

## Capitalist and De-Industrialized Identity: American “National” Allegory in John Updike’s *The Centaur* and Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*

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### Abstract

Jameson’s national allegory of the third world literature uses post-colonial identity to represent the embattled intellectual. In this paper the post-colonial identity will be replaced by a capitalist and post-industrial identity, since the American society has been subject to these two major molds during the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the millennium. John Updike’s *The Centaur* (1963) and Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust* (2009) represent not Jameson’s “embattled intellectual” but the average downtrodden American citizen who struggles to provide

the basics of life in a relentlessly materialistic society. The feeling of unworthiness of the protagonists dooms their lives, but only the allegory of sacrifice gives unity and meaning to the otherwise meaningless world and gives dignity to the mediocre middle and (non)-working class. The use of allegory for both writers helped them to draw in words the disappointment of the American citizens towards their country which left them to face their predicament on their own in an everchanging society.

**Keywords:** Allegory, Capitalism, de-industrialization, sacrifice, middle and working class

## Capitalist and De-Industrialized Identity: American “National” Allegory in John Updike’s *The Centaur* and Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*

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By the end of the Twentieth century, scholars have revived interest in national allegory as an extremely flexible genre to help investigate the evolving ideologies of the contemporary world; it is a “language for encoding reality and binding people together” (Hariman 270). From a modernist point of view, allegory is bad art; allegory is treated as a lesser mode than a symbol: whereas symbol is “beautiful, effective, fertile, unique, transcendent, allegory is didactic, mechanical, ugly, ineffective, and barren.” (Day 105) The reason behind this bias against allegory is that it has been regarded as resembling its simpler predecessors “fable” and “parable” in that it is a didactic extended metaphor predicating on duality of signification: the events, characters and setting of the surface meaning and the underlying encoded metaphoric domain that, after all, remain unambiguous.

The word allegory brings to mind the moral *grand récits* of the European Middle Ages when such texts as Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) required minimal effort for interpretation. Adding to this the moral dogmatism related to these works led the West to regard allegory as a lesser mode than symbolism, the more sophisticated and ambiguous mode. Hillenbrand describes the downfall of allegory: “throughout the nineteenth century, critics as varied as Thomas Macaulay, Mathew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle continued the job of rubbishing allegory; and with the decisive advent of modernism, its demise seemed complete” (642). In modernism, the text gained ground on its own right, thus diminishing the

already declining function of allegory that projected morality outwardly and driving the West to discredit allegory as an outdated mode for modernism.

From a postmodernist perspective, allegory regained its lost luster. Craig Owens reevaluates allegory and relates its revival to the inception of postmodernism. He also justifies why allegory was condemned: allegory occurs when one text is doubled by another; that is, when

[O]ne text is read through another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship maybe; the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest . . . the allegorist does not invent images, he confiscates them . . . he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. That is why allegory is condemned. (69)

Owens continues his argument to state that the ephemeral, hybridized nature of allegory distinguishes it for the modernist impulse and, accordingly, relates it to the postmodernist impulse instead.

The term “national allegory” was coined by Fredric Jameson in his essay on Wyndham Lewis in *Fables of Aggression* (1979) and was tackled elaborately in the famous controversial article ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’ (1986). Jameson defines “third-world” national allegory as ‘the story of the private individual destiny [which] is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society’ (69).

In a national allegory, the personal is the national. Jameson cites an example represented in Sembene Ousman's short story "The False Prophet" which, as its name suggests, depicts a national allegory of the corruption and exploitation of religion in the Muslim world.

The connection that Jameson draws between the personal and the national/political in "third-world" texts is inaccurate for an obvious reason: he states that all Third-world literature is essentially political: 'Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension' (69).

In spite of this essentialist nature of the narratives of the "third-world," Jameson is eager to differentiate between the national allegory of these literatures from the traditional Western conception of allegory as 'an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalences' (73). The national allegory of the "third-world," is, for Jameson, far more complex. He distinguishes it from Bunyan's stereotypes, but still replaces the battle of "good" and "evil" of the past with the homegrown nationalism and multinational capitalism respectively.

However, if Jameson relates the term to Third World countries, he concedes that literature of the "first world" uses allegory "unconsciously" and "covertly" (79). This paper tackles the paradoxical notion about allegory adopted by Hillenbrand; namely, that allegory can be both postcolonial and postmodern simultaneously, can be "both didactic and indeterminate, both affirmative of meaning and suspicious of it, both constructive and deconstructive, both committed to the retelling of lost histories and suspicious of any attempt to know the

past" (648). Hillenbrand is trying to decipher the paradoxical split between postmodernism and postcolonialism which keeps them "irreconcilably apart" in spite of their shared celebration of difference, their insistence on decentering and their exposure of the mythical all-powerful metropole: "And as far as the allegorical mode is concerned, this means that postcolonial allegory (with its desire to open colonial history up to alternative interpretation) and postmodern allegory (with its distrust of interpretation in any fixed shape or form) cannot comfortably coexist" (644).

However, there might be a light at the end of the tunnel; if we banish a priori interpretations of allegory and consider its more subjective, flowing, heterogenous nature, allegory's richer potential can be restored allowing us "to move beyond literary naïveté to a space where both postcolonial identity and postmodern distrust can live alongside one another" (647).

This paper will not tackle postcolonial identity since it will take two American novels as a case study. The postcolonial will be replaced by a capitalist and post-industrial identity, since the American society has been subject to these two major molds during the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the millennium. John Updike's *The Centaur* (1963) and Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* (2009) represent not Jameson's "embattled intellectual" but the average downtrodden American citizen who struggles to provide the basics of life in a relentlessly materialistic society. The two writers' aim is not to investigate their characters' inward look for self-identity, it is rather using this quest for self-identity to illuminate the social conditions that shape them.

*The Centaur* (1963) narrates the story of a downtrodden high school teacher who struggles in his work to teach reluctant

students, tolerate the bullying of the principal and at the same time retain the image of a role model in front of his son. George Caldwell is the embodiment of generosity and kindness in a purely materialistic world. The whole novel is basically narrated from Peter Caldwell's, George's son, point of view. The adult Peter remembers three days he passed with his father while Peter was a teenager. Updike utilizes myth to emphasize George's estrangement from his world and a means by which Caldwell can find meaning to this absurd world: "I wouldn't mind plugging ahead at something I wasn't any good at," my father said, "if I knew what the hell the point of it all was. I ask, and nobody'll tell me" (Updike 131). George is Chiron the noble Centaur who sacrificed his immortality to atone for Prometheus's sin of stealing fire and to save Prometheus, Peter, from the perpetual suffering ruled on him by Zeus, the school principal, Zimmerman. Doc Appleton is Apollo who has a healing power and tries to cure Peter. This dwelling on myth is a defense strategy against the meaninglessness of life and a parallel pattern for the otherwise formless existence.

The basic extended metaphor in the novel is Caldwell as Chiron; the story begins and ends with him. In our initial introduction to him, George Caldwell is wounded in the leg by an arrow, an actual incident that was committed by one of the delinquents in his class. Mythologically, Chiron, the noblest of the Centaurs, was wounded by the poisoned arrow of Hercules in a wedding of the Lapithae. Denied the wine, the Centaurs start to attack the women attending the feast. In attempting to restrain his followers from their foolishness, Chiron receives a poisonous arrow in his leg. His immortality, which was granted to him as a special favor, would not allow his death nor his recovery, thus doomed to live in perpetual agony. The wound would be of little or no use for the

rest of the story, but it served to link Caldwell to Chiron, or allegorically speaking, reality to myth. Caldwell is advised by Phillips, who appears several times as Pholos, the wise centaur, not to question Zimmerman, Zeus, about the missing basketball tickets. Caldwell revolts against the conformity of his fellow teachers, but in the process is estranged from them. Zimmerman, hearing the commotion in Caldwell's class, comes in to restore order, reducing Caldwell in front of his students to a buffoon. The class turns into a circus, with students, dropping books to the floor, sailing paper airplanes and some boys flirting with girls. Losing his temper, Caldwell advances to Diefendorf, the star swimmer, and strikes the boy several times with the steel arrow shaft that was removed from his ankle. Zimmerman rushes to write an official report on this incident and Caldwell finishes the lesson about the creation of the universe with: "One minute ago, flint-chipping, fire-kindling, death-foreseeing, a tragic animal appeared . . . called Man" (Updike 52). The mythological/historical grand acts of the past are mirrored by the ridiculous, trivial acts of the students in the present.

Dualities abound in the novel from characters to events and places and even in details. The two clocks that are hanging in Caldwell's kitchen are discrepant: "I walked past the high mantel where two clocks said 7:30 and 7:23 respectively. The faster clock was red and electric and plastic and had been purchased by my father at a discount. The slower was dark and wooden and ornamented and key-wound and had been inherited from my grandfather's father, a man long dead when I was born" (Updike 59). Caldwell's faster clock represents the pressing time that he suffers under but cannot catch up with and the older, slower one stands for the past happier times that he longs for but cannot attain; times when

“Men lived without cares or labor, eating only acorns, wild fruit, and honey that dripped from trees, drinking the milk of sheep and goats, never growing old, dancing, and laughing much. Death, to them, was no more terrible than sleep” (Updike 99). Thus, time, with its two levels, Caldwell’s contemporary time, and the time of Caldwell’s mythical counterpart, is patronizing Caldwell and adding to his feeling of inadequacy and inefficiency.

In addition to allegorical discrepancy between Caldwell’s past and present time and his incapacity to embrace any of them, Caldwell’s humility and sense of inadequacy is revealed through his handling of Peter’s gift. The expensive gloves that Peter gave to his father for Christmas were worn just one day and then left in the back seat of the car to be stolen by a hitchhiker. Peter never understands his father’s attitude towards the gloves although Caldwell was amazed by how beautiful they are: “They are too good . . . They are wonderful gloves . . . When I was a kid if anybody had given me gloves like that, I would have cried real tears” (Updike 76). Caldwell feels unworthy of wearing such luxurious gloves as much as he feels unworthy as a father: “You deserved a winner and you got a loser” (Updike 150). When the car breaks down and Caldwell cannot fix it, he tells his son: “This is the kind of thing . . . that’s been happening to me all my life. I’m sorry you got involved in it. I don’t know why the damn car doesn’t move. Same reason the swimming team doesn’t win, I suppose” (Updike 150). From a Capitalist point of view, Caldwell can deservedly be called a “loser”: he is a teacher who cannot provide enough money for his family to live comfortably, he cannot afford a fancy car that will never break down on any occasion, his swimming team never wins and, to top all off, he is wasting his time and energy searching for “meaning” in life. Were

Caldwell living in any other society, he might have not felt this debilitating and discouraging sense of unworthiness. In searching for meaning in his formless life, as mentioned earlier, Caldwell asks everyone he meets if he can help him find meaning to their existence. Nobody gives him a satisfying answer, not his fellow teachers, not the drunken hitchhiker, not even March, the minister. Thus, in a materialist society weighing success only by financial wealth and material gain, Caldwell is a “loser.” But, in a mythological setting, where life is much simpler and where material gain is of little avail, Caldwell would have been a much more successful and worthy man in his society.

Uphaus calls *The Centaur* a mock epic because Updike presents mundane events in a non-proportionate heroic level. For instance, the punishment ruled by Zeus on Prometheus (Peter) is reflected in his skin disease: “[F]or my belly, as if pecked by a great bird, was dotted with red scabs the size of coins. Psoriasis. . . So I had come to this conclusion about my psoriasis: it was a curse. God, to make me a man, had blessed me with a rhythmic curse that breathed in and out with His seasons” (Updike 52). Thus, the pecking of Prometheus liver by a bird is Peter’s Psoriasis. Since Prometheus was not born immortal, it was essential for some immortal being to take on his mortality to ease his suffering. In the scene of the hotel room when Peter was watching a big neon owl flashing on and off and pecking on pretzels, he discovers, “My sense of myself amplified until, lover and loved, seer and seen, I compounded in several accented expansions my ego, the city, and the future, and during these seconds truly clove to the center of the sphere, and outmuscled time and tide. I would triumph” (Updike 165). Here Peter is preparing for his assumption of immortality which now, he understands, can be achieved through

incorporating all the life of the preceding generation into the succeeding one. His realization that he would triumph gives answer to his father's search for meaning: the father will live through the son.

However, living George Caldwell's life seems far from attractive: his doubt that he has cancer, his feeling of inadequacy toward his son, his debts, all push him to the edge of despair. Accordingly, he views in death a way to escape, a way toward freedom of responsibilities. Sadly for him, the doctor announces that the pain in his intestines is not cancer, it is just a disease that needs some rest or change of career. At this crucial point, George Caldwell decides on his final sacrifice: to surrender to conformity, to cease all search for spiritual freedom and to go back to his old job with all the frustration and responsibilities entailed. The Buick which George Caldwell walks toward is a hearse which carries Chiron, or that part of George Caldwell which was immortal and godly, to certain death in an environment which destroys the spirit.

George Caldwell's selflessness through good works and through the acceptance of death means the departure of Chiron, that part of his duality which is spiritual and godlike. Mythological references function to vividly illustrate that duality, that division between man's body and soul, which is a constant concern for Updike. Allusions to Chiron in the novel serve both to represent that side of George Caldwell which yearns for permanence and immortality, and provide a mythical framework which will make the world more meaningful. The epigraph of the novel, taken from Karl Barth, describes George Caldwell's duality. The epigraph also reflects the tension between the metaphoric and the realistic visions: "Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is

the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." Myths are those methods which man has created to make heaven conceivable to him, and realistic evidence or empiricism leading to scientific knowledge is the means by which the earth is conceivable to man. Thus, George Caldwell is the teacher of general science at Olinger High School who, despite being doubtful of his abilities, has great sensitivity to the fears and needs of others. Allegory seems to fit in as a mode of bringing past with presence, reality with myth:

. . . allegory is an omnipresent mode of symbolizing; it is the mode that is resolutely liminal. Allegories are exercises in necessarily imperfect translation between such incommensurable realms as cosmology and history, myth and interpretation, image and idea, past and present, theory and praxis, author and interpreter. These dynamics are themselves versions of the liminal space between incommensurability and identification. (Hariman 268)

Eventually, George Caldwell sacrifices his spiritual search for meaning and truth at the end of *The Centaur* and chooses instead the role of parent and provider, a dedication to this world in which spiritual hopes must die. Thus, George Caldwell accepts this natural world and the mortality in time which is inevitable within it. When wrongly diagnosed with cancer, his only concern was his son: "He needs me to keep him going, the poor kid doesn't have a clue yet, I can't fade out before he has the clue . . . My old man went and died before he was my age, and I didn't want to double-cross my own kid like that" (Updike 224-225). Once he realizes he doesn't have cancer, his only concern is to finish his time in order to get his twenty-five-year pension. The ultimate sacrifice the father can give to

his son is to live on; otherwise, death would be an escape.

At the end of the novel Chiron dies but George Caldwell lives on, a mere mortal. Allegorically this abandonment of immortality is not all adverse in Walter Benjamin's view: "An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory" (223). Peter says his father has moved through "Waste, rot, hollowness, noise, stench, death," "the many visages which this central thing wears" (Updike 188). But Peter's final epiphany is that "[o]nly goodness lives. But it does live" (Updike 297). This conclusion disrupts George's fear that he will only pass on a message of despair to his son. On the contrary, it is the wisdom of the fathers that is passed along.

The use of myth is paralleled to the loss of faith in Suzanne Uphaus's point of view:

The thematic loss of Christianity parallels the artistic loss of classical faith. I will demonstrate how this loss of faith in another world represents the confinement to this world: thematically, it means the decline of Christian faith into good works and, artistically, it represents the decline of myth into naturalism. The force of this world destroys the spiritual ideal in both father and son, leaving them confined to the physical world and especially to their bodies. The acceptance of the body, either its mortality or its sexuality, reflects this confinement. (Uphaus 25)

The American society in the 1960s was moving from conservatism and social conformity, symbolized by George Caldwell, the teacher, to revolt and liberalism, symbolized by Peter, the artist.

The civil rights and the sexual liberation movements cast The Middle American White men into the shadows and the rebel youngsters and underdogs into the foreground:

Whenever there is a major revolution or change in the power structure of some aspect of society, the outs, the insurgents, the underdogs always become the center of attention and receive the major share of publicity. Thus, in the United States, the activities of racial minorities and youthful rebels are given center stage, while their adversaries, the white, middle-class, middle-age establishment, sink into the shadows. (Robinson 332)

George Caldwell has become a symbol of the marginalization of the Middle American White men who became the "silent majority" in the 1960s and 70s lacking a voice, spoken of by others, but not themselves speaking. Their rights have been ignored in order to nurture for the rights of the gender, racial and sexual rights of the minorities who arrived to silence the majority.

Moreover, David Myers suggests that the adventures of George Caldwell and his son may "amount to an allegorical quest," where the father is a messianic figure on a pilgrimage to goodness, and the son is an embodiment of Satan in his pride, selfishness, lust and sloth (Myers 74-5). The narration of Peter as an adult and a fully-fledged artist is interpolated with "forgive me, forgive me"; that is, he is trying to ask his father's forgiveness for his rage and misunderstanding when he was a teenager at the time of his and his father's three-day adventure.

There was a huge transformation in the American society demographically and economically by the early first-twentieth

century. In the 1950s almost the third of the labor force in the USA worked in factories. Cities like Chicago, Detroit and Saint Louis were among the top ten industrial centers in the US. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, less than one in ten Americans worked in factories. Sherry Lee Linkon argues that the job loss not only represents an employment opportunity lost, but has “deep identity consequences” as well (Linkon 150). The sons of these laid-off fathers lost the blue-collar role model and struggle to construct a masculine identity in the absence of industrialized work. *American Rust* (2009) draws the contemporary reader’s attention to the particular sense of placelessness and insecurity associated with economic liberalism. The once busy productive cities are replaced by decay and erasure, replacing the once masculine, self-confident identity to one of self-defeat.

Fredric Jameson’s take on the transformation of the American class system as opposed to the European one is of importance here. Jameson describes the “qualitative break, a quantum leap, between the older industrial systems and what now gets to be called post-industrial society” (Jameson, 1977, 843). Jameson attributes the absence of the class system in American society to the absence of the classical aristocracy of the European type, and accordingly a failure in generating a proletariat that antagonizes this class; a logic he calls “American mythic explanation” (Jameson, 1977, 843). Moreover, he explains the process of “Americanization” of not only older European societies but Third World as well: this process entails a social homogenization where traditional social classes are disappearing and are being replaced by the “embourgeoisement of the worker” which Jameson defines as “the transformation of both bourgeois and worker into that new grey organization person

known as the consumer” (Jameson, 1977, 844). The ultimate goal has become not to resolve the conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but to access the means by which both can reach optimum consumerism in a globalized and Americanized world system.

The values of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the women’s movement and the anti-authoritarian egalitarianism of the students’ movement were not inherently subversive, unlike the values of the social class. On the contrary, the former values are part and parcel of the Enlightenment and intrinsic to “the internal logic of the system, which has a fundamental interest in social equality to the degree to which it needs to transform as many of its subjects or its citizens into identical consumers interchangeable with everybody else” (Jameson, 1977, 844). Yet, if society seems classless in appearance, in reality it is not. Thus comes the necessity to present class structure in a tangible form:

to say that class structure is becoming representable means that we have now gone beyond mere abstract understanding and entered that whole area of personal fantasy, collective storytelling, narrative figurability, which is the domain of culture and no longer that of abstract sociology or economic analysis. To become figurable - that is to say, visible in the first place, accessible to our imaginations - the classes have to be able to become in some sense characters in their own right: this is the sense in which the term allegory in our title is to be taken as a working hypothesis. (Jameson, 1977, 845)

The class consciousness generated by new capitalism has become objectified and dramatized and no better mold to be used to present such a new structure than



allegory that will be highlighted later on in the study.

Meyer's novel describes the vacant mills, broken-down cars, and creaking bridges of the de-industrialized environment: "The city has once been promising but now it was mostly abandoned, ten-story buildings and hotels, all empty, brick and stone stained dark by soot." The reason why Meyer chooses a landscape of ruin is because it suits allegory which "is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete – an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin . . . ruins thus stand for history as an irreversible process of dissolution and decay" (Owens 70). Decay here is a word that can apply both literally and figuratively on the setting of the novel. The political and economic decisions taken after WWII led to "the ghettoization of the older urban neighborhood" (Jameson, 1977, 851). These neighborhoods with their decaying small businesses that were being gradually replaced by parking lots and chain stores could no longer harbor high aspiring young people who had no choice but to leave.

The protagonists of the novel Isaac English, an intelligent promising high school graduate and Billy Poe (referred to throughout the novel as Poe), a former high school football star who turns down athletic scholarships, both opt to stay in Buell, a small struggling town where few businesses remain open. Isaac English dreams of leaving and this dream-vision "is, of course, a characteristic framing and opening device of allegory" (Fineman 46). When they finally decide to leave, it is as if they are doomed by the ill fate of their families. While the novel's two protagonists Isaac and Poe initially seem launched on a road adventure, their travels quickly take an abrupt twist when a crime occurs. Isaac, when he suddenly makes the decision to

escape and leave his father behind, steals \$4,000 from his father and is preparing to take the train and head west, pursuing his dream of landing in Berkeley and going to work at a physics research institute. He asks Poe to tag along to catch the train and, on the way, they stop into an abandoned factory building to warm up. There three homeless men pick a fight with them and one grabs Poe and threatens to kill him. Isaac, in order to save Poe, throws a ball bearing on the man killing him. But Poe leaves his jacket behind, and he becomes a suspect in the killing. Poe is arrested and Isaac sets off on his way only to get beaten and robbed realizing his own insufficiency. Both protagonists represent what is called "impotent rage": to act loyally and silently in compliance with the ethical values of the society (respect for law and order, patriotism, the ideal of the family) when this very society requires them to shed the obsolete protestant ethical self in favor of the individualistic consumerist self. This dilemma tears them apart leading to their loss of identity and turning their American dream into one of escape.

As each young man leaves a crumbling home far behind, he discovers himself involved in an "ancient relationship": "Wolf or sheep, if you didn't choose it was chosen for you. Hunter or hunted, predator or prey" (Meyer 271). Linkon attributes this aggressive attitude to the loss of the father figure in the lives of both, though both fathers are still alive. Virgil Poe, Bill Poe's father drinks too much and cannot hold a steady job. He appears briefly at the start of the novel when his ex-wife reconsiders reuniting with him, but he then disappears abruptly again. On the other hand, Henry English, Isaac English's father is a handicap, paralyzed by a steel-mill accident. He is totally dependent on his son; accordingly, Isaac feels trapped both by his father and by his hometown, Buell. In both

cases of fatherhood; the one who deserts his family or the one who gets paralyzed by his injury at work, the two fathers fail not only as family providers, but fail as fathers as well. Work in the working-class culture is what defines men and fathers. Despite having physical strength, as in the case of Poe, or mental brightness as in the case of Isaac, without work, there is no strong sense of self and accordingly, no place to go.

The two young men not only grow up with no role models or the father/provider figure, they also inherit the sense of ineptness of physical strength and blue-collar solidarity. Poe does not have a clear vision of the future and is not satisfied with feminine like jobs as a shopkeeper. He finds vent for his version of masculinity in getting into fights, one of which while fleeing with Isaac, will cause his future to be eternally doomed. He is behind bars for most of the novel for a crime he didn't commit. The only way to prove his toughness is through violence that almost gets him killed in a prison fight. Poe imagines himself going nowhere: "This place had been waiting for him. There were those who had capabilities and those who didn't and even in his glory days he had known, known they would figure it out one day, a bullet he would never dodge" (Meyer 271). Isaac, on the other hand, has a clear view of the future and dreams of running away to Berkeley and working at a Physics research institute; however, he is as paralyzed as his father and feels internally trapped and ineffectual. Although the father is present for Isaac, his presence becomes a burden not a value for the son. The father's dependence on his son feels like a trap which leaves both of them feeling emasculated.

Most of the characters in *American Rust* dream, at some point or the other, of leading a different life. Isaac English dreams of becoming a physicist, but he doesn't have

the practical knowledge to do so. Instead of consulting his father, he steals his father's money and lose it on the way. He dreams he would reach California in a Romantic/Western trip on foot and by train, "Traveling properly on foot, the kid is now beyond the places he knows anyone. His material comforts falling away, no place will be foreign. The world is his home" (Meyer 103). He is beaten and robbed. After shoplifting for food and clothes from a Walmart, he gives up and hitch-hikes back home. Poe, after rejecting a football scholarship, dreams of joining college, but never applies to any. Grace, Poe's mother dreams of becoming a government worker, but her dream was shattered when she gets married to Poe's father and gets stuck in Buell. The atmosphere of ruin and erasure of the town is reflected on its inhabitants; they lack the drive to success at best and feel unworthy of it at worst.

At its deepest level, then, *American Rust* mutates an allegory of sacrifice. The small man, Isaac, is of course marked as the intended sacrificial victim. "I am the truth in a knife", he reflects, but he does not know at whose command his father exchanged his son's life for his own, demanding that his boy stay home to care for him rather than going off to college. The Abrahamic father comes to regret this exchange and ultimately reverses course, sacrificing himself to his son's future through suicide. Similarly, in taking the blame for the murder that Isaac committed, Poe imagines himself to be balancing the scales, trading Isaac's life for his own. In the same fashion, Isaac wonders if on his own faltering path, he has "already traded [himself] for the Baron" (Meyer 298), and when he finds he has not, he attempts to save Poe by turning himself in to the authorities, and so on.

In *American Rust*, sacrifice is revealed as the foundation of moral order; this is what persists when social life has

been stripped down to its bare bases. Sacrifice stands in contrast to the more calculating decision-making modeled, for example, by Lee, Isaac's Yale-educated sister. "It was statistics, expected value," she reminds herself. Self-interested rational choice appears directly linked to upward social mobility and capitalism. In spite of Isaac's intelligence and Lee's friend's offer to help him get into Yale, Isaac chooses to stay in Buell to care for his partially paralyzed father in an accident in the steel mill back when it was still working. Similarly, Grace, Poe's mother, chooses to stay in Buell when she was offered a state job in Pittsburg. The only character who decides to leave Buell is Lee, Isaac's sister who not only goes to Yale on a scholarship, but marries a wealthy classmate as well. However, she feels guilty for leaving responsibility of caring for their aging paralyzed father to Isaac and, thus, comes home to hire a medical aide for their father to allow Isaac to go to college. Here we have two different social structures: Lee, representing the center, the privileged, consumerist/individualistic culture and her brother Isaac representing the decentered, marginalized, eager - to - help/ sacrificial culture. The problem that arises here is that both structures, however willing to mix and co-exist, will never absorb each other:

One of the more realistic things about recent American commercial culture, indeed, has been its willingness to recognize and to represent at least in passing the strange coexistence and superposition in the America of today of social worlds as rigidly divided from each other as in a caste system . . . or permanent Third World existence at the heart of the First World itself. (Jameson, 1977, 852)

There is little that the individuals of the center can do in order to reverse the situation and include periphery to their center. It seems in order to succeed in such a society, individuals have to polish the rust that has now become a symbol of the old "industrial" values of work, frugality and self-denial.

The chief of police, Budd Harris, comes to stand for the helplessness and agitated incapacity of local power structure. He used to be involved in a romantic relationship with Grace Poe and for this reason hides a piece of evidence in order to protect Poe. When failing to convince Poe to incriminate Isaac, Harris drives to the house of the remaining living witness and confronts him to leave town, but when the latter refuses, Harris shoots him dead destroying the only evidence against Poe. This act on Harris's part as representative of the executive power of the ruling class transfers him from the objective, non-intervening, law-enforcing zone to the subjective, empathic and side-taking one.

Now the allegorical class structure of the book comes to light in three levels: the first, the "deindustrialized marginalization" of the labor class struggling to move upward in society and incarnated in Isaac and Poe. The second, the impotent power structure symbolized in Chief Budd Harris whose loyalty is more inclined towards the marginalized struggling class rather than the bourgeoisie whom he should be serving. Finally, the rich powerful capitalist elite who manage to escape being decentered and marginalized and succeed in acquiring the necessary tools for upward mobility symbolized in Lee English with her Yale education and her leaning on her in-laws' formidable financial resources. This "class consciousness" is a product of the "new visibility capitalism [which] becomes objectified and dramatized as an actor and as a subject of history with an allegorical

intensity and simplicity that had not been the case since the 1930's" (Jameson, 1977, 857).

Philipp Meyer ironically criticizes the capitalist biased rebuilding of American ruins:

[Poe's mother] remembered when everyone came out to watch the two-hundred-foot-tall and almost brand-new blast furnaces called Dorothy Five and Six get toppled with dynamite charges. It was not long after that that terrorists blew up the World Trade Center. It wasn't logical, but the one reminded her of the other. There were certain places and people who mattered a lot more than others. Not a single dime was being spent to rebuild Buell. (Meyer 45)

The central conflict of the novel sets spontaneous popular altruism and solidarity squarely against the suppositions of capitalist reason. Meyer's allegory ultimately extracts from Isaac and Poe's story a national allegory of a working-class ethic that survives the social degradation resulting from its abandonment by capital. His point is the human need for dignity, no matter what the social context, that accompanies labor.

Seen structurally, allegory in both novels tends towards a repetitive, ritualistic and static sequence rather than a dynamic one. The narrative is imprisoned and trapped just like the characters who find no escape from their status. George Caldwell in *The Centaur* cannot escape his miserable status as a weak, pathetic teacher; Isaac and Poe not only return to their first status of despair and desolation, but are threatened by being imprisoned for their man slaughter in self-defense. Moreover, allegory builds its structure on previously separate art mediums and combines them into an eclectic work,

thus, crossing aesthetic boundaries, bringing allegory closer to hybridization. This, in fact, accounts for why allegory was proscribed by modernism and hailed by postmodernism.

On the one hand, *The Centaur* structures its narrative on Greek myth as discussed before and places Peter Caldwell as a lyrical persona on the other. The lyrical persona "assumes many guises, many poses, many voices" (Mellard 113). The narrative voice of Peter varies back and forth from objective omniscience to first person, and from tasteful pastoral myth to newspaper obituary; thus, forcing the narrative towards variation and discontinuity (Mellard 114). *American Rust* can be placed as a projection of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) where two migrant workers, George Milton and Lennie Small, dream of buying their own piece of land and growing their own cattle and crops, but the feeble-minded Lennie commits a murder by mistake due to his uncontrollable habit of desiring to stroke soft things. Out of pity and love George kills Lennie to save him from mob lynching. Similarly, Poe, when in prison, stoically resists all attempts to make him confess and tell the truth about the murder to save his friend, Isaac. However, this resistance takes its toll on his spirit: "He had slept through life, let the currents take him. He had let the currents take him faster and faster and he had not noticed. He was at the end now, the big drop" (Meyer 322).

The two novels depict the American dream in reverse, or, its loss thereof. The protagonists of both stories feel betrayed by their society and country. George Caldwell, representing mediocre middle class white Americans, lost the respect and deference of his students, yet, he still struggles to teach them in order to provide for his family and his son, Peter, who, at first shares his father's students' indignation at him. Only when time passes and Peter grows up does

he appreciate the sacrifice his father has offered him. Isaac and Poe are seemingly cursed for aspiring to dream of leaving their hometown, Buell and end up in despair and in prison respectively.

The use of allegory for both writers helped them to draw in words the disappointment of the American citizens towards their country which left them to face their predicament on their own in a relentlessly everchanging society. These citizens fought back by the only tools available for them: sacrifice, loyalty and

love. The broader social picture of the American society was reflected through the exceptional resources of the artistic expressivity of allegory. John Updike and Philipp Meyer, in their compelling and absorbing novels, substitute the American Dream with an allegory of sacrifice that provides the protagonists with the will to go on, even if not for themselves, but for their loved ones. Allegory has successfully given shape on paper to the fragmentary nature of the actual lives it has symbolized.

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