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# Book Review: The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction White-Collar Work by Andrew Hoberek

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*The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work*, by Andrew Hoberek. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 158 pp. \$55.00 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

In this brief but densely fruitful study of post-World War II fiction, Andrew Hoberek calls for closer attention to this literature's underlying class anxieties, specifically those related to the steadily waning fortunes of white-collar workers. Hoberek argues that members of the Professional-Managerial Class (PMC) have gone from dreaming believers in America's promise of autonomous prosperity for all to embittered realists regarding their increasingly precarious dispensability. Hoberek's lengthy introduction nods most affirmatively to C. Wright Mills in an extensive overview of the PMC's history and its gradual depreciation at the hands of increasingly wealthy overlords; his subsequent chapters provide close readings of a persistent subtextual concern with PMC conditions, primarily in works by Ayn Rand, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, and Flannery O'Connor.

In his opening discussion of the history and changing circumstances of the PMC, Hoberek seeks to correct the tendencies of cultural, political, and literary critics to either subscribe to the myth of America as a classless society or, when they do attend to class, to ignore the declining conditions and opportunities of middle-class laborers. While such workers are routinely characterized as blithely privileged managers of those who work for them, Hoberek demonstrates that their situation has gone from an already tethered prosperity and agency during the 1930s through the 1970s, to a contemporary condition of normalized precarity. The mental labor performed by the middle class does still allow for the transcendence of its members over the physical demands of manual labor, but as the literary works surveyed by Hoberek repeatedly recognize, the middle class has always harbored its own work-related angst. Hoberek credits Timothy Melley with aptly characterizing this condition as "agency panic," an obsession among the PMC with its own declining autonomy that managed to conserve "individualism discursively by continually describing it as threatened" (Hoberek 10). From the PMC's early twentieth-century beginnings in the shift from small-scale, putatively independent business ownership to mental labor for increasingly wealthy and centralized employers, through the 1950s Cold War atmosphere and the 1960s emphasis on anti-conformity, the middle-class laborer's prosper-

ity was increasingly tempered by a sense of stifled agency. In regards to American literature, Hoberek seeks to overturn “the evasion of the economic that continues to structure our readings of postwar fiction” (33) because the fiction itself registers deep concerns with economic conditions, including those of the PMC. His study also works toward a convincing corrective of a persistent disregard by postmodern theorists of the realities of work. In his conclusion he looks forward to a literature that recognizes a contemporary middle-class awakening to the merging of its situation (most obviously through “downsizing” and the shifting of jobs overseas) with that of the workers it has supposedly transcended. Hoberek also returns repeatedly in this regard to two particular realms of mental labor—authors themselves who labor in rather ironic pursuit of individualism, especially via stylistic originality, and university teachers, who falsely regard their own supposed ascendancy and autonomy.

Hoberek prefaces his reading of Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* with specific contemporaneous concerns about the middle-class, especially as reflected in Lionel Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination* and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man*. Both works tapped into percolating PMC apprehensions by drawing alarmed attention to this class’s tendency toward group-think, a mindset blamed for draining the PMC’s creative energy. For Hoberek, Rand’s writings deserve a fresh look because they codify her era’s nostalgia for a frontier past built by true-blooded American individuals, who were remembered as nobly driven by a hunger for dollars into building the greatest, most egalitarian society on earth. Driven by a conviction that any governmental meddling hampered entrepreneurial spirit and creativity, Rand depicts her railroad magnates, the Taggarts, as stalwart, inventive individualists, but this characterization overlooks the reality that railroads succeeded in large part *because* of governmental subsidies, as well as the fact that railroads declined when those subsidies were shifted to “massive direct funding for highways, airports, and other facilities” (41). Seeking to shift the standard critical focus from the novel’s railroad owners to its midlevel workers, Hoberek reads its dystopian, quasi-communist government as analogous to “the organization,” the vaguely bureaucratic mindset that was commonly figured in Rand’s time as a threat to middle-class autonomy. Rand’s inventive mental laborer and implicit PMC representative, John Galt, is meant to be heroic because he and his (ironically) communal band of working dropouts resist bureaucratic

restraints on their generative originality. While Rand thus reflects insightfully and prophetically the growing emphasis on ideas as property, she continually overlooks how her vaunted capitalism undermines and co-opts the production of the individual idea generator “in its relentless drive toward centralization” (51), an elite-controlled centralization that utilizes for its own gain both government subsidies and a relative lack of governmental regulation, steadily degrading in the process the PMC’s material conditions and prospects.

In his analysis of economic matters in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Hoberek studies connections between white middle-class and African-American experience. Hoberek provides a new reading of Ellison by showing that although PMC membership was virtually unattainable at the time for African Americans, many of his roving protagonist’s efforts to find comfortably situated work constitute a sharp analysis of the white PMC, particularly its ironic ontological reliance on figurations of blackness. Hoberek credits Ellison with depicting black servitude as both negatively and positively perceived by the white PMC—as the prototype for its supposed enslavement, and as the vigorous counter for its own insincerely performative existence. Hoberek turns, as others have in this regard, to Mailer’s seminal essay “The White Negro” and Kerouac’s *On the Road*, citing them as examples of similarly white investment in simultaneously feared and admired conceptions of black labor. Hoberek’s contribution here is the clarification of Ellison’s insights that this self-reflective white gaze on the darker Other/brother is a specifically middle-class gaze, and that this class’s malaise cannot be addressed through fantasies of shedding one’s whiteness because they actually “stem from a process of proletarianization” (69).

Reading against the grain of accepted thought on Jewish assimilation, Hoberek goes on to address Jewish American negotiations with PMC life, primarily as reflected in Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*. Hoberek points out that while March’s picaresque encounters primarily consist of relationships in which he performs middle-class labor for other characters, his memories of previous generations repeatedly depict their relatively autonomous working status as individual business owners. In this sense, Bellow registers how Jewish assimilation paralleled the PMC’s historical movement from propertied ownership to something close to indentured servitude. And yet,

Jewish creative intellectuals and their characters become appealing for ordinary white members of the PMC because of their paradoxically individualized aura, which they attain (like figurations of blackness do for Mailer and Kerouac) because their discernible Jewishness represents a distinguishing difference from the undifferentiated blandness that haunts the PMC psyche. Similarly, Hoborek reads O'Connor as suited to her times because she too addressed "the postwar obsession with individuality," with her "freaks" and lower-class whites attaining an exoticized appeal for the PMC in ways resembling that of the Otherized African Americans and Jews (95). However, like the other authors Hoborek considers, O'Connor also reveals ways in which the "postproprietary middle class has misunderstood its proletarianization" (95). Occasionally, Hoborek's study loses its focus, and his reading of *The Misfit* in O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" as a character who is "not quite intentionally unmask[ed] as an organization man" (112) struck me as murky and strained.

Overall, though, Hoborek argues convincingly that scholars have yet to recognize how deeply concerned late twentieth-century authors were with the work life of the PMC. Hoborek does not consider any of the literary or critical thinkers that he surveys fully cognizant of the middle-class slide that he himself persistently charts, but he does see the beginnings of such awareness in the end of postmodernism. Hoborek sees reason to hope for a general sharpening of that paradigm's negligence of class matters, with Negri and Hardt's *Empire* approaching the discursive eminence that Jameson's writings once had, and with writers like Richard Powers producing novels that focus on the current conditions of PMC labor, rather than the usual, mere critique of consumption patterns. While Hoborek himself labors too hard at some points to shore up his argument, he is certainly correct that the dwindling circumstances of middle-class America need more discrete attention as a factor of labor, and that such concerns have already agitated our prominent literary laborers.

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