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The Presidential Character: Richard Nixon as Literary Subject

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"Of all my literary inventions, Richard Nixon is the most nearly autonomous."

—Gore Vidal (*United* 900)

Abstract

This article establishes Richard Nixon as a vital figure in the development of literary characterization in the United States from the late-twentieth to early-twenty-first centuries. During Nixon's lifetime, tension between postmodernist and realist modes of representation dominated the U.S. literary landscape. As portrayals of Nixon in literature evolved from those of caricature to those of serious characterization, the figure of Nixon as a liberal subject—that is, a subject capable of being represented realistically in fiction, a character with a fully-developed consciousness who can evoke sympathy—offered ambitious novelists a device for narrowing broad, social themes into a psychological context and for widening local, psychological spaces into a historical context. In establishing the trajectory of the Nixonian trope in U.S. literature, this article examines plays and novels by Gore Vidal, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, A.M Homes, Don DeLillo, and others.

Keywords

Fiction, Realism, Postmodernism, Characterization, American Literature, Nixon

Başkanlık Karakteri: Edebi Bir Özne Olarak Nixon

Özet

Bu makale, Richard Nixon'ı yirminci yüzyılın sonlarından yirmi birinci yüzyılın başlarına kadar Amerikan edebiyatında karakter gelişiminde önemli rol oynayan bir figür olarak ele alır. Yaşamı süresince, Amerikan edebiyatında postmodernist ve gerçekçi temsil biçimleri arasında bir gerilim egemendi. Nixon'ın edebi tasvirleri karikatürlerden ciddi betimlemelere dönüşürken, kurmaca eserlerde gerçekçi bir şekilde temsil edilebilen ve sempati uyandıran tam gelişmiş bir bilinç düzeyine sahip bir özne olarak Nixon figürünün kullanımı, iddialı romancıların geniş, sosyal temaları psikolojik bağlamda daraltabilmelerini ve yerel, psikolojik alanları tarihsel bağlamla ilişkilendirmelerini mümkün kıldı. Amerikan edebiyatında Nixon örneğinin kullanımının izini süren bu makale, Gore Vidal, Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, A.M Homes, Don DeLillo ve diğer yazarların romanlarını ve oyunlarını incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Kurmaca, Gerçekçilik, Postmodernizm, Karakterizasyon, Amerikan Edebiyatı, Nixon

On October 25, 2010, Jonathan Franzen was invited to a private summit with the president of the United States. The meeting had no official agenda. Its ostensible purpose was to ratify Franzen's status as a significant American writer; to celebrate a novelist who had accrued the elusive combination of critical acclaim and wide popular readership; and to honor Franzen at the height of his career, after his fourth novel, *Freedom* (2010), was declared a masterpiece of modern social realism. For twenty minutes ("an eternity," Franzen later reflected), the novelist had the ear of arguably the most literary-minded president in a generation: unlike his immediate predecessors, who favored heavy biographies, Barack Obama enjoyed contemporary fiction lauded by New York critics (Eby; Baker). The meeting took place a week before the nation's white middle class, galvanized by recession and against Obama's stimulus policies, returned a conservative majority to the House of Representatives. Such middle-class angst was a major theme in Franzen's fiction. Between books and current events, the two men

had plenty to talk about. But Franzen had only one topic on his mind: Richard Nixon.

"[Nixon] was our last liberal president," Franzen lamented (qtd. in Melber). None of Obama's immediate predecessors, he argued, had pushed domestic policies as progressive as Nixon's. Obama laughed dismissively and replied: "The only problem is that Nixon was crazy" (Melber). This evasion did not satisfy Franzen, whose concerns went beyond politics. By the early 2000s, Nixon had accrued a great deal of culturally symbolic power. Many liberal historians used Nixon's domestic agenda like a geological stratum to measure rightward cultural drift: what was reactionary in Nixon's time now seemed downright progressive (Greenberg 304–08). Meanwhile, Nixon himself was more frequently invoked in narrative media than any of his peers; he had been portrayed in more films than any other twentieth-century president (Harris; Perlstein 24; et al). Nixon's ubiquity in popular culture was second only to the Founders' and Abraham Lincoln's. Like Lincoln, Nixon had been a powerful and politically savvy president whose personality and neuroses provoked analysis from both armchair psychologists and fiction writers. Like the image and idea of Lincoln, the image and idea of Nixon had become a potent vector through which American themes were interpreted.

Nixon's recurrence in fiction demonstrates more than his historical significance. "As actors want to play Hamlet," said historian Richard Reeves, "writers want to write about Nixon, and they will never stop." Nixon has inspired immense creativity against the backdrop of major aesthetic shifts within American literature. Between 1970 and 2010, critics have argued whether literary postmodernism has waned and, if so, what has replaced it. Some critics claim that we are witnessing a resurgence of traditionalist literary realism. Debates about the compatibility of realism with twentieth-century literary innovations, and how society and the individual can be adequately represented after decades of literary experimentalism, dominate this conversation. Nixon has a vital supporting role in the history of this debate. He has become an indispensable literary trope, and his fictional incarnations reveal important continuities in American literature after 1970. He brings broad questions about literary representation into focus.

In 2002, critic Linda Hutcheon assessed the state of postmodernism in two words: "it's over" (166). That same year, Jonathan Safran Foer's

Everything is Illuminated and Zadie Smith's *The Autograph Man*, two highly publicized novels, exploited all the devices and conventions of literary postmodernism: irony, playful language, non-linear narrative structure, exaggeration and caricature, scrambled allusions, and an emulsification of highbrow and mass culture. "Postmodernism" seemed to be doing fine. Even Hutcheon acknowledged that a concept so hopelessly elastic as postmodernism would enjoy a hearty afterlife: "the postmodern moment has passed," she wrote, "even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on…" (181). And yet few could deny the palpable sense that postmodernism's moment has passed. In 2007, *Twentieth-Century Literature* entitled a special issue "After Postmodernism." Even if it wasn't over, it was over.

Most literary critics identify literary postmodernism's zenith with the publication of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). The sprawling novel, set during the final years of World War II, spun theoretical physics and advanced mathematics together with astrology, European history, pop culture, and cameos by real-life figures. *Gravity's Rainbow* also adopted what Mary K. Holland calls, "the poststructuralist notion of the problem of language—the arbitrary, uneconomic relationship between words and things, signs and meanings, and the resulting absurdity of any notion of inherent, necessary, or universal meaning through language" (2). This notion, which can be traced through much identifiably postmodern fiction of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, seemed to reject the possibility of mimesis, however tenuously defined. Many writers and critics who rejected poststructuralism's apparent nihilism identified as realists. Some critics employed terms like "operatic realism" to salvage the projects of Pynchon and others from such poststructuralist nihilism, to distinguish between postmodern literary representation and the poststructuralist philosophy that seemed to undergird it (Toth 109).

Meanwhile, in MFA programs, a powerful new literary style was emerging: minimalism favored short stories, like those of Raymond Carver, over novels. Carver's sparse, elliptical prose exemplified the new style. Minimalism, wrote Mark McGurl, turned away from, "the kinds of things one finds in history textbooks" (i.e., the kind of things one finds in *Gravity's Rainbow*) to "the smallness, privacy, and racial homogeneity of domestic life in the late 1970s and '80s" (314–15). Many writers, however, were unwilling to sacrifice large, historical concerns, even as they could not avoid minimalism's powerful influence. Novelists such

as Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, Russell Banks, and Jonathan Franzen increasingly balanced broad, social themes with renewed emphasis on locality, psychology, and family relationships. Thus, a late twentieth-century realism emerged in contradistinction to postmodernism.

By 2000, critics began challenging this bifurcation of American fiction between postmodernism and realism (Hoberek 236). Postmodernists like Pynchon, some argued, never fully abandoned realist values, nor was their philosophy of language distinguishable from earlier experimental writers (e.g., James Joyce) whose careers preceded the toxic label "poststructuralist." Other critics argued that postmodernism's existence was self-evident, that it was poststructuralist/anti-realist in philosophy and historically situated in mid-century. But this posed a problem. "[What] could possibly come 'after' postmodernism?" asked Robert Rebin in 2001. "Does not postmodernism itself connote a kind of finality, 'the end of things'—not least of which would be the end of innocence with regard to language and mimesis?" (7). Holland offered a modified perspective, arguing that a turn from anti-realist, poststructural postmodernism toward "postmodern humanism" was the major literary development of the three decades between 1990 and 2010 (200). Such a turn literally applies to the career of Jonathan Franzen, who abandoned dense, experimental fiction in the early 1990s in favor of writing more accessible, character-centric, realist novels. But any combination of postmodern and realist sensibilities places limits on character representation, limits that Franzen described in 2009:

> [The] novel is a bourgeois liberal form, and it succeeds to the extent that it confers importance on…Everyman figures – on the nonfamous, on the nonconsequential. … What a president is able to experience is so far beyond most readers' ken as to not produce a recognizable texture. … Somehow it's a lot easier to identify with a child soldier in Africa than with Idi Amin. The child-soldier character gets to live as a character, whereas the Idi Amin character walks around in the chains of being Idi Amin. … [Fiction] thrives on the anonymous. The anonymous life can be inhabited, the public life is closed to you. ("Liberal Form")

For Franzen, novels about major historical figures are generally

bad; he prefers "straight biography." This preference may be Franzen's own and nothing more, but his description of prose fiction's limits is not. Traditionally, the object of representation in fiction has been what Franzen terms a "recognizable" or identifiable subject or consciousness: the liberal subject. A narrator is language mimicking voice or thought (often both). Famous persons who appear in prose fiction call undue attention to themselves and generate cognitive dissonance in the reader. The effect is frequently deliberate, as when Napoleon appears in *War and Peace*. Postmodernism flattens this effect. Pynchon writes cameos of Wernher von Braun and Malcolm X with the same distance and exaggeration that he uses for most of his characters. These cameos are not awkward or disruptive because all the subjects are equally and cartoonishly rendered. In realist fiction, however, Malcolm X's character would be wildly overdetermined with political and historical meaning. Nevertheless, one figure seems to inspire fiction writers to confront this challenge of representation: Nixon.

Throughout his career, Nixon seemed to compel observers to frame him in literary terms. Nixon's obsessions with power and control invited frequent comparisons with Shakespeare's great kings; the trajectory of his career—rise, fall, resurrection, and resignation—provides a narrative tragedy on a Greek scale. The title of Gary Wills' famous *Nixon Agonistes* (1970), an allusion to John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, simultaneously invoked the Hebrew, Greek, and English epic traditions. Meanwhile, Nixon's famously protean public image and numerous personal reinventions suggested a mental lacuna that writers are happy to fill. In 1972, journalist Arthur Woodstone published the curiously titled *Nixon's Head*, which revealed that White House reporters increasingly exchanged Machiavelli for Freud when explaining Nixon's behavior (vi). When Nixon's presidency ended in a fantastic public meltdown, revealing elaborate networks of paranoid espionage, many speculated about the president's mind. *New Republic* editor John Osborne concluded that Nixon had "suffer[ed] from some mental defect that preceded the Watergate affair by many years" (qtd. in Greenberg 261). Osborne's diagnosis was retroactive, nodding to decades of curiosity about the content of Nixon's head, as well as questions about his personality and character: who was the *real* Nixon? This question presents a problem for biographers but an opportunity for fiction writers, who seem drawn to Nixon as one of the rare instances in which an iconic public figure provides the scaffolding for a plausible

literary representation. Through sheer historical accident, Nixon offers writers something Idi Amin or Abraham Lincoln cannot: a head.

Novelist and playwright Gore Vidal, who began writing critical pieces about Nixon in the 1950s, was especially possessive of this property. When a litany of psychobiographies appeared after Watergate, explaining everything from Checkers to China through a psychoanalytic lens, Vidal declared: "Enough is enough … do not inflict this Freudian horseshit on Nixon—*my* Nixon" (*United* 903). Any schematic explanation of Nixon diminished his uniqueness, his specificity, and his locality: key ingredients for realist character development. Vidal asserted the realist's imperative to portray rather than explain, and laid the early groundwork for an important shift from Nixon as Caricature to Nixon as Character. His 1960 play, *The Best Man*, is the earliest significant portrayal of Nixon in literature. Set during a fictional Democratic convention, the play pits the patrician frontrunner William Russell (a romanticized Adlai Stevenson) against the young, red-baiting Senator Cantwell (a barely disguised Nixon) in a bid for the presidential nomination. Vidal enjoys puns: his proxy Nixon spews cant well, and often seems incapable of much else (he "can't well"). Unlike earlier Nixon parodies, Vidal's engages seriously with the play's character. Vidal also displays impressive foresight. Senator Cantwell privately reveals his intention to recognize Red China and steals compromising files from an enemy's psychiatrist, twelve years before President Nixon did both. He attacks his opponents from the right only to dodge leftward, much to the disgust of his opponent Russell. Cantwell is unperturbed: "There are many ways of leading: the worst one is making brilliant speeches on the right side at the wrong time. I know how to wait" (138). Russell's retort to Cantwell, meanwhile, skillfully compresses decades of anti-Nixon rhetoric, some of it premonitory: "The self-made man often makes himself out of pieces of his victims," he warns the populist Cantwell (138).

Vidal was especially adept at capturing Nixon's voice. "I like the way you always manage to state the obvious with a sense of real discovery," Russell observes, describing a habit familiar even to Nixon's admirers (160). This anticipates a key component of Nixon's public image: the importance of voice. Any portrayal of Nixon on film, television, or radio hinges on his distinctive baritone. Nixon's voice is essentially the equivalent of Lincoln's beard, a marker of his Nixonness. This is never more apparent than when the imitation fails.

Anthony Hopkins nearly quit midway through filming Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) because the Welsh actor struggled with Nixon's accent. Ever major review of *Nixon* focused on Hopkins's eventual decision to forego straight impersonation, whether they praised or panned his overall performance. Hopkins mimicked the president's movements and body language, but not the voice. For most viewers, this was the defining aesthetic decision of the film, for better or worse. "I never feel I can get the accent right," Hopkins later said. "I can do … the essence of Nixon, the tortured man … I've got the mask, but it's the accent. Everyone knows what he sounded like. The voice" (Weinraub). This lesson that the voice matters more than the essence—that the surface may be more essential than the depths—has not been lost on the writers who incorporate Nixon into their fiction.

Readers may not hear pitch, but style and syntax can be performed on the page. Nixon's rhetoric, however, is deceptively difficult to master without becoming caricature. Historian David Greenberg described Nixon's speaking style as simultaneously "hard-hitting" and "cagey" (43). His delivery was frequently too studied, his performances almost deliberately inauthentic. A reporter once remarked, "I had the impression he would even practice his inflection when he said 'hello'" (Perlstein 22). "Nothing about him is spontaneous," said Murry Kemptom (qtd. in Greenberg 46). Vidal wrote that Nixon always "remembers to smile the way people do" (*Last* 239). He famously recycled common maneuvers: the appearance of fairness (*on the one hand…, on the other hand...*). Banalities about difficulty and sacrifice (*I won't take the easy or popular path*). The non-accusation accusation (*Vidal mimes: "I am not saying that President Johnson is a* card-*carrying Communist. No, I am not even saying…that he* is *a Communist. No. But I question…*") (*Last* 238–39). Nixon's public statements were often fraught with qualifiers. Novelist Philip Roth selected a characteristically contorted Nixon statement as the epigraph to his satirical novel, *Our Gang* (1971):

> From personal and religious beliefs I consider abortions an unacceptable form of population control. Furthermore, 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. (474)

This passage readies the palate for what follows by demonstrating the kind of Nixonian syntax that will be parodied throughout the novel: nearly 300 pages of Nixon satire, written as absurd political dialogues between characters named President Tricky Dixon, Reverend Billy Cupcake, Attorney General John Malicious, and Mr. Asslick. The sex and scatology of novels like *Portnoy's Complaint* had made Roth a celebrity; in *Our Gang*, he relied on crude puns, sick humor, and wild exaggeration for comic effect. For instance, Tricky declares war on Denmark to contain the spread of loose pornography laws. But the novel's real satiric force comes from its verisimilitude. Officially a novel, *Our Gang* is structured like a play and Tricky sounds like Nixon. Describing the impending conflict with Denmark, Tricky intones: "Now I know there are always those who would prefer that we take a weak, cowardly, and dishonorable position in the face of a crisis. They of course are entitled to their opinion" (526). He assures his audience, "that the great majority of the American people" support his actions, and warns the Danish government that any attempt to drive out American forces "would be interpreted by Americans of all walks of life, professors and poets as well as housewives and hardhats, as a direct affront to our national heritage" (526, 530). Here and throughout *Our Gang*, Roth judiciously preserved the content and style of Nixon's rhetoric. Roth mocked Nixon through faithfulness; he swaps out proper nouns here and there for comic effect, but strove to duplicate rather than exaggerate the object of his satire. He heightened the absurdity everywhere except in Nixon's voice.

Vidal would take Roth's technique a step further, literalizing Roth's efforts to mime Nixon. Vidal's *An Evening with Richard Nixon* (1972) consists almost entirely of words used by and about Nixon. If Roth sought to capture Nixon's unnaturally contorted public statements, Vidal's second play on Nixon attempted to highlight the full breadth of his many voices. In debates, for instance, Nixon often seemed both wildly aggressive and stubbornly passive—a difficult quality to represent. Vidal shows this filibustering style in the scene of Nixon's 1946 debate with liberal Congressman Jerry Voorhis. Nixon is citing Voorhis's support of rations two years earlier as evidence of Voorhis's belief in extreme government controls in peacetime:

> Nixon: You were in favor of a gas rationing…
>
> Voorhis: In wartime…

> Nixon: Grain rationing…
>
> Voorhis: The war…
>
> Nixon: Meat rationing. There are those working in high official places who would destroy our constitutional principles.
>
> Voorhis: Now, look here…
>
> Nixon: … Today the American people are faced with a choice between two philosophies of government: one of them supported by the radical P.A.C. [the C.I.O.'s Political Action Committee] and its adherents…
>
> Voorhis: Of which I am not one.
>
> Nixon (*Through him*) … would deprive the people of liberty through regimentation. The other would return government to the people…
>
> Voorhis: Let's get back to the PAC …
>
> Nixon: By all means. (*Holds up a paper triumphantly*) Here is proof that they are endorsing you. (23)

In this entire scene, only three words—"By all means"—are invented. The rest of the dialogue is taken verbatim from the Nixon-Voorhis debate. More than any other fiction writer of the late twentieth century, Vidal was fascinated by, and particular about, the segregation of fact and fiction. In *An Evening with Richard Nixon*, nearly every line spoken by the title character was lifted from the public record. In the text itself, Vidal distinguishes between the public record and his own lines with separate typeface. The bulk of the original dialogue belongs to the characters of George Washington, who narrates, and Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, who function as a cross between Greek chorus and peanut gallery. Other historical figures appear throughout, and are likewise quoted from the public record. (Vidal cheekily cites Gloria Steinem, Nikita Khrushchev, Hubert Humphrey, and others as co-authors.)

Vidal's stage directions do work that original dialogue otherwise might. The actor playing Nixon is directed to smile when Humphrey mocks "the new Nixon" in 1968, indicating that Humphrey is taking his bait (88). He scowls whenever Eisenhower mentions Nixon's unimpressive war record. Vidal occasionally placed conflicting public

statements from different contexts side-by-side to highlight Nixon's hypocrisy. More often, however, he allowed Nixon to explain the logic of his political contradictions. Nixon explains, for instance, why he lied about covert operations in Cuba during the 1960 debates. Vidal's Nixon is an honest liar, unlike Vidal's Kennedy, who the character of Washington clearly dislikes. Eisenhower tries to defend Kennedy: "You came at the beginning," he explains to Washington. "You were lucky. We came at the … we came later in the story" (131). Eisenhower's reluctance to say "the end" only underscores the point Vidal wished to make: Washington's republican experiment had failed. National failure is Vidal's constant theme. When, in the final moments, an offstage voice demands to know who cut down a cherry tree in the center of the stage, Kennedy attempts to shift blame: "Nixon did" (132). Eisenhower corrects him: "We all did," an ambivalent conclusion, especially considering Vidal's largely anti-Nixon audience. When it came to Nixon, Vidal frequently sided against his own audience, if not quite with Nixon. His pronouncements on Nixon are layered with irony. "Nixon's sense of fun is the most remarkable thing about him," he wrote, "even more appealing than his ability to hear what the silent say (a typical Nixon joke, incidentally, quite lost on ponderous liberals)" (*United* 884). "Of all my literary inventions," Vidal declares, the sometimes robotic and decidedly non-fictional Richard Nixon "is the most nearly autonomous" (900).

Vidal's qualified admiration contrasted with the brutal satire of most Watergate-era portrayals of Nixon. Roth's *Our Gang* ends with the president's assassination and comeback in Hell, where he campaigns against the Devil to rule the underworld. "My fellow fallen," he says, "Let me say at the outset that I of course agree with much of what Satan has said here tonight in his opening statement. I know that Satan feels as deeply as I do about what has to be done to make Wickedness all that it can and should be…." (589). But he quotes from the Book of Job as evidence of Satan's collusion with Righteousness, much as he might have used a Communist pamphlet against a moderate Democrat. Quoting Satan's own words from Scripture, he argues that the Devil is soft on evil. A similarly demonic Nixon appears in the final pages of *Gravity's Rainbow*. The character is Richard Zhlubb, owner of the Orpheus Theater (Pynchon's symbol for America in 1973) who fastidiously tends the queues outside his cinema. His patrons are distracted by harmonica players who, complains Zhlubb, create "a state of near anarchy" in the queue (755). "Now they're all doing it," he growls. "Well, not 'all,' let me

just clarify that, of course the actual lawbreakers are only a small but loud minority.... Certainly not all those good folks in the queue." Zhlubb is a twitchy, manipulative character: he plays recordings of cheering, jeering, riots, and nuclear explosions to create confusion. Scholar Andreas Killian calls Pynchon's 760-page novel an epic of paranoia and the "ultimately literary expression" of a conspiracy-obsessed society (228). He also describes Nixon as "the foremost representative of the paranoid style that entered postwar American life" (258). It's fitting, he says, that Pynchon's novel should conclude with an image of Nixon directly addressing the reader: "I suppose you're on *their* payroll," Zhlubb says to the reader (756). Most characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* are tormented by a mysterious *them*. They internalize paranoia, which metastasizes and infects their social interactions, which in turn radiate paranoia back at them. Such a social blueprint was convincing in 1973 during the height of the Watergate revelations, when paranoid visions of government that would have seemed fantastic a decade earlier suddenly felt plausible. Pynchon had written about vast conspiracies in his earlier fiction, but conspiracy is subordinate to paranoia throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. Whereas conspiracy is an external event, and lends itself to the scope of postmodern fiction, paranoia is an internal state, one that can be rendered in both social and psychological terms.

After *Gravity's Rainbow*, novelist Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) is among the most widely cited exemplars of high postmodernism in American fiction. It also offers the most extensive portrayal of Nixon in all of fiction. Set in Washington, D.C., in the days surrounding the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg execution, the novel alternates between chapters of carnivalesque absurdity *à la Pynchon*, which portray the mood and voices of the nation, and first person narration from Nixon's perspective. The novel is therefore structured like a maddening dialectic, moving back and forth between a crazed heteroglossia—a series of dialogues and loosely structured narration that represent the American body politic—and Nixon's increasingly frantic chapters, in which he attempts to stabilize and control the political situation surrounding the execution.

Nixon as first person narrator enables Coover to layer the character's thoughts and voice, his contradicting attitudes, ambitions, motives, and values. Whereas Roth and Vidal would have had Nixon make contradictory statements, Coover can have him think one thing and say another without alienating the reader. The Rosenberg execution

was a distant memory to the novel's initial audience; Nixon's career had undergone several renovations since 1953, and so the harried old man who intoned "I am not a crook" did not overwhelm their sense of Coover's young vice president. But Coover constructs his character with all the versions of Nixon, from the spry Cold Warrior to the defeated ex-president, without producing a scrambled collage. His Nixon is recognizably Nixon, and yet available to us as an open, relatable, and sympathetic fictional subject (Nixon is the only fully realized character in the 530-page novel). He is practicing realism within the postmodern novel—every other chapter is a Nixon chapter, and every other chapter reads like *Gravity's Rainbow*. The point of overlap between the two is the voice. Coover uses Nixon's syntax and some of his rhetoric, but he also constructs a reflective, sensitive character. "People misunderstand me," he says. "Personal hatred is a big waste, it's as simple as that. Issues are everything, even when they're meaningless—these other things like emotions and personalities just blur the picture and make it difficult to operate" (48). "I'm a lot like Lincoln, I guess, who was kind and compassionate on the one hand, and strong and competitive on the other" (49). Such would-be Nixonisms litter the novel, lending credibility to Coover's characterization and fleshing out his character. Only Coover would depict Nixon dwelling on his insecurities, reflecting on his marriage, or indulging in cryptic daydreaming, as during a contentious vote in the Senate: "I tried to maintain a semblance of order for the sake of the visitors up in the galleries, and watched the doorways (seven, like the holes in a man's head) to see who was coming and going" (59). Later, when the vote is over, Nixon "rapped the gavel smartly. I didn't know if it was a proper occasion for rapping the gavel, but it seemed like a good thing to do: BANG!" (61). While shaving, Nixon thinks, "I was born a hundred years too late. If I could let this damn thing grow, I'd look like Ulysses S. Grant. There'd be no talk about shyster corporation lawyers or used-car salesmen then" (173). These lines demonstrate the experience of complex and simultaneous thought, which the reader can recognize both in Nixon and in himself. The fact that they are Nixon's thoughts does not prevent the reader's identification.

Like previous writers, Coover relies on Nixon's voice to construct his facsimile. But unlike previous writers, Coover uses the voice to get inside Nixon's head. Unlike Vidal, who relies on dramatic form and direction quotation, or Roth and Pynchon, who rely on dialogue and caricature, Coover's portrayal uses prose to develop a rounded, self-

aware, sympathetic character, one capable of possessing contradictions without hypocrisy.

Public Burning remains undeniably postmodern in form and function. By the end, Coover ceases to separate Nixon from the more frenetic, carnivalesque elements of the novel. The figure of Uncle Sam, an embodiment of the American zeitgeist, brutally rapes Nixon in the final pages, a disturbing and dramatic demonstration of Coover forcing Nixon to interact with the chaos that surrounds him. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, such a scene would not jar the reader because it would match the tone of the entire of the novel. But in *Public Burning*, the careful segregation of the chaotic chapters from Nixon's chapters renders the concluding violence even more shocking. Throughout the novel, Nixon stands in for the individual; here, Coover is subordinating the individual subject to society. Such subordination is common in postmodern fiction, but it rarely follows such careful character development as Coover invests in his Nixon. In the final scene, Nixon reflects, "Maybe the worst thing that can happen to you in this world is to get what you think you want" (534). This idea—that victory is defeat—would transfer to almost every subsequent portrayal of Nixon. So would Coover's introduction of Nixon's head to the voice. Coover weaves these two together to produce a fully realized literary character, one possessing self-awareness, blind spots, and consciousness of his own blind spots. This integration would persist.

As White House tapes were published and circulated in coming decades, the voice's scope was dramatically widened. Our idea of what Nixon's voice was, changed. The hard objectivity of the tapes made Nixon the most empirically accessible American president, but his personal aversion and historical resistance to psychological interpretation offered a tantalizing canvas for any writer who sought to reconcile large subject and intimate characterization within the crumbling edifice of postmodernism. Donald Freed and Arthur M. Stone's one-man play *Secret Honor* (1984) effectively took Coover's Nixon up through and beyond Watergate. The play's conceit—that Watergate was staged so Nixon could forfeit the presidency, saving the nation from a cabal of predatory capitalists—is little more than a frame for Nixon's monologue, and it is unclear whether the authors intend the audience to believe any of it. Nixon appears deranged but fights for the audience's sympathy. He struggles with the tape recorder. He orders flowers (anonymously) for a sick employee. His resentments, whose depth horrified the nation ten

years earlier, are played for laughs: "The Founding Fathers were nothing more than a bunch of snotty English shits!" (Freed). The rhythms of his speech are taken directly from the White House tapes. He stops and starts. He sputters. He speaks in ellipses and fragments, switches topics mid-sentence, and punctuates those sentences with curse words. He bellows: "What all those East Coast pricks never understood was that I [was] a winner because I was a loser. I dream of failure every night of my life. That is my secret. To make it in this rat race you have to dream of failing everyday. That is reality. … Yeah, I was a dogcatcher, a used car salesman… [I won] because I knew today, the dogcatcher is king!" (Freed). Nixon identifies himself as the vindicated anonymous subject and is also therefore available as a subject for literary fiction.

Middle-class subjects (not quite dogcatchers) remained the primary object of American literary fiction into the 1990s and 2000s. In this fiction, Nixon became, in many ways, the liberal subject *par excellence*. Fiction writers would continue to use Nixon to disperse failure, whether political or domestic. He would recur in novels of decay and collapse in every imaginable social sphere, a patron of the sympathetic loser and a touchstone of suburban malaise. John Updike's *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992) uses Nixon as a catalyst of decline. Alfred Clayton, an historian who toils endlessly on a biography of James Buchanan, watches Nixon's resignation with his children while his wife is on a date with another man. Clayton recalls, "the flickering light of one man's exploding ambition and dream," and realizes he occupies a not dissimilar position (8). Nixon serves a similar function in Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994). Set in November in 1973 in the Connecticut suburbs, the novel examines two couples and their children, all of whom struggle with their own malaise despite their apparent financial and sexual freedoms. After a foiled tryst with his neighbors' wife, Ben Hood masturbates, at first reflecting on former partners but then focusing his sexual imagination on the act itself, and his mental voice begins to mimic Richard Nixon:

> What a blessing when oblivion descended on these exercises. Masturbation was a falling sickness, with the emphasis, these days, on the sickness part. But at least he didn't have to think. At least he was granted a moment without Benjamin Paul Hood and his fiscal responsibilities, without the lawn, the boat, the dog, the medical bills, credit card and utility bills, without

> the situation in the Mideast and in Indochina, without Kissinger and Ehrlickman or Jaworski or that Harvard asshole, Archibald Cox. Just a little peace. (28)

Moody invoked Nixon several times with different characters, each time reminding the characters that Nixon's crisis is also theirs. Mark Maxwell's *Nixoncarver* (1999) comically renders the identification of Nixon with middle-class consciousness by imagining a relationship between the former president and short story writer Raymond Carver, the man most identified with the rise of sparse, character-oriented, domestic realism. The two men meet on the California coast and enjoy a retirement together, taking fishing trips with the fictional narrator, who frets that, between Carver and Nixon, "I don't have a story of my own" (176). When Nixon dies, the narrator regrets not having told him more about his own life, but decides, "it was a story he'd heard before. Same old, same old" (176). Nixon had already had the same experience.

This retroactive bond with Nixon is even adopted by Philip Roth, who by the late 1990s had begun a series of ambitious, realist novels that refracted major shifts in American culture since World War II through the private experiences of families from Newark's Jewish community. In *American Pastoral* (1997), Roth told the story of "the Swede," a star athlete from Newark whose stuttering daughter, Merry, becomes involved in a left-wing terrorist organization in the early 1970s. The Swede is a successful businessman and basically apolitical, but he struggles to maintain personal stability between two fiercely political generations. Merry and the Swede's father, Lou, are united in their hatred for Nixon's politics. Lou's political identity was forged in admiration for Roosevelt and disdain for Joe McCarthy and Nixon. Merry's was forged in radical leftist opposition to Vietnam. In the 1960s, Lou writes diplomatic anti-war letters to President Johnson (a reasonable man, Lou believes), hoping to offer Merry an example of sensible protest and temper her violent opposition to the war. Merry will not accept such a timid response: "There's no d-d-d-difference between [Johnson] and Hitler," she stutters (288). "You're exaggerating, sweetheart…" her grandfather replies. "[You] forget what Hitler did to the Jews, Merry dear. You weren't born then, so you don't remember." This grandfatherly tone does not move Merry, who describes Vietnam as "one *b-b-big* concentration camp" (289).

A few years later, with Nixon in power and his granddaughter

in hiding, Lou's diplomacy evaporates: "He's up in the middle of the night writing him letters," his wife tells her son, the Swede. "Some I have to censor myself, I have to physically stop him, the language is so filthy" (299). Manic writing, foul language, anger and bitterness late in the night: Roth need not flesh the tropes out any further. Lou has internalized Nixonian behavior in his hatred. Lou gloats about the Watergate trials. When John Ehrlichman appears on TV, he says, "This is a real fascist—the whole bunch of 'em, Von Ehrlichman, Von Haldeman, Von Kalmbach … these so-called patriots … would take this country and make Nazi Germany out of it" (287). Nixon is a "skunk," a "miserable fascist dog." Roth writes:

> Nixon liberates [Lou] to say anything—as Johnson liberated Merry. … Get Nixon. Get the bastard in some way. Get Nixon and all will be well. If we can just tar and feather Nixon, America will be America again, without everything loathsome and lawless that's crept in, without all this violence and malice and madness and hate. Put him in a cage, cage the crook, and we'll have our great country back the way it was! (299–300)

Lou rails against "Mr. Von Nixon and his stormtroopers" and at the same time decries the recent trend of middlebrow pornography (such as the film *Deep Throat*): "Let me tell you who goes to those movies: riffraff, bums, and kids without supervision" (350). Lou is Nixonian despite himself, ranting about "bums" and bemoaning moral decay.

Roth's second novel in the series, *I Married a Communist* (1998), tells the story of Ira Ringold, a successful radio personality and Communist who is blacklisted in the 1950s. Nixon is a shadow villain throughout the novel, lurking in the background, but his most prominent appearance occurs at the end, in 1994, when Nathan Zuckerman reflects at length on the former president's recent funeral. Disgusted by the sonorous pageantry over Nixon's life, Zuckerman (Roth's famous proxy) growls that, "had Ira been alive to hear them, he would have gone nuts all over again at the world getting everything wrong" (280). Like Lou, Zuckerman sounds more anti-Nixon than he is. The idea of "getting everything wrong" echoes the most famous passage from *American Pastoral*, Roth's rhapsody on human relationships:

> You fight your superficiality, your shallowness, so as

> to try to come at people without unreal expectations, without an overload of bias or hope or arrogance … and yet you never fail to get them wrong. … You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again.... And yet what are we to do about this terribly significant business of *other people*…? … The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. (35)

The "business of other people" is also the business of characterization, a serious business for writers of realist fiction. The interchangeability of failure and success is the Nixonian trope that runs throughout Roth, and so much other contemporary fiction, wherever the Nixonian voice arises, whether from Lou, from Ben Hood, or from Nixon himself.

A.M. Homes' novel *May We Be Forgiven* (2012) pushes this trope to a comical degree: the main character, Harold Silver, is a "Nixon Studies" professor whose marriage, career, home, health, and life's work disintegrate over the course of a single year. Catastrophe follows catastrophe. In moments of despair, Silver reflects on Nixon, his abiding passion. When he suffers a stroke and must have his brain scanned, he recites Nixon's enemies list. Nixon's daughter, Julie Eisenhower, contacts him to read over recently discovered short stories by her father, works of Carveresque minimalism. He enthusiastically agrees to edit them, but the project is taken away: even as a Nixon enthusiast, he fails.

As a consequence of Nixon's near-universal association with middle-class failure, depictions of Watergate were increasingly rendered with sympathy rather than revulsion throughout the 1990s. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), a masterpiece of what Holland calls "postmodern humanism," the character Klara watches Watergate unfold with great ambivalence: "[Klara] didn't enjoy it the way her friends did. Nixon made her think of her father, another man of frazzled mind, rehearsed in his very step, his physical address, bitter and distant

at times, with a loser's bent frame, all head and hands" (373). The hands do the work, sign the treaties, commit the crimes. The head is the other problem, the more difficult problem for a fiction writer to solve: the problem of characterization. By the new millennium, Nixon was not only a figure capable of being characterized, he was a figure capable of evoking sympathy from other characters. In Joyce Carol Oates's *White Girl/Black Girl* (2006), an anti-Nixon liberal can barely disguise her sadness as Nixon resigns:

> You felt a stab of pity for him. You saw a human soul dragged inside-out like a soiled sock. Veronica laughed, wiping her eyes. Oh how silly she was being, she knew! Quickly saying that it was Pat Nixon she grieved for. … Why is it we so much more vividly recall shame, than pride? Our own shame more than the shame of others. (24)

Veronica experiences pity for Nixon, which inspires shame; she remembers her shame better than his. Ann Beattie's *Mrs. Nixon* (2011) stretched the experience Oates described—this mixture of pity for and attraction to the Nixon family—into a book-length meditation on the former president, his wife, and the nature of writing. Contrasting Nixon's intensity with John F. Kennedy's cool distance, Beattie writes, "RN brought himself into everything and could admit no distance between his person and the presidency" (216–17). This compulsively intimate proximity allows for a deep, personal identification—the kind that allows for a realist construction of character. Beattie began writing *Mrs. Nixon* after learning that Pat Nixon wrote no memoir. Half of *Mrs. Nixon* rewrites the couple's personal and political history as creative non-fiction, full of facts but also full of their inner life, and the other half meditates on the act of writing itself. Beattie advised would-be fiction writers on the work of fiction and construction of character (citing, among others, Raymond Carver). Here, Nixon inspires writing about writing.

By the turn of the millennium, Nixon had become a device for narrowing broad, social themes and for widening local, psychological spaces. Don DeLillo effectively described this interplay in *Underworld* (1997). Matt Shay, a one-time chess prodigy (the quintessential Cold War game) and Vietnam vet, reflects on an old portrait of Nixon and "wonder[s] if the state had taken on the paranoia of the individual or

was it the other way around" (465). Shay is preparing for his civilian life and feeling paranoid: "the massive system [that] connects them at levels outside your comprehension…. Ideas used to come from below. Now they're everywhere above you, connecting things and grids universally" (465–66). Time and again, writers use Nixon to map the grid between broad, social-historical ideas and local, personal experience. In literature, historical figures are usually overdetermined by their historicity, and are most often rendered with flattening characterizations by experimental writers. Invented fictional characters are open to interpretation and identification, but they are anonymous. Nixon helps writers negotiate between these two poles. For writers of fiction, Nixon provides more flexibility and access to characterization than perhaps any other major historical figure.

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