

Alienation, Reification, and Narrativity in Russell Banks' *Affliction*

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In Russell Banks' novel, *Affliction*, one can see recurring instances and figurations of strangeness as correlatives for states of the characters' alienated consciousness under a capitalist economy. Interspersed throughout the novel, images of characters figured as masked, mirrored, strange, nonhuman, or with body parts that don't seem to belong to their owners are inextricably bound up with the phenomena of ideology, false consciousness, and reification. In the novel, the ability to construct coherent narratives enables characters to survive or to succeed on middle-class terms. Conversely, an absence of this ability, as seen most notably in Wade, results in suffering, violence, and a tragic degree of estrangement from society. Banks reveals to us how Wade's economic estrangement coupled with his inability to construct realistic narratives (his tendency towards distorted versions of reality) are implicated in the states of cognitive dissonance, "strangeness," or dissociation that recur throughout *Affliction*. Strangeness in the psychological or interpersonal sense is thus shown to be interrelated with and to arise out of economic estrangement.

Banks' novel reveals to us the ramifications of one of the central problems for the modern age, which is the extent to which commodities effect a qualitative change in society when the commodity structure has come to be the dominant form of exchange. As Lukács writes in *History and Class Consciousness*, before we address the problems stemming from the "fetish character of commodities," we must be very "clear in our minds that commodity fetishism is a *specific* problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism. . . . What is at issue *here* . . . is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?"¹ Under the capitalist regime, not only has labor become mechanized, subject to cold, scrupulous calculation, fragmented into areas of specialization, abstracted away from the human, the communal, and the empirical, but this process "extends right into the

¹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (MIT Press, 1971) 84.

worker's 'soul': even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate . . . their reduction to statistically viable concepts."² Man is no longer in control of the products of his labor; he no longer gets to decide when or where he will sell his products; they are no longer a part of him, and he himself becomes incorporated into a system the workings of which seem mysterious, unknowable, too complex to be fully intelligible. This reduction of the human spirit to a "statistically viable concept" drives not only the worker but also the owner of capital and indeed every member of such a society into a state of passivity and estranged conformity to laws that seem inexorable. Individuals do not understand the processes, rules, and laws under which the system seems to operate but become blindly functioning parts of it, unable to gain a transcendent view of their real material and social conditions.

It is no coincidence that *Affliction* begins on Halloween, with all the children of Lawford in masks and the town itself eerily compared to "a village in a medieval German folktale."³ A gang of boys ("like a pack of feral dogs") runs through town damaging property and playing pranks "as if releasing imprisoned spirits" with their "wild" and "transformed" faces betraying their anarchic delight in destruction.⁴ The town of Lawford is also described as though it were practically a ghost town, its thwarted, spectral inhabitants stuck "in the region's dead economy."⁵ We might think of the released spirits as simultaneously nourished and banished by the reifying laws of the market economy and the masked boys as an externalization of the town's secret delight in the destruction of its own property. This delight, which Wade himself once experienced (but repressed as he grew older), is allowed free reign and indulgence here but is then quickly buried in the deadening maze of ideology within which the town normally operates.

It is also telling that the novel begins during hunting season, when strangers from out of town show up with rifles in hand, eager to inaugurate a yearly ritual of violence (or attempted violence) in the woods around Lawford. This, too, is described meaningfully by the narrator, Rolfe, as being like an ongoing war, with the animals figured as

² Lukács 88.

³ Russell Banks, *Affliction* (HarperPerennial, 1990) 2.

⁴ Banks 7.

⁵ Banks 10.

sacrificial victims in an attempt to warn enemies of the power of “the tribe.”⁶ The way the deer corpses are described as “trophies” strapped to the roofs of cars is one of the earliest instances of fetishism that recurs throughout the novel. Commodification, fetishism, and reification are closely related, if not interdependent, phenomena, as discovered by Marx in *Das Kapital*. In certain archaic religious rituals, a totemic emblem or fetish was worshipped not for its own inherent qualities but for the powers with which it was symbolically invested by the community of worshippers. Marx saw that one of the essences of capitalist commodification is its reenactment of this fetishization process, only in terms of the products of labor and labor power itself. The commodity comes to be worshipped as object qua object, and the social meanings embedded in it are erased, disguised, covered over. Importantly, the fact that the “commodity does not appear as the product of actual labour allows it to transcend (in ideology) the mundane world of class and labour relations – that is, to transcend history.”⁷ The object-as-commodity’s use-value is ignored, and it comes to be seen only in the light of exchange-value (what price it can fetch on the market or what amount of capital or surplus-value it can generate).

This dialectical process turns social meanings, values, and forces into seemingly impersonal objects devoid of subjective meanings and the traces of labor that went into their making. Workers come to be fetishized and objectified in this way as well. In the chapter “The Commodity” in *Das Kapital*, Marx compares religious communities that use fetishes to modern capitalism. With religious fetishism,

the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁸

⁶ Banks 74.

⁷ Stephen Baker, *The Fiction of Postmodernity* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000) 13.

⁸ As qtd. in Baker 13.

One of the most important ways Lukács advanced Marxist thought was in his analysis of what he called reification (*Verdinglichung*), a concept found in Marx's own writings on commodity fetishism but which was developed and refined by Lukács. In understanding Lukács' views on reification, it is important to distinguish between objectification and reification. The former is the process that occurs when a worker's labor becomes sedimented (or materialized) in the object produced (or, in a service economy, one could say, in the service performed). The worker's life-force (time and energy) becomes embedded in the actual material product that is then violently divorced from his being and sold as an impersonal commodity on the market. Reification, on the other hand, is a process of deep mystification and normalization of contingent (unnatural) social relations between humans whereby these relations become seemingly immutable and unintelligible to the individual. In masking the places where power really resides, this process naturalizes relations which are actually completely unnatural (or, one might say, that have nothing necessarily "natural" about them). What is constructed and conditional is treated as though it were a given and inalterable state of affairs.

Though no character stands entirely outside the opaque mystifications and ideologies of reified society, Wade's brother, Rolfe, the narrator of the novel, is able to flee the dehumanizing economic conditions of Lawford partly because he is able to find a language in which to make some sense of the afflictions suffered there. Wade is described several times during the novel as being intelligent, and Rolfe admits that Wade was a better student than he was. However, Rolfe is the one who goes on to become the history teacher, surrounded by privileged students, making a quiet, middle-class living as an academic, not entirely free of his own ideologies, but certainly far from the despair of blue-collar Lawford. We are led to ask then, why is Rolfe able to escape but not Wade? What is it about Wade that keeps him stuck in his situation, though he has had the same background and upbringing as Wade? I think the answer to this question at least partially lies in the way Wade is depicted as being unable to construct legitimate, normative, or coherent narratives about the world around him and his life situations.

As Rolfe says of his brother Wade, "Knowledge and secrets: everyone had them, and Wade Whitehouse had neither."⁹ Every time Wade enters into a situation that turns

⁹ Banks 165.

sour or pathos-ridden or emasculating for him, the situation is preceded or followed by an instance of his constructing a narrative that is completely out of whack with what is actually going on. Rolfe also describes him as living “almost wholly out there on his skin, with no interior space for him to retreat to” – the polar opposite of Rolfe, an introverted loner who is depicted as being almost completely devoid of emotions, as cold, repressed, and empty inside.¹⁰ However, his ability to find a language in which to articulate his sense of reality seems to be Rolfe’s saving grace.

Although Wade remains unable to decipher the hieroglyphs of the social body and the reified consciousness under capitalism, he is nevertheless discomfited by things and does not simply pass over appearances that others choose to ignore. He is aware of something wrong; he just doesn’t know how to articulate the wrongness. For example, Nick Wickham’s new neon sign “Home Made Cooking” bothers Wade. He rightly sees this as questionable, and it gets under his skin, as the phrase does imply that it is the act of cooking itself that is being “made” at home. Cooking itself, as an activity, can’t be “homemade” unless “cooking” is a metonym for the products of cooking, in other words, for food. Furthermore, not only is food cooked in a restaurant by definition not “homemade,” it is also ironic that in emphasizing the “homemadeness” of Wickham’s food, the pink neon sign, a bit of urban-esque advertising, simultaneously signifies a state of increased commercialization and decreased domesticity.

Like her brother Rolfe, Lena is also able to escape Lawford in terms of physical geography but, unfortunately, only to take up with a religious fundamentalist husband and to adopt the even more distorted ideology of the “Bible Believers’ Evangelistical Association,” an apocalyptic sect of born-again Christians who believe that members of their sect will be rescued by Christ during the “Rapture.”¹¹ This kind of delusional thinking and the family’s odd appearance might simply occasion laughter or contempt were it not for the fact that Banks again exposes the painful underlying truths of their existence, which the religious fanaticism clearly serves to cloak and compensate for. As Banks writes, “Their disheveled and deprived daily lives were now regarded as evidence not of incompetence, as in the past, but of their new priorities . . . whereas before they

¹⁰ Banks 215.

¹¹ Banks 222.

had been depressed and frightened, for what seemed very good reasons, such as poverty, ignorance, powerlessness, etc., they were now optimistic and unafraid.”¹² Thus, we are able to see the ideological vice-grip of reification in that “reified consciousness is unable to grasp itself as reified consciousness and can only think of itself as a given, as *natural*.”¹³

Banks also emphasizes the radical extent to which others in Lawford are dehumanized by the economic conditions in which they find themselves. We are shown from the beginning how few options there are for men like Wade and Jack Hewitt in the small town of Lawford, how enraged they become at what they perceive to be their “bad luck” and the impotence of this rage, as rage under a false consciousness must always be misdirected and thus powerless to alter anything real. The rhetoric of luck, fate, and individual character serves only to reinforce and naturalize, for the characters, the conditions they find themselves in. Banks, however, purposely draws our attention to the empirical realities underlying this condition. For example, Banks takes some pains to reveal to us how financially trapped Jack is by enumerating the various payments he has to make and which keep him working “overtime to make enough money to pay interest on borrowed money,” even though he is relatively young.¹⁴

Wade’s life seems to him the result of a series of accidents he could not prevent, and he sees Jack as heading in the same direction, fated to wind up in the same position that he has. Not only individual characters like Jack and Wade but indeed the entire town of Lawford itself is described as being in the grip of a relentless, ineluctable fate. “In an ultimate sense, the place is enclosed by a fierce geometry of need, placement, materials, and cold,” Rolfe notes.¹⁵ Indeed, there is an underlying truth to this sense of things being fated, in the sense that, as Marx describes in *Das Kapital*, the worker is never, under capitalism, a truly “free” agent. This is not some divinely ordained, metaphysical fate but the coercive entrapment of being forced to sell one’s labor power on the market in order to merely physically survive. As one critic puts it, “At first, it may appear that the worker is a free agent and that capital is not coercive. Indeed, the worker himself sells his labor

¹² Banks 222.

¹³ Baker 14.

¹⁴ Banks 66.

¹⁵ Banks 50.

power to the capitalist and engages in a contractual relationship with him. After the deal is made, however, it is discovered that . . . [i]n fact, the worker was in the bondage of capital even before he appeared as a ‘free agent’ of his labor power. As part of an unending cycle, all he can do is sell his labor power over and over again.”¹⁶

Jack Hewitt, however, does not have the requisite knowledge to enable him to see it this way and instead takes some comfort in a reified view of his situation. His shoulder ruined by pitching for the Red Sox, he stoically takes “the statistical view” by thinking about how few athletes ever make it as far as he did.¹⁷ Sheer “bad luck” is seen by his friends also to be what separates him from the sports celebrities they see on television. “The reified world appears henceforth quite definitively,” Lukács writes, “as the only possible world, the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world vouchsafed to us humans. Whether this gives rise to ecstasy, resignation or despair . . . this will do absolutely nothing to modify the situation as it is in fact.”¹⁸ Interestingly, Jack’s repetitive action injury actually exemplifies the atomizing effects of capitalism’s division of labor. By over-focusing on one narrow mechanized range of activity, workers become experts at that one activity in order to succeed in a competitive market economy, but they also thereby lose all sense of their “species-being,” their sense of belonging to a social group or more organic totality of humanity. Hence, subjectivity itself is fragmented. As Lukács puts it, “The specialization of skills leads to the destruction of every image of the whole.”¹⁹ This objectification of man – turning him into a machine through the division of labor in this way so that he is good at only one or two very specialized automatic movements or skill – is the commodity-reification process in action.

Wade is presented as being not only inarticulate in terms of his own personal narratives but also as being unable to comprehend the narratives (or the significance of narratives) communicated to him by others, which is in part what leads to the tragic outcome of the novel. For instance, “strangeness” appears to be linked with Wade’s inability to “hear” or understand narratives for the first time early on in his interactions with his daughter, Jill. The first time Jill speaks it is literally through a mask, described

¹⁶ Isidor Wallimann, *Estrangement: Marx’s Conception of Human Nature and the Division of Labor* (Greenwood Press, 1981) 27.

¹⁷ Banks 76.

¹⁸ Lukács 110.

¹⁹ Lukács 103.

as being slightly ridiculous and yet frightening all the same. Wade suddenly feels afraid of his own daughter, unable to understand what she is saying to him. They are too late for trick-or-treating, so Wade tries to take her to the town Halloween party, which she makes very clear she has no interest in attending. She repeats at least eight times that she wants to go home and doesn't want to be there, but Wade is simply unable to hear her. When Jill finally takes matters into her own hands and calls her mother, Lillian, Wade's ex-wife, to come pick her up, Wade is suddenly thrown into "an old familiar sequence" of being unable to step back, detach, and analyze the situation.²⁰

This scene prefigures what happens later on when Wade is completely unable to hear Alma Pittman's version of the events in Lawford that Wade has been growing increasingly paranoid about. Alma Pittman, described as "mannish, abrupt" and "aloof," something of an outsider who nevertheless loves the town and its citizens, is the one person who might be capable of acquiring a knowledge of the real social and material conditions of the citizens' lives (she has the entire town's historical records and statistical information at her fingertips and is said to be the one person who connects the provincial concerns of the town to a larger national identity).²¹ Alma tells Wade, "sometimes things are simpler than you think."²² She shows him the computerized records of the property acquisitions of Gordon LaRiviere and Mel Gordon's Northcountry Development Corporation and indicates that perhaps they are starting up a ski resort on the land.

In other words, there is no secret conspiracy involving unions and mafia groups, and the death of Evan Twombly at this point is looking more and more like it was actually an accident. As Alma puts it, Wade is not seeing something both much simpler than the jumbled narrative he's strung together and at the same time more important. She asks him to "please forget" about the narrative he's strung together and attend to the actual facts, the cold hard data she shows him on her computer screen and on a surveyor's map of the township.²³ However, as in the scene with his daughter Jill, he is utterly unable to hear her ("Wade did not hear her," Banks writes), and from this point on

²⁰ Banks 31.

²¹ Banks 279.

²² Banks 281.

²³ Banks 284.

in the novel, his behavior, stemming from his distorted version of events, spirals out of control.²⁴

Again, figurations of strangeness, masking, and dissociation arise after this scene. Rolfe describes Wade as being under the control of forces outside of himself, mysterious forces incapable of being penetrated or allayed, and Wade, after losing his job with LaRiviere, is described as being almost inhuman, alien, machinelike: “His movements were abrupt and erratic, and his face was red and stiffly contorted, as if he were wearing a mask made from a badly photographed portrait of himself.”²⁵ This brilliant, disturbing image is perfect for describing Wade’s lack of self-knowledge and self-possession. It is not even just that he is wearing a mask or that his face looks like a blurred photograph of his face – Banks places Wade’s self-representation at a *triple* remove by comparing it to “a mask made from a badly photographed portrait” of his face. At the economic nadir of the novel, Wade, at this point, is without money, a job, or a car. He is truly trapped. Yet his internal narratives continue to grow more deluded and bizarre. He believes that when he exposes LaRiviere to the town that the townspeople will make him a hero, that he will be saving Jack Hewitt from an unpleasant fate, and that he will be able to put Mel Gordon and Gordon LaRiviere out of business.

One of the more chilling scenes of cognitive strangeness and economic estrangement occurs when Wade is directing the school buses and recalling his loss of his daughter Jill. Directing traffic is the one part of Wade’s job as a police officer we ever really get to see him perform throughout the novel. Otherwise, his status as police officer is almost nonexistent (all he does is warn Jack Hewitt to move his truck once and not to smoke marijuana in public). Otherwise, he is completely left out of the loop when Evan Twombly is shot and is viewed with contempt by the state troopers who come in to deal with the case. The only part of his law enforcement job we really see him perform is the relatively demeaning task of being the school’s crossing guard. Whether out of distress with his powerlessness to change things or out of grief at his loss of Jill or something else entirely, Wade wakes up in a bad mood one snowy morning and passive-aggressively decides to hold up a long line of vehicles for no apparent reason. Though at first he

²⁴ Banks 285.

²⁵ Banks 288.

derives some satisfaction from this assertion of his will, this display of agency soon ushers in its opposite – a state of extreme dissociation and in fact, paralysis, as Wade becomes frozen, as if trapped in his own body, unable to break out of the pose: “He looked like a demented scarecrow. He felt like a statue, however: a man made of stone, unable to bring his arms down or force his legs to walk, unable to release the one remaining school bus and the dozens of vehicles lined up behind it and the dozen more facing it.”²⁶

The body would seem to be a thing most fully belonging to its owner. However, even Wade’s body does not seem to be entirely his. The body (and inner states of consciousness of the self) might be seen as, metaphorically, a last refuge of private property for the proletarian laborer. However, Wade is repeatedly described as being, even here, dispossessed. For example, he endures freezing temperatures in the grader’s cab, where his gloved hands become “stiff as monkey wrenches.”²⁷ The grader is described as a monstrous object that, though it is not directly the product of Wade’s work, is clearly a means of his exploitation by LaRiviere. Banks describes the grader’s headlights as being like a “hungry insect’s eyes” and the grader itself like a “beast” that is seen “munching implacably along the road.”²⁸ Banks thus discloses to us, through such descriptions, the underlying social meanings of such objects that have been reified and emptied of their social meanings. The grader, a mechanical object, has come to life and gained agency as a sentient being, while Wade slips further into objectification with his hands like inanimate tools.

These instances of strangeness are directly related to the fact that, as one critic explains, “As is the case with any other commodity, the capitalist owner of labor power has the right to subject this power to *his* will.”²⁹ Thus, the capitalist also, perforce, owns the laborer, since the laborer cannot be separated from the labor power he expends and is forced to sell. A human being cannot be separated from his or her own life-activity without serious impairment of the wholeness and well-being of the individual. Marx believed purposive activity and the production of objects necessary to sustain and

²⁶ Banks 71.

²⁷ Banks 94.

²⁸ Banks 93.

²⁹ Walliman 28.

enhance life to be an essential part of the human species-being, what makes us distinct from animals – that is, the fact that we are conscious of our activities and pursue them purposefully, rather than blindly. We produce the means of our existence and manipulate nature in order to do so, unlike animals.

However, under capitalism, it is the owner of capital who decides how the products of human labor are disposed of; the laborer himself has no say in the matter. Since he can't determine what happens to the product of his labor, "his own product confronts him as 'something alien, as a power independent of the producer.'"³⁰ The alien-ness of the external products of the worker's labor can be seen throughout *Affliction*, not so much in the actual physical products of Wade's labor, per se, since we don't see the wells he has dug, except briefly and indirectly when he visits the Gordons, whose wells he dug before their house was built (and here we don't actually see the physical wells, though it is significant that this site of Wade's hard labor becomes, in this later scene, the site of his humiliation by Mel Gordon, who has no idea that Wade dug the wells that provide the water Gordon's family uses everyday); however, we can see the process of alienation taking effect in his interactions with other people (particularly with his boss LaRiviere) and in his general sense of unease, estrangement, and bodily dissociation throughout the book. What happens repeatedly is that parts of Wade's body seem to become displaced from his identity and seem to either belong to someone else or be machine-parts, inanimate objects, or animals.

Other notable instances of figurations of strangeness include the following. In a yuppie bar in Concord, where Wade clearly feels out of place: "he was feeling once again like a double exposure: everything the other people said and did was half a beat off the rhythm of everything he said and did, so that the others seemed almost to be members of a different species than he, as if their species had a slightly different metabolism than his and relied on a related but different means of communication than his, so that everyone else in the room seemed to be sharing everyday knowledge and secrets that he was biologically incapable of experiencing."³¹

³⁰ Walliman 32.

³¹ Banks 164-5.

After Wade gets into a fight with his father after the funeral: he “washed his hands slowly and deliberately . . . as if they were small dirty animals he felt tenderly towards. . . . He told me, the following morning, that he looked like a stranger to himself, as if someone had sneaked in behind him and got caught accidentally by the mirror . . . ‘it was like I had never seen myself before that moment, so it was a stranger’s face.’”³²

At Wickham’s, “He . . . saw that his hands were trembling. Look at the bastards, shaking like little frozen dogs begging at the door to be let inside. . . . One minute he was moving securely through time and space, in perfect coordination with other people; then, with no warning, he was out of step. . . . The room filled with coded messages that he could not decode, and he slipped quickly into barely controlled hysteria.”³³

Suffering from a toothache while his father watches television, “Wade chased the pain in his face around the room, from window to window to door, as if his face were a dog in a pen looking for a way out.”³⁴

Even the trailer in which Wade lives and where he imagines bringing Jill home for a visit, the one place he should feel least displaced in, is described from Wade’s point of view as follows: “he looked at the room as if there were a stranger living here, a man he had never met, and he felt his stomach tighten with aversion. He would not want to meet such a man.”³⁵ From a distance, the trailers in the Mountain View Trailer Park where he lives are described as looking like “metal coffins awaiting shipment.”³⁶ Wade feels a strangeness about his car, too, the inadequate vehicle in which he must perform all of his police duties, when he recalls standing in a parking lot “examining his pale-green car as if it were a stranger’s, finding it unaccountably ugly.”³⁷ These instances of objects striking Wade as alien exemplify what Lukács describes as second-order alienation:

The second nature of human constructs . . . is a petrified, estranged complex of meanings which can not any more awaken inwardness. . . .

The strangeness of [this] nature as against first nature, is only a projection

³² Banks 273.

³³ Banks 108.

³⁴ Banks 295.

³⁵ Banks 57.

³⁶ Banks 49.

³⁷ Banks 54.

of the discovery that man's self-created environment is no longer his home but his dungeon. . . . When the constructs cannot animate their content into spirituality . . . they must – in order to prevail – turn into a power which dominates man indiscriminately, blindly, unexceptionally.³⁸

Wade is also described as yet another piece of property owned by LaRiviere; his time is not his own. Wade, for all intents and purposes, is a resource exploited as much as possible by LaRiviere, as labor and the laborer are forms of capital for the owner and agent of capital. Not only is Wade the foreman of LaRiviere's well-drilling crew, but as the part-time local police officer, he is also under the auspices of the Board of Selectmen, of which LaRiviere is chairman. LaRiviere thus controls Wade's salary, his hours, and even owns the piece of property on which Wade's trailer sits, the trailer having also been purchased from LaRiviere, under the impression that it was the "best" on the lot. Wade fantasized that he would have time to fish and use the beach, but as it turns out he has never had the time to even buy a fishing rod, and the trailer turns out to be the coldest one on the lot in the winter. As Banks writes, "Wade Whitehouse the snowplow driver belonged to Gordon LaRiviere the town road agent . . . then [he would] belong to the Board of Selectmen. And at no time would he belong to himself."³⁹

The quantifiability of time under capitalism and the "objective," cold, impersonal nature of the relations between worker and activity and between worker and owner are explored by Lukács as follows:

From the standpoint of the individual, the essence of the modern division of labour is perhaps that it makes work independent of the always irrational, thus only qualitatively determinable, capacities of the workers and places it under objective, goal-oriented criteria that lie outside his personality and have no relationship to it. The major economic tendency of capitalism is this same objectification of production, its separation from the personality of the producers.⁴⁰

³⁸ As qtd. in Zitta, 149-50.

³⁹ Banks 114.

⁴⁰ As qtd. in Frisby, 77.

This can be seen clearly in LaRiviere's treatment of Wade. He wants nothing to do with what he sees as Wade's irrationality, nor with anything that cannot be quantified, inventoried, or tallied on a profit-loss sheet. On the contrary, LaRiviere believes that Wade's life "had no purpose other than to facilitate" his own, and this cold egotism seems even worse when we learn that Wade actually looks up to LaRiviere, loves him in a way, and at times wishes he had been his father.⁴¹

Evan Twombly, as well, uses time to commodify others, or rather, commodifies time in his use of others. He presents himself as a very busy man whose time is valuable – so valuable that he must talk and smoke simultaneously so as not to waste a moment. He offers Jack Hewitt "an extra hundred dollars" to find him a large buck within a couple of hours of their setting out for the woods, as if the faster they get the hunt over with the better, reducing the ritual in this way to a kind of simulated performance, a playacting reinforced by the fact that Twombly's fetishized Winchester rifle has never once been fired. What Twombly seems to be saying here is that he can literally buy Jack's time and expertise. There is no acknowledgement of Jack's humanity. Twombly simply wants to appropriate his knowledge of how to hunt so he can obtain yet another token of conventional masculinity, like his unused Winchester. We see here how "time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things.'"⁴²

Wade is not only figured as the property, in his capacity as wage-laborer, of Gordon LaRiviere, but also of his parents, as are the other children in the Whitehouse family. Banks thus reveals to us the phenomenon of capitalist reification spreading its tentacles into the farthest reaches of society, invading not only all workplace and civic relations but also those relations thought to be immune to market forces, the supposedly private realm of the family. As Lukács writes in *History and Class Consciousness*, "'Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man.'"⁴³ Banks writes that the Whitehouse children were largely left alone and that Wade in particular was "treated

⁴¹ Banks 247.

⁴² Lukács 89-90.

⁴³ As qtd. in Baker 14.

like a piece of inherited furniture that had no particular use or value but might turn out someday to be worth something.”⁴⁴ The rhetoric of economic exploitation thus extends deep into the psyches of the Whitehouse family members.

Once, when Wade is being beaten by his father Glenn, Glenn’s face is described as being “twisted in disgust and resignation, as if he were performing a necessary but extremely unpleasant task for a boss” while Wade’s mother, Sally, stands by holding a bowl of popcorn “as if she were his assistant and the bowl contained certain of his awful tools.”⁴⁵ The fact that Wade would even hint at disobeying his father throws his father into a rage, as if his son were an object over which he has the right to exercise complete control. However, we are given no easy answers to the enigma of violence in the novel. Banks resists providing us with simple ideological solutions but instead implicates human suffering (both perpetrators and victims of) in a socio-economic context that is so complex that it resists any attempts to distill it into any unifying or totalizing interpretation. As a result, Wade Whitehouse, a character who would not seem particularly sympathetic if viewed superficially from the outside, becomes someone deeply human and complex, someone whose motives and behaviors we can’t easily ascribe meanings to but whom we become invested in nevertheless because we see his life as if it were our own.

Even Wade’s own child is, however, reified, turned into an “emblem” as Banks puts it, when Wade goes through his power struggles with his ex-wife Lillian. Banks makes it clear that Wade does truly love Jill and attempts in his own way to express this in his relations with her. However, Banks also shows how even this relationship falls victim to the process of objectification. When the legal system, intimately bound up with the capitalist economy, denies Wade the ability to visit or co-parent his child, Banks shows us how Jill becomes a pawn in Wade’s attempt to recover his self-respect and authority. As Banks writes: “When you take a man’s child from him, you take much more than the child, so that the man tends to forget about regaining the child and instead focuses on regaining the other – self-respect, pride, sense of autonomy, that sort of thing. The child becomes emblematic.”⁴⁶ The child is not being seen for itself here but instead

⁴⁴ Banks 94.

⁴⁵ Banks 101.

⁴⁶ Banks 162.

invested, like a totem or fetish, with extrinsic symbolic meanings. Wade was not savvy enough to hire a competent lawyer to represent him in the first custody case with Lillian and is not only unable to afford a full-blown case by the time he tries to regain his rights to custody but is informed by J. Battle Hand that he has no chance of winning such a case. The sadness over his loss of Jill is intolerable for Wade, though, so he nevertheless forces her to spend time with him, even though she herself makes it clear she has little desire to do so.

When Banks summarizes the trajectory of Wade's life from bright, gifted boy full of potential to "a man wearing cheap mismatched clothes and driving a borrowed battered old stake-body truck, a man without a proper home to call his own, without a job, without any respect in the community, without a wife and with no one to care for but a drunken father who hated him and whom he hated," we know that this tragedy occurred not simply due to the beatings Wade received at the hands of his father, though some readers might want to reduce the book to a narrative about child abuse and male violence. We know that it is about that but also much more than that. Indeed, by the end of the novel, not only Wade as individual but the entire town of Lawford comes to be a casualty of the trajectory of events brought on by the encroaching world of post-industrial capitalism, a world where a series of homogeneous Burger Kings come to take the place of locally owned restaurants like Wickham's.

As Rolfe says near the end, "it sometimes seems that there is no one in Lawford . . . whose life . . . has not been changed more by the Northcountry Development Corporation than by Wade's awful crimes. . . . The community, as such, no longer exists."⁴⁷ The insidious, quiet, calculated infiltration of the town by the ski resort business results in even more profound changes whose full ramifications are not yet seen and whose destructions and deracinations of the once tightly-knit, if economically depressed, community, because they masquerade as perfectly normal "business-as-usual" events, no one notices or laments.

⁴⁷ Banks 353.

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