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Another Novel Is Possible

Muckraking in Chris Bachelder's U.S.! and Robert Newman's The Fountain at the Center of the World

Lee Konstantinou

Dystopia When?

Over the last decade, Anglo-American novelists have increasingly turned to the genre of dystopia to explore themes of militarism, environmental risk, media manipulation, and global economic exploitation. Notable dystopian novels include Max Barry's *Jennifer Government*, Richard K. Morgan's *Market Forces*, M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, as well as popular young adult dystopias, most prominently Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy, which imagines a future North America where a gladiatorial tribute system takes on the logic of reality television. Even novelists who don't typically write science fiction have gotten into the dystopia business, with more or less apocalyptic overtones. One thinks immediately of Matthew Sharpe's *Jamestown*, Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse*, Gary Shteyngardt's *Super Sad True Love Story*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, as well as quasi-surrealist dystopias such as George Saunders' *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* and Joshua Cohen's *Witz*. These "new maps of hell," to borrow the memorable title of Kingsley Amis' classic 1960 study of science fiction, are literary snapshots of the future, fallen to pieces, that either serve as warnings about where Utopian political aspirations might lead or encode an author's tentative hopes for a better future. Fredric Jameson would call the former category—for example,

Orwell's 1984—"anti-Utopias," reserving the prestigious term "dystopia" only for works that include Utopian hopes alongside political criticism (*Archaeologies* 198–99). Whether we categorize them as "anti-Utopias" or "dystopias," all the texts listed above attempt to sublimate fears inspired by contemporary technological, political, and economic crises into art. The popularity of dystopia raises an important, seemingly simple question: If contemporary life is so bad, why do novelists focus on the future rather than criticize the present in some more direct fashion?

Given that many of these dystopias satirically extend the logic of neoliberalism, why can't we find realist fiction about contemporary political and economic crises? Though definitions differ, I will adopt David Harvey's description of neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practice that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2).¹ Over the last forty years, neoliberalism has yielded stark results globally. Even in the United States, the presumed beneficiary of such policies, wages for lower income brackets have remained stagnant or decreased, accompanied by an explosion of working hours and borrowing to maintain living standards, supporting Harvey's suggestion that neoliberalism is not only a political-economic theory but a "project to restore class power" (62). Neoliberalism's damaging effects have been noted not only by leftists, but increasingly by Keynesian liberals. Larry Bartels, who can hardly be called a radical, has characterized the political economy of the present era (in the United States) as a "New Gilded Age," a "retrogression of historic scope," with little prospect for change in the near future (13). Even outside the United States, there has been a marked rise in inequality since the mid-1980s in almost all OECD countries, including relatively egalitarian societies such as Norway and Denmark ("Growing Income Inequality in OECD Countries"). These dire circumstances reinforce the urgency of my question: Where might we find literary *economic* protest in a non-science fictional mode today? The original Gilded Age² spawned a rich tradition of protest in the subsequent Progressive Era, the naturalism of Crane, Norris, and Dreiser, the muckraking fiction of Upton Sinclair, David Graham Phillips, and the American novelist Winston Churchill. This tradition was enriched in the 1930s by a diversity of new genres, such as "new realism, dynamic realism, magic realism, social surrealism, proletarian surrealism, epic theatre [and] revolutionary symbolism," as Michael Denning documents in *The Cultural Front* (121).

In the 1960s and 1970s, metafiction and postmodernist fiction refurbished the tradition of protest fiction, participating in the era's broader cultural and social movements, in many cases targeting the military-industrial complex and the white-collar economy. Even in an age of affluence, economic issues were central in important novels such as William Gaddis' *JR* (1975). Today, literary writers rarely incorporate political and economic themes into their fiction. The former diversity of political literary genres has atrophied.

This essay asks why, and examines two recent novels that offer answers. Though there are other genres that this essay might have investigated, I am interested in the fortune of the muckraking novel, the *ne plus ultra* of partisan fiction.³ My first example, Chris Bachelder's 2006 novel *U.S.!: Songs and Stories*, is a work of metafiction that also paradoxically celebrates the muckraking tradition. Robert Newman's 2003 novel *The Fountain at the Center of the World*, meanwhile, revives muckraking literary strategies in order to attack water privatization in Mexico and to dramatize the protests at the 1999 World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle. Both novels reconsider the tradition of muckraking for the New Gilded Age, albeit in different ways, and with different degrees of enthusiasm. Though we shouldn't equate muckraking with political fiction *tout court*, or deny the Lukácsian possibility of finding political significance in seemingly non-political realist novels, *U.S.!* and *The Fountain at the Center of the World* have much to teach us about contemporary literary culture.

Liberalism, Objectivity, and Muckraking

Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* begins with news, or rather with a double disavowal of the news: "The news about Walter Berglund wasn't picked up locally—he and Patty had moved away to Washington two years earlier and meant nothing to St. Paul now—but the urban gentry of Ramsey Hill were not so loyal to their city as not to read the *New York Times*" (3). The triple negative of Franzen's first sentence maps the social world of Ramsey Hill with startling economy. On the one hand, Walter's public meltdown at a press conference isn't picked up in local newspapers. He simply isn't important enough to merit attention in St. Paul. On the other hand, residents of Ramsey Hill, where Walter and Patty once lived, fancy themselves to be world citizens, which means, of course, that they read the *New York Times*, the ultimate metonym for their aspiring urbanity. Franzen's narrator, it seems, mocks Ramsey Hill residents for exposing their provinciality

through their conflation of knowledge of the news with worldliness. Not only are they not cosmopolitans, they're naive enough to think that subscribing to the *New York Times* might make them so. And yet, isn't *Freedom* itself a novel of the news? Hasn't it been lavishly praised for depicting a sweeping social portrait of the American 2000s, immediately negating the central premise of this essay?⁴ Hasn't it been praised in this way by the *New York Times*, the paper of record, which leads one to suspect that Ramsey Hill's urban gentry would eagerly read *Freedom*? Indeed, *Freedom* features characters attacking George W. Bush, skewers neoconservative ideology, depicts the outrageous corruption of Iraq War subcontracting, and focuses on the devastating effects of mountaintop removal mining, all while showing the difficulties of environmental activism.

Despite all this, Franzen would insist that his novel is anything but a novel of the news. In one of his most important essays, "Why Bother?," he disowns his previous drive to "Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream." He rejects the spirit of his first two novels (*The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*) in favour of his new "desire to write about the things closest to [him], to lose [himself] in characters and locales [he] loved" (95).⁵ For much the same reason, he also rejects injecting politics into fiction. "I am a fiction writer," he explains in an interview with Chris Connery. "I'm political only as a citizen, not as a novelist." To be political as a novelist is dangerous because "your art's in danger of becoming illustrative or didactic—in some sense, an act of bad faith." In a startling reversal, within only a few sentences, Franzen also claims that fiction is "a liberal project" and that "[w]hen Jane Smiley uses the phrase 'the liberal novel,' she basically means 'the novel, period.' The form is well suited to expanding sympathy, to seeing both sides. Good novels have a lot of the same attributes as good liberal politics. But I'm not sure it goes much further than liberalism" (qtd. in Connery 46). It would be easy to accuse Franzen of self-contradiction. After all, he wants the novel to be a non-political vehicle for aesthetic pleasure, while also associating it with the prestigious political name of liberalism. Yet to dismiss Franzen would be a mistake, leading us to miss that his position is part of a long tradition, embodying the same paradox, that promotes the liberal value of good fiction.

A compressed reminder of this tradition clarifies Franzen's view. There is, of course, the American liberal interpretation of Bakhtin, which celebrates dialogism or heteroglossia as the novel's official ideology; according to this view, dialogism is also a political bulwark against a "mistaken

attachment to systems," which Bakhtin calls "theoretism" or "monologism," and which one set of his interpreters calls "semiotic totalitarianism" (Morson and Emerson 28).⁶ Though we would hardly be tempted to think of him as a carnivalesque figure, Lionel Trilling expresses a similar sentiment about the powers of the novel. In "Reality in America," an essay written against the literary critic V.L. Parrington, Trilling juxtaposes the crass reductionism of Theodore Dreiser with the subtle complexity of Henry James. According to Trilling, James' complexity both avoids the mind-denying tendency of Dreiser's leftist politics and constitutes a politics that more aptly approaches our multivalent political reality than naturalism does. For Trilling and other mid-century intellectuals, the liberalness of the novel stood in opposition to radical politics, sociology, and deterministic social theory. The liberalness of the novel was reaffirmed yet again by Richard Rorty, who claimed that one's ironic aesthetic preferences are a purely private matter but also that the novel is better than philosophy at enlarging human sympathy and producing a vicarious fellow feeling among readers.⁷ Great novels teach us what it might feel like to suffer in another's shoes, even someone whose "final vocabularies" are very different from our own. Advocates of the liberal novel describe liberalism as a specific ideological alternative to dogmatic political positions—for Rorty, the theological certainties of metaphysics; for Trilling, the undialectical grossness of radical literature; for some of Bakhtin's interpreters, an oppressive semiotic totalitarianism; and for Franzen, the mania for using fiction as a vehicle for conveying information about Systems, a sin he attributes not only to canonical postmodernists but also to contemporary novelists, such as Richard Powers. These writers paradoxically posit not only that the novel essentially is liberal but also, when discussing non-liberal novels, that the novel ought to be liberal. The foil of the liberal novel is usually the radical novel, committed art, the didactic novel, naturalism, activist fiction, or muckraking fiction. Though Franzen may personally agree with Walter Berglund's political opinions, his responsibility as a novelist requires him to subordinate his beliefs to the novel's essential dialogism. News is in *Freedom*, then, despite the fact that it is not a novel of the news.

Muckraking fiction, by contrast, aspires to give us news. Indeed, the very term "muckraking" arose from the intersection of journalism and fiction. When, in 1906, he denounced the "Man with the Muckrake, who could look no way but downward," Teddy Roosevelt had in mind Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and David Graham Phillips' journalistic exposé of

Senate corruption and graft, which appeared in the Hearst-owned magazine *Cosmopolitan* (Miraldi 26). By Roosevelt's account, the muckraker was the sort of man who is perniciously "fixed on carnal instead of on spiritual things," who "refuses to see aught that is lofty, and fixes his eyes with solemn intentness only on that which is vile and debasing," a refusal that makes him "one of the most potent forces for evil" in the Republic (58, 59).⁸ Muckraking threatened to enflame "the brutal greed of the 'have-nots,'" to inspire "violent emotionalism," and to empower "the wild preachers of unrest and discontent" (62, 64). Typically associated with Progressive Era reform movements, turn-of-the-century socialist fiction, and partisan journalism published in venues such as *McClure's*, *Collier's*, and *Cosmopolitan*, the term muckraking survives today in contemporary journalistic debates, but has largely disappeared among novelists. Discussing philosophical debates among journalists, Robert Miraldi explores muckraking (from the Progressive Era to today) in terms of its difference from objective journalism. Miraldi identifies objective journalism with the idea that "readers and listeners can best make up their minds about public policy issues when they are given verifiable 'facts'" that are "delivered by independent, neutral observers . . . who provide for the reader competing versions of the 'truth'" (15). More substantively, drawing on the classic work of sociologist Gaye Tuchman, Miraldi outlines the "strategic rituals" that journalists aspiring toward objectivity deploy. Stories that seek to satisfy "the profession's unwritten tests of objectivity" value government documents and sources above others; cite evidence only when it is clear that "someone else is responsible for the facts, words, or opinions" presented; attribute every presented fact to someone other than herself, often to a point where the reporter and her opinions are rendered invisible; frame every story around some recent event or "newspeg"; and structure every story as an "inverted pyramid," with the most important information in the lede and the least important information at the end, so that editors can easily cut stories (16–17). Against what we might call the poetics of objective journalism, contemporary muckraking stories "are compilations of documented fact that lead to an indictment—of individuals or institutions," works that emphasize the first-person situatedness of the reporter, that focus on long-term research rather than newspegs, and that do not attempt to conceal the opinion of the writer (18).

Miraldi symptomatically omits fiction from his account, defining muckraking as "journalism, not literature" even as he discusses Progressive

Era novelist-journalists (18). While a systematic study of contemporary muckraking fiction has yet to be written, it should be clear that the aspiring raker of muck faces strikingly different opponents in the fields of journalism and literature. Whereas contemporary muckraking journalism opposes claims of objectivity, literary muckraking claims to speak about "reality"—to be more objective—in a way that liberal literature can't or won't. In an interview, Bachelder suggests:

The blind spot of classical liberalism is that it does not see itself as a position. . . . It wants to be a container for all positions, not a position itself. . . . The novel fits well into the liberal ideology—it's a space where competing views can be dramatized. The author does not (*should* not—this is ethical) have an agenda. She does not advance a position. Pedophilia is complicated! Let's see this from all the angles. I'm interested in Chekhov with regard to our contemporary notions of art. He was among the first to say that the author should not have a point of view. He valued ambiguity, complexity, mystery. This is our notion of high literary art, while Sinclair's notion has declined. It's barely art. (email interview)

While contemporary activist journalists, such as Michael Pollan, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Naomi Klein, differentiate themselves from objective reporters, contemporary political novelists, such as Bachelder and Newman, struggle against the hegemony of literary liberalism. Understood this way, muckraking fiction, we will see, is as much a formal as a historical or social category. Indeed, if, as Cecelia Tichi argues, muckraking aspires to "radically change people's minds," the novels under consideration here might be regarded as failures (1). Neither *U.S.!* nor *Fountain* has changed many minds or altered our public discourse about neoliberalism, though phenomena such as Occupy Wall Street might be regarded as an activist response to similar political-economic circumstances. The fact, nonetheless, that these novels try to change minds is significant in itself, and the formal means by which they make this attempt differ from muckraking journalism. Contemporary muckraking novelists openly present their political views; embrace political-economic topicality; foreground the ideological views of their characters over other characteristics; and seem to hope that novels will inspire real-world political activity. In short, *U.S.!* and *Fountain* imagine a non-liberal political mission for fiction; they make economic class a primary narrative concern; and they place fiction and news

in closer proximity than the liberal tradition would allow. Rather than run away from providing “social news” or displaying political partisanship, these novels embrace such goals. A different kind of novel, they seem to argue, is not only possible, but also crucially necessary.

U.S.! and Them

Chris Bachelder’s strange second novel, *U.S.!*, attempts to revive muckraking realism for an era that has, to put it mildly, lost interest in the genre. The novel tells the story of the American left’s attempts to resurrect Upton Sinclair. This is, in the world of the novel, a literal resurrection. Upon each revival, Upton⁹ earnestly writes muckraking novels that address the problems of the day, books with titles such as *Bombs Away!*, *More Oil!*, *Safe Drinking Water! A Novel*, and *Arms for Hostages!* The publication of these political novels, though largely ignored by the American reading public, so enrages the American right that the resurrected Upton is continually assassinated, only to be resurrected again in an endlessly repeating cycle. Upton’s assassins become major celebrities, and upon each resurrection, they compete to be the first to murder the writer again. On the one hand, the assassination plots of *U.S.!* recall the actual history of muckraking, specifically the career and 1906 assassination of Pulitzer journalist and novelist David Graham Phillips. On the other hand, the novel—published exactly a hundred years after Phillips’ murder—builds its bleak central joke atop the fact that someone like Upton Sinclair would need to be literally resurrected for anything like a left novelistic tradition to be revived in the twenty-first-century United States. What would it be like, *U.S.!* asks, to live in a world where political novels could motivate murder? Bachelder programmatically lays out his reasons for exploring this question in an October 2004 article in *The Believer*, which takes the form of an annotation of a *Harper’s*-style graph, featuring facts about Sinclair’s uses of the exclamation point in his novel *Oil!* “Exclamation points as ammunition,” Bachelder writes in his telegraphic annotation, suggesting that the exclamation point might be a tool of political art, part of a “poetics of class war” (“A Soldier”). For Bachelder, the exclamation point becomes both the formal expression of Sinclair’s embarrassing political sincerity and, in its typographic gaucheness, a sign of why it is difficult to revive his example in the present.

In order to embrace Sinclair’s enthusiasm, Bachelder must, like Franzen, reject aspects of his earlier commitment to metafiction and postmodernism.

In his *Believer* essay, Bachelder disavows his first novel, *Bear v. Shark*, which satirizes American political and media culture by imagining a dystopian near-future world in which Las Vegas has seceded from the United States and is hosting a virtual-reality duel between a computer-generated bear and shark at the Darwin Dome. This first novel fails, Bachelder declares, because it is unable to keep up with the ruthless pace and self-parodying tendencies of American reality. “[W]e are actually living in an age when satire is increasingly untenable,” Bachelder concludes, “because satire relies on clear distinctions between real and absurd, and between core and surface, and those are not distinctions we can easily make anymore” (“A Soldier”). In wishing that the novel had the vitality to keep up with its society, Bachelder participates in the postmodern tradition that the critic James Wood has denounced as “hysterical realism” and that Franzen abandoned after the publication of his first two systems novels. And yet, in growing weary with his own postmodern irony, Bachelder takes his cue less from Wood and Franzen than from David Foster Wallace and the writers associated with Dave Eggers’ various literary enterprises (McSweeney’s Books, *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern*, and *The Believer*). That is, Bachelder breaks with postmodernism not at the level of goal—the critique of things as they are—but rather at the level of strategy. Postmodern fiction was once useful for novelists but has now lost its power. It follows that the task of the post-postmodern novelist shouldn’t be to remove all traces of political content and “social news” from fiction but rather to invent new, more effective ways of injecting news, politics, and critique into the novel.

Despite his belief in the need for a politicized post-postmodern novel, Bachelder is ambivalent about his own efforts. It’s true, he writes, that contemporary fiction has “turned inward: into the suburbs, into the house, into the mind. The canvas has gotten small. We still of course have a few straight-up political writers . . . but by and large it seems that we have done little to expand and develop this tradition.” And yet, Bachelder’s postmodern irony has left him too skeptical to trust in politically motivated fiction. “I’m not ambivalent about the cruel and crumbling empire, but I am ambivalent about how to engage it artistically. I’m ambivalent about Upton, who on one hand was a tireless, courageous class hero, and on the other hand was a poor writer, an egomaniac, a gullible freak, and a bad father” (“A Soldier”). Paradoxically, Bachelder wants to reanimate the literary tradition that Sinclair represents but seems to accept the liberal critique of naturalism and muckraking fiction. He is unable to imagine the possibility of a

well-written update to Sinclair's brand of muckraking fiction. One suspects that his problem isn't really a question of style—someone of Bachelder's talent could easily write sentences better than Sinclair's—but rather the drive to rake muck in the first place. Bachelder's solution to the problem that Sinclair poses resembles John Barth's solution to the "exhaustion" of the novel in 1967. Instead of solving the political problem, finding a way to reanimate Sinclair's literary legacy with better sentences, Bachelder turns a postmodern novelistic form against itself, foregrounding the need to find a successful version of post-postmodernism.

In the 200-page first part of *U.S.!*, the "Resurrection Scrapbook," Bachelder presents primary source documents from the world of his novel. These documents include amazon.com reviews of Upton's books (there aren't many), Upton's journal entries, transcripts of television interviews with Upton assassins, a syllabus for a course that Upton teaches—called "English 684! Advanced Fiction Writing (Or Literature as a Class Weapon)"—short vignettes featuring nameless starry-eyed leftists devoted to resurrecting Upton, transcripts of voice-mail messages, haikus written in Upton's honour, jokes told at his expense, among other genres and types of documents. There is even a section called "The Camera Eye," after Dos Passos' sections of the same name in the *U.S.A. Trilogy*, which is another important reference point for Bachelder. The overall portrait of Upton that emerges is of a writer who is almost universally reviled, with the exception of a small cadre of leftist supporters. In *U.S.!*, an anonymous (fictional) review of Upton's (fictional) novel *Pharmaceutical!* describes the book as a "criminally unbalanced tirade against the pharmaceutical industry" that utterly fails as art:

One does end up sympathizing with [the protagonist] Harold, though not for the reasons that Sinclair intends. Harold's great conflict is not that he is trapped within a ruthless economic system, but that he is trapped within a ruthless novel, a structure infinitely more dehumanizing, rigid, and predetermined than the capitalism it denounces. The wonderful thing about America is that you always have a shot, while the dreadful thing about a Sinclair novel is that you don't. (14–15)

Bachelder cleverly inserts the critique of partisan fiction into his own attempted political novel, as though to inoculate *U.S.!* from the charge that he is as unreflecting as Sinclair. In this fictive review, which recalls Wood's polemic against hysterical realism, the fictional reviewer creates an analogy

between determination in fiction and determination in the economy. As many actual liberal literary critics have done before him, this critic claims that the aesthetic failure of the radical novel can be found in its deterministic view of life. Fiction that denies the reality of socioeconomic mobility must therefore fail aesthetically. It is important to note that Bachelder does not necessarily disagree with this fictional reviewer's aesthetic assessment of Sinclair. In addition to describing Sinclair as "a poor writer, an egomaniac, a gullible freak, and a bad father," he laments that "[t]he end of *The Jungle* (the socialist pamphlet part)" is "almost unreadably bad" ("A Soldier"). And yet, it is clear that Bachelder does not agree with the reviewer's assessment of American reality. America is not a place where "you always have a shot."

Despite these reservations, the second part of *U.S.!* dramatizes the power of Upton's fiction to change lives. Titled "The Greenville Anti-Socialist League Fourth of July Book Burning," Part 2 is a self-contained novella about Upton's inadvertent visit to the GASL's annual event, which features the burning of *A Movable Jungle!* The second part shifts from primary source fragments to continuous realist narrative, describing the arrangement of the burning and Upton's journey to Greenville. The novella reaches its narrative climax when the naive and well-meaning young organizer of the book burning, Stephen, accidentally picks up a copy of *A Movable Jungle!* and reads it. Bachelder describes what happens next this way: "Stephen had only slept three hours, and when he awoke, on the floor with the novel on his chest, he found that nothing in his life was the same. He felt that the book had been a strange dream and that he was still trapped within it" (268). Stephen's unexpected development of political consciousness has inconclusive effects. His transformation does indirectly prevent Upton from being successfully killed by the assassins who have gathered in Greenville to murder him, and yet the novella ends with the haunting image of children "permitted to stay up late for this one special night, [who] waved sparklers and danced wildly around the pyre of burned books," suggesting that one boy's political awakening can hardly mollify the enduring power or appeal of the American right (298). What is noteworthy about this novella is that even though, at the level of form, it uses realist narrative codes, at the level of content it remains fantastic, as any rendition of a resurrected Upton Sinclair must. It's not hard to imagine that the transforming power of literature is just as much a fantasy as the possibility of bodily resurrection. Readers, moreover, never learn anything about the content of *A Movable Jungle!* Even if the power of Upton's writing to transform lives were more than a fantasy, *U.S.!* itself doesn't have

the journalistic density of Sinclair's actual fiction. It is a novel about muckraking, not a muckraking novel.

The reader is left in a paradoxical situation. If the fact that "the world is crappy (not existentially, but socio-politically . . .)" requires the novelist somehow to address that crappiness; and yet, if Sinclair's writing (his "poetics of class war") is as "unreadably bad" as his critics and Bachelder accuse it of being; and finally, if the postmodern tradition turns out to be little more than "making fun of everything and standing for nothing"—what should the post-postmodernist novelist be doing ("A Soldier")? We get a partial answer from Albert, a character also known as The Last Folksinger, the son of Upton, whose death, which Upton learns about telepathically, marks the emotional climax of *U.S.!*: "Albert knew that art must not turn its back on the world. He felt deeply that art—his songs—must address inequity and cruelty and suffering. What was required, he knew, was a poetics of engagement. And yet what was also required was that Journey song, you know the one" (261). The phrase "poetics of engagement" comes from E.L. Doctorow. "Every writer knows how dangerous it can be [to write about one's political convictions] in terms of doing something good," Doctorow explains in an interview. "But I'm rethinking the whole thing. In view of the emergency—I think it is an emergency—is some kind of new aesthetic possible that does not undermine aesthetic rigor? A poetics of engagement" (qtd. in Morris 64). Writing of Doctorow, Fredric Jameson famously elucidates "the paradox that a seemingly realistic novel like *Ragtime* is in reality a nonrepresentational work that combines fantasy signifiers from a variety of ideologemes in a kind of hologram" (*Postmodernism* 22). *U.S.!* reverses the terms of this description. As though trying to get around Jameson's denial of the possibility of political realism (outside science fiction), Bachelder tries to get at reality not through Doctorow-style realism but through the very holographic "fantasy signifiers" that Doctorow is accused of creating in lieu of realism. Bachelder hopes to find a way back to partisan realism, without denying the difficult obstacles posed by aesthetic liberalism and postmodernism.

Where Is the Centre of the World?

Bachelder rejects Franzen's assumption that the novel is intrinsically liberal but also wants to reject the postmodernist critique of realism; and yet, as we have seen, Bachelder finds himself unable to find a way to move forward.

That is, *U.S.!* is less the sort of novel that Bachelder wishes that he could write—a novel composed in terms of a "poetics of engagement"—than a novel outlining the difficulty of writing such a novel in the present, at least for him. The stand-up comic and activist Robert Newman offers a different perspective on the same problem. Whereas *U.S.!* metafictionally recollects the power of muckraking without wholly adopting the narrative strategies associated with that tradition, Newman's *The Fountain at the Center of the World* actually tries to rake the muck of neoliberal globalization and to imagine alternatives to it. Newman dismisses the view that realism is always a code word for liberalism and tacitly contends that it is still possible to tell realist political stories, even in the era of multinational capitalism.

Fountain is a novel concerned with the political battle over water privatization in Mexico and the 1999 protests at the World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle. Newman tells this political story through the entwined lives of two brothers, separated at a young age and reunited when the younger brother develops what seems to be myelogenous leukemia, which turns out instead to be the incurable "chagas disease," a disease that "feeds on the blood of the poor" (130). After their mother dies, an English couple adopts the younger brother, who is given the name Evan Hatch; the older brother, Chano Salgado, is raised by family members in Mexico. Evan becomes a public relations professional working for Poley Bray Communications, while Chano becomes a disillusioned activist whose wife is murdered as a result of her political work. The novel's third major character is Chano's son Daniel, who is sent to Costa Rica after Chano is imprisoned and mistakenly thought to have died. The contrast between the brothers—their starkly different political views, their different positions in global relations of power—drives the novel's plot. A full account of the Dickensian twists of *Fountain* is impossible here. Newman takes us from London to Tamaulipas to Costa Rica to the deck of a container ship to Seattle, portraying a vast and dazzling global network of characters and organizations. What is most striking about the novel is the style Newman employs to narrate political-economic interconnection and complexity. Newman sketches the contours of the capitalist world-system through his rendition of the brothers' ideological perspectives. Evan and Chano imagine power relations in remarkably similar ways, albeit with their political conclusions reversed. The critic Suman Gupta observes "a certain common ground" between the brothers because "the two are looking at the screen of people (the *demos* in democracy) from opposite sides" (21).

Not only do the novel's characters see the world in similar, if ideologically flipped, terms, but the novel's third-person narrator constantly intervenes in the main narrative, editorializing, giving readers reams of relevant information. These factual interventions operate formally as interruptions in the novel's diegesis, sometimes to a level that recalls the genre of "faction" that the muckraker David Graham Phillips is famous for inventing. Early in the novel, for example, we learn in a parenthetical aside that Chano's wife "(. . . never called him Chano, the short form of Mariano)" (10), and on the next page we are informed that "Tamaulipas, the northeastern-most state of Mexico, is a land of dead rivers" (11). These relatively minor interruptions—parenthetical explanations designed to orient a reader unfamiliar with Mexican geography and nicknames—pepper Newman's prose. Newman interjects numerous descriptions into his narrative: of public relations strategies, the details of global trade agreements, bomb-making methods, techniques for enduring tear gas, among others. A critic like James Wood would condemn this style for breaking the suspension of disbelief required of great novelistic art and for elevating information above characterization. Newman, by contrast, consciously makes managing information, weaving fact into the fabric of fiction, an operative element of his novelistic craft. Whereas, in the mainstream literary novel, facts are supposed to be filtered through specific and distinct points of view, Evan and Chano are distinguished less by their voices and styles of consciousness than by their ideological commitments and political disagreements. Whereas the liberal literary tradition conceals necessary research, the novel that Newman writes paints an openly partisan and information-rich portrait of the world-system.

Even chapters narrated from the teenage Daniel's point of view insert news and dense descriptions of global interconnection. Early in the novel, the Mexican fishing fleet has been grounded because it is no longer compliant with American legal mandates following the passage of the "Dolphin Death Act." Because the fleet is grounded, Daniel is able to crew for a Costa Rican fishing boat that is making its way to Mexico, which immediately takes advantage of the economic opening, fearing that the Mexicans will not be landlocked for long. "[T]he Dolphin Death Act coincided with strange events," we are told:

At first no one saw the connection. But on the Frankfurt Eurex and in London Bridge City, on the Dow Jones and Tokyo Nikkei, the numbers

were going up and down and all around and no one knew why. Green screens howled like amps wailing feedback from an undiscovered electrical source. All was confusion until, with an apologetic cough, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency stepped forward and explained.

The Mexican trawler fleet, said the DEA, is the Cali cartel's fishing fleet of choice, the preferred delivery service to export cocaine to the Docks of Bologna, Rotterdam, and Liverpool, which was why finance houses that had long handled these high-yield, see-no-evil blind trusts suddenly had burst condoms in the belly. Thus the Mexican fishing fleet was to get a rapid dolphin-friendly refit and its grounding was, in the event, to last only ten days. (26)

Though it appears in a chapter focalized through his perspective, this description bears no relation to Daniel's consciousness or to any facts about the world that he would know. The homogeneity of capitalist value—represented by the high mobility of "see-no-evil" drug money—and the interconnections of the world economy find a formal analog at the level of the sentence. Metaphors, like "burst condoms in the belly," seem to come straight from Newman, or at least a narrator who has done the same research that he has. Interestingly, Newman does not only reserve his arguably monological style to represent the capitalist economy; he also uses it to portray the anti-WTO Seattle protests and alternative-globalization protests more generally, which have often been described as a "movement of movements" to give a sense of their size and political heterogeneity. The Seattle alternative-globalization protests were—somewhat like Occupy Wall Street and its offshoots—based on an affinity group model, loosely affiliated organizations, each of which had its own agenda, united through the governing body of a spokescouncil, which operated according to a consensus model. This mode of organization is often seen as a postmodern solution offered by alternative-globalization movements to global capitalism.

In a fine ethnography of the 2001 protest at the Summit of the Americas meeting in Quebec City, David Graeber goes so far as to align the radical puppeteers present at the protest to the Bakhtinian tradition of carnival, suggesting that the tactic is a "tacit [attack] on the principle of hierarchy itself" (503). Graeber's invocation of Bakhtin suggests both the continuities and breaks with liberal thought that any radical protest novel of the present moment must negotiate. Like liberalism, the new radical movements attempt to satisfy multiple, competing, often very different desires

via designated deliberative procedures; against the liberal tradition, alternative-globalization protesters reject the market as the specific deliberative mechanism of arriving at these collective decisions in the sphere of the economy. For liberals, the carnival looks a lot like a marketplace; Graeber's anarchist version of the carnival more resembles a spokescouncil. Whatever we think of the political efficacy of radical puppetry, it is noteworthy that Newman's strategy for representing both the global hierarchies of multinational capitalism and the anti-hierarchical but heteroglossic politics of counter-globalization movements relies on a consistently flat descriptive style. This might suggest that the heteroglossia of actual movements need not find a formal analog in novelistic heteroglossia. Or, more provocatively, it might suggest that the muckraking tradition and monological style are necessarily linked. I have been making a case for the latter view. Specifically, I would argue that Newman's flatness of style originates in his apparent rejection of the idea that political information should be delivered to the reader only through the consciousness of his characters, which is an analog of the muckraking journalist's rejection of the objective journalist's insistence on not speaking in her own voice. Like Newman, Bachelder rejects the idea of filtering political facts through the focalizing consciousness of characters, and thus in his novel presents a large array of primary-source documents alongside an unmarked monological narrative voice. Newman, meanwhile, firmly chooses the path of muckraking, and the evidence of his novel suggests that this option is anything but "unreadably bad."

Toward a Non-Liberal Novel

In his review of *The Corrections*, James Wood means to malign Jonathan Franzen when he says that the novel is "a kind of glass-bottomed boat through which one can glimpse most of the various currents of contemporary American fiction" (201). Franzen's focus on character is laudable, while "[a]ll the rest is 'social news' and may be turned off, as it deserves" (209). In the world of literary reviewing, there is always a critic ready to expose trace amounts of news, information, and partisanship in literary fiction. Foregrounding heteroglossia, differentiating between and rounding out characters, writing your identity, achieving mutual understanding across chasms of difference—these are the dominant values of contemporary Anglo-American literary culture. It has not been my goal in this essay to condemn liberal fiction or determine the true purpose of the novel. I don't

believe any authoritative or general statements can be made on this question. It's perfectly possible to enjoy—and celebrate—both *Freedom* and *The Fountain at the Center of the World*. Rather, a simple question has driven my inquiry. As economic inequality accelerates, as transnational corporations grow in power, as elites are increasingly identified as part of a highly mobile cosmopolitan "Superclass"—what Samuel P. Huntington pejoratively and from a nakedly nationalist perspective called "Davos Man"—the great mainstream of Anglo-American literary production remains locked in what we might as well call the Franzen Orthodoxy. Only the paraliterary world of science fiction has ignored this orthodoxy in any systematic way. Even modest literary attempts to relate individuals to large social structures and collectives—as we find, say, in the fiction of Richard Powers—are often treated as out of bounds. Why?

My conclusions are necessarily tentative. I think we must reject the argument that global politics as it now exists is, in some sense, unrepresentable or impossible to get at using old forms, as though representing global power relations was once upon a time some simple matter. The evidence of these books, especially *The Fountain at the Center of the World*, suggests that we should regard this argument with great skepticism. We must also, for similar reasons, be suspicious of any suggestion that there are not really contemporary political movements for radical fiction writers to connect to. The flourishing of political documentary, non-fiction, and memoir—not to mention the existence of alternative-globalization movements, powerful oppositional responses to the American War on Terror, and now Occupy Wall Street—suggest that the lacuna I am noting is specifically located in the field of literary fiction.

The forgotten origin of the term "muckraking" suggests that the institutional division of journalism and fiction might offer some measure of explanation for this gap. Whereas novelists once cut their teeth as journalists, as Shelly Fisher Fishkin has observed, today, writers more often do their apprenticeships in creative writing programs, or write in an environment shaped by program aesthetics. In what Mark McGurl has called "the program era," the aesthetic ideology of the M.F.A. degree goes well beyond the program, encompassing professional reviewing culture, influencing the global publishing field, and shaping careers that unfold outside academia. And as McGurl notes, science fiction is markedly outside the system—it is "only minimally represented in the creative writing program establishment" (405)—which might explain why literary authors, disturbed by the present,

are turning to the genre as a way of addressing political themes. The ultimate paradox of *U.S.!* is that Bachelder, who went through the creative writing system, subscribes enough to its aesthetic ideology that he cannot directly write the muckraking novel he wants to write, but must displace the writing of such fiction to a future moment. Newman, meanwhile, came to fiction after previous careers as a stand-up comic and a political activist. *Fountain* also suggests a final explanation for the relative absence of muckraking novels today. Corporate publishers, in the United States and elsewhere, largely do not support the genre. Published by Verso in the U.K., and Soft Skull Press in the United States, *Fountain* had a hard time finding its way into print. The rejection letters it elicited reportedly took the form of “five-page, single-spaced screeds about the book’s politics”; Newman’s U.S. publisher, Richard Nash of Soft Skull, quips that “[i]f the big corporate publishers didn’t act like big corporate publishers, we’d never have gotten Rob’s book” (qtd. in Charle). How science fiction manages to avoid these concerns will have to be the topic of future research. Further research will also be needed to quantify more precisely the full range of output of mainstream literary publishing, as well as to develop better literary-sociological models to account for why a genre like muckraking could once have been so widespread and so popular, but is currently, despite its enduring aesthetic power, stuck in the grave.

Notes

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- 1 One definitional question here concerns the relationship of classical liberalism to neoliberalism. On this question, the development economist Ha-Joon Chang provides a useful distinction: “Neo-liberal economics is an updated version of the liberal economics of the 18th-century economist Adam Smith and his followers. . . . Neo-liberal economists support certain things that the old liberals did not—most notably certain forms of monopoly (such as patents or the central bank’s monopoly over the issue of bank notes) and political democracy. But in general they share the old liberals’ enthusiasm for the free market” (13).
- 2 The term “Gilded Age” itself has a literary origin, arising from the title of Mark Twain’s 1873 novel of the same name, which he co-authored with Charles Dudley Warner.

- 3 I will not, for instance, be discussing David Simon’s *The Wire*, which Walter Benn Michaels calls “the most serious and ambitious fictional narrative of the twenty-first century so far,” “like a reinvention of Zola or Dreiser for a world in which the deification of the market is going out rather than coming in.” I will also not be discussing documentaries, non-fiction, memoir, or other directly journalistic genres.
- 4 Sam Tanenhaus, the editor of the *New York Times* Book Review, wrote, “Jonathan Franzen’s new novel, ‘Freedom’ . . . is a masterpiece of American fiction. . . . Once again Franzen has fashioned a capacious but intricately ordered narrative that in its majestic sweep seems to gather up every fresh datum of our shared millennial life.” And yet, despite being impressed by Franzen’s sweep, Tanenhaus concludes this way: “Walter, groping toward deliverance, mourns ‘a fatal defect in his own makeup, the defect of pitying even the beings he most hated.’ But of course it is no defect at all. It is the highest, most humanizing grace. And it cares nothing about power.” The review’s final emphasis falls, unsurprisingly, on characterization and the non-relation of the novel’s ambitious sweep to the aspiration for power.
- 5 For Franzen’s view of the failure of postmodernism, see “Mr. Difficult,” originally published in *The New Yorker* and then reprinted in *How to Be Alone*.
- 6 Morson and Emerson define semiotic totalitarianism as “the assumption that everything has a meaning relating to the seamless whole, a meaning one could discover if only one had the code. This kind of thinking is totalitarian in its assumption that it can, in principle, explain the totality of things; it is semiotic (or cryptographic) in its approach to all apparent accidents as signs of an underlying order to which the given system has the key” (28). For a critique of Morson and Emerson’s interpretation of Bakhtin, see Hirschkop.
- 7 For a thoughtful analysis of Rorty’s paradoxical claims about the relationship of cultural politics and “real” politics, see Robbins 127–47. At times, Rorty seems committed to reviving patriotic discourse in the service of reconstructing the Old Left; on other occasions, Rorty celebrates aesthetic liberal autonomy from public life in ways that recall Cold War liberalism.
- 8 Roosevelt drew the figure of the muckraker from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.
- 9 In this chapter, I use “Upton” to refer to the character in Bachelder’s novel and “Sinclair” to refer to the historical person, Upton Sinclair.

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