic, to the frontier myth. With regard to this theme, it is useful to consider Richard Slotkin's important work on this myth, and his statement that, "where the European stood amid the ruins of an established society and used its fragments to build a new house, the American felt himself to be the creator of something new and unprecedented" – a theme that dovetails with the American Gothic use of the alternative order, in fact.<sup>327</sup> McCarthy's use of figures of authority and government both supports and questions this conceptual framework, illustrating a new society based on republican government rather than on Europeanised monarchy, where governors and presidents are namechecked and treated as legitimising

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<sup>326</sup> Amongst other functions: the judge is also a supernatural/Satanic figure, and embodies and discusses an array of philosophical concerns, on which there is substantial scholarship. For example, Sara L. Spurgeon, 'Foundation of Empire: The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*' (from *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier*. 19-40. College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP, 2005; rpt. in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Cormac McCarthy*, 85-105); the *Blood Meridian* chapter in Kenneth Lincoln's *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Leo Daugherty, 'Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy' (in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, revised edn.. Ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce. 159-75. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 1999); David Holloway, ' "A false book is no book at all": the ideology of representation in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy' (in *Myth, legend, dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Rick Wallach. 85-200. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000).

<sup>327</sup> Richard Slotkin. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973. 370.

forces, if not quasi-mystical forces. Yet it is a society where these embodied forms of republican government are pathetically helpless against the true authority of violence and forceful individuals. The judge acts as a demagogical conman who is the greatest figure of authority in the text, accorded by his title as “the judge” a degree of apparent socio-political authority, and despite all his many depredations against civilians and perversions a figure of greater power than any of the sergeants, governors, alcaldes, and their ilk who serve in the governments of the two republics. The apparent protagonist is simply “the kid”, an ordinary citizen of no power or authority either theoretical or practical, and he is borne along in the judge’s wake to his eventual ruin. The new society sought and trumpeted by the American and the frontier myth is revealed to be either a sham, or a gateway to anarchy.

The judge, then, represents this new (and terrible) society himself, considering the description McCarthy gives of him towards the novel’s end as he visits the kid at a surgeon’s: “whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go” (309). The passage ends with a description of the judge watching a forger creating false money (or, at least, this appears to be the scene; the exact nature of its reality is ambiguous), seeking “favour with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end” (310). The judge here acts as a controller of the economy, in the role of authority over money and thereby the capitalistic forces and agents that underpin American society. The sense that he represents that society and embodies its governing forces is furthered by this strange and ambiguous scene. As he fuses embodied and spectral executive force, he also here fuses government and corporate power, the division between which comes to the fore, as noted, in *No Country for Old Men*: he thus foreshadows the coming twentieth century and the increasing domination of corporate power.

Christine Chollier comments on this scene in her work on the questioning of market economies in *Blood Meridian*, stating that the forger is “trying to establish a system where exchange would no longer depend on barter but on currency, which might perhaps limit some of that violence...the ideologue of the gang [i.e. the judge] will not permit a trade other than war to dominate the market of predation”.<sup>328</sup> Chollier’s commentary is relevant first because it places the judge in a position of power over the market, and thus over America’s

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<sup>328</sup> Christine Chollier. ‘ “I ain’t come back rich, that’s for sure,” or the questioning of market economies in Cormac McCarthy’s novels.’ In *Myth, legend, dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Rick Wallach. 171-6. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 175.

market-based society, and secondly because of its reference to the judge as an “ideologue”: Chollier identifies him clearly as a political figure, arguing for his particular philosophy and indeed imposing it. The judge can be posited as an iteration of an ideological dictator, in fact; the manner in which Chollier refers to him certainly bears the hallmarks of a Stalin- or Maoesque twentieth-century dictator dedicated to a particular philosophy. Considered in conjunction with Jonathan Imber Shaw’s essay, one can contend that McCarthy here again offers a commentary on the novel’s contemporary context of the Cold War, as with the possible echo of the “imp” of nuclear weaponry.

This is not to suggest that the judge therefore represents the Soviet leaders, which would be too obvious and nationalistic for McCarthy’s intricate and rarely straightforward engagement with power and ideology. The judge is, after all, American, the novel and the scene under discussion taking place relatively early in the nation’s history as it was still being forged (by men like the scalphunters). That he has an attested historical referent, in the journal of an officer of the American army, adds to this American-ness. What he may, instead, represent here is the American government’s imposition of an ideological dictatorship, akin to the Soviet Union or other regimes inimical to American interests, however one chooses to interpret the line “of this is the judge judge”. If he is, as Chollier suggests, judging the currency in the sense that he intends to ensure the trade of war remains paramount, then he stands for America’s dedication to war. If, as I have suggested, he is simply judging the currency and thereby standing as an arbiter of the market economy, he stands for the nation’s dedication to capitalism and to the market. These need not be mutually exclusive – either way, this is what he is said to judge and therefore we can extrapolate from this some sense of his symbolic power. Shaw’s previously cited contention that “the novel suggests that the mobilization of violence as an ultimate form capable of delineating the divide between good and evil, between those delivering justice and those deserving eradication, is rife with contradiction and mortal danger” in relation to Reagan administration foreign policies, can be extended to the idea that American opposition to ideological regimes in the latter half of the twentieth century is also rife with contradiction.

The use of the word judge, here doubled up in a particularly emphatic phrase, becomes more significant in this context: the image of the United States (or, more specifically, its government) standing as a judge over not just its own society, but also the world, becomes apparent. To again take an example from the contemporary politics of the United States, President Zachary Taylor involved the nation in a quarrel with Portugal in 1850 relating to the payment of debts, demanding money back from the European nation that it had confiscated from an American ship. Taylor referred to Portugal’s refusal to pay the debt as a refusal to

“do justice”; thus justice is connected once more with money and the market, and the American president is shown as judge over the world.<sup>329</sup> The judge in *Blood Meridian* does, of course, judge the kid at the novel’s end, starting from the scene where he is depicted watching and judging the work of the coldforger. He finds the kid wanting and having failed to engage properly in the society and pseudo-democracy of which he is a part, the scalphunter gang. A wider sense of the American government as judge of society seems evident, the proximity of these judgements suggesting the connection of American justice and economy, not to mention other concerns such as war and violence.

The Gothic sense of an “alternative order” suggested by Cowell is evidenced by McCarthy’s use of government, but here presenting a lack of order, or an order governed by the power of the individual, provided with legitimacy by often weak figures of authority and government, such as White’s marauding raid, tacitly supported by Governor Burnett. The narrative of American civilisation and the ideals of republican government are largely rejected by the text, which implies the idea that the power of such a government is largely the aforementioned: that of providing a respectable legitimacy to otherwise savage acts. Indeed, considered in the context of McCarthy’s work as a whole, this can be seen as part of a continuing theme in his literature. John M. Grammer discusses the protagonist of McCarthy’s 1973 novel *Child Of God*, Lester Ballard, in similar terms, identifying the significance of his rifle: “an armed man, prepared to defend the country and his own liberty and property, was for our ancestors the ideal republican citizen, the foundation of stable order” (making reference to the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, the right to keep and bear arms, as testament to this).<sup>330</sup> He proceeds to describe Lester’s “descent into madness – a madness which carries out, in horrifying ways, the essential impulses of the threatened pastoral republic”.<sup>331</sup> Here, this is by attempting to recreate a domestic idyll in a rundown cabin with, eventually, the corpses of murdered women.

*Blood Meridian* tackles the same issue differently. Glanton’s gang are in fact explicitly contracted to defend the republic of Mexico against Indians (in the discourse of the nineteenth century, such actions against Indians would also be viewed as defending their own republic, at least in theory, though the complicity of the American government in the Indian raids in Mexico should not be forgotten), and even when not employed in such an

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<sup>329</sup> Quoted in *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore*. Elbert B. Smith. Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 1988. 72.

<sup>330</sup> John M. Grammer. ‘A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy’s South.’ In *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, revised edn.. Ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce. 28-44. Jackson, MS: U of Mississippi P, 1999. 39.

<sup>331</sup> Grammer, ‘A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral and History in Cormac McCarthy’s South’, 39.

active defence, they each very much represent the “armed man” of which Grammer speaks, the frontiersman and pioneer. The use of the historical evidence attested, however, creates an additional dimension to this Gothic creation of an alternative order: the order portrayed by *Blood Meridian* is, in many of its parts, historically attested as the order that did in fact exist. It posits an alternative order to the myth of the republic, rather than to the republic as it existed in the nineteenth century, which was, significant evidence suggests, closer to the alternative the text posits.

Elbert B. Smith posits a link between politics, violence, and entertainment in his account of the presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore, stating

Future generations of Americans would vent their more competitive aggressions and channel their love of excitement through collegiate and professional sports on a national scale, through the extraordinary adventures and drama of motion pictures, and, finally, through the constant vicarious violence of television. For the American of 1848, however, politics filled most of this need.<sup>332</sup>

Smith's commentary is a useful guide to the aspects of *Blood Meridian* that are discussed here. *Blood Meridian* is by no means a novel *explicitly* about politics or political figures in the sense that a novel such as Roth's *The Plot Against America* is. However, as has been argued there is a substructure to the novel comprising a discourse of authority/government, and particularly its role in legitimising acts otherwise apparently outside the acceptable social order and the narrative of the idealised republic. The entertainment of the plot's principal characters, the scalphunter gang, seems very much to be in violence and bloodshed. Even Captain White and his raiders are not entirely dissociated from this urge: although he is not shown revelling in the violent debauchery the Glanton gang partake in, his planned action is a military and therefore violent one, and his language carries a strong sense of glorying in his mission. “We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land”, the captain announces to the kid, adding with enthusiastic emphasis, “that's right” (34). This is in the same paragraph as the reference to the tacit support of Peter Burnett, significantly. The thrill and entertainment of impending physical conflict are provided, again, with legitimacy from a figure in government, the construction of the paragraph emphasising the importance of Governor Burnett's support.

Smith's argument, then, can be expanded, to an idea of a general desire for entertainment through violence on the part of Americans in the nineteenth century, a desire and process in

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<sup>332</sup> Smith, E., *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore*, 19.

which government and politics had an important role to play.<sup>333</sup> The judge, clearly, takes a great deal of amusement from both wanton violence and the political game, as evidenced by the scene discussed above where he makes a presentation of the Mexican sergeant to Glanton's men, or in his frequent speechifying. At the conclusion of the novel, the judge speaks to the kid in terms of some form of performance of history: "this is an orchestration for an event. For a dance in fact. The participants will be apprised of their roles at the proper time. For now it is enough that they have arrived" (328-9). The performative, entertaining aspect of these various intertwined processes – government and politics, war, history, the struggle for dominion and authority – is adumbrated here by the judge, who is presented himself as a distinctly theatrical type throughout the novel. Politics and violence are all seen to be part of a great dance or game, an entertainment for the masses. Not for nothing does the main text of the novel end with a scene of an exuberantly dancing crowd centred on the judge: "and they are dancing, the board floor slamming under the jackboots and the fiddlers grinning hideously over their canted pieces....he bows to the fiddlers and sashays backwards and throws back his head and laughs deep in his throat and he is a great favourite, the judge" (335). As always, he is referred to as the judge, and here he is explicitly depicted as a popular figure and as a leader; and indeed, even here, in phrases such as "the board floor slamming under the jackboots" and, later, "he swings about and takes possession of one of the fiddles", there is the underlying threat of violence in the heart of the dance.

Beyond this, the argument for the importance of violence in the American social order and mythology of the republic is important. Richard Slotkin discusses the significance of violence in relation to a myth of the American hunter, and its relation to historical cycles and recreation and regeneration, such as the new American state was seeking:

In a democracy based on the social equality of the upwardly mobile, perpetual motion is as important a sign of social importance as the possession of an established fortune. Indeed, the former is of more value, since stagnant or inherited wealth is, by the hunter's standards, a sign of lost vigour. The myth of the hunter, as seen by the Indians and by writers like Flint and Cooper, is one of self-renewal or self-creation through acts of violence. What becomes of the new self, once the initiatory hunt is

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<sup>333</sup> This notion provides connections with *Vineland* and the primacy of television and televised violence. The passage in which Hector Zuñiga sees what appears to be the beginning of a militarised coup on late night television, particularly, is salient, as is Ronald Reagan's film career, especially his appearances in Western and war films. Reagan's use of his cinematically derived 'cowboy'/soldier image, as discussed below, also inform *No Country for Old Men*'s dialogue with the impending Reagan era.

over? If the good life is defined in terms of the hunter myth, there is only another hunt succeeding the first one.<sup>334</sup>

Slotkin goes on to explicitly connect democracy with this impulse and myth: “we have, I think, continued to associate democracy and progress with perpetual social mobility (both horizontal and vertical) and with the continual expansion of our power into new fields or new levels of exploitation.”<sup>335</sup> Glanton’s gang in *Blood Meridian* are, of course, scalp-hunters. More than this, they are scalp-hunters acting primarily with the impulse of profit, capitalistic gain, suggesting a deep connection with American society extending even to the contemporary social context of *Blood Meridian*’s writing, in the time of Ronald Reagan’s capitalist economic policies and leadership.

Importantly, they are shown as the real (or a real, at least) power in the land, rather than the official government represented by helpless figures such as the alcalde of San Diego or Angel Trías, important as the legitimating role played by figures such as Governor Burnett is shown to be. The scene of Trías’ celebration of the scalphunters has already been discussed, but here again it contains an important detail indicating the gang’s power. McCarthy depicts Glanton’s total disregard for the office and authority of the governor:

Glanton took charge of the long canvas bag stamped with the state cartouche and cutting the governor short he rose and dumped the gold out onto the table...and in a brisk drumhead disbursement divided out the pile of gold with the blade of his knife so that each man was paid his spoken share and no further ceremony to it (170).

To a degree, this scene mocks the trappings and rituals of government: Glanton simply divides up the money his men have earned through violence, “no further ceremony to it”. The description has the air of democracy to it, even, as Glanton allots to each man “his spoken share”, as agreed and earned. Yet, Glanton is undermining the official government as represented by Trías here, Trías’ bursar being introduced “to cheers, catcalls, hoisted bumpers”. Trías may be an appointed governor, but as previously explored, he was a popular one in whose appointment public opinion had played a role.

Here, power seems more to reside with the hunters, with those who are earning new fortune in the “perpetual motion” of which Slotkin speaks. He discusses the problematic figure of the hunter, stressing the importance of his activity and violence, the destructively potent fusion of the hunter and the cultivator of the land, which is again worth quoting at some length:

this confounding of the figures of the hunter-wastrel and the farmer-cultivator has had disastrous social consequences. It enables us to exploit and lay waste the land as a

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<sup>334</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, 556.

<sup>335</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, 557.



means of transforming and improving it and converting it into the ideal world of our dreams. It enables us to express our love of the land and its potential by destroying it. The key term is *improvement*...Boone and the Indians lose their land for failing to improve it, for enjoying it in its natural state. Crockett and his farmer-speculators, on the other hand, who planted one field of corn for one year that they might reap specie when they sold out the next, gained the absolute right to the property because they had demonstrably increased its value in money.<sup>336</sup>

He also avers that “not the cultivator, but the *conquistadore* is the American Aeneas”.<sup>337</sup> Slotkin’s claims are pertinent and useful here, as we see the scalphunters having earned their money, having increased their own value and, indeed, the “value” of the lives they have taken. They, the text suggests, are the deserving inheritors and figures of power in the land, at least according to the hunter myth as described by Slotkin. The idea of “value” is also referred to by Fielder, as cited above, when he refers to the judge assigning to each member of the gang a “use-value” in a “scriptural economy”: the importance of the relationship between the individual, his value, and power is of some note in the text.

Elbert Smith comments that, “for most Americans during the 1850s, getting ahead economically was more important than the arguments over the extension of slavery”.<sup>338</sup> He further refers to Millard Fillmore (President 1850-1853) in a related vein, saying that “if Millard Fillmore enjoyed his official duties at all, it was probably in the role of high priest for progress and prosperity”, again connecting progress and democracy to wealth and the economy rather than to social progress and justice.<sup>339</sup> The president, the ultimate representative and symbol of democracy (Zachary Taylor, the contemporary president of the early events of *Blood Meridian*, insisted before standing that he would be “the president of all the people if at all, & not of a party”), is described in a quasi-religious role (again) as an advocate for implicitly capitalistic advance.<sup>340</sup> The comparison to Glanton, the leader of the gang, and thus their ‘president’, in the aforementioned scene, is telling. Beyond this, one can also draw a comparison with the judge, in his equally semi-mystical role as a high priest of war and, as discussed above, seemingly the market as well. Trías here provides the money to stimulate the economic advance of the scalphunters. They have demonstrated their value, which he then allots financially, but Glanton then, seizing the money from the governor, distributes it according to each man’s contribution, and thereby the true power is shown to lie

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<sup>336</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, 555-6.

<sup>337</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, 555.

<sup>338</sup> Smith, E., *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore*, 199.

<sup>339</sup> Smith, E., *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore*, 199.

<sup>340</sup> Quoted in Smith, E., *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore*, 39.

with those who create their own value and display a successful allegiance to the profit motive. Thus, the scene alluded to presents a complex vision of democracy and power, as it seems to undermine and question official governments and figures thereof.

Fredric Jameson's writings on the American hunter and the ideological novel complicate this vision yet further, however. Jameson argues that violent adventure stories

permit the exercise of an ideological double standard: on the individual level it allows you vicariously to experience and to satisfy this 'ineradicable' instinct for violence, which is then the object of your critique on a social and political level, where it causes you to posit the need for...the authoritarian state, to hold the disorder and the anarchy of individual violence and of human nature in general in check.<sup>341</sup>

Thus, if one accepts Jameson's argument, McCarthy's use of violence in the text in fact hints at the need for an authoritarian state, or at least encourages the reader to take that view. Indeed, the corollary of much of what has already been discussed – the weakness of embodied government and authority – is that one could interpret the text as arguing for stronger government, one that, unlike Trías' hapless "sorcerer's apprentice", can keep its "imp" on a short and controlled leash. At the same time, this presents a significant degree of conflict with the link suggested between violence and American democracy posited by the aforementioned scene at the celebratory dinner. Further to this, the judge should, as a judicial figure and in the parlance of government the one neutral figure of power who should stand above partisan politics and enforce justice (and all the associated concepts such as fairness and the rule of law), be a character who can enforce our idea of a civilised society, and is also, of the principal cast of characters, the only one directly associated with government. Yet he is the most violent and depraved of them all. In this way, the potential drive towards authoritarianism that such a violent text might be seen to invoke, especially in the light of Jameson's criticism, is answered by McCarthy's asking what, then, occurs if the government in power is, itself, anarchically violent. It indicates the subtle complex of narrative on government and power in *Blood Meridian* that such contrary views can be taken from the text.

To return to Jameson's essay, it is worth noting his view of the contradictions of the hunter myth as figured in James Dickey's *Deliverance*: "a process of *displacement* is involved, in the Freudian sense of the word: the rational surface of the mind accepts the objection, while the unconscious remains symbolically and unconsciously committed to Lewis' enterprise."<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Fredric Jameson. 'The Great American Hunter, or Ideological Content in the Novel.' *College English* 34.2 (1972): 180-97. 182.

<sup>342</sup> Jameson, 'The Great American Hunter, or Ideological Content in the Novel', 183.

*Blood Meridian* entails an acceptance of its many objections and counter-arguments, but retains a similar symbolic commitment to the ultimate authority of violence. Unlike *Deliverance*, however, this argument is explicitly and intricately illustrated in the text, not least in the opposition of the vaguely civilised, democratic kid to the supremely authoritarian judge, who states that anything existing on Earth without his knowledge exists without his permission – and it is the judge who wins in the end, it would appear, for whatever it is that happens to the kid in the jakes he does not appear again, whilst the judge is dancing at the centre of the crowd at the novel's end. McCarthy does, in fact, give to the judge a speech of a democratic, yet deeply sinister, variety when he visits the kid in jail: "for it was required of no man to give more than he possessed nor was any man's share compared to another's. Only each was called upon to empty out his heart into the common and one did not. Can you tell me who that one was?" (307). Here, the judge is terrifyingly democratic, accusing the kid of having committed a great crime, of having "broken with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise" (307). Within the democracy of the scalphunting gang, the kid has failed, and has undermined thereby its power – and, the judge would have him believe, doomed himself in the process. Elbert Smith refers to the "physical threats and violence that often accompanied the open balloting" in mid-nineteenth century America, and the judge illustrates this, claiming a democracy in this conversation with the kid but implying serious threat to him for not falling in with the gang's majority choices.<sup>343</sup>

Sara L. Spurgeon contends that McCarthy makes use of these myths in "deliberately deconstructing the imperialist aims and justifications of the old myths while disrupting assumptions about the ideas and identities they were intended to uphold".<sup>344</sup> She describes the novel as an "American origin story", rewriting the myths to "bridge the discontinuity...perceived by the public to exist between the mythic past of the American West and its modern realities", finally identifying the text as "a newly structured version of National Fantasy, though not one that imposes any kind of hoped-for order or control".<sup>345</sup> The use of the hunter myth to engage with issues of government, democracy, and power, though generally left aside by Spurgeon, fulfils this aim, linking the chaotic violence of this American myth to the functioning of government and thereby to the modern day, especially in light of the novel's ending as the judge dances on eternally. As Spurgeon says, however,

<sup>343</sup> Smith, *The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore*, 18.

<sup>344</sup> Sara L. Spurgeon. 'Foundation of Empire: The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.' From *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier*. 19-40. College Station, TX: Texas A&M UP, 2005. Rpt. in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Cormac McCarthy*, 85-105. 85.

<sup>345</sup> Spurgeon, 'Foundation of Empire: The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*', 86.

this myth provides no order other than a general order of violence: the only sense of order stems from the caprice of forces such as the judge, individual demagogues, and aggressors. Here the judge's apparently random choices (such as his adoption of the fool, or seeming adoption and subsequent brutal murder of an Indian child) come to the fore: there is no sense or order to his actions, merely his own will.

In one instance, however, Spurgeon's argument is flawed, or at least stops short of a full consideration of the issue: she argues that "in many ways McCarthy has produced a counter-history, in contradiction to the meaning generated from most official histories of the period. It is within the accuracy of the historical detail of *Blood Meridian* that McCarthy finds his mythic history...".<sup>346</sup> It is wholly valid to refer to *Blood Meridian* as a counter-history insofar as it contradicts the sanitised, legendary version of American history – the sort that would agree with Sylvester Mowry in believing America a "higher civilisation" – but surely the point must be that McCarthy uses contemporary historical reports to reveal that the historical record itself does, in fact, reveal a meaning closer to what he posits in the novel, that the mythic history is the flawed and ill-informed one. Official histories may support this latter narrative, but historical documentation of the time such as the *Comisión Pesquisadora de la Frontera del Norte* report and newspaper pieces such as those cited above support McCarthy's narrative to a considerable degree. Spurgeon's phraseology does not seem to acknowledge this complication, legitimate as her wider claim may be.

The hunter myth, then, helps us towards an understanding of the culture and politics underlying *Blood Meridian*. The nature of authority, democracy, and civilisation are, and have long been, deeply ambiguous in American society, and McCarthy uses the narrative of *Blood Meridian* to explore the intricacies and convolutions of these issues. The historical referents of the text augment this exploration: knowing that Angel Trías and Peter Burnett did, according to the evidence of the time, act in the ways they are depicted acting in the text, indicates that the text is not only a hypothetical literary consideration of the problems evoked, but one based in harsh realities those problems created in nineteenth-century America. The issues of the authority of violence, the hunter myth, and the nature of democracy relate also back to the American Gothic, as alternative orders are posited at several points, whether that be the drive towards authoritarianism, the authority of violence, the power of those who can prove 'value', or other systems explored in the narrative.

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<sup>346</sup> Spurgeon, 'Foundation of Empire: The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*', 87.

*Blood Meridian's* discourse of government does then, ultimately, form an important substructure to the text. When we consider again Shaw's analysis of *Blood Meridian* in the light of the contemporary Reagan administration's interventions in Central America, McCarthy's engagement with the power and violence of the American government seems all the more evident. Vince Brewton has, further to this, identified the Vietnam war as a silent presence in McCarthy's novels, asserting: "the Vietnam experience, while never appearing directly in McCarthy's novels, has nevertheless left a deep imprint on his early work."<sup>347</sup> (Vietnam has a slightly more express role in *No Country for Old Men*.) The American government plays a similar, silent, and perhaps unconscious role. The government, in some form or another and whether that of Mexico or of the United States, appears in a supporting and in some sense controlling role throughout *Blood Meridian*, providing the building blocks of the narrative at several junctures.

The kid's journey from meeting the judge to his final apparent destruction by him offers a multiplicity of interpretations, of which one fits this structure. Returning to Sepich's image of the judge leading the idiotic masses, as figured by the fool Bell, we can extend this image to consider the kid as someone more informed and more sensitive than those "idiotic masses" – and who, however, meets his end at the hands of the judge. His own power (which, the judge suggests towards the novel's end, resides primarily in attempting to be silent, unrecognised, and thus invisible, an impossibility in the world of aggressive individual power posited by the novel's engagement with the hunter myth) is utterly defeated by the judge's, by the monstrous symbol of government and society. Much of the novel's narrative is, like the Indian raids described in the *Weekly Arizonian*, "aided and abetted" by government. As has been discussed, without Peter Burnett's support, Captain White's raid might never have happened, and the kid would never have been in the position to join Glanton's gang; Angel Trías' actions trigger those of the gang which occupy much of the rest of the text. The judge – the aforementioned symbol of government, a fusion of the embodied and disembodied executive power – is, as discussed above, arguably more the protagonist than the kid, having certainly a more fully realised and memorable personality, and whose actions demonstrably affect the narrative frequently, where the kid appears to be a character to whom things happen rather than one who makes things happen.

Thus, the actual narrative of the novel is, however quietly, driven by the actions of government – indeed, whatever the importance of Burnett's support in White's raid, that the raid is proposed at all flows from the actions of the American government in the US-Mexican

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<sup>347</sup> Brewton, 'The Changing Landscape of Violence in Cormac McCarthy's Early Novels and the Border Trilogy', 65.

War, and the subsequent inaction of the “mollycoddles in Washington”. Given the extensive historical documentation supporting much of these elements of the narrative, much of it employed directly by McCarthy, the novel starts to appear, amongst its other meanings, as a disquisition on and inquisition into the role and power of government in mid-nineteenth century America. The text does not directly represent at length historical politicians and officials (unlike *Mason & Dixon*’s portrayal of Washington), with the exception of Angel Trías, who is a Mexican rather than American figure and still only appears briefly, and it does not engage in an explicit way with the presidency itself. However, as has been argued, there is an exploration of individual power and ultimate power invested in a single person in the form of the judge, which represents and reflects on the presidency, while the broader meaning of the presidency and consequences of executive actions feature in important ways in the text.

### ***No Country for Old Men*: executive weakness and corporate power in the new West**

*No Country for Old Men*, in many ways, represents a thematic sequel to *Blood Meridian*. There are numerous similarities and continuities between the two novels. Both are set in the southwest – *No Country* primarily in Texas, *Blood Meridian* in Texas, northern Mexico, California and more vaguely defined areas of generally uninhabited desert in what is now known as the Four Corners region.<sup>348</sup> Each employs a seemingly deathless, terrifyingly psychotic “villain” who stands outside conventional morality (Judge Holden in the earlier work, Anton Chigurh in the latter); both feature a comparatively sympathetic protagonist who is destroyed in the narrative directly or indirectly via the agency of the ‘villain’ (the kid and Llewellyn Moss). The novels each feature extensive dialogues on fate, human nature, and philosophy, and depict a lawless anarchy in place of a functioning society. This is arguably a feature common to all McCarthy’s work, but especially prevalent within these two novels, aside from the complete anarchy of *The Road*, set in an imagined future rather than historical time. In the present analysis, *No Country for Old Men* further functions as a sequel to *Blood Meridian* in its reflection on issues of government and the ordering of society, or lack thereof. The novel should be fully considered in terms of its historical context and setting, particularly its connection with the beginning of the Reagan administration, and with regards to the opposition – and connection – it displays between corporate power and governmental executive power. These two forms of power are represented throughout the text by its narrator, the sheriff Ed Tom Bell, and – primarily – Anton Chigurh, its antagonist. The novel’s relationship with the Western, particularly given Ronald Reagan’s deployment of imagery associated with that genre, is also significant. Llewellyn Moss represents something

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<sup>348</sup> That is to say, the area defined by Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado.

of a (post)modern cowboy figure, and the nature of his fate is important in drawing out the meanings of the novel.

### American anarchy and the role of technology

Daniel Butler has suggested that *No Country* represents the inherent anarchy of American society (although McCarthy's view, and deployment, of anarchy is substantially different to that expressed in Pynchon's work).<sup>349</sup> He deploys a helpful analogy with Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, whose Professor character sees America as the best hope for anarchists. Butler argues that, "the Professor's belief, implicitly sanctioned by the words of the Duke of Arcos, is that America is where the real anarchist outlaw can thrive, a hypothesis that Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* examines."<sup>350</sup> He continues to describe the setting of *No Country* as reflecting this anarchy: "the absurd bedlam of the Eagle Pass gunfight suggests a contemporary America immersed in the anarchy foreseen by the Professor, an America wallowing in the 'lawless temperament' and 'anarchistic character' diagnosed by Conrad's 'perfect anarchist'."<sup>351</sup> This anarchy strongly implies the abdication, or inefficacy, of executive power, in (almost) contemporary America, the novel being set in 1980. Thus, it asserts that the grim chaos of the borderlands seen in *Blood Meridian*, set one hundred and thirty years earlier, has not abated with the advent of modern technology and communications (and consequent expansion of executive power). This is a point made explicitly in the novel: in one of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell's internal monologues within the text, he says, "I dont know that law enforcement benefits all that much from technology. Tools that

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<sup>349</sup> McCarthy's anarchy is brutal, chaotic, and more or less apolitical, whereas Pynchon's is much more positive. As Robert Sklar puts it, *The Crying of Lot 49* "is an anarchist miracle, a novel which not only postulates another world but creates with the truth of art another world's intrusion into this one." ('An Anarchist Miracle: The Novels of Thomas Pynchon.' In *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. 87-96. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978. 95.) This intrusion of other worlds is clearly visible in most of Pynchon's work; particularly relevant here, of course, is *Vineland*, and the alternative community of the Thanatoids, amongst others. George Levine, similarly, suggests that "the pressure towards anarchy [in Pynchon's work], in a world structured to resist anarchy at any cost, might release us, ironically, into a more humane order". ('Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon's Fiction.' In *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Thomas Pynchon*, 57-76. 61. The anarchy McCarthy depicts is violent, random, and far from humane – although the landscapes of *Blood Meridian* do also suggest the "human continuities with stones and mountainsides" Levine describes, albeit in a very different fashion (61). There is no sense that anarchy may provide some degree of political recovery and social justice in McCarthy's work: it merely allows for the continuation of the eternal conflict *Blood Meridian* takes as arguably its central theme.

<sup>350</sup> Daniel Butler. ' "What's Wanted is a Clean Sweep": Outlaws and Anarchy in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*'. *Cormac McCarthy Journal* 9.1 (2011): 38-50. 41.

<sup>351</sup> Butler, ' "What's Wanted is a Clean Sweep": Outlaws and Anarchy in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*', 41.

comes into our hands comes into theirs too. Not that you can go back. Or that you'd even want to" (62).<sup>352</sup>

The worlds of the two novels remain fundamentally similar in their chaotic anarchy. Technology changes, allowing for a shift in how both figures outside the law and figures of authority combat one another. Bell indicates modern society is still in some way preferable to the past, as one does not necessarily want to return to the world before contemporary technology. However, these extralegal forces remain in combat with authority, violence continues, and in his scepticism of the degree to which technology helps the authorities, Bell suggests that there is no indication that there is even significant shifting of the balance between the forces. The nation remains as subject to the power of figures and forces operating outside legal and formal socio-political frameworks as it was in *Blood Meridian*.

The appropriation of technology is a complex issue here. In Pynchon's work, technology can serve the ends of the authoritarian state and figures such as Brock Vond, or it can serve alternative communities in a more positive sense such as the 24fps film collective in the same novel (although the collective is eventually compromised, problematising its textual meaning). Raymond Malewitz makes a similar argument relating to McCarthy's work, positing that "this proliferation of misuse continues McCarthy's search for an alternative to late capitalism. If the problem of McCarthy's late novels ... is the inevitable penetration of exchange value into use value in American culture, the misuse of objects might be thought of as a strategy for resisting the commodification of human-object relations".<sup>353</sup>

This would certainly seem to suggest a comparison with Pynchon's work and his deployment of technology in *Vineland* and other novels, yet it is problematic. Chigurh (mis)appropriates technology in *No Country for Old Men* for extralegal purposes, yet these are violent, antisocial purposes. He makes use of this technology, as we will see, in the service of making himself appear attractive as a business partner (of sorts) to a corporate interest. Thereby he is very much directly involved with late capitalism and its practitioners: he may not be part of an authoritarian, executive government system, but he is a part of the corporate system that appears to have taken its place. A useful comparison could be drawn with *Mason & Dixon*'s depiction of Benjamin Franklin, a brilliant inventor and creator of technology, and a figure very much tied into the business world and the executive one: he is

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<sup>352</sup> Cormac McCarthy. *No Country for Old Men*. Basingstoke and Oxford: Pan, 2005. All references to *No Country for Old Men* are to this edition. The lack of apostrophe in the word "dont" is part of McCarthy's stylistic idiom, though he does use them in other contractions such as "I'll".

<sup>353</sup> Malewitz, ' "Anything Can Be an Instrument": Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*', 726-7.



introduced in the novel in an apothecary's shop providing advice on prices and giving Mason and Dixon the advice "never pay the Retail Price", and subsequently "pressing Dixon upon the Topic of Mason's 'East India Company Connections.'" <sup>354</sup> Franklin would also serve as President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania and the United States' first Postmaster-General. Franklin creates great technological innovations such as the Glass Armonica in the novel, and seems an outlandish character, described in the text as a "celebrated American Philosopher" rather than a political figure, but in fact connected with both corporate and executive power (267). Chigurh is a very different character, but similarly his unusual use of technology is difficult. He operates extralegally, but as part of a corporate power system. We are given the unpalatable choice between state technology of the sort deployed by Vond in *Vineland* and Chigurh's destructive technology.

It is revealing, furthermore, to consider Chigurh, and his use of technology, in light of Pynchon's essay 'Is it OK to be a Luddite?'. Pynchon posits that, for the Luddite, sceptical of technological progress and consequences, "to insist on the miraculous is to deny to the machine at least some of its claims on us, to assert the limited wish that living things, earthly and otherwise, may on occasion become Bad and Big enough to take part in transcendent doings."<sup>355</sup> Chigurh has an ambiguous attitude to this sort of belief. He tells Carla Jean things "are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world" (260). Very shortly afterwards, he shoots her. In this, he appears to deny the possibility of miraculous events, of unexpected changes in fate. He also asserts the supremacy of technology as he deploys his weapon to end Carla Jean's life.<sup>356</sup> However, his execution of this fate, his position as an agent of the destiny that the coin which determines Carla Jean's survival symbolises, could be seen, in and of itself, as a form of "transcendent doing". Chigurh certainly bears a strong resemblance to Pynchon's "Badass" in 'Is it OK to be a Luddite', although he is more likely to inspire a terrified awe than admiration.<sup>357</sup> His ability to create havoc – "work mischief", in Pynchon's terms – is to some considerable

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<sup>354</sup> *Mason & Dixon*, 267-270.

<sup>355</sup> Thomas Pynchon. 'Is it OK to be a Luddite?'. *New York Times Book Review*, 28<sup>th</sup> October 1984. *The Modern Word*. Web. 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2014.

<sup>356</sup> This can perhaps be linked to the idea of Manifest Destiny, that the United States of America was somehow *fated* to conquer the North American continent and create a "new world". Yet, here, we see a much darker side to fate: as some nineteenth-century politicians invoked Manifest Destiny to justify actions such as war with Mexico, so Chigurh invokes fate in his murders. (Notably, he rarely actually spares anyone, suggesting his philosophical pronouncements are somewhat disingenuous.)

<sup>357</sup> "And Ned Lud's anger was not directed at the machines, not exactly. I like to think of it more as the controlled, martial-arts type anger of the dedicated Badass.

There is a long folk history of this figure, the Badass. He is usually male, and while sometimes earning the quizzical tolerance of women, is almost universally admired by men for two basic virtues: he is Bad, and he is Big. Bad meaning not morally evil, necessarily, more like able to work mischief on a large scale. What is important here is the amplifying of scale, the multiplication of effect." Pynchon, 'Is it OK to be a Luddite'.

degree reliant on technology: Chigurh, as much as he is a psychopathic, almost supernatural, character, like the judge in *Blood Meridian*, is nevertheless a part of a vast nexus of modern corporate and technological power. He thus represents a problematic figure, who bears relation to Pynchon's "Badass", but from an alternative standpoint where fate, technology, and the individual human form a complex relay of agency and power.

Bell states that technology comes into both legal and extralegal forces' hands, but that he has no ability, or desire, to "go back", to a situation before modern technology, although his attitude seems to be complicated, believing "some things is worse" and telling a car salesman "I thought I'd stick with what I had. That aint always a good policy. But it aint always a bad one neither" (62). Notably, however, he does not express any desire for a pre-technological era, merely for older technology. The text indicates that the transcendent acts of the past – the popular conception of which, again, is noted by Pynchon – either never existed and have always been compromised, or have been replaced by the actions of technologically aided, morally ambiguous and potentially psychopathic forces such as Chigurh.<sup>358</sup> This denied nostalgia is expressed in the very ending of the text, in fact, when Bell awakes from his dream of his father's light in the darkness of the pioneer era. The hope that living beings may yet be able to perform transcendent acts, denying the machine its power, is itself compromised, the machine – or even a representative of the capitalist, technology-driven system such as the coin – being complicit in what transcendent acts may be available. The same can be observed of Judge Holden, who more so than Chigurh represents a force antithetical to miracles, given his statement that anything that exists in nature without his knowledge does so without his consent. Power resides with forces such as Chigurh and Holden – forces, of course, frequently working in tandem with corporate entities – given their ability to use technology more inventively than the authorities representing the executive.<sup>359</sup>

### **The corporate psychopath**

Chigurh's psychopathic nature in itself draws a connection between the character and corporate power. Joel Bakan has identified, in *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of*

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<sup>358</sup> "The craze for Gothic fiction after *The Castle of Otranto* was grounded, I suspect, in deep and religious yearnings for that earlier mythic time which had come to be known as the Age of Miracles. In ways more and less literal, folks in the 18th century believed that once upon a time all kinds of things had been possible which were no longer so. Giants, dragons, spells. The laws of nature had not been so strictly formulated back then. What had once been true working magic had, by the Age of Reason, degenerated into mere machinery. Blake's dark Satanic mills represented an old magic that, like Satan, had fallen from grace." Pynchon, 'Is it OK to be a Luddite?'

<sup>359</sup> At least when those authorities operate within their proper bounds: Holden does claim, and appears to carry, some executive authority, but clearly abuses it.

*Profit and Power*, the psychopathic character of corporate entities: “the corporation is *singularly* self-interested and unable to feel genuine concern for others in any context....as a psychopathic creature, the corporation can neither recognise nor act upon moral reasons to refrain from harming others.”<sup>360</sup> Chigurh, similarly, never displays any emotion at all, let alone concern for others. He is bound to his ideas about fate, as represented, tellingly, by the coin. Bakan further states that “nothing in [the corporation’s] legal makeup limits what it can do to others in pursuit of its selfish ends, and it is compelled to cause harm when the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs”.<sup>361</sup> As much as Chigurh may discuss fate and ascribe the deaths of his victims to the result of the coin toss, no one escapes that could implicate or apprehend him. Wells, Carla Jean, and others must die in order that he can, at the end of the novel, return the money to the Houston company and prove his worth to them (while Llewellyn Moss dies at another’s hands); in this way, Chigurh’s actions closely match Bakan’s delineation of the psychopathic corporation, able to cause harm without thought to ensure profit.

*Unlike* a corporation, Chigurh seems to be almost entirely unrestrained by the law, which together with self-interest is identified by Bakan as all that holds corporate bodies in check. Chigurh seems to have no regard for the law or authority, Bell proving woefully inadequate, to the point of irrelevance, in the task of preventing his crimes, and thus Chigurh operates essentially unchecked. He can be understood, consequently, as an expression of psychopathic corporate power in its purest form, unfettered by any concern for others or for socio-political structures and codes. His philosophical beliefs and discussions thereof perhaps render him somewhat more directly engaged with his victims than a corporation might, but may after all be a theatrical act, not dissimilar to corporate advertising, designed to convert people to his view. Bakan observes that “the modern business corporation, an artificial person made in the image of a human psychopath, now is seeking to remake real people in *its* image.”<sup>362</sup> Chigurh, in a similar fashion, seeks to persuade his victims to see the world as he does, driven by an entirely amoral power of fate – and, pointedly, apparently *does* convince Carla Jean, as she states that she “truly does see” what Chigurh is saying just before he kills her (260).

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<sup>360</sup> Joel Bakan. *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. London: Constable, 2004. 56-60. Emphasis Bakan’s.

<sup>361</sup> Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, 60.

<sup>362</sup> Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, 135. (Bakan’s emphasis again.) This, of course, presents a familiar idea of phantom and embodied power, with the corporation as an “artificial person”, like the judge in *Blood Meridian*, fusing elements of the two.

## The frail executive

The chaotic depiction of contemporary America presented in *No Country for Old Men* strikes at the heart of its foundational history: Joseph L. Blau writes that, “those who advocated the adoption of the new Constitution of the United States of America saw their situation and that of the country in terms of the stark alternatives of government or anarchy. To reject the Constitution and return to the articles of Confederation was, in their opinion, to commit the country to anarchy; to adopt the Constitution was to establish a government.”<sup>363</sup> Alexander Hamilton, one of the most influential Founding Fathers, warned against the spectre of anarchy and the problems attendant on having insufficient government. The nation, as it was established by the Constitution, was thus founded on a keen desire to avoid anarchy and build a state of laws and executive authority enforcing them. *No Country for Old Men*, as will be discussed below, acknowledges that for the majority of the nation’s populace this system of laws and government functions much as it is supposed to do, but a significant minority live and transact their business outside this system, and this minority cannot be governed, creating an anarchic space in American society that cannot be regulated and controlled, even by a figure of executive authority such as Ed Tom Bell.

The seemingly boundless power of Judge Holden, who, as has been previously discussed, bears at least some apparent actual executive authority in *Blood Meridian*, is reflected in Bell’s description of the near-godlike powers granted to a sheriff by the Texas state constitution in *No Country*. Both indicate that, in McCarthy’s America, executive authority can in fact contribute to anarchy; if we take Hershleifer’s definition of anarchy as “a system in which participants can seize and defend resources without regulation from above”, it is evident that Holden’s depredations are regulated by no one, while Bell is theoretically endowed with extensive power and authority in a similar fashion, but in practice fails entirely to regulate the exchange of resources, and resulting conflict, amongst the novel’s characters, the relevant resource here being the money that Llewellyn Moss finds.<sup>364</sup> Hamilton, notably, seems to have foreshadowed this problem: in early essays supporting the adoption of the Constitution, he threatened its opponents with the Constitution being forced on them militarily, but subsequently in private correspondence labelled the finally adopted document a “frail and worthless Fabric”.<sup>365</sup> <sup>366</sup> Clearly, the use of overwhelming physical force to

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<sup>363</sup> Joseph L. Blau. ‘Government or Anarchy? in the Debates on the Constitution.’ *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 23.4 (1987): 507-19. 507.

<sup>364</sup> Jack Hershleifer. ‘Anarchy and its Breakdown.’ *Journal of Political Economy* 103.1 (1995): 26-52. 26.

<sup>365</sup> Quoted in Blau, ‘Government or Anarchy? in the Debates on the Constitution’, 513.

<sup>366</sup> Quoted in Blau, ‘Government or Anarchy? in the Debates on the Constitution’, 514.

impose a settlement against citizens' wishes, without recourse to a formalised legal, executive, or legislative structure, would in some degree constitute anarchy; and the final document that would become the United States Constitution was regarded by one of its staunchest proponents as weak and ineffectual, suggesting a firmly extant current of anarchy was allowed to remain within the constitutionally framed nation. Consequently, McCarthy illustrates an America where executive, constitutional authority is of limited power – unless abused, where it can become nearly infinite, and consequently provide only another form of anarchy. Implicitly, the developers of the Constitution failed in their mission to prevent anarchy existing within America.

Perhaps the most striking similarity between *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old Men* is the quasi-supernatural figures of Judge Holden and Anton Chigurh. Both have seemingly limitless power within the text, and both seem to be symbolic representations of forces greater than the human. Holden concentrates on the eternal and holy nature of war, while Chigurh talks frequently of fate. Their relationship with executive authority changes, however. As discussed in the preceding section, Holden, along with the rest of the Glanton scalphunter gang, is given leave to carry out his violent depredations through his employment by Angel Trías, governor of Chihuahua, to hunt Native Americans, and carries the title of judge, an apparently historical detail, appearing towards the end of *Blood Meridian* to carry some genuine authority in San Diego. Chigurh, however, is employed not by a governmental power, but does business with a corporate firm with an office on a seventeenth floor “with a view over the skyline of Houston and the open lowlands to the ship channel and the bayou beyond” (139). It is this company's actions that set loose the genie from the bottle, to employ the image from *Blood Meridian*, and they cannot return him to the bottle any more than Trías could Holden and the scalphunters. Indeed, the company tries, employing Carson Wells to pursue Chigurh, because they are “missing product and ... out a bunch of money” (140). Chigurh despatches Wells without difficulty.

The company is, however, depicted as a significant force in the world of *No Country*. The image of the elevated office with its grand urban vista – extending out even to the more wild image of the bayou – in itself projects a sense of corporate power, the city of Houston and its hinterlands depicted as visually and physically subordinate to this commercial space. Its view is over the skyline, in a significant detail, not across it, which together with its stated location on the building's seventeenth floor demonstrates its height.<sup>367</sup> One might also note

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<sup>367</sup> It should be noted, however, that in 1980, the tallest buildings in Houston (the title of tallest building changed during the year) were One Shell Plaza with fifty floors, succeeded by Enterprise Plaza with fifty-five floors (*Emporis*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2014). Thus, an office on the seventeenth floor would not in fact be

that this is far grander than the introduction of the novel's main locus of executive power, Bell's sheriff's office: "Bell climbed the rear steps of the courthouse and went down the hall to his office" (41). The courthouse itself is an executive building, of course, but is not described, and Bell's office is only a room somewhere within it, accessed from its back entrance. Bell's first act after entering the office is to speak on the phone with a woman whose cat is in a tree and evidently will not come down, leading Bell to observe, "it's money [he said]. You have enough money you dont have to talk to people about cats in trees" (41). His position of executive power is frustrating and trivial; whereas the office of the company with whom Chigurh deals indicates the trappings of wealth. Besides its view and physical removal from the citizenry and the city's everyday life on the seventeenth floor, it also contains a "desk of polished stainless steel and walnut", containing "not a picture or a piece of paper", suggesting that its occupant does not have to concern himself with humdrum trivialities of worldly business in the way Bell does (139). It is also very literally inaccessible to the general public, as it is only accessible via an elevator that "recodes itself after every trip" – technology again plays a role in the construction and defence of power in this society, a way for corporate entities to close themselves off physically from the rest of the world in a way that Bell's hypothetically powerful sheriff's office cannot. Money – Bell's lack of it, the company's possession of it, Moss's theft of it – seems to constitute the only true power in an otherwise anarchic landscape.

### **Bell as elected sheriff/Chigurh as corporate agent**

The novel certainly demonstrably undercuts the notion of any actual executive power. Its very first scene, besides the introductory monologue from Bell, features Chigurh violently murdering a sheriff's deputy; Bell himself, despite being the ostensible protagonist of the novel (or one of them, as Moss could validly claim the title too), has little purpose in the novel's world, arriving at crime scenes too late to do anything, failing to stop Moss's death (and Moss's wife's), and failing abjectly to catch Chigurh. Corporate power has replaced executive power, though only in the sense that Trías had power, the power to open the bottle and unleash subsequently uncontrollable forces: the representatives of executive authority are ineffectual, relegated to the sidelines even more than Trías. Bell represents the executive authority and democratic system of the United States particularly inasmuch as he is an elected sheriff; he states that he "campaigned pretty hard" and refers to his wife's being unsure "about me runnin" (90). This reflects political reality in Texas, where the state

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above all of the Houston skyline, though its location might allow a perspective overlooking the city's tallest skyscrapers. All these buildings are occupied by major companies, which only stands to underline the extent of the corporate power and wealth that McCarthy illustrates.

constitution stipulates that each county of the state elect a sheriff: “there shall be elected by the qualified voters of each county a Sheriff, who shall hold his office for the term of four years...”.<sup>368</sup> In this way the sheriff mirrors the federal presidency, also elected for a term of four years; he is an elected, partisan figure (unlike candidates for citywide office in Texas, who in cities without “home rule status” are required to be independent, candidates for sheriff may run representing a political party).<sup>369</sup> Larry Ball tellingly refers to sheriffs “presiding over” counties in the south-western frontier states in the nineteenth century, a state of affairs which continues, in theory at least, in the modern era, the office of sheriff remaining generally unchanged.<sup>370</sup>

As a popularly elected figure, Bell is a symbol of American democracy and its form of executive power, and it is significant that McCarthy makes the choice to explicitly identify him as an elected officer. Particularly as a law enforcement officer, he is a part of the supposed “big protective republic” to which Roth refers in *The Plot Against America*. Meanwhile, Chigurh is just the opposite. Butler observes that “the anarchical violence of Anton Chigurh (motivated neither by greed nor by political agenda) becomes less the sign of one man's fear of a boogeyman and more the expression of an entire culture's anxiety about anarchy”.<sup>371</sup> Chigurh, then, is in part terrifying because he cannot even be identified with any form of executive or political power or motive – he is simply a force, acting under his own inscrutable motivation. Of course, however, he is more entangled with the corporate world than he expressly acknowledges in dialogue. It should be noted that his name itself bears an implicit historical reference to a case of tangled land speculation in New Mexico that began in the early nineteenth century, and continues to this day, the Anton Chico land grant. The grant has been the subject of multiple cases of litigation, appeals, and land grabs by a vast web of businessmen and politicians for nearly two centuries, to the detriment of the citizens actually residing there. A history of the grant by Severiano R. Sisneros, Jr., secretary/treasurer of the grant's board of trustees, accuses the federal government of “failure...to protect the rights of the Heirs of the Anton Chico Land Grant under the treaty [of Guadalupe Hidalgo]”, and goes on to accuse the government of sanctioning the various interferences and legal machinations over the grant, finally claiming “this is unprecedented by any prior wars or

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<sup>368</sup> *Constitution of the State of Texas*, Article 5, section 23. *Texas Constitution and Statutes*. Web. 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014.

<sup>369</sup> *Texas Election Code*, Title 9, Chapter 143, section 143.002. *Texas Constitution and Statutes*. Web. 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014.

<sup>370</sup> Larry D. Ball. ‘Frontier Sheriffs at Work.’ *Journal of Arizona History* 27.3 (1986): 283-96. 283.

<sup>371</sup> Butler, ‘ “What's Wanted is a Clean Sweep”: Outlaws and Anarchy in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Cormac McCarthy's *No Country For Old Men*’, 44.

conflicts won by the United States or other Treaties promulgated in any subsequent wars after this period and it knowingly continues until the present.”<sup>372</sup>

The allusion in Chigurh’s name to this ongoing dispute about property rights ties him to at least some degree to corporate, monied interests, very much like those the character is involved with in the novel – again, acting beyond the law and either without cognisance or action by the government. One of Chigurh’s final appearances in the novel underscores this. When he returns the money that Moss stole, he appears in typical business uniform, “dressed in suit and tie” (250). When asked what he wants for returning the money, he says, “the purpose of my visit is simply to establish my bonafides. As someone who is an expert in a difficult field. As someone who is completely reliable and completely honest. Something like that” (251-252). The company man to whom he is talking responds, “someone I might do business with”, to which Chigurh replies simply, “yes” (252). The conversation continues, Chigurh stating that they will be working with new people, the “old people” having moved on as “not everyone is suited to this line of work. The prospect of outsized profits leads people to exaggerate their own capabilities” (253). The central plot of the novel – Moss’ discovery of the money, and Chigurh’s and others’ resulting pursuit of him leading to his death and Carla Jean’s – is revealed to be, essentially, a business deal. Chigurh’s actions derive from a desire to prove his usefulness to the company, and his philosophical musings throughout the novel now take a turn towards business advice. As a result, Chigurh may in many ways represent an unfathomable, near-supernatural force, akin to Judge Holden, but like Holden, he also represents a more terrestrial, human force – here, the financially driven, corporate power, as opposed to the power of governmental authority Holden claimed by the title “judge”.

It must also be observed, however, that many of McCarthy’s characters cannot generally be easily placed into such structures and systems as those of government and the business world. Elsewhere, Steven Frye has noted that the narrator of *Blood Meridian* “warns readers that even Judge Holden...cannot be contained or characterized by any one system”.<sup>373</sup> It is impossible for characters such as Chigurh and Holden (or others such as Lester Ballard in *Child Of God*) – or McCarthy’s world itself – to be so neatly constrained by any given philosophical or social system, such as that of American republican democracy. Chigurh, Moss, Wells, the company with which Wells and Chigurh do business, even Carla Jean

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<sup>372</sup> Severiano R. Sisneros, Jr.. ‘A Brief History of The Anton Chico Land Grant From Its Beginning Until The Present.’ *New Mexico Legislature*. Web. 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014.

<sup>373</sup> Steven Frye. ‘Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy.’ In *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye. 3-11. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. 5.



Moss, are all to some degree acting outside the law, or at least complicit in extralegal activities: Bell, the only major character attempting to live wholly within the established rules and confines of American civil society, has the least agency of any of them.

### **The novel's context: the rise of Reagan, cowboy president**

What is most significant to this analysis, however, is the novel's context. It is, by some way, McCarthy's most recently-set work, with the exception of the film screenplay *The Counsellor*, which is set contemporarily to its time of writing in the early 2010s, and *The Road*, set an unknown number of years into the future, or possibly in an alternative present.<sup>374</sup> The novel is set in 1980, a century later than some of his previous novels, and decades later than other works such as *Child Of God*. It is set in the year that Ronald Reagan was first elected President, Jimmy Carter's disastrous term was reaching its end in the Iranian hostage crisis, and the Cold War was – thanks, in no small way, to Reagan- about to launch into its deeply unstable final phase before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Reagan had cultivated a political image as a traditional Western hero, based in part on his film career: Richard Slotkin notes in *Gunfighter Nation*, a “famous campaign poster, ‘Bedtime for Brezhnev’, which shows a cowboy-clad Reagan holding a six-gun on the Russian leader...transformed the most ridiculous of pop-culture formulas (‘B’ Westerns and comedies like *Bedtime for Bonzo*) into recipes for a renewal of the American myth.”<sup>375</sup> Reagan appropriated the myth and symbol of the Western cowboy in the service of his political and administrative ends. *No Country's* brutal deconstruction of that same myth, whether through the self-doomed Moss or the ineffectual Bell, in the historical setting of 1980, implicitly brings into sharp question Reagan's own posturings as a Western hero – not to mention George W. Bush's own deployment of that same mythology two decades later, when the novel was being written. McCarthy's own conservatism, and the role it may play here, is debated and unclear, but certainly he has never appeared to be specifically partisan: presidential and executive figures of any affiliation are challenged and interrogated by his work.

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<sup>374</sup> *The Road* has itself been accused of reanimating frontier masculinity, being in some sense, if not a neo-Western, a future Western, as the father and son traverse vast tracts of (implicitly) American land inhabited mostly by violent gangs.

<sup>375</sup> Richard Slotkin. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1993. 643-4.



Figure 3: *Bedtime for Brezhnev* poster (1981)<sup>376</sup>

Simultaneously, however, it underscores Reagan's economic philosophy, which was also founded partially on Western, frontier imagery, "proposing a tertiary Turnerism, in which the multiplication and manipulation of financial capital replaces both agrarian commodities, and industrial expansion as the engine of economic expansion...in just the way that the opening of...the Frontier had energised the economy in the past."<sup>377</sup> Chigurh's links with the Houston company, and the centrality of money to the plot (both the money Moss steals and Chigurh's coin), suggest the more potent, forceful side of Reagan's recreation of the Western frontier myth is the rapacious economic one. Where this concept of frontier economics was viewed as beneficial in Reagan's political and economic vision, though, it is remarkable that some of the most famed Westerns tended to question nineteenth-century corporate activities in the West. In indicating the destructive power of neo-Western economics, *No Country* draws a genealogical line with such iconic Western films as *Once Upon A Time In The West* (Sergio Leone, 1968) and *High Plains Drifter* (Clint Eastwood, 1973). These are films that establish a corrupt, venal corporate power on the frontier, set against either ordinary citizens (as in *Once Upon A Time*), or authority figures (as in *High Plains Drifter*, though the film's actual protagonist is not the murdered sheriff, other than potentially as a supernatural reincarnation of him). However, where films such as these usually result in victory for the forces opposed to the corporate power, *No Country* ends with the opposite, Chigurh returning the stolen money to the company, himself more or less unharmed, and the 'good' forces defeated.<sup>378</sup>

<sup>376</sup> *Political Graphics*. Web. 6<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

<sup>377</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, 646.

<sup>378</sup> The Coen brothers' 2007 adaptation of the film slightly downplays the significance of the Houston company, but the theme of amoral corporate power remains. In this, it bears marked similarity to its very near contemporary and fellow 2008 Academy Award winner, Paul Thomas Anderson's *There*

## Chigurh and the Cold War

In this Reaganite setting, it is evident that Chigurh to a considerable extent symbolises fears of foreign invasion and the 'evil empire' of the Soviet Union, indeed of the total annihilation promised by Mutually Assured Destruction. (It should be noted that Billy Parham unknowingly sees the Trinity test, the first detonation of a nuclear bomb, in *The Crossing*, McCarthy's 1994 novel – together with the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, McCarthy engages subtly but clearly with the nuclear age.) Besides the likely reference to the Anton Chico land grant, Chigurh's first name has clear Russian overtones, his surname being difficult to identify but not obviously deriving from English or another Western European language. Towards the end of the novel, a teenager who encounters Chigurh is asked by Bell if he is Mexican, and is told, "I don't think so. He was kindly dark complected is all." (291) Consequently, he is a mysterious figure of no specific ethnicity, but evidently foreign in some sense. His often arbitrary destruction of characters within the novel through extremely violent methods, and particularly his use of unexpected forms of modern technology- the captive bolt gun- to this end, reflect contemporary fears over possible impending nuclear war and the wanton destruction it would deal throughout the nation, alongside fears that the American government would not be able to prevent this from happening.

Malewitz writes about McCarthy's depiction of technology and the interaction between man and manmade object in his work, suggesting that, "McCarthy's nostalgic, rugged-individual aesthetic testifies to the departure of artisanal forms of production and the subsequent arrival of industrial capitalism's anarchic world of commodities."<sup>379</sup> The captive bolt gun is an example of this: Malewitz argues that Chigurh's misappropriation of the technology, commonly used on farms, and other such misuses by both Chigurh and Moss "hollow out the prescribed utilitarian telos of commodities", so that "McCarthy's late-modernist hero and antihero renaturalize the artificial world of commodities and remake the new west into the Wild West".<sup>380</sup> This interpretation deepens the novel's engagement with the Western genre, in some ways suggesting, through the 'wildness' of the West, the aforementioned atmosphere of anarchy in American frontier spaces. My analysis regards McCarthy's work as consequently critiquing the Old/Wild West too: *Blood Meridian* and *No Country for Old*

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*Will Be Blood*, which depicts as its central character a mercenary Western businessman at the turn of the century, pursuing an oil claim to the cost of all other considerations.

<sup>379</sup> Malewitz, ' "Anything Can Be an Instrument": Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*', 722.

<sup>380</sup> Malewitz, ' "Anything Can Be an Instrument": Misuse Value and Rugged Consumerism in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*', 727.

*Men* both indicate the chaos of Western spaces and accord true agency only to psychopathic antagonists such as Judge Holden and Chigurh.

However, the use of the gun can also be seen as Chigurh making use of and weaponising the technology the modern corporate world has created. Given his involvement with the Houston company (and its similar use of technology as a form of aggressive defence), it is hard to see Chigurh as somehow isolated from and even opposed to the corporate world, of which he seems to be an admittedly extralegal part. Saliently to the Cold War setting, his use of technology to visit extremely violent harm on individuals reflects concerns about the potency of technology in the nuclear age, and how it could be perverted to hugely destructive ends. We are introduced to Chigurh by his weaponry, tellingly. In this early scene, he has apparently handed himself in at a police station, where – before he has said or done anything – the deputy calls the sheriff “on the mobile” (itself a new piece of technology in 1980) and explains, “Sheriff he had some sort of thing on him like one of them oxygen tanks for emphysema or whatever. Then he had a hose that run down the inside of his sleeve and went to one of them stunguns like they use at the slaughterhouse” (5). Before we know anything else about Chigurh, we know that he has appropriated technology designed to be beneficial – in medical and agricultural settings – for what we presume to be violent ends, and know to be by the end of the short chapter when he kills an innocent driver making use of it. The knowledge that this unusual technology is going to be used in such a manner hangs over the first part of the scene; after the bolt gun’s first use in the film adaptation, the tension whenever Chigurh is on screen becomes unbearable.

Ronnie Dugger’s work on Reagan, written during his first term, defines this Reagan-era Cold War fear: “the likelihood, as it appears to me now, is that...the nuclear arms race, while appearing to lessen, will enter a destabilized and very possibly terminal stage. We are all now trapped in a general human emergency that may well end in a nuclear holocaust.”<sup>381</sup> He continues to postulate the idea that “if there ever was a time for active civic virtue, if there ever was a place for active civic labour, it is here and now that every American must be a citizen above all.”<sup>382</sup> In *No Country for Old Men*, however, very few characters display any civic virtue, and the only one who does, Bell as sheriff, has very little success and seems lost in a world of uncontrolled violence. Dugger describes Reagan as subscribing to “what can best be understood as a devil theory of the Soviet Union”, stating in speeches that “there is

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<sup>381</sup> Ronnie Dugger. *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*. London: McGraw-Hill, 1983. xv.

<sup>382</sup> Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*, xvi.

sin and evil in the world” and that the Soviets “are the focus of evil in the modern world”, with a general lack of morality.<sup>383</sup>

The amoral destructive force represented by Chigurh certainly bears a strong similarity to this Manichean conception of the foreign power of the Soviet Union. In the course of actual history, the USSR collapsed and the United States ‘won’ the Cold War, but Bell, as representative of the American government, Moss, as the ordinary citizen (and, as I will argue later, a potential symbol for more than one president himself), and Wells, the corporate hitman, are all helpless against Chigurh. The text quietly implies that the United States perhaps ignored malign forces within its own borders in favour of acute nuclear anxiety: that the lack of “civic virtue”, in Dugger’s phrasing, in the nation in the 1970s and 1980s, and the related rise of corporate power presented a more considerable threat. At the same time, Chigurh’s essential foreignness simultaneously echoes American neuroses about amorphous external (and yet internal) forces somehow inimical to national interests in ways that stand wholly outside the United States’ democratic system.

### Reagan’s influence

Beyond nuclear anxiety, the novel’s general engagement with society and its ordering reflects and critiques the philosophy and atmosphere of the Reagan era. Pierre Lagayette avers that McCarthy’s Western novels offer “patterns of opposition [which] induce a Manichean vision of the world that pits virtuous men against villains ... and culminates with the ‘good guy/bad guy’ dichotomy in *The Road*, which sounds like an echo of the ‘evil empire’ rhetoric, the hawkish policies of the Reagan years, and the last somersaults of the Cold War.”<sup>384</sup> He identifies the seizure of Mac’s ranch in McCarthy’s 1998 novel *Cities Of The Plain* as an “apt metaphor for the rapacious and imperialistic instinct of a militarized superpower whose decisions cannot or should not be opposed”.<sup>385</sup> I would argue, however, that this depiction of government applies only to the somewhat more romantic Border Trilogy (of which *Cities Of The Plain* is the final volume), and not to McCarthy’s two other Westerns- *Blood Meridian* and *No Country*, the latter of which can fairly be described as a neo-Western given its setting, violence, and themes. *Blood Meridian* depicts a feeble, passive government, the United States’ federal government a physically distant nuisance at best, and Mexico’s government able only to legitimise the horrific acts of the Glanton gang. *No Country* depicts a world ruled more by corporations and forceful individuals with access to

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<sup>383</sup> Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*, 353.

<sup>384</sup> Pierre Lagayette. ‘The Border Trilogy, *The Road*, and the Cold War’. In *The Cambridge Companion*, 78-91. 81-2.

<sup>385</sup> Lagayette, ‘The Border Trilogy, *The Road*, and the Cold War’, 82.

modern technology, if not simply by anarchy, a world where government, and the carrying out of functions belonging to it such as justice, is more of a farce than anything else. Thus we have the exchange between Bell and his deputy Wendell at the scene of the desert murders, which covers a discussion of whether coyotes will eat a Mexican corpse and whether a dead body remains a drugrunner or is simply dead, before concluding: “ ‘It’s a mess, aint it Sheriff?’ ‘If it aint it’ll do till a mess gets here.’ ” (77).

This takes place with the background context of the impending Reagan administration, led by a president who “sees government as inherently oppressive and evil while private autonomy (especially whatever corporations want to do) is always best”, with the result that “the idea of public service and the government as instrument of democracy is lost”.<sup>386</sup> It is of considerable note that Reagan himself was influenced significantly by the corporate world. For most of his upbringing and career as a Hollywood actor, he was a Democrat and generally liberal – as Dugger puts it, “a shining liberal who memorized parts of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt’s inaugural address and campaigned for Truman and Humphrey in 1948”, who evolved into “the nation’s most right-wing president since McKinley”.<sup>387</sup> Elsewhere, he is described as having been “an enthusiastic New Dealer” during Roosevelt’s first term.<sup>388</sup> He studied economics and sociology at Eureka College under a professor who was “an advocate of social reform who might hold forth to his students on, for example, the monotony of the work of Henry Ford’s assembly line”.<sup>389</sup> He would, however, after the Second World War, take a job hosting General Electric’s television show, which would require him to tour the company’s plants and address its employees. Dugger observes that “GE was known as a conservative and Republican company, and Reagan was blending in”.<sup>390</sup> His shift in the second half of his career to conservative politics therefore seems to have derived from engagement with, and employment by, corporate audiences: GE both revived his acting career so that he stayed in the public eye, and strongly influenced his involvement in politics and values, so that Reagan’s presidency, in fact, can be seen as having been launched by corporate interests just as the Houston company’s drug deal unleashes Chigurh.

Beyond moves towards corporate power, it has been elsewhere noted that, “as sixties’ and eighties’ values merged, individualism trumped moralism. Most Americans were more willing to indulge impulses than submit to authority, to live for the moment rather than be

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<sup>386</sup> Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*, xiv.

<sup>387</sup> Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*, 1.

<sup>388</sup> Stephen Vaughn. *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. 13.

<sup>389</sup> Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*, 2.

<sup>390</sup> Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*, 13.

constrained by tradition.”<sup>391</sup> Reagan himself proclaimed in a 1967 address, as Governor of California, that “we have been so obsessed with mass movements, we have forgotten the sanctity of the individual”.<sup>392</sup> Butler, meanwhile, postulates that “each character [in *No Country*] is pledged to his own individual freedom, which is, ultimately, no freedom at all...Chigurh is so compelling because outlaw ethos is such an integral component of American identity, and the anarchy of individual aspiration is a fundamental element of American character.”<sup>393</sup> Consequently, we should understand *No Country for Old Men*’s destructively anarchic society as taking place in the context of the imminent presidency of Ronald Reagan, focussed on individualism over society, corporate freedom and power over executive authority, and generally opposed to the idea that government is worthwhile or effective.

### **The outlaw, and individual responsibility and power**

This sense of dangerously chaotic anarchy contrasts somewhat with the alternative outlaw communities of Pynchon’s work, where characters operating outside legal and social structures – such as those using the Tristero system in *The Crying Of Lot 49*, or various groups in *Vineland* – are generally represented sympathetically, as better alternatives to state power, and where outlaw figures remain part of a community and society. Chigurh, however, is a malevolent force outside the control of the law, whose involvement in society extends to dealings with the corporate part of it and imparting philosophical lessons to his victims. Moss is a less directly dangerous figure – though he does cause his wife, the girl he meets later in the novel, Wells, and other tertiary characters to lose their lives – but his operation apart from legal forces, even leaving American territory to have his wounds seen to, is not depicted as a sensible or useful choice. It is, perhaps, a necessary choice, given the weakness of the authorities, but has ultimately the same end result of failure and death. Moss may fit the traditional outlaw mould, but McCarthy does not romanticise his character or fate: the narrative is a fight between individuals operating extralegally but, as Butler observes, with no true liberty deriving therefrom, merely the ability to move quicker and be more cunning than your opponent. Nevertheless, Moss is in the end brought down by one of the Mexicans, rather than Chigurh, not exactly an act of random chance, but- after following Chigurh’s pursuit of him for most of the novel – one that suggests the emptiness of both his

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<sup>391</sup> Gil Troy. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005. 267.

<sup>392</sup> Address at the installation of President Robert Hill, Chico State College, May 20, 1967. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Web. 25<sup>th</sup> April 2014.

<sup>393</sup> Butler, ‘ “What’s Wanted is a Clean Sweep”: Outlaws and Anarchy in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* and Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country For Old Men*’, 48.

and Chigurh's actions. The various attendant deaths, often of innocent characters (innocent within the context of the novel, at least), imply that the law offers no real protection in any case, in a sense rendering everyone outlaws, subject to the whims and choices of others more than the state.

The paramount nature of individual responsibility, without protection or aid from the government, is apparent in the scene, late in the novel, where Chigurh murders Carla Jean: she says during their conversation, "there's just me. There aint nobody else" (257). There is no sense of a society, of a larger community, that will help her, and Bell – absent wholly from the scene – cannot protect her any more than he protected her husband. Carla Jean's realisation here of how truly on her own she is bears some comparison to Philip's understanding of how little he can trust the government of the republic in *The Plot Against America*. However, there is, beyond this, a sense of the almost limitless potential power of the individual in the text. Carla Jean is helpless here, unprotected by her government or husband, or any social or communal tie, with terrifyingly sole responsibility for her own life in the form of her call on the coin toss. We cannot ignore the scene's other presence, however, Chigurh, equally alone and sundered from society, but frighteningly and remorselessly powerful. Frye suggests that McCarthy's work is in dialogue with the philosophical ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, referring to the Nietzschean *Übermensch* who "rejects external notions of value and through a process of self-discovery defines morality through the force of will", identifying Judge Holden as one such character, and pointing out that, despite the judge's violence and wanton killing, he speaks "at length in a distinct blend of philosophical argument and poetic expression. Readers are forced to consider the legitimacy of his claims regardless of how he chooses to apply them."<sup>394</sup>

The same can be said of Chigurh: though he is less obviously learned, he speaks in eloquent terms about fate. At the Sheffield filling station, he philosophises to the owner:

Anything can be an instrument, Chigurh said. Small things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont pay attention. And then one day there's an accounting. And after that nothing is the same. Well, you say. It's just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing. As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment. How could that be? Well, it's just a coin. Yes. That's true. Is it? (57).

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<sup>394</sup> Frye, 'Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy', 7.



Here, Chigurh, like Holden, expresses a part of his own philosophy, as he also does at various other junctures throughout the novel, such as when he visits and kills Carla Jean. Like Holden, he has his own sense of morality and philosophy by which he operates, seemingly separate and disconnected from any sense of social authority, whether governmental or otherwise. It is the force of Chigurh's character and (a)morality that vests him with the relentless, almost supernaturally powerful aura he carries in the novel. It is because of this forcefully willed individual morality that he, one of the characters Bell identifies as "bad people", is ungovernable, as was Holden in *Blood Meridian*. Bell, who lives within and indeed enforces the law set down by the government, by contrast demonstrates little power and consequently has little of Chigurh's aura of strength. We should note again, though, that Chigurh does in fact operate within the corporate world, controlled ultimately by the power of money and the desire to prove himself useful to the company in Houston – rendering the presence of the coin in this scene significant, as the most explicit and potent symbol of the capitalist system. Michael Germana has argued for the representational power of the coin in Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853), referring to the coin's status as having "*real* exchange value" (emphasis Germana's) as opposed to paper banknotes, which were increasingly bearing less and less relation to any actual value in gold or silver in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>395</sup> The coin in *No Country* has express power over life and death, a value far greater than that of simple exchange for goods. Carla Jean's situation, and indeed the entire narrative, result from Moss' theft of money. The symbolism of the coin is consequently inescapable, especially given Chigurh's own involvement in the corporate system, questioning Chigurh's true independence from socio-political structures; it is of importance also that the coin (standing for money more generally) is a representation of *both* power structures, issued by the government and used by the corporate world to further their own power. Indeed, coins and banknotes represent in some considerable degree a transfer of power from the government, which creates and provides them, to the corporate community, which use them in the establishment and consolidation of their power and authority. The coin is a more effective symbol, therefore, for Chigurh in 1980, than the ambiguous title of "judge" for Holden in the mid-nineteenth century.

In spite of Chigurh's inextricable involvement in power structures beyond his own control, *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian*, between them, suggest that real agency and

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<sup>395</sup> Michael Germana. 'Dollars and Cents: A Reading Journal Response about "Bartleby, the Scrivener," American Money, and Literary Magazines of the 1850s.' *American Periodicals* 12 (2002): 193-7. 195.

potency lie with the individual who develops and lives within his own moral philosophy, at least to the degree that this is attainable, and that such a character is, in effect, impossible to in any meaningful sense govern. Chigurh's speech to the filling station proprietor reflects this view. An ordinary coin may seem lacking in power (although its symbolic power, as noted, is great), and cannot be an "instrument" of anything, but its physical essence, and the comparative triviality thereof, belie its ability to be responsible for significant acts, such as deciding whether the proprietor, and later Carla Jean, live or die – again, for those individuals, the power to literally destroy or save the world. Chigurh, too, is only a man, but by bearing the coin and using it to make decisions about lives, his acts take on the same great significance. Bell, meanwhile, describes his position as having "pretty much the same authority as God", but this authority does not amount to any great agency throughout most of the text (64). Bell's authority is to be distinguished from Chigurh's power, in a very similar relationship to Trías's authority and the scalphunters' power in *Blood Meridian*.

### **Power over life and death**

Bell is ascribed this sort of power at the novel's opening: the text begins with one of his monologues, the first lines reading, "*I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville. One and only one. My arrest and my testimony*" (3, italics McCarthy's). Here, he bears direct responsibility for someone's death, as Chigurh does. However, it is a clearly circumscribed power. This is the only time he is responsible for anyone's execution, as he tells us immediately; the third sentence is "*my arrest and my testimony*", indicating the legal bounds within which he operates. Chigurh operates within no such bounds and is responsible for several deaths merely in terms of those that we are expressly shown during the course of the novel. It is salient, furthermore, that the nineteen-year-old whom Bell sends to the gas chamber indicates no remorse or change in character: "*...he told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again. Said he knew he was goin to hell*" (3, italics McCarthy's). The man nevertheless addresses him as "Sheriff", an almost mocking formality given his evident disregard for any authority set over him. The use of the term is the first mention in the novel of Bell's position, set in a context that robs it of all potency. Chigurh's victims plead and debate with him, trying to avert their (potentially) impending deaths, whereas the man Bell condemns calmly accepts the nature of his own character, operating like Chigurh by his own morality, not concerned with any other set of values. The only power Bell exerts over him is the power to, in his eyes, send him to hell, which he appears to know as a certainty and be unfazed by, unlike Chigurh's victims who exhibit less surety and for whom death is perhaps

thereby a more frightening prospect. Chigurh seems to exercise power over the spirit of others, where Bell, the representative of government, exercises power only over their body.

The historical and political context of the novel is also again salient: the 1970s, the decade just ending at the time *No Country for Old Men* is set, had seen the federal suspension and restoration of the death penalty by the Supreme Court and resulting debates about the issue. Reagan had used the debate as part of his campaign for the California governorship in 1966, the *Los Angeles Times* citing a Death Row inmate at the time: “ ‘Mr. Reagan is outspokenly in favour of capital punishment and he has just been elected by a tremendous majority,’ said Jesse James Gilbert, 41, who has languished on Death Row for two years. ‘If the courts begin to reflect his thinking, he will be in a position to become the greatest butcher governor in history.’ ” <sup>396</sup> Under his later presidency, his Attorney-General, Edwin Meese, would publicly support capital punishment for convicts under the age of eighteen.<sup>397</sup> The man Bell sends to the gas chamber is nineteen, only slightly above that age. The passage thus engages with contemporary concerns about capital punishment, its efficacy, and the role of executive authority therein. Bell condemns the youth to death (indirectly – he is not a member of the court, of course), a seemingly purposeless action as he does not repent and seems to already have condemned himself, to Hell.

This contrasts with Chigurh’s condemnation via the coin toss of Carla Jean (again, like Bell, he does not personally pronounce the condemnation, acting only as an intermediary for the sentencer). Carla Jean is seen to have come to some form of epiphany via her ‘sentence’: Chigurh tells her, as quoted previously, “you can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You’re asking that I second say the world. Do you see?” Carla Jean responds: “Yes, she said, sobbing. I do. I truly do” (260). What exactly it is that Carla Jean sees is left open, but Chigurh, the bearer of her death sentence, effects a realisation of something profound in her in a way that Bell, the bearer of the Huntsville youth’s death sentence, does not. The two passages introduce the sense that the death penalty as imposed by the state lacks meaning and purpose, whereas when it is enacted by another force it successfully carries meaning – although that meaning may appear to be that things “are not some other way”, Chigurh’s question, “what does that mean?”, negating the purpose of searching for a meaning as such. Of course, Chigurh has motivation to kill Carla Jean, to cover his tracks, which in turn lays open the meaning of what he says to her; his

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<sup>396</sup> *Los Angeles Times*. 4<sup>th</sup> December 1966.

<sup>397</sup> Philip John Davies and Fredric A. Waldstein, eds. *Political Issues in America Today*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1987. 172.

philosophising could be regarded as little more than sadistic play with his victims. Bell's failure to apprehend Chigurh or protect Moss effectively sets a death sentence over several characters – Llewellyn and Carla Jean Moss, Wells, the hotel clerk, the girl that befriends Moss – also hinting at the power by failure to prevent criminal actions that figures of authority hold, as with Angel Trías in *Blood Meridian*.

### **The novel's other historical contexts**

The contexts of *No Country for Old Men* extend beyond the novel's own historical setting. McCarthy's own context for writing should also be considered. The novel was published in 2005, the year George W. Bush began his second term as President of the United States. Lagayette argues that the Border Trilogy, published throughout the 1990s, "must also have been influenced by the resurgence of democratic idealism and liberalism of the Clinton years", and that McCarthy "on hindsight perceived the vanity of wild anti-communism, the arms race, and the rhetoric of American supremacy".<sup>398</sup> Yet *Blood Meridian* and *No Country* suggest a somewhat different reading to this analysis of the Border Trilogy. In these texts, one written and published in the depths of the Cold War, the other published well over a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union during the presidency of a neoconservative interventionist, anarchy and violence is the natural state of things, certainly in America and, implicitly, globally. There is no sense of "democratic idealism" or "liberalism" in *No Country*. In fact, the one representative of the democratic system, Bell, expresses a strong cultural conservatism, indicating concerns about increased crime, the availability of abortions, and defending the politics of so-called "rednecks" in monologue section VII. If McCarthy is influenced here by the Clinton years, it is manifested more in an implicit warning that American society remains as chaotic, violent, and uncontrolled as it was in the considerably more lawless mid-nineteenth century. Ellis, an elderly former law enforcement officer Bell goes to visit near the novel's conclusion, observes to Bell, "how come people dont feel like this country has got a lot to answer for? They dont. You can say that the country is just the country, it dont actively do nothin, but that dont mean much....This country will kill you in a heartbeat and still people love it" (271). Here, the unquestioning patriotism of many Americans, and their loyalty to its established social system, is challenged, Ellis identifying the inherent danger present in the nation. Any sense of idealism is absent.

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<sup>398</sup> Lagayette, 'The Border Trilogy, *The Road*, and the Cold War', 80.

## Governing “the good” and “the bad”

In one passage in the novel, alluded to briefly already, Bell confronts the idea of government directly, in McCarthy's most explicit engagement with the theme. It is worth quoting in full:

*It's an odd thing when you come to think about it. The opportunities for abuse are just about everywhere. There's no requirements in the Texas State Constitution for bein a sheriff. Not a one. There is no such thing as a county law. You think about a job where you have pretty much the same authority as God and there is no requirements put upon you and you are charged with preservin nonexistent laws and you tell me if that's peculiar or not. Because I say that it is. Does it work? Yes. Ninety percent of the time. It takes very little to govern good people. Very little. And bad people cant be governed at all. Or if they could I never heard of it (64, italics McCarthy's).*

Bell here expresses an important subtlety in McCarthy's construction of government and the ordering of society. The anarchy he depicts is not absolute. The characters we see in his work are, for the most part, to at least some degree “bad people”. We see far fewer of the governable “good people”, but Bell's argument seems to suggest that “good people” take little governing as they are presumably unlikely to commit antisocial acts in the first place. It is the “bad people” that need governing, as these are the elements of society that seek to destroy it and sow universal chaos; but these people cannot be governed, and are often, owing to their willingness to ignore moral qualms, the most potent figures, ensuring that society remains in an unstable state of considerable anarchy. The passage also lays open the concept of the executive authority and its vestment in a sole person – Bell refers here to his own position as sheriff, but this can stand as a symbol for the entire executive branch of government. The constitution, after all, requires comparatively little of the President: it merely states that they must be at least thirty-five years old, a natural-born citizen of the United States, and have lived there for at least fourteen years.<sup>399</sup> Bell refers to his job as having “pretty much the same authority as god” despite the almost total lack of requirements to hold the position, implicitly challenging the entire democratic conception of the executive power in the United States.<sup>400</sup> Significantly, though, he states that, most of the time, it works.

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<sup>399</sup> Article II, Section 1, of the United States Constitution: “No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States.” National Archives and Records Administration. *Archives.gov*. Web. 25<sup>th</sup> April 2014.

<sup>400</sup> As noted above, the Texas State Constitution has only this to say about sheriffs: “There shall be elected by the qualified voters of each county a Sheriff, who shall hold his office for the term of four years, whose duties, qualifications, perquisites, and fees of office, shall be prescribed by the

Momentarily, McCarthy seems more aligned with Roth, and his greater – though deeply qualified – faith in the American system of government, his statement that the point of *The Plot Against America* is that it ‘didn’t happen here’.

It would, however, be a mistake to equate Bell’s voice with McCarthy’s. Bell remains an ineffective character in the novel, more an observer than a figure with agency to shape the narrative. McCarthy’s novels are filled with “bad people”, from the supernatural trio of *Outer Dark* to the cannibals of *The Road*. The “good people”, or those who are at least less morally suspect – or in positions of social responsibility – the kid in *Blood Meridian*, Angel Trías, the alcalde of San Diego, John Grady Cole, Carla Jean Moss, Bell – usually either die by the hands of the “bad people”, or are wholly powerless to stop them. This aside, the “good” people are not unambiguously good: the kid is voluntarily involved in the scalphunter gang and its depredations, Trías is portrayed as an intelligent and eloquent, but ineffectual, politician who unleashes torment on his own people, and Bell fails to understand the modern world, and is beset by guilt about the truth of his supposed heroics in World War II, where he “cut and run”, leaving his wounded company behind (276). Thus, even such “good people” as McCarthy depicts are compromised. Further, he seems to suggest that there are more “bad people” than Bell believes, that the world tends more towards the “bad” and towards anarchy, and that the “bad” have far greater force than the “good”. Bell describes a figure of authority such as the sheriff as being in some sense close to a god, but it is a feeble god – one who cannot keep their society in order because its most powerful elements are ungovernable. Again, we must recall the novel’s context, especially the unspoken Cold War backdrop: an apparently superhuman alien force of great destructive power, Chigurh, cannot be reined in by a figure of American executive power, Bell, reflecting contemporary fears about conflict with the Soviet Union. Bell aligns his position with godhead, but Chigurh – and the forces he symbolises – could equally be regarded as satanic, a foe that cannot easily be overcome.

### **George W. Bush: another cowboy president**

The text of *No Country* also, as noted, exists in the shadow of the presidency of George W. Bush. Bush, as president, affected a cowboy image, and involved the United States in

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Legislature, and vacancies in whose office shall be filled by the Commissioners Court until the next general election.” (Article 5, section 23. *Texas Constitution and Statutes*.) The state’s Local Government Code *does* provide some necessary qualifications, however, requiring that a sheriff “(1) has a high school diploma or a high school equivalency certificate; and (2) is eligible to be licensed under Sections 1701.309 and 1701.312, Occupations Code” (which concerns age and previous convictions). (*Texas Local Government Code*, Title 3, Subtitle B, Chapter 85, Subchapter A, section 85.0011. *Texas Constitution and Statutes*. Web. 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014.)

somewhat chaotic overseas conflicts that spiralled out of control. Natasha Mayne discusses the persistent potency of the cowboy image in American politics with specific reference to Bush: “a recent example of the persistent power of this mythology in a national context exists in Barbara Walters' 20/20 interview with president-elect George W. Bush ... [Bush] sits on a hay bale in the barn on his Texas ranch, professing to be a 'simple cowboy', while talking about his policies, the state of the economy, and his controversial nomination of Senator John Ashcroft for attorney general”.<sup>401</sup> Bush would play up to this image, notably, in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on US soil, saying at a press conference in answer to whether he wanted Osama bin Laden dead: “I want justice. And there's an old poster out west, that I recall, that said, 'Wanted, Dead or Alive.’ ”<sup>402</sup> In making this statement, Bush clearly aligned himself with the tradition of the Old West and the figure of the lawman. Llewellyn Moss, whose name evokes Bush's somewhat between the central 'w' in the forename Llewellyn and the similarities linguistically and conceptually between the words 'bush' and 'moss', equally resembles something of a cowboy character. He is introduced shooting antelope in the Texan countryside and displays throughout the novel the laconic bearing of the conventional cowboy. His ill-fated entanglement in the trans-border criminal world through taking the money, pursuit by the alien Chigurh, and eventual death at the hands of Mexican gangsters, can be read as an allegory of Bush's involvement in foreign wars. This reading is made more attractive by the Texan setting: Bush had been Governor of Texas immediately before his ascent to the presidency. While it is a less explicitly political backdrop in the novel than the California of Nixon and Reagan in *Vineland*, the geopolitical context is nevertheless significant. Bush can also be usefully connected with Ed Tom Bell: again, their names are not hugely dissimilar, both surnames containing four letters beginning with a “b”, the forenames representing common Anglo-American first names. Bell is the sheriff, the lawman figure of the Old West in a modern setting, the image to which Bush appeared to appeal in his post-September 11 press conference; Bell's failure to save Moss or Carla Jean, or to apprehend Chigurh, a mysterious, alien force not at all unlike Bin Laden, can thereby be read in part as an allusion to Bush's failure to apprehend Bin Laden.

### **The Western image**

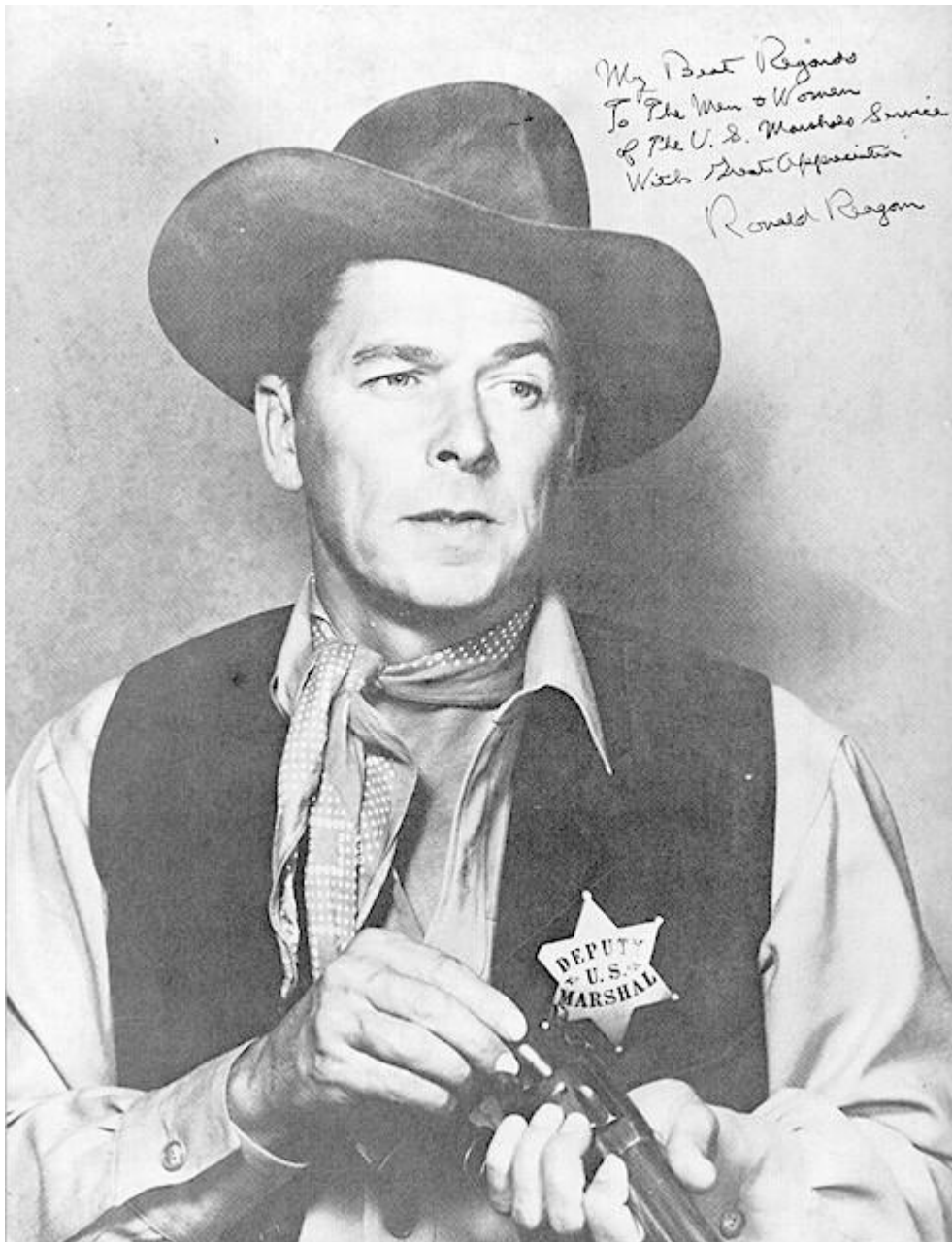
The image of the cowboy, and McCarthy's engagement with it, is also relevant to Reagan. Reagan was attracted to Westerns and the Old West, and represented it on screen in

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<sup>401</sup> Natasha Mayne. 'As Far as the Eye Could See: Cormac McCarthy, Myth and Masculine Visions in the "New" American West'. *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 20.2 (2001): 1-12. 3.

<sup>402</sup> 'America's New War: President Bush Talks with Reporters at Pentagon.' *CNN*. Web. 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2014.

Western roles: “he liked Western or outdoor pictures (‘in which I can move’), preferably with a historical flavour (‘with thoughts and lots of action’).<sup>403</sup>



**Figure 4: Ronald Reagan as a deputy US marshal in *Law & Order* (1953)<sup>404</sup>**

He ‘believed that the post-Civil War years when “our blue-clad cavalry stayed on a wartime footing against the plains and desert Indians was a phase of Americana rivalling the Kipling era for colour and romance”, and “saw a connection between such stories and the values he had grown up with”.<sup>405</sup> Besides all of this, he was himself originally from a Midwest state – Illinois – and became Governor of a Western state, California. Evidently, the imagery of the West and the Western appealed to him, and seems to have had a significant influence on his

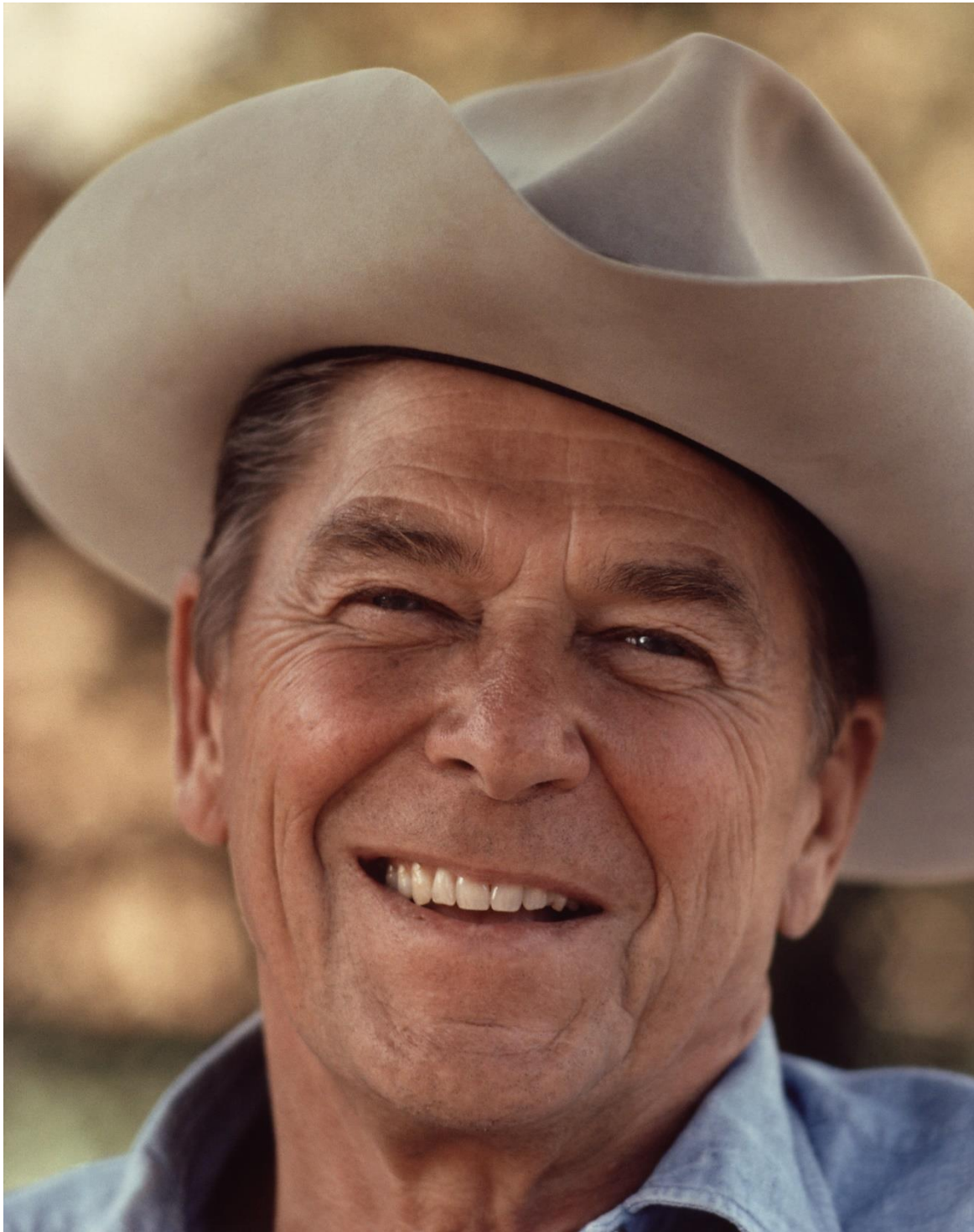
<sup>403</sup> Vaughn, 221.

<sup>404</sup> *USMarshals.gov*. Web. 26<sup>th</sup> September 2014.

<sup>405</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*, 221-2, quoting Reagan.



view of American history and values – he would tell a Senate committee in 1955 that “the heritage of our country is based a great deal on those early days of violence here in the West”.<sup>406</sup>



**Figure 5: Ronald Reagan as president, wearing a cowboy hat<sup>407</sup>**

McCarthy, however, tends to undermine the conventional Western hero. Mayne for example argues that his “ambiguity signals a departure from the eagle-eyed visual perspicacity of the

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<sup>406</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*, 222, quoting Reagan.

<sup>407</sup> JasonFWright.com. Web. 26<sup>th</sup> September 2014.

stock Western hero, and, fundamentally, a failure in (visual) agency. The visual 'patience' of the Western hero, so valued in the genre of the Western novel, is futile in McCarthy's Westerns".<sup>408</sup> Mayne's analysis refers to *Blood Meridian*, a text which I have argued is updated by *No Country for Old Men*, depicting a modern West in the Reagan era in which the conventional Western hero – Moss – foolishly gets himself embroiled in the fallout of a drug deal, leading to his own and his wife's demise, lacking the perspicacity necessary to be a successful Western hero. In his first appearance in the novel, even, he alerts the antelope he is hunting to his presence by insufficient caution: "they had just flat seen him" (9). This early failure presages his eventually terminal failures in the novel, an apparently typical Western hero whose actions are, indeed, futile.

### **The border and international contexts**

The border context is also relevant for reading the presence of Reagan in the text. Mayne observes that McCarthy's "cowboys repeatedly use Mexico as a space for trying to reclaim dreams of the Old American West".<sup>409</sup> Reagan's administration became involved in conflicts in Central America, Reagan's affinity for Westerns and Western-influenced view of American history lying in the background. Saliently, in a radio address prior to his presidency, Reagan favourably cited the view of a Congressman, Steve Symms, who said "the Caribbean is rapidly becoming a Communist lake in what should be an American pond", demonstrating this attitude – deriving ultimately from the Monroe Doctrine – that Central and Latin American spaces are *American* spaces, in the sense of the United States specifically.<sup>410</sup> <sup>411</sup>The spilling of the plot, violence, and narrative of *No Country for Old Men* over the Mexican border reflects the intrusion of the American West/Western into Hispanic Central America. It is in Mexico that Moss meets Carson Wells and refuses to help him, the two Americans making use of a Mexican space for their discussion, with little real sense of Mexican sovereignty or identity as anywhere other than a space outside the immediate authority of the American government.

When Moss arrives in Mexico, the text describes it thus: "when he reached the gatehouse there was no one there. He pushed through and into the town of Piedras Negras, State of Coahuila" (118). This contrasts sharply with his interrogation at the American checkpoint

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<sup>408</sup> Mayne, 'As Far as the Eye Could See: Cormac McCarthy, Myth and Masculine Visions in the "New" American West', 5.

<sup>409</sup> Mayne, 'As Far as the Eye Could See: Cormac McCarthy, Myth and Masculine Visions in the "New" American West', 6.

<sup>410</sup> Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency*, 518. Quoting Reagan.

<sup>411</sup> See above for a fuller explanation of the Monroe Doctrine.

when he returns across the border later in the narrative; on the Mexican side, the border seems to be a fiction, technically there but not enforced. The emphasis McCarthy places on “the town of Piedras Negras, State of Coahuila” has an ironic tone, according the town its full formal title, even going so far as to capitalise the word state, but it appears to be empty and unguarded, no sign of any authority as you might expect at the border of a “State”. Wells appears in Moss’ hospital room without any explanation, or any apparent trouble in accessing the room: Moss simply wakes up and he is there, “a man sitting on a metal chair against the wall holding a bouquet of flowers”, here contrasting with the Eagle Hotel, which has just been visited by Wells, in which the room Moss had stayed in was still barricaded off by police tape (148). Mexican characters are accorded little to no agency or speech; at the hospital, Moss holds on to a nurse’s arm, who says “encouraging things to him in Spanish” but does no more. We do not directly encounter the Mexican drug runners, even though it is their activities which provide the impetus for the entire narrative. In an earlier trip across the bridge to Mexico, Moss visits the town of Ciudad Acuña, where he visits a boot shop containing exotic boots made of “crocodile and ostrich and elephant”, buys some bandages, and eats at a restaurant (after having been invited by a taxi driver to “go see the girls”) (85). There, he orders a steak: “when the steak came he cut into it and chewed slowly and thought about his life” (85). Mexico here is represented as a space for white Americans to step outside their lives for a time, an exotic locale providing pleasure activities to indulge in and a site for mental rest, but not one containing fully realised, named people with whom Americans might engage. Later, it is a place outside authority and the law where Moss can get his wounds tended to without question or difficulty, and where he and Wells can have a conversation away from the grim events across the border and the spectre of Chigurh. Yet, the activities of the drug runners across the border and Chigurh’s own foreignness serve to remind us that Mexican territory is not so removed from American life as the characters might think. Their intrusion into it – Moss intrudes into the Mexicans’ space at the novel’s very start, becoming embroiled in the events spiralling from their activities, indeed – implies American impunity in the Central American sphere.

This takes place in a historical context where Reagan’s presidency is just around the corner, with its heavy involvement in Central America, and view of it as a place to fight America’s ideological battles. The exact setting of 1980 also places the novel in the dying days of the Carter administration, in many ways defined by the Iran hostage crisis, and the resulting American embarrassment at the very public display of the limits of American power beyond its own sovereign territory. Troy observes that “if there was one arena where Reagan and the Reaganauts were primed to be overzealous, it was in Central America”, where, according to then Speaker of the House of Representatives Tip O’Neill, “the president ‘thinks

he's John Wayne' ".<sup>412</sup> Reagan could also use involvement in that region to his own domestic ends, invading Grenada days after a major terrorist bomb killed marines in Lebanon in 1983: "a chorus of hosannas echoed throughout the land, greeting the return of American power and exorcising the Vietnam curse".<sup>413</sup> This overzealous involvement in the affairs of Central America would lead the administration into the Iran-Contra scandal, in which funds from the sale of arms to Iran were illegally diverted to support the anti-Communist rebels in Nicaragua. The administration demonstrated a wider interest in Central America, attempting to influence its social development. O'Neill's line portrays Reagan as another form of McCarthy's cowboy, using Central American spaces as somewhere to recreate the old American West. Wells' exchange with Moss in the Mexican hospital is informed by this same concern. Wells asks Moss if he fought in Vietnam, claiming that he himself did:

Were you in Nam?

Yeah. I was in Nam.

So was I.

So what does that make me? Your buddy?

I was in special forces.

I think you have me confused with somebody who gives a shit what you were in.

I was a lieutenant colonel.

Bullshit.

I dont think so.

And what do you do now.

I find people. Settle accounts. That sort of thing.

You're a hit man.

Wells smiled. A hit man (156).

Vietnam represents another intervention by the United States outside its own territorial space; Wells attempts to use this experience as a way to bond with Moss, while sitting in a Mexican hospital. The insidious undertone of American violation of non-American space is significant. Wells further reveals that, rather than conforming to any image of a heroic veteran, he is now a hitman, a contracted killer, an extralegal agent of execution not hugely different from Chigurh. Chigurh is the foreign force of death here, visiting destruction upon American citizens on American soil. Wells however, at least if we are to take his claim to have fought in Vietnam, and to have had a comparatively senior rank, as being truthful, has

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<sup>412</sup> Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, 244.

<sup>413</sup> Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, 157.

acted in the same role in foreign territory, subsequently returning to the United States to continue dispensing death. An equivalence is thereby made between the acts of external interests against America and its own acts around the world in violation of non-American territorial sovereignty (again, that the novel was written during George W. Bush's first term and thus the invasion of Iraq is also salient). Nevertheless, Wells, who functions within the American social system – and is to some degree another representative of executive power if he is in fact a retired soldier – is still helpless against the individual force of Chigurh.

### **Vietnam's presence in the text**

Further, Vietnam has a particular relevance here. The concept of the American involvement in that country's war as a grave error on the part of the American government – one with extensive and serious consequences for American society – is reflected upon across the works of McCarthy, Pynchon, and Roth. *The Human Stain* prominently features a Vietnam veteran, Lester Farley, a deeply damaged and unstable individual who is eventually responsible for the death of the protagonist, Coleman Silk, in some degree an analogue of Bill Clinton, as well as his own ex-wife Faunia. Joseph Slade and Shawn Smith have persuasively argued that one of the narrative voices of *Gravity's Rainbow*, too, is a Vietnam veteran; Smith states that "the two 'station-marks' that the narrator mentions bracket the years in which the Johnson administration committed fully to a long-term US military presence in South Vietnam (1966) to the publication of the so-called Pentagon Papers, which revealed the extent to which several administrations had misrepresented the US's Vietnam policy and prosecution of the war."<sup>414</sup> He goes on to argue that, consequently, "*GR* is its *narrator's* attempt to draw parallels, and establish a line of continuity, between World War II and the Vietnam War."<sup>415</sup>

A common interpretation emerges, placing Vietnam as an exemplar of American executive overreach and incompetence, symbolising the arrogance and assumed power of the American government simultaneously with its true weakness. For Roth, this has direct personal consequences for individuals, in the tragedy of Silk and the Farleys. Silk, as observed, reflects in some ways Bill Clinton, and indeed the text expressly puts forward the comparison, mentioning the Lewinsky scandal early in the narrative; his ignominious end could thereby be read as a commentary on the self-destructive entanglement the Vietnam conflict brought upon the American government. Pynchon, meanwhile, seeks to connect

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<sup>414</sup> Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, 59.

<sup>415</sup> Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, 59-60. Emphasis Smith's.

Vietnam with World War II, a continuity of conflict and aggregation of state power. The character Richard M. Zhubb, who appears towards the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the same point where Slade and Smith locate the Vietnam veteran narrator, is a clear parody of Richard Nixon. He acts as the night manager of the cinema in which the novel ends, implicitly when a bomb – possibly a Cold War era ICBM – is dropped on it. Once more, the Vietnam conflict and the involvement of the American government in it are connected with destruction and an intricate structure in which they, and the American citizenry, are enmeshed. In *No Country for Old Men*, Vietnam's role is more subtle. As argued, Wells is a Vietnam veteran (supposedly) and now a corporate hitman, essentially, while Moss, more assuredly a genuine veteran of the war, bears some comparison to Lester Farley, less clearly desperate and unstable but nevertheless a laconic character familiar with violence and in need of money. The plot unfolds from his theft of the drugrunners' money; while there is no express sense that this directly derives from his status as a financially troubled Vietnam veteran, the historical backdrop of the war is quietly present. His refusal to consider their common experience to establish any kind of bond with Wells revokes any sense of soldierly comradeship, even as they transact their business in another non-American space affected by American actions, once more establishing the importance of the Vietnam conflict as an expression of misplaced executive hubris by the United States.

### Questioning borders

The border is a porous space in McCarthy's Western and neo-Western novels in general, as when Moss heads into Mexico shortly before he meets Wells – with the Mexican border gatehouse not manned – or the roving of the scalphunters across the border with no regard for territorial delineations. Throughout the Border Trilogy, characters cross between the United States and Mexico, and in *The Road*, of course, no borders and territories exist, only one boundless space controlled by roving bands of post-apocalyptic barbarians. This erasure of the border speaks to concerns about government once more, and to the issues Ed Tom Bell raises about the nature of governing people. Spener and Staudt observe that borders "generally reflect either (1) the inability of culturally distinct groups to get along with each other well enough to form a single government or (2) the ability of one or more national groups to exclude or enclose another group or groups."<sup>416</sup> They further state that "without borders, the world as we know it would cease to exist."<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> David Spener and Kathleen Staudt. 'The View from the Frontier: Theoretical Perspectives Undisciplined'. David Spener and Kathleen Staudt, eds.. *The U.S.-Mexico Border: Transcending Divisions, Contesting Identities*. 3-33. London: Lynne Rienner, 1998. 7.

<sup>417</sup> Spener and Staudt, 'The View from the Frontier: Theoretical Perspectives Undisciplined', 7.

Accepting this analysis, the need for borders and the concept of the nation state derive primarily from the necessity for a coherent government. However, Spener and Staudt also question the nation state's "continued relevance as a unit of analysis". Albert and Brock suggest that "states as spheres of power are coming under strain...the diminishing regulatory competence translates into a loss of social competence and cohesion."<sup>418</sup> *No Country for Old Men* clearly represents the situation they describe. The border is not even guarded on the Mexican side; authorities of neither country are able to even significantly affect the chain of events opening out from the drug deal whose aftermath Moss stumbles into. Mike Davis has explored the existence of transnational communities across the US-Mexico border, describing how "hundreds of *ejidos*, *rancherías*, villages and small towns in Mexico...have had to learn how to live like quantum particles in two places at once."<sup>419</sup> These communities remain firmly linked to their home villages in Mexico, maintaining their own traditions and social structures. The border is a presence for them, but does not prevent their ability to establish these transnational societies. This, naturally, extends to both legal and extralegal figures and communities; Davis observes the problem of the "inadvertent remittance of US social problems...to the home community", indicating that violence and criminality may flow both ways across the border in a complex network.<sup>420</sup> The American government has theoretical authority, but little power, in the text of *No Country*, and McCarthy's use of the border setting underlines this efficiently. Bell's observation that 'bad people' cannot be governed is the crux of this theme within the text: the social power of the United States, and the power of its executive, extend only so far as the lives and communities of "good people". The bad cannot be restricted by arbitrary borders any more than they can be governed. We are reminded again of *Blood Meridian*, where Trías's legitimising of the scalphunters affects territory on both sides of the border, and both nations merge into one nightmarish landscape.

Again, therefore, we can read *No Country* as a modern update of the earlier novel, and we can understand that both question and suggest an invalidation of the concept of physically bounded nation states, controlled by a single central government, as being one that does not necessarily function in practice. The existence of extralegal forces beyond the control of proper executive authority as provided by constitutional government, who may and frequently do operate across prescribed territorial boundaries, can render such a theoretical

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<sup>418</sup> Mathias Albert and Lothar Brock. 'New Relationships Between Territory and State: The U.S.-Mexico Border in Perspective'. In *The U.S.-Mexico Border*. 215-232. 215.

<sup>419</sup> Mike Davis. *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City*. London: Verso, 2000. 77.

<sup>420</sup> Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City*, 88-9. Davis' analysis refers to the problems created by US authorities deporting gang members back to Latin American nations – so, to some degree, this transnational violence is *created* by the actions of executive authority.

socio-political construct porous, at the least. Robert Sack describes the concept of territoriality as “the geographical expression of social power”.<sup>421</sup> The fluidity of territoriality in *No Country for Old Men* (and *Blood Meridian*) implies, consequently, a lack of social power on the part of the United States’ government. The novel’s setting close to the border creates a lack of certainty about identity and nationality: when Wells visits the Eagle Hotel, he encounters a clerk who is “maybe Mexican and maybe not” (144). Later, Moss crosses back into the United States and encounters a border official who tells him that “some American citizens” are allowed through, and he is the one to decide who those citizens are: here, the potential power of executive authority, the godlike powers Bell refers to, is invoked, but the notion of the national community, of a socially cohesive territory, is reduced to the whim of an individual man and, implicitly, his decision as to whether somebody seems “American” or not (187).

Within the United States, even, territory is flexible and complicated. The unit of government that is most often invoked is the county. Bell refers to being “sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five” in one of his monologues, the sheriff being elected on a county basis by the Texas state constitution (90). When Bell arrives at the motel where Moss has been shot, the narrative mentions that “there were two Culberson County patrol cars and a state police car all with their lights going” (236-7). Thus, the incident Bell was investigating spills beyond his jurisdiction and authority, the limits constitutionally defined territories place on authority clear to see. Bell earlier makes an important comment regarding the nature of “community”, the social entity that territory should in theory provide physical form to: discussing his attendance at cemetery cleanings, he says, “it is community and it is respect, of course, but the dead have more claims on you than what you might want to admit or even what you might know about and them claims can be very strong indeed” (124). The dead seem to carry more weight in this hierarchy than the living community, a point which is underscored by the entire narrative, and Bell’s involvement therein, deriving from the death of the drug runners whose money Moss then takes, besides Bell’s implicit and explicit guilt relating to his wartime experiences and power over life and death as a sheriff, which opens the novel. True power lies somewhat more with death and the consequential events it spawns, as war was the supreme power for Holden in *Blood Meridian*. The comparatively rather trivial authority and power of the counties and their sheriffs – of the state, even, one of whose patrol cars is in attendance at the motel – is overshadowed by the vast territory of the dead.

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<sup>421</sup> Robert D. Sack. *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986. 5.



This aside, it must also be noted that the novel's preoccupation with technology and the power it grants those who have it extends to concerns about physical territory as well. As has been discussed above, the corporate office of the company with whom both Wells and Chigurh have dealings is on a hidden floor of the building, accessible only by an elevator with an ever-changing passcode, thus being literally "off the map" and seemingly extraterritorial. The cartel with which it works operates with impunity across the border. This is perhaps partly what renders the novel so terrifying: the American citizenry have no power to protect them from the likes of Anton Chigurh, alien forces of the other. Albert and Brock also observe, in the context of discussing the US-Mexico border, that "demarcation vis-à-vis the Other becomes an important element in the constitution of a self or, to put it generally, of a modern subjectivity": the porous nature of the border challenges the fundamental conception of American society and exiles a figure such as Bell to a general irrelevance.<sup>422</sup>

### **No 'country' for old men**

It is, then, useful to look again at the novel's title, one of the meanings of which can be read as denying the very existence of the 'country' that an old man such as Ellis (and, implicitly, Bell) professes to love. In the shadow of *Blood Meridian*, of course, Bell's nostalgia and belief that society has worsened – particularly evident in his monologue after meeting the El Paso sheriff (194-7) – is misplaced, as McCarthy's work suggests a general belief that human society does not change significantly and is continually violent and chaotic in every time and every place. This is the view McCarthy propounds in the interview cited in the introduction to this project: "the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom."<sup>423</sup> McCarthy deploys historical context and material in his novels to underscore this idea: the diary of Samuel Chamberlain used in *Blood Meridian* and the historical existence of the scalphunter gangs is one example, *No Country for Old Men*'s allusions to Vietnam and the Reagan administration's involvement in Central America, together with the activities of the drug cartels and the legal corporations supporting and working with them providing another. His narratives suggest that, whilst precise loci of power may move around, sometimes being legitimated by executive authority and at other times functioning despite theoretical executive opposition, power overall still remains with the violent, ungovernable minority to which Ed Tom Bell refers in his monologue.

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<sup>422</sup> Albert and Brock, 'New Relationships Between Territory and State: The U.S.-Mexico Border in Perspective', 217.

<sup>423</sup> 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction'.

The chaotic state of society in *No Country for Old Men*, progressing from the near anarchy of *Blood Meridian*, bears out this worldview. Bell is on the losing side of the battle to protect society from itself, and seems largely to have accepted this loss already. The ending of the novel expresses this. Bell has a dream vision of his father, “back in older times”, riding on through mountains ahead of him: “and in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up” (309). The vision denies the protection of society, of ancestral power and American history, and by extension of the “big protective republic” Roth describes. It appears only as an intangible vision, a promise of protection and security that cannot actually come to pass. The phrase “and then I woke up” concludes the novel: Bell has specified that this dream occurs after his father’s death, so he is waking into a world where his father cannot help him at all. The vision prefigures Carla Jean’s narrative in the chronology of the plot (in the actual text, her death precedes the description of the dream), who is left towards the end of the novel to face the grim reality of Chigurh sitting before her with the protection only of the chance that the coin he flips will land heads up.

Bell himself may be taken as, in some sense, a symbol for Reagan. Reagan, as has already been noted, was compared to John Wayne (or accused of trying to be him, at least) by some. Troy notes that the pop culture of 1980s America – GI Joe toys, the *Rambo* films, the Schwarzenegger film *Commando* (Mark L. Lester, 1985) – “exploited America’s cold war anxieties while feeding desires for a modern-day sheriff to right the world at home and abroad”, and draws attention to Reagan’s own “frequent references to Vietnam, and his fascination with Rambo, Dirty Harry, and other celluloid warriors”.<sup>424</sup> Evidently, Reagan played up to an image of himself as sheriff- one already established in his films, where he had played the likes of Frame Johnson, “last of the southwest’s great shooting marshals”, who “lived by the gun...killed by the law...and loved a woman even his bullets couldn’t tame.”<sup>425</sup> For Terry O. Morse’s 1939 film *Smashing the Money Ring*, Warner Bros. “publicized Reagan as ‘commander’ of the Junior Secret Service, and members received a card bearing his signature”.<sup>426</sup> Yet, by the time he was president, he was also an old man, hence the Democrats’ attempts to portray him in the 1984 presidential election as “both Mr. Magoo and Scrooge”.<sup>427</sup> He would be the oldest president ever, 73 on the day of his re-election. Bell, the old sheriff looking back to a supposedly less violent, socially dysfunctional

<sup>424</sup> Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, 241.

<sup>425</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*, 233.

<sup>426</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*, 70.

<sup>427</sup> Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, 148.

time, and ultimately unable to control the chaotic force of Chigurh, reflects Reagan in more than one way. The comparison brings another meaning to the novel's title: the old, those who look back to earlier and allegedly better times that were, in fact, as bad as their contemporary moment, are not suited to inhabit, let alone attempt to exert authority over, a nation such as the United States. The novel finally suggests the fallacy of the protective nation, Bell's vision reaching back into American history to conjure up an image of courageous American pioneers, a type of the Western figure beloved by Reagan – but the image is ultimately denied by Bell's waking, returning to a society driven by the force of individuals in which his authority is apparently near infinite, but his agency barely exists.

### Conclusion: “there’s always a federal angle”<sup>428</sup>

The ways in which Pynchon, Roth, and McCarthy explore and critique presidential and executive power are not straightforward or reducible to one stance. They approach this vexed political dynamic from divergent standpoints, to start with: Pynchon and Roth seem to both retain an arguably utopian hope for a better and more egalitarian system, though their work, as I have argued, forcefully questions and problematises the existing organisation of the federal government’s executive branch. McCarthy is more pessimistic (which is perhaps evident from his most recently published novel, *The Road*, given its post-apocalyptic, anarchic setting), with little suggestion of potential redemption in his work.<sup>429</sup> He also suggests that corporate power has assumed primacy in the modern United States, a dynamic that is also strongly present in Pynchon’s work. However, it is clear that all three writers present the presidential/executive “force” as something greater than the exact authority theoretically granted to it by the constitution. As Ed Tom Bell observes, the executive has powers not far removed from those of a god; but the embodied figures who serve in it may have no real agency, like Bell himself, or only a limited ability to unleash the spectral forces the executive can call up, as we see with Governor Trías, and perhaps Charles Lindbergh, given his complicated role in *The Plot Against America*. However, there are characters who seem more capable of a full marshalling of these forces, as may be the case with those actually controlling Lindbergh’s administration (though, it should be noted, the influential power of Lindbergh’s wife, the *elected* president’s First Lady, and subsequently that of Roosevelt, are still employed to put an end to the brief dictatorship of Burton K. Wheeler).

This thesis’s argument, therefore, is that the presidential – and more broadly speaking, the executive – dynamic is a major, and generally overlooked, concern in the work of these three writers. It is critically productive to investigate and map this concern, as the representation of the presidency and executive power in these texts is inextricably bound up with their understanding of the United States as a nation, its historical narrative and socio-political psyche. The presidency is so central to the United States’ history, and to its conception of democratic government and society, that its illustration and the implications deriving from it in literary texts, especially those that can in some sense be designated ‘social’ or ‘historical’ novels, cannot be overlooked. We need only look to Pynchon’s most recent novel, *Bleeding*

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<sup>428</sup> Thomas Pynchon. *Bleeding Edge*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2013. 100.

<sup>429</sup> Though *The Road* itself offers a glimpse of optimism in its conclusion, a hint that family and community could survive even such a catastrophe as the unidentified disaster the novel takes place in the shadow of – offering an intriguing parallel with Pynchon and Roth, who also valorise family and community but from a much more left-wing perspective.

*Edge*, published in 2013 during the writing of this project, for further evidence of how common a concern presidential and executive power is in his work. The text – which is Pynchon’s most explicit ‘9/11 novel’, though this is a label also ascribed to *Against the Day* – again resists the direct use of presidential characters, but the Bush administration (spiritual successor to the Reagan government that controlled the world of *Vineland*) casts a shadow across the narrative.<sup>430</sup> The novel’s antagonist, Gabriel Ice, is in some way that is never made absolutely clear involved with the federal government. Much of the novel is informed by conspiracy theories involving the executive branch of the government, particularly those involving the Montauk Project and the September 11 attacks, though the text itself does not actually support (or specifically deny) these claims.<sup>431</sup> Rudy Giuliani, the mayor of New York at the time of the attacks, who would later unsuccessfully run for the presidency, is also referred to regularly, especially with regard to his extensive control over the city and the changes he has wrought to it.

Nicholas Windust, a federal agent, is one of the novel’s (typically Pynchonian) sprawling cast of characters, who, like Brock Vond, exerts a physical, sexual control over Maxine Tarnow, the novel’s protagonist. Maxine retains more independence than Frenesi in the earlier novel, but her thoughts remain often preoccupied with Windust. He ends up dead, however, murdered quite possibly by the very government for which he was working, just as Vond’s power is terminated by Reagan and he is left to be ‘disappeared’ by Blood and Vato. The phantom executive force operates beyond the level of any individual, embodied figure, any of whom is dispensable, able to be abandoned and cut off from power (Lindbergh again is relevant here given his mysterious disappearance towards the conclusion of *The Plot*). As in *Vineland*, executive government controls, in some sense, the entire network of *Bleeding Edge*’s narrative: “there’s always a federal angle”, as Maxine states at one juncture.<sup>432</sup> The

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<sup>430</sup> Martin Paul Eve notes that *Against the Day*’s pre-release blurb featured the claim that “no reference to the present day is intended or should be inferred”. Eve notes that “in the indisputably ironic tone of the final sentence, crucial issues of metaphorical relativity and absolutism are raised that bring the contemporary politics of *Against the Day* to light”, providing an indication of the critical consensus concerning *Against the Day*’s contemporary resonances. Martin Paul Eve. ‘“It sure’s hell looked like war”: Terrorism and the Cold War in Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* and Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*.’ In *Thomas Pynchon & the (De)vices of Global (Post)modernity*. Ed. Zofia Kolbuszewska. 39-53. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2012. 39.

<sup>431</sup> Jonathan Lethem suggests in his review for the *New York Times* that “this time out, Pynchon may be pursuing a small clarification in his historical pageant of conspiracy. “Bleeding Edge” unnervingly plays footsie with 9/11 trutherism, but I think the discomfort this arouses is intentional. Like DeLillo in ‘*Libra*,’ Pynchon is interested in the mystery of wide and abiding complicity, not some abruptly punctured innocence”. ‘Pynchonopolis’. Rev. of *Bleeding Edge*. *New York Times*. 12<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

<sup>432</sup> The novel also provides an especially pertinent passage shortly after the September 11 attacks: “‘But there’s still always the other thing. Our yearning. Our deep need for it [referring to the idea that the Bush administration perpetrated the attacks] to be true. Somewhere, down at some shameful dark recess of the national soul, we need to feel betrayed, even guilty. As if it was us who created Bush

executive aggrandisement identified by David Thoreen in *Vineland* continues in *Bleeding Edge*, now simply part of the national fabric. The conspiracy theories around September 11 suggest a sinister sense of Bush's own REX 84, a pretext to introduce sweeping, constitutionally dubious powers, only this time it actually happened, in the form of legislation such as the PATRIOT Act. This is not to imply that Pynchon supports the claims that the Bush administration was involved in the commission of the September 11 attacks – but that his work indicates the ruthlessness with which the federal executive will exploit such disasters to augment its own power. Bush is certainly the heir to Nixon and Reagan in the earlier novels.

The presence of this presidential/executive dynamic even in texts such as *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Human Stain*, is particularly central to the argument I have presented. These are not overtly 'political' novels; even a text such as *The Human Stain* which employs contemporary political concerns in its narrative focuses more on issues of identity and subjectivity. We know that Pynchon and Roth are both working in and interrogating left-wing traditions, though not the same tradition; we know that McCarthy is in some sense more conservative, though his precise politics remain debated. Pynchon and Roth, particularly, certainly project political ideals, experiments, and possibilities (which may be historical, and now lost) in their texts: Pynchon focuses on potential alternative communities, drawing on early twentieth-century socialism and anarchist tendencies, while Roth seems to have an investment in a more vocal, communal left-wing Democratic politics. *Our Gang*, 'Positive Thinking on Pennsylvania Avenue', and 'The President Addresses the Nation' are more directly partisan, though none of them specifically advance Democratic alternatives to Eisenhower or Nixon. *The Plot Against America* seems to support the mythic status of Franklin D. Roosevelt, but problematises this as it does it. However, most of the texts discussed here are not straightforward political satire, or heavily partisan tracts. They are about the experiences of their individual characters (who are often ordinary citizens, or presidential *avatars* rather than actually presidential), and the social milieu in which they live.

Thus, the executive force is demonstrably a kind of universal presence in the United States, and the lives of its citizens, whether or not they choose to be directly engaged in political activity. The likes of Lester Farley and the Roth family, even if politically *aware*, do not seek involvement in the political process themselves beyond voting, but still cannot escape from the socio-political nexus of executive power. A text such as *Our Gang*, that much more

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and his gang, Cheney and Rove and Rumsfeld and Feith and the rest of them – we who called down the sacred lightning of 'democracy', and then the fascist majority on the Supreme Court threw the switches, and Bush rose from the slab and began his rampage. And whatever happened then is on our ticket.' " (322)

expressly satirises a presidential figure, or works of fiction primarily about, or representing, such figures – such as Coover's *The Public Burning* – inherently must depict the machinations and workings of the presidency and the executive branch. The novels studied here are in dialogue with this governmental structure even while focussing on a wide array of other concerns, often chiefly the subjective experiences of individuals and families, indicating the insidious ubiquity of this force. The operation of that force upon individual bodies and minds is integral to its representation, revealing its ability to reach into the physical figures of citizens, while, in an intricate relay, the physicality of embodied presidential figures can shape and direct it; Pynchon's depiction of Washington hints that inherent flaws in the presidential system to some degree may originate in its legendary first leader's own characteristics.

The specific historicity of these texts is also crucial to this project's argument. Even in Roth's counterfactual *Plot*, the narrative is informed and supported by extensive detail from the historical record, as is made very evident by the gazette of historical figures appended to the novel. Lindbergh may never have served as president, or even have been the Republican nominee, but he was considered for the candidacy, and expressed the sort of views he is elected on in the text. As has been demonstrated, Washington's appearance in *Mason & Dixon* is clearly founded on evidence from the period. Given Pynchon's whimsical and often bizarre textual imaginings, it would be easy to miss that he is, in fact, a writer with such a deep, scholarly attitude to historical research, and the extent to which this informs the serious conceptual and cultural politics underlying the surface weirdness of his novels. *Blood Meridian*, too, draws to a substantial extent on historical materials, going well beyond Samuel Chamberlain's journal (the primary source for some of the chief characters and the general narrative outline). These texts, largely, do not hypothesise; they reveal views of the presidency and executive power that are occluded by the 'established' historical record. It could be argued that the 'established' record is often almost as critical of Nixon, particularly, as Roth's vicious satire, but even here Pynchon develops the point beyond merely a critique of Nixon's highly publicised shortcomings: he suggests that Reagan carried on Nixon's work in the 1980s, that the failures of the 1960s countercultural generation created an opening for Nixon, and, ultimately, that the mercantile interests of the original eighteenth century revolutionaries – and Washington himself – ensured the creation of a system that was set up from its beginnings for figures such as Nixon, Reagan, and Bush.<sup>433</sup> *The Plot Against America* does expressly engage in hypotheticals, and according to Roth at least its point is

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<sup>433</sup> We might note here Lethem's description of Pynchon as "wildly consistent": there are very clear through lines and parallels between his texts, and a historical narrative of the presidency from its origins with Washington in *Mason & Dixon* to (nearly) the present day in *Bleeding Edge* is consequently a critically fertile frame through which to consider his work.

that 'it didn't happen here', but it is made to seem very plausible, and we are left to wonder how sincerely Roth's comment should be taken, or at least if it should be qualified. The text's reversion to 'real' history is certainly demonstrably problematic, glossed over quickly and in a staccato fashion, almost as if something is, again, being hidden.

There is assuredly further research to be done on this topic: as the introduction discussed, the presidency and executive power more broadly are represented and analysed in a vast quantity of American literature (as well as cinema, television, and other artforms). This project has focussed on three white, male, heterosexual authors; these authors provide far-reaching and important engagement with the executive power in multiple texts, and this is why they have been the subject of this thesis, but there is of course great potential for investigating how authors from different minority backgrounds have made use of the presidential figure. This is especially pertinent now, as the nation's first African-American president heads towards the end of his second term, with a female candidate likely to be the Democratic Party's next presidential nominee, and Hispanic, black, and female candidates competing for the Republican nomination. Literary authors to investigate might include figures such as Toni Morrison, who wrote in 1998 on Bill Clinton and the Lewinsky scandal, describing "feral Republicans, smelling blood and a shot at the totalitarian power they believe is rightfully theirs" and exploring the idea that Clinton was the United States' 'first black president' because of his background, despite his white ethnicity.<sup>434</sup> We could also consider Louise Erdrich, as a Native American writer, who has spoken about her past voting for Richard Nixon and presidential relationships with Native communities, and is politically active on social media.<sup>435</sup> Particular attention might also be paid to recent representations on the screen of presidents who are not white, male, and heterosexual: *24*'s David Palmer, *The West Wing*'s Matt Santos, *Veep*'s Selina Meyer, and *House of Cards*' Frank Underwood (who is depicted as being at least bisexual).

Further research could equally usefully be carried out on texts by the authors that feature here: besides the new and exciting material contained in *Bleeding Edge*, amongst Pynchon's

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<sup>434</sup> Toni Morrison. 'The Talk of the Town.' *New Yorker*. 5<sup>th</sup> October 1998.

<sup>435</sup> Lisa Halliday. 'Louise Erdrich, The Art of Fiction No. 208'. Interview with Louise Erdrich. *Paris Review* 195 (2010). Erdrich remarks that she "had a strange, brief flirtation with the right. I voted for Richard Nixon. But then Nixon was a hero to a lot of Native people. Despite everything else, he was one of the first presidents to understand anything about American Indians. He effectively ended the policy of termination and set our Nations on the course of self-determination. That had a galvanizing effect in Indian country. So I voted for Nixon and my boyfriend wanted to kill me and I didn't know why." In March 2015, Erdrich posted on her Facebook page asking people to sign a letter against the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline, indicating her current political activism: "let's give our president overwhelming support in this bold move. Please sign and be part of a positive move toward a liveable future on earth. Thank you, Louise".



work *Against the Day* warrants further investigation; *I Married a Communist* employs an Abraham Lincoln impersonator and the McCarthy era, and other novels by Roth, such as *The Great American Novel* and *Portnoy's Complaint* include significant references to presidential figures and presidential avatars similar to Coleman Silk; McCarthy's *Suttree* involves struggles with local governmental figures, and the narrative of his earlier work *Child of God* is sparked off by a government sale of Lester Ballard's land, further problematising the nature of executive power and its effect on national and local communities, the loss of his land being central to Lester's descent into murderous sexualised violence. The specifically physical and sexualised elements of the executive force are apparent in texts such as *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Child of God* – there is more research to be done here, expanding on my discussion of *The Human Stain* and bodily violence in other texts, ultimately perhaps proposing a link between presidential/executive and sexual power. My intention here has been to interrogate those texts by these three writers which are in the deepest dialogue with the presidential and executive power: other works deserve further analysis, as this dynamic is evidently a common presence – however shadowy it may be – in Pynchon, Roth, and McCarthy's oeuvres.

I have aimed in this project to identify something of a critical lacuna in the study of these writers – and in American fiction more generally – where presidential power is concerned, and to propose a model for how we might understand the construction, representation, and use of this power in the literary texts of these three major American writers. The dichotomous yet interconnected nature of the embodied and phantom executive force forms the core of this model: the complicated relationship between the individual (presidential figures and avatars) and the spectral 'presidency', the web of influence, effect, and cultural meaning that the executive branch controls. This is much more expansive than simple representation of individual presidents: whilst this occurs in passages such as Washington's appearance in *Mason & Dixon*, the presence of Roosevelt in *The Plot Against America*, and the parody of Nixon in *Our Gang*, executive power is visible in these texts primarily as a more ubiquitous, disembodied organising principle. It is on these grounds that I propose there is ample opportunity for further study of American literary texts – we must investigate works that do not necessarily take presidential figures, or even national politics, as their apparent primary interest.

I have also endeavoured to open out critical discussion specifically on Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy: the lack of substantive work on Roth's evident interest in the presidency has been remarked upon, while McCarthy's use of executive figures and presidential contexts has hitherto not been specifically critically engaged with. Sean

McCann's essay on the engagement of *Gravity's Rainbow* with the presidency offers a starting point for a wider conversation on Pynchon's concern with the nature of executive power in the United States, which I hope to have taken further here by expanding that analysis to *Mason & Dixon* and *Vineland*. This analysis allows an appreciation of new critical vistas within the already extensive body of work on Pynchon, Roth, and McCarthy, presenting a deeper understanding of how their fiction relates to national history, politics, and cultural understanding. The figure of the president – the American god of Ed Tom Bell's describing – and its various avatars casts a long shadow over these texts, at once mythical, historical, and intensely personal. The uses and abuses, constant presence, and ghostly phenomenon of the executive force are without doubt a subject of major interest and consequence for these writers, presenting an exciting and rich developing field of study.

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