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**"Power always goes on and on": the limits of masculinity in *Marabou Stork*
*Nightmares and Fight Club***

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Compulsory Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to trace the construction and performance of violent masculinity. In this thesis I argue that a particular form of violent masculine identity emerges from within a hegemonic structure of gender relations. I employ two popular, contemporary novels, Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1997) and Irvine Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1996), to examine a form of masculinity which is involved in these relations.

I explore these novels with the aim of identifying the ways in which their characters engage with those around them in accordance with the system of power which encompasses them. In doing so, I hope to explain the restricting limits placed upon their bodies, and clarify the compulsions which drive their private demeanours and interpersonal behaviour. I argue that these characters perform a model of masculine identity which is founded upon an ideology of naturalised male authority and grounded in the social practice of violent dominance. *Marabou Stork Nightmares* depicts a male narrator who, in enacting a model of hegemonic masculinity, becomes implicated in the reproduction of hegemonic masculine domination. *Fight Club* examines the role of this model in restricting its members to structural and physical domination.

Each of these novels is concerned with outlining the limitations of a performance of masculine gender identity directed through violence. In different ways they convey the extent to which a hegemonic system of dominance generates a decidedly difficult and unhappy experience. Overall, this thesis attempts to connect these novels, and to account for the problematic experiences of their characters.

Introduction: the power system of masculine violence

In their analysis of the ways in which individuals are involved in the ongoing procedure of "Doing Difference", C. West and S. Fenstermaker argue that the concept of gender identity might best be considered "an emergent property of social situations"¹. Similarly, J. Weeks has argued that understandings of identity have proceeded "against nature", yielding a perception of gender representation as forms of behaviour which stem from an engagement with "invented categories" of cultural expectation². These statements indicate a conception of gender identity as a social performance conducted in accordance with the instructions of cultural doctrine. From this, importantly, an analysis of gender identity construction "could reveal the mechanisms by which power is exercised and inequality is reproduced"³. In this study, I seek to engage with this possibility, as a means of examining the masculine performance of individuals in two contemporary novels: the anonymous narrator of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, and Roy, from Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*. These characters strive to assert a normative masculine identity, as a cultural imperative, through social practice. Specifically, these novels trace the performance of a masculine gender identity through physical violence, and speak to the limits of the performance constructed in these ways. I wish to describe the restrictions placed upon these individuals by this procedure of identity construction and representation, the harmful effects that arise from them, directed at their social surroundings, and the limitations upon their potential for subversion.

My reading of these novels relies on J. Butler's model of gender "performativity", a theoretical outline which situates human identity as a function of procedural enterprise, that is, a "repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of

substance, of a natural sort of being"⁴. Butler arrives at a critical juncture which would envisage the concept of gender as not simply "the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex" but, further, "the apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established"⁵. Thus might the forms of gender representation enacted within and between various social groups ultimately arise from the direction of a greater imperative. This is achieved by the imposition of an abstract ideology upon the human body, and the term "gender" is thus understood as "the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'pre-discursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts" (original emphasis) ⁶. Butler's discussion posits gender as an outcome of a power system, its effect to produce within the social sphere a normative, "pre-conscious" notion of sex. This formula amounts to an effectual "cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible", an ideological template which may both delineate and elucidate the course of social behaviour⁷. A particular gender model, as a blueprint of socially normative identity and interaction, in this sense is able to inform the prevailing mode of "relation between socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts"⁸.

I am interested here in the dynamics which produce an environment of gender difference, and the ways in which that difference is translated into a socially standardised practice of interpersonal dominance. Butler's description of gender identity as a product of cultural instruction and social practice implicates the body within alignments of power, as what "makes" a subject either masculine or feminine resides less inside his or her body than outside, as part of the multiple intersections of a cultural landscape. S. de Beauvoir's contention that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" is thus redeployed to involve men in a similarly continual procedure of construction and representation⁹. The achievement of a normative masculine representation operates as an effect of social

interrelation, and is engaged with a variety of cultural information. As such, to “be a man” in a given social setting requires a format of behaviour which is both related to cultural doctrine and situated within a larger social environment of power relations. M. Kimmel has argued that the concept of standardised masculinity itself is dependent on “the ways in which gendered individuals interact with other gendered individuals in gendered institutions”¹⁰. Gender difference from this outlook emerges as a function of cultural domination, upholding the dichotomy of a power system which establishes one social group subordinate to another: “power is what produces those gender differences ... the power of some men or women over other men or women”¹¹. Thus it is established that normative gender relations – the interactive social business between individuals and their social groups – work to position gendered individuals upon a cultural standard of performativity.

The characters in both *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* are obliged to interact with their social environments from within the structures of cultural supervision. As gendered individuals, their conditions and behaviours (and, further, the restrictions on and possibilities of them) are understood from within the parameters which define their masculine positions. R. W. Connell has explained that these parameters, which circumscribe normative masculine identity, are institutionalised in the prevalence of a naturalised masculine authority over all women, and, too, over other men. His initial description of “hegemonic masculinity”, formulated together with T. Carrigan and J. Lee, embarks from the question of “how particular groups of men inhabit positions of wealth and power, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance”¹². The term “hegemony” is borrowed from Gramsci’s conception of naturalised power arrangements, and is utilised in this context to denote the ways in which a model of masculinity occupies a position of “ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions and persuasion”¹³. Connell himself declares that the

term suggests a form of social and cultural ascendancy which “extends beyond contests of brute power into the organisation of private life”¹⁴. His conception of hegemonic masculinity thus delineates the framework in which masculine authority becomes naturalised, working to identify “the [model of] masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations”¹⁵.

Fight Club and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* both introduce male protagonists engaged with this model of idealised, hegemonic masculinity, and in different ways they explore the various effects of this format at the levels of private identification and social interaction. Ultimately, these characters are involved in the construction of a masculine identity which is both founded upon an ideology of male authority, and grounded in the practice of social domination. As Kimmel has noted, “within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured”¹⁶. This hegemonic definition of manhood promotes the figure of “a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power”, and equates a normative performance of masculinity “with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, [and] in control”¹⁷. J. Katz relates that the hegemonic category is promoted through the imagery of a particular “vision of masculinity – adventurous, aggressive and violent – that provides men of all classes with a standard of ‘real manhood’ against which to judge themselves”. C. Cheng declares that a central effect of this imagery is to instil within social practice an understanding of normative, expected male dominance: “hegemonic masculinity is characterized by numerous attributes such as domination, aggressiveness, competitiveness, athletic prowess, stoicism, and control ... [and] this gender performance must be constantly validated by “proving” itself as dominant and in control of itself and others”¹⁸.

The male characters of both *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* strive to enact a socially normative gender identity, as a cultural imperative, as a means toward achieving private and public authority. In doing so, they exhibit an internalised concern with the imagery of naturalised male authority. Connell declares that the hegemonic “discourse of ‘masculinity’”, while universally instructive, “is constructed out of the lives of (at most) five percent of the world’s population of men, in one culture-area, at one moment in history”¹⁹. While the accepted ideal or “face” of masculine identity “need not correspond at all closely to the actual personalities of the majority of men ... [it is nonetheless] what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support”²⁰. Significant here, then, is the proliferation of idealistic imagery which might take the form of hegemonic “publicity”, a thoroughly pervasive “public face”, instrumental in the collective spread and private internalisation of the hegemonic principle²¹. The dominant descriptions of gender identity which comprise this model are both “stylised and impoverished”, representing necessarily “skeletal” representative versions of human relationships²². The idealisations of a hegemonic model prevail as a function of social propagation, and in this regard the efficient, hegemonic expansion of a dominant masculine ideal relies on culturally exalted exemplars of its ideals: prototypical figures of fantasy, such as film characters or prominent sports personalities, who articulate the cultural desirability of and direct a social compulsion to “an unattainable ideal”²³. In this manner, pictures of hegemonic masculinity serve to proliferate a naturalised sense of “the power that some men have over other men and that men have over women”²⁴.

The men in *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* are concerned with exercising such power, as a means of asserting and maintaining a degree of private and social authority. Where Roy in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* finds that he is directed toward violent dominance by his social environment and its discursive traditions, the

narrator from *Fight Club* utilises a similarly violent dominance in an attempt to claim a masculine identity, and eventually to alter his social and cultural conditions. These novels present men who, in their divergent degrees of engagement with the imagery of idealised masculine authority, exhibit the effects of its internalisation. Both demonstrate the capacity for an ideological imagery of naturalised male authority to translate, through the male body, into forms and practices of violent masculine dominance. Central to this discussion is the contention that the framework of a hegemonic hierarchy operates through formations of dominance and subjugation between groups of men. In a hegemonic system, the idealised model of masculinity is positioned in relation to subordinated others, and this is a relationship maintained by regular competition between men of varying performative models. Underlying this competition is a conception of male authority which exists in sharp distinction to female powerlessness. Effectively, men are placed upon the hierarchical scale of masculine performance in accordance with the relative "manliness" of their own individualised display. Connell insists on the fact that the rankings of masculinity "name not fixed character types but configurations of practice", and that the grid of hegemonic hierarchy is in this respect an inclusive one, encompassing varying postures of masculine performance within a system of assessment²⁵. Both Roy and the anonymous narrator look to establish themselves upon their environments, from within a format of dominance, and their desire to do so stems from an acknowledgement of their conditions as those which privilege a hegemonic format of masculine achievement at the expense of others.

Each protagonist lives in a world which involves them in this system of administration, and each of them come to an awareness of their positions as components of power in a hegemonic, hierarchical system of domination. They illustrate, in this regard, the ways in which an adherence to the hegemonic model

is ultimately limiting and damaging. They do this by referring to the tendency of hegemonic masculine authority – that “power” of an idealised manhood – to engender a naturalised practice of interpersonal violence. Simply, violence is represented in these novels as the principal instrument of a masculinity which strives to establish itself upon the hegemonic hierarchy. Such violence is grounded throughout in the principles of male competition. I use the term “hypermasculinity” to label this behavioural format: a practice which involves a continual exertion of dominance upon the external environment, it “represents an unconscious defensive manoeuvre on the part of males who are in conflict about or who are insecure about their identities as males”²⁶. I argue that this conflict and insecurity arises as a standard element of masculine identity constructed within a system of hegemony, as men within it are directed to compete for recognition, and, too, for a continual affirmation of that esteem. An institutionalised inequality between groups of men grounds masculine social relations in competition, as “although it may be true that men ... enjoy institutional privileges at the expense of women, as a group men share very unequally in the fruits of these privileges”²⁷. The hegemonic system of masculine assessment positions the men within it in relation to their environments, and fosters an understanding of identity as arising from continuing practices of competition. These men aspire to an idealised identity of autonomy, grounded in violence, and “while most men cannot possibly measure up to the dominant ideals of manhood, these maintain a powerful and often unconscious presence in our lives”²⁸.

The male characters of *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* engage with the other men around them from within a format of hypermasculine violence. They do so, ultimately, in seeking to establish a degree of masculine authority. D. Holt and C. Thompson testify to the fact that Western men are subjected to an infiltrative, instructive “fantasy of autonomy”, and they confront a system of identity in which

to be a "real man" is to be "adventurous, exciting, potent, and untamed"²⁹. H. Brod argues that such imagery is dangerous in the context of its social implementation, as "persisting images of masculinity [which] hold that 'real men' are physically strong, aggressive, and in control of their work" produce within the men on a hegemonic hierarchy deep "insecurities [which] impel them to cling all the more tightly to sources of masculine identity validation"³⁰. J. Katz suggests that a persistent route for men toward such validation may well be "through the use of their body as an instrument of power, dominance and control"³¹. Katz points to the relationship between this fantasy and the "pandemic of violence" as it is committed by men across the Western world: there exists a "cultural imagery linking various masculinities to the potential for violence", in which "violent behaviour is considered masculine (as opposed to feminine) behaviour"³². In describing the hierarchical system of hegemonic masculinity, Katz alludes to a sense of naturalised equation between "violent" and "authentic" masculinities, so as to produce an influential realm in which manhood itself is associated with "physical size, strength and ability to use violence successfully"³³. The system of masculine hegemony is thus implicated in the cultural proliferation and social production of "a glamorised form of violent masculinity ... produced and legitimated [through] comic books, toys, the sports culture, comedy, interactive video, music video [and] pornography"³⁴. For the men who are driven to assert a format of hegemonic masculine authority upon their social circumstances, "the physical body and its potential for violence provide a concrete means of achieving and asserting 'manhood'"³⁵.

In *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, Roy is driven to assert himself in hypermasculine terms as a matter of social necessity, while the narrator of *Fight Club* looks to exercise himself in this way as a means toward masculine self-realisation. The forms of violence – physical and discursive – in which they become involved are

enacted against women and other men, in an imposition of their male selfhood upon the outer environment. If "hypermasculinity" denotes a performance of active aggression and violence as a means toward masculine dominance, then the hypermasculine male is involved in a continually troubled attempt to "be", that is, "be seen as", a "real man". Violence committed against other men is seen to be a direct means of engagement with an immediate competitor on the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity. Equally, physical and psychological forms of violence against women represent a form of interaction, through the female figure, with other men. In this sense, the different forms of violent interaction conducted between the individual (hypermasculine) man and his immediate social environment might serve a similar purpose: to have masculinity conferred upon and within him, by fellow male participants, in a space of hierarchical competition and regulation. As masculine violence is seen to be a form of engagement with a general masculine audience, so the active subordination of women represents a similar means of recognition. K. Robinson affirms that in this sense, forms of violence against women "become part of the performance of hegemonic masculinity that can cement gendered cultural bonds between those boys and men who take up this form of masculinity"³⁶. Kimmel, too, describes the interdependence of these directions of male violence, noting that while men effectively "test" themselves under the gaze of other men, "women become a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on the masculine social scale"³⁷.

The protagonists of *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* engage with a type of hypermasculine violence which, alternately directed at other men, of varying masculine status, and at women, as subordinate commodities of male power relations, works in each manner to supervise their masculine performance. Hypermasculinity here has the capacity for policing masculinity, tying men to the instructions of an internalised masculine normativity. Hegemonic masculinity in

this sense serves to establish a form of punishment for non-compliant modes of masculine performance, in a rejection of them to the spaces of non-masculine subordinancy and discrimination. Through such dictation may this hierarchy account for and effectively exclude contrary gender performances toward the end of its own cyclical continuation. Both men find themselves involved, by these means, in an encompassing system of power which works upon their gender identities to reproduce structures of dominance. Ultimately, in either case, this involvement amounts to a thoroughly unfulfilling experience of masculine identity. The mechanism of hegemonic masculinity, productive as it is of a form of identity founded on problematic structures of dominance and oppression, creates a lived experience of constant competition and contradiction. M. Donaldson has noted to this end that the overriding experience of the hegemonic ideal is a distinctly unhappy one, that hegemonic dominance can “undermine, appropriate some men’s bodies, organise, impose, pass itself off as natural, deform, harm, and deny ... but not, seemingly, enrich and satisfy”³⁸. Tying men to a meaning of identity and purpose grounded in the explicit subordination of those around them – the dominance of women and the ongoing antagonism of other men – the hegemonic model fails to direct its members toward a gratifying sense of personal achievement or functional capability.

Marabou Stork Nightmares and *Fight Club* trace the performance of masculine gender identity through physical and discursive forms of violence; in different ways, they relate the limits of the performance constructed in these ways. I argue that in the former novel, all of the cultural institutions and social practices which instruct Roy in a normative enactment of “real” manliness are revealed to be moments which involve his body as a component of hegemonic power relations. A. Kelly has argued that Irvine Welsh’s novel is concerned most with presenting a “dominant and aggressive paradigm of masculinity”, developing a protagonist who exists as a

"cultural reproduction"³⁹. Roy is shown to be surrounded and instructed by a plethora of masculine models – "imperialist discourse, football, his father, uncle, brothers and peers" – all of which "prove inadequate and inauthentic and fail to instruct Roy how to behave, act or be like a 'man'"⁴⁰. These models foster within Roy an "aggressive assertion of dominant masculine identity", and thus involve him in the "economy of pain" of his gender system, in an equation of cyclical domination: "behind every victimiser there stands a victim and every victim in turn becomes a victimiser"⁴¹. B. Schoene-Harwood affirms that Welsh is concerned with depicting an environment of gender identity in which "every victimiser is shown to have started life as a victim"⁴². As he finds himself "under enormous pressure to assert himself as a man", so Roy makes clear that "physical violence often seems the only instrument by which he can command the respect he deems himself entitled to"⁴³.

Instructed into a format of identity whereby hypermasculine violence is utilised as a means of establishing the necessary measure of hegemonic masculine authority, Roy is inured to violence as a way of "determining a man's social rank as either a winner or a loser"⁴⁴. M. MacKay has written that, in examining the "pack behaviour of underclass men", the novel "provides Welsh's strongest critique to date of the tribalism of male behaviour"⁴⁵. Violence in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* is understood within the context of a social environment which legitimates domination as a means of identity construction and self assertion. Roy is seen to be implicated as part of "a wider context of sexual exploitation and abuse", directed against and from his body⁴⁶. Roy is in this sense indicative of the hegemonic "dichotomy of exploiter/exploited" which surrounds and defines his position, profoundly engaged within a structural, hierarchical system "which oppresses its own members"⁴⁷. Roy is involved, then, in the practice of "forever translating violation into violence", his procedure of identity construction effectively reduced to an equation in which

"abuse spawns abuse"⁴⁸. Schoene-Harwood finds that the novel is descriptive of the restricting effect of hegemonic power relations, as it "fails to introduce a constructive, emancipatory vision of how the vicious cycle of violence and violation can be broken". Similarly, E. Jackson and W. Maley point to the "double-bind" of Welsh's own "impossible position", his characters rooted to circumstances in which "the cycle is recycled"⁴⁹. I argue here that the novel is concerned with delineating this "dead-end" of hegemonic masculinity, involving its characters within the encompassing cycle of domination. *Marabou Stork Nightmares* illustrates the manner in which its characters attack each other in an ongoing, circular motion of violent assertion and retribution, remaining blind to the imperatives of power which direct their bodies, and unconscious to possibilities of social change.

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* engages with this very blindness. Palahniuk presents a male protagonist situated and implicated within an encompassing system of power which restricts his agency to a demarcated arena of limited capacity. P. Mathews has written that the narrator of this novel is in various ways "squeezed into a space designed to inhibit rather than enhance communication", and from this position, "lives a life that is mostly devoid of real, unscripted choices"⁵⁰. His existence is structured in accordance with an abstracted principle of power arrangement, as "the majority of his ethical choices are governed by economic necessity"⁵¹. M. Iocco has noticed that the narrator's attempt to remove himself from such "numbing" strictures serves to tie him to a format of "homosocial bonding and male belonging through violence"⁵². The narrator becomes involved in a model of hegemonic masculine violence, with other men, as a means of asserting his gender authority upon his social environment, with the objective of cultural revolt. Iocco argues that the novel is concerned here with a presentation of the "male body as a site where the meanings, limits and excesses of contemporary masculinity are tested, defined and redefined"⁵³. This performance of violence is

attacked by H. A. Giroux, for whom the display of such "chest-beating impulses ... legitimise unequal relations of power and oppression while condoning a view of masculinity predicated on the need to wage violence against all that is feminine"⁵⁴. J. Kavadlo disputes this reading, arguing that Giroux "substitutes what the film and novel depict for what they ultimately prescribe"⁵⁵. Palahniuk's depiction of the violence of hegemonic masculinity is seen to be less concerned with presenting a "chest-beating impulse" as an alternative to the narrator's static position of "consumerist conformity" than describing the manner in which this alternative evolves into a further system of equally static conformity⁵⁶.

L. M. Ta contends that the violence in *Fight Club* is a "necessary device", as it comes to involve the narrator and others in a structure of domination: "by creating the illusion of freedom through demands for self-regulation and self-punishment ... [the novel] relies on the realisation that these individuals seek relief from an oppressive capitalistic order through means that are equally conforming and repressive"⁵⁷. Ta relates how the narrator and his colleagues in the novel feel driven to "take aim at an enemy culture that has crippled their masculinity, but the recourse they choose literally self-destructs"⁵⁸. Palahniuk ultimately problematises what Giroux imagines to be the novel's "solution", as the narrator's attempt to "establish meaningful and personal heteronormative relations to confront the enemy ... has proved to be defeating"⁵⁹. M. Pettus has stated, to this end, that the narrator's engagement with a hegemonic model of violent dominance succeeds only in "reproducing the dominant system it opposes"⁶⁰. In this way, the narrator has served to impose a system of regulation in the stead of another system of regulation, and so his "challenge reproduces the [hegemonic] system's models and values"⁶¹. In *Fight Club*, the narrator finds his attempt at social change defeated by its own capacity to function in what Schoene-Harwood refers to as the "binarist logic of oppression"⁶². Palahniuk describes the extent to which a hegemonic system

of gender performance is inherently encircling, incriminating a procedure of social revolt in the dichotomy of domination.

Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* presents the "dead-end" of hegemonic masculinity, as all of the means by which Roy is educated in how to "be a man" are revealed to restrict his body to the cycle of violent dominance. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* indicates that this cycle serves to absorb challenges to itself, negating the narrator's efforts at subversion by implicating them within the structures of oppression. I will explore the texts of these two novels as a means of illuminating the key moments in which they trace the performance of a masculine gender identity through physical violence, and speak to the limits of the performance constructed in these ways.

"We terrorise oor ain people": the cycle of masculine violence in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*

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- Page 18 2. "All I have is the data I get": an internal discourse of hegemony
- Page 23 3. "The law ay the wild": learning violent dominance
- Page 29 4. "One of the top boys": the cycle of "casual" violence
- Page 35 5. The trouble with "my fuckin entitlement": recognising cyclical harm
- Page 40 6. "It's all just one big Z": the dead-end of hegemonic masculinity

1. Marabou Stork Nightmares: an introduction to the novel

The narrator of *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, Roy Strang, begins the novel in an initially unaccounted-for coma. His narration takes form in three intersecting spheres of consciousness: the hallucinatory imagination of himself as colonial explorer, the chronological account of his past life, and the real-time description of his hospital bed-ridden, comatose state.

Roy's dream-state positions him in the role of an imperial hunter/explorer, travelling through colonial Africa, together with his hunter/professional footballer companion, Sandy Jamieson. Their expedition is constructed in the narrative format of the Boy's Own tradition. What initially appears as a fantastical tale of spirited adventure gradually becomes an uglier picture of Roy's own repressed masculine identity, revealing the more menacing aspects of his nature through surrealist images of exploitative colonial cruelty and sexual violence.

This creative narrative overlaps with Roy's retrospective relation of his own history, in which he recounts the events leading to his unconscious condition. His description begins in Leith, Scotland, where he was born into a middle-class family, consisting of his violently authoritarian father, John, his delusional mother, Vet, two half-brothers, Tony and Bernard (the former an unashamed womaniser, the latter homosexual), and his promiscuous sister, Kim. In addition to this mix is the family Alsatian, Winston Two, which Roy despises.

In his early adolescence, Roy and his family relocate from these beginnings to the prospects of Johannesburg, South Africa. There they are supported by Roy's uncle, Gordon, a champion of apartheid, who proceeds to sexually molest Roy and blackmail him into silence. When Gordon is killed by a car bomb, Roy finds himself

and his family returned to Scotland, their visit to South Africa having lasted just eighteen months.

From here, Roy spends the next few years developing into a violently homophobic, misogynist football hooligan. While he maintains full-time employment as a computer systems analyst, Roy expends most of his energy in fervently violent brawls with other, similar groups of hooligans. Roy quickly rises to the summit of his group, becoming one of the "top boys".

This violent pursuit continues until the group targets a young girl, named Kirsty Chalmers, and systematically drug, kidnap and gang-rape her. The group goes unpunished for their crime, acquitted at the subsequent trial, and Roy remains stricken by the moral callousness of the act. Deciding that his life's work has been but to inflict harm upon others, he attempts to commit suicide, and it is his failure in this act which leaves him in his coma.

Toward the end of the novel, while still unconscious, Roy is visited in his hospital bed by Kirsty. As she tells him how she has methodically murdered his "casual" colleagues, she mutilates his genitals and finally kills him.

2. "All I have is the data I get": an internal discourse of hegemony

The narrative of Roy's comatose imagination presents a particular opportunity for an exploration of his psyche, seen to display the extent of his immersion within the logic of hegemonic masculinity, and to illuminate the predominant ways in which this logic works upon him through the media of cultural discourses. At issue is how Roy imagines himself within the recesses of his subjectivity, as the pictures of his dream-state illustrate a preoccupation with cultural idealisations. I will examine here the constitution of these pictures with the aim of describing the culturally idealised gender identity with which Roy is engaged throughout the novel. In doing so, I will show how imagined forms of masculinity are constructed from the material of cultural discourses. This will lead to an understanding of Roy's narrative as a reflection, first, of his desire to cultivate an idealised gender identity from the discourses which inform him, and, second, of the extent to which these discourses direct him toward a specific model of hegemonic dominance. This model is revealed in the narrative to be founded upon a naturalised practice of violence, which in turn yields a conception of colonial adventure as an expedition of exploitation. Roy's imagination ultimately serves to narrate an internalised ideal of hegemonic masculinity grounded in practices of violent subordination.

Exploring the ways in which masculinities are produced in apparatuses of cultural discourse, G. Dawson begins by stating that "masculinities are lived out in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination"⁶³. By this he means that popular media of cultural information, or the "narrative resource[s] of a culture", constitute a "currency of recognisable social identities"⁶⁴. In this sense, "idealised norms and stereotypes of gender" are derived from a "cultural repertoire of images and narratives"⁶⁵. In particular, Dawson emphasises the capacity of "heroic fantasy", the "wishful imaginings of a secure and coherent masculine identity" to perform as

a principal "cultural commodity", its distribution into the structures of psychic make-up and everyday life conducted through the media of popular culture"⁶⁶. Through the continued cultural broadcast of "hero figures", "the history of Empire continues to have a determining influence over cultural and political life in modern Britain"⁶⁷. In *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, Roy's comatose implementation of an idealised masculine format is indicative of the extent to which predominant "imagined forms" of masculinity are "made up" and propagated by "creative cultural activity"⁶⁸. His unconscious imaginings of colonial masculinity and adventure mark an interaction with the "repertoire" of his cultural environment, as he imagines an idealised masculine self from specific material of cultural information. These discourses of adventure and fantasy are seen to instruct the manner in which he fashions an internalised understanding of gender role and representation.

Throughout his unconscious imaginings, Roy implicates himself within a "Boys' own" model of adventure narrative. His engagement with this format serves, firstly, to illustrate a desire for a culturally idealised gender identity. B. Schoene-Harwood has noted that the novel's "fantasy safari" might present a pathway into the "dark continent of Roy's masculine imaginary", as he is able to "access colonial Africa as a state of virtual power, freedom and authority [simply] by having accurately memorised all the relevant props and scripts of imperial adventure"⁶⁹. In the course of his dream-state Roy "skilfully mimics the pseudo-aristocratic diction of traditional public-schoolboy adventure narratives"⁷⁰. A. Kelly writes that the language of Roy's narration functions as a parodic echo of the "Enid Blyton-esque" tradition of adventure story writing, adopting a "euphuistic discourse" in describing the fantastical realm of idealised masculine identity⁷¹. Shot through with exclamations of "gosh and golly" adolescent enthusiasm, in which everything is either "wizard", "heavenly", "horrid" or "beastly"⁷², his narrative model often matches that of an English boys' annual. Roy finds this fantastical format

immensely alluring, continually expressing a yearning to “go deeper”, “back down under” into what is “SUPPOSED TO BE AFRICA OR SOMEWHERE OR EVEN INSIDE MY HEAD” (MSN 52, 122). This tendency in itself points to his desire to enter the fantastical formation of colonial Africa as a means of imaginatively replicating conditions for “exotic self-expansion”: when living in an adventure fantasy, Roy may construct an idealised masculine self⁷³.

Roy’s engagement with this fantastical narrative marks, secondly, the extent of his enculturation within its discursive traditions. Simply, Roy’s treatment of the “props and scripts” of the “Boys’ own” literary tradition in an imaginative narration of adventure reveals the manner and extent of their internalisation within him. P. Farley describes the “ideological purpose” behind these representative forms, noting that they have served a significantly discursive function as potent “teaching devices”, designed to “transmit ideological ‘manliness’ or ‘womanliness’ to children”⁷⁴. Crucially, this imagery is one in which “British males demonstrated the most desirable masculine ideal”, as the “representations of ideal masculinity were defined by contrast with various indigenous ‘others’”: the adventure narrative thus adopts as a central motive a “construct of gender hierarchy in which the primary or “central” subject, against which everything “other” or “else” was usually defined, was English, male, white and middle-class”⁷⁵. Dawson writes that the format of masculine identity offered by the adventure story tradition is itself founded upon conceptions of naturalised violence⁷⁶. Roy’s imaginative enactment within the specific profile of a hunter is important, as “hunting lay at the heart of the nineteenth-century image of exploration, pioneering and adventure ... [displaying] stoicism, application, command of self and followers”⁷⁷. This imaginative embodiment is representative of the extent to which a naturalised, violent dominance is internalised within Roy’s unconscious as a normative quality of ideal masculinity.

While Roy endeavours to position himself and Sandy as benevolent explorers and hunters, occupied only within a compassionate civilising role, this imagery is continually undercut by the interrupting visions of more self-interested, abusive motivations. These moments of exposure become most persistent when Roy and Sandy approach Lochart Dawson, a colonial businessman supposedly concerned with “taking [Africa] to the next phase” (MSN 52). This supposedly commercial enterprise is continually exposed as simple exploitation, its notions of “opportunity”, “vision” and “progress” effectively translating into practices of “asset-stripping” and “child-molesting” (MSN 54). Roy finds that within his narration, he struggles to remain entirely “in control”, and the state of imagination in which “me and Sandy, ... we’re the good guys in this” is subjected to a steady critique (MSN 161). Sandy is often described to be acting purely on “humanitarian principles”, a romantic description undermined by recurrent narrative flashes which hint at “a sick tribe of demons lurking behind his generous if gormless facade” (MSN 6). The sympathetic, altruistic imagery of the “humanitarian” colonist is destabilised most in moments where Sandy attempts to sexually assault the native boys he supposes to protect: “C’moan little fellow, we’ll have some fun! Sandy said. Then he went, - Ye want a fuckin ride ye wee cunt, ah’ll gie ye a fuckin ride awright” (MSN 68).

C. Whyte notes that Roy’s comatose “condition is a refuge as much as it is a predicament”⁷⁸. What Roy seeks in these fantasies of cultural discourse is to embody a format of hegemonic masculinity and the stable sense of social authority it implies. As a white, upper-class Englishman, involved in the adventurous and perilous exploration of colonial Africa, Roy can imagine himself within discursive terms. The unstable nature of this imaginative figure testifies to the “brittle fragility of all projections of ideal masculine perfection”⁷⁹. An examination of his lived, middle-class, Scottish status will reveal both the extent to which he yearns for this gendered authority, and the manner in which he is instructed to embody it by

cultural discourses. Furthermore, these imaginings display as a central underlying feature a mode of naturalised, exploitative violence: the normative utilisation of brutality toward the achievement of self-interested ends. Roy himself remarks that “all I have is the data I get. I don’t care whether it’s produced by my senses or my memory or my imagination ... The only reality is the images and texts” (MSN 16). As is made clear from a reading of his unconscious narration, his discursive instruction has served to naturalise the doctrine of hegemonic masculinity as a way of thinking and seeing. It serves, further, to reveal the extent to which his identity has become implicated in a model of violent, corrupt masculine performance, grounded in competitive brutality: “down here in the comforts of my vegetative state, in my secret world I can fuck who I want, kill who I please” (MSN 17).

3. "The law ay the wild": learning violent dominance

If Roy's immersion within the instructions of cultural discourse ultimately lead him to an understanding of his masculinity grounded in naturalised violence, then the socialising procedures of his upbringing mirror the logic of that movement. As has been shown, Roy's engagement with a hegemonic hierarchy of masculinity is ensured and displayed by the extent of his discursive interaction. In a similar way, his relationship with this hierarchy is both solidified and problematised by an education into the social practice of its cultural doctrine. While discourses of normative violence inform his unconscious mind, systematic exercises of violent dominance work upon his body. I will examine Roy's conception of his own social environment as a moment of involvement within power relations of social separation and constraint. This conception combines with a childhood education which advocates and encourages a normative application of both retributive and competitive violence. At this point, Roy's socialisation into a cycle of violence is compounded by his move to South Africa, in which he is taught to regard social and individual opportunity as arising from the overt domination of others. Finally, his treatment of Winston Two illustrates the extent to which he is thoroughly trained and implicated in the cyclical violence of hegemonic masculinity.

As Roy grows up, he becomes increasingly aware of the distinctively disadvantaged nature of his social environment. He refers to the building in which he is raised, in an underprivileged "scheme", as an "ugly rabbit hutch ... a systems built, 1960s maisonette block of flats, five stories high" (MSN 19). These conditions serve to impose upon Roy a sense of profound inferiority, as they denote a social status of powerlessness. B. Schoene-Harwood notes that Roy is in this sense "structurally emasculated", while under the weight of "patriarchal imperatives", and this combination directs his behaviour in a world "ravaged by a continuous battle for superiority and power"⁸⁰. This is a sense continually reinforced in the novel's

portrayal of active social subordination, culminating in his arrest, at the age of nine, for the seemingly innocuous act of "playing football in the street" (*MSN 21*). He affirms that this social positioning is a matter of internalisation: "we should have known, even at that age, that as the scheme was a concentration for the poor; this like everything else, was prohibited" (*MSN 22*). Other forms of amusement are similarly proscribed, as when his limited attempts to explore "as far as the fuckin beach" are interrupted by "people in the big hooses" who would "go away and call the polis" (*MSN 26*). Roy and his companions translate their own dispossession into moments of cruelty, catching and killing bees in "little prison cells ... we used ice-lolly sticks as the doors. We had a concentration camp, a tiny Scottish housing scheme, for bees" (*MSN 22*). His description of ordinary childhood activity suggests a formative experience shot through with normalised violence: "as a kid I did the normal things kids in the scheme did: ... battered smaller/weaker kids, [and] got battered by bigger/stronger kinds" (*MSN 21*).

Roy's socialisation into a violent format of behaviour continues and intensifies from within the domestic setting of his family unit. From the outset his parents involve him in a naturalised routine of regular physical violence, making him responsible in the acts of maltreatment performed against his body. His father, John, is shown to be "a total basket case", who "was always threatening to shoot anybody who complained about us" (*MSN 19, 23*). Roy and his siblings "were all frightened of him ... [and] worried about the shotgun he kept under the bed" (*MSN 26 - 27*). The uneasy sense that John "could change moods quickly" is brutally underlined when Roy is made the victim of a "bad battering", requiring "six stitches above the eye" (*MSN 26, 23*). Roy is immediately made complicit in this violence, forced to lie about his wound: "I had to tell everyone at the casualty that I was muckin aboot with Tony and I fell. I had bad headaches for a long time eftir that" (*MSN 23*). In this sense, his silence is a matter of social education, involving his body within a

recurring history of physical abuse. His mother, "if anything, was worse" (MSN 19), and "if the neighbours were terrified of my Dad ..., they were also pretty wary of my Ma" (MSN 23). Roy recalls receiving a "good slapping from my Ma. As she belted me, I remembered Vet saying: - I'm only daein this cause if yir faither finds oot n he does it, ye'll ken aw about it" (MSN 62). He remarks that this logic is sound, and that he lives under the eternal, "extreme threat" of "incurring [John's] wrath" (MSN 62). Nevertheless, while "she was actually doing me a favour, ... unfortunately she was instinctively quite good at violence. She stopped when my nose started to bleed heavily" (MSN 62). These instances of brutal punishment together constitute a systematic schooling into an understanding of violence as something which may be used to discipline the body.

Roy's domestic education into expectations of violent retribution is accompanied by a simultaneous training in normative practices of violent competition. He describes how John institutes a ritualised arrangement of aggressive, inter-family antagonism, in the form of boxing "lessons" involving Roy and his brother, Bernard. John, driven as he is to educate his sons in the violently heteronormative practices of a hegemonic masculine ideology, "set[s] up a ring in the living-room, with four confiscated traffic cones defining its perimeters", delineating a domestic setting as a literal site of violent opposition (MSN 29). Roy recounts how his father, who "had a thing about me being too uncoordinated, ... and considered Bernard too effeminate", would "force us to fight until one or both us broke down in tears of misery and frustration" (MSN 29). Roy himself readily internalises the ruthless logic of one-on-one combat, finding that while "Bernard was older, bigger and heavier-handed, ... I was more vicious and quickly sussed out that you could do greater damage with slashing swipes than punches" (MSN 29). Roy is encouraged to an amplified heartlessness by John's commands to "Poke ehs fuckin eye right oot! ... GO FIR THE KILL, NAE FUCKIN PRISONERS!" (MSN 29). Eventually, with Roy

having "opened up [Bernard's] eye above the brow with a tearing twist", Bernard is left with "blood ... splashing out onto his face", and is told by John that "Ye'll huv tae learn tae stick up fir yirsell" (MSN 30). Roy explains the rationale behind this ritual, concluding that "those fights [simply] made us fear Dad and hate each other" (MSN 30).

This impression of ritualised violence and dominance is later extended and exaggerated in the context of his family's visit to South Africa. Here Roy is socialised into a conception of personal identity and achievement founded upon the violent subordination of others. He is introduced to South Africa, by his father, as "a white man's country", where "white is right": a site of authority established on a generalised political ideology and social assertion of dominance (MSN 24). This perception is confirmed upon meeting his Uncle Gordon, an "unreconstructed pro-apartheid white supremacist" (MSN 62). Gordon educates Roy in the racist perspective and practice of white dominance, relating the violently discriminative means by which he has come to a position of social influence: "I'm a ... penniless Scotsman from Granton. There I was nothing, another skinny teddy boy. Here, I count. No fucking Kaffir is going to take this away from me!" (MSN 84). Roy is continually taught to regard and treat any "lazy, stupid person with the dirty-coloured skin" in the heartless, contemptuous manner of a "real Afrikaaner" (MSN 65). Roy and his sister are persuaded against any closeness to their caring housemaid on the grounds that she is "a servant and a Kaffir" (MSN 64). Roy comes to a sense of his own social dominance as a state founded on a sustained, systematic subordination of the inferior "other", and is trained in these terms by Gordon: "These people are different to you and I, Roy. They are one stage up from the baboons you'll see in the *veld*" (MSN 64). This is indicative of Schoene-Harwood's assertion that power gradually "becomes the main driving force in Roy's life, infiltrating and corrupting all his other interests, principles and desires"⁸¹. He

is made continually aware that his is a world defined by the deep, institutionalised divisions between people, and that within such a world, he must adopt a "love-proof apparatus exclusively aimed at pre-emptive defence"⁸².

Roy learns to embrace his family's new-found social status, striving to characterise himself in a new terminology of personal opportunity. He strives for exemplary academic achievement, envisioning a realm of individual progression by intellectual means: "I had, for the first time, ambition of a sort ... I was into being a zoologist" (MSN 77). His assertion that he "could see possibilities ... I saw a career path" arises from a sense of personal potential as per the luxury of a dominant social position, which is itself predicated upon both an ideology and everyday enforcement of violence (MSN 77). Roy is by these means socialised into a perception of self worth which defines itself solely in relation to the perceived worthlessness of others. His own superiority, in this sense, is a relationship established and maintained by a format of naturalised violence. When he leaves South Africa to return to Scotland, Roy finds that "I seemed to be popular there; a big cheese, a top boy, *numero uno*" (MSN 87). He gains from this recognition a deep, "perverse sense of empowerment; an ego even" (MSN 88). His self-regard is defined purely in relation to a perception of others' inadequacy: "I knew I was fuckin special ... I knew I wasn't going to be like the rest of them; my old man, my old lady, Bernard, Tony, Kim, the other kids in the scheme" (MSN 88). His assessment that "I was Roy Strang" is thus qualified by the perception that "they were rubbish. They were nothing" (MSN 88). He is conscious that within the violent cycle of his environment, social and personal authority is maintained by continual, violent practices of enforcement, and so his notion of social influence translates into resolve: "Maybe I had to go back, but it was going to be different. I wasnae gaunny take any shite" (MSN 88).

He concludes his visit to Africa having efficiently learned “the law ay the wild”, declaring his identity to be a matter of seeking out and sustaining physical dominance: “Ah wis gaunny make sure every cunt kent ma fuckin name” (*MSN* 74, 89). Roy comes to an idea of his environment as one where a naturalised format of cyclical violence operates with the objective of sustaining positions of social authority and private opportunity. When considering his upbringing, Roy relates that he has been “surrounded by latent and manifest violence my whole life” (*MSN* 134). A significant part of this environment and the mindset it has served to foster within him is Winston Two, the family Alsatian. Roy remembers the pet as a “vicious beast” who “savaged [him] badly”, and, as per the conditions of his violent environment and the instructions of his unforgiving upbringing, he responds in retaliatory mode: when moved to contemplate “turning the other cheek and Christian forgiveness and all that sort of shite”, he concludes that “nobody believed in that crap” (*MSN* 165). He thus makes clear that a naturalised cycle of violence has instilled within him a philosophy of instinctive competition and dominance, where “it was you against the world, [and] every cunt knew that” (*MSN* 165). After he exacts his excessively sadistic revenge, he explains the rationale behind his actions in the terminology of his socialisation: “Winston made a mistake. He fucked about wi Roy Strang. Nae cunt fucks about wi Roy Strang” (*MSN* 168).

4. "One of the top boys": the cycle of "casual" violence

Roy's socialisation into the cycle of retributive and competitive violence, as a means of securing and maintaining social status, is vigorously applied in the context of his return to Scotland. Roy's upbringing into a mode of competitive violence thus involves his body in a repetitive behavioural loop, where instances of violation develop into continued practices of outward violence. I will explore the nature of Roy's initial forays into violence against men as an involvement within a cyclical procedure, where his physical aggression is utilised as a means toward asserting and defending his masculine standing. This enactment displays an inner preoccupation with a sense of identity grounded in violent declaration and constant reinforcement, his masculine character ultimately reliant on a propensity for violence. In the light of this necessitated taste for violence, his involvement with a gang of football hooligans grants Roy a forum for the potential achievement of recognition, *via* the display of hypermasculinity, as detailed in the introduction above. This recognition serves a function both from within and outside the hooligan social circle, effectively allowing Roy to parade his masculinity, as an internalised cultural ideal, before a general social audience. His recital of a violent hypermasculinity involves Roy in the organising business of hegemonic masculinity, encircling him in a binding routine of violence directed against and from his body.

Roy begins to turn violence done against him into a mode of instinctive, excessive retribution from the moment he returns to Scotland. Schoene-Harwood has described how, if South Africa presents to Roy a form of "promised land", the "scheme" in Scotland offers only the threat of "systemic emasculation"⁸³. Roy's behaviour upon his return is seen to be in reaction to this threat, as "it seems as if the more precarious and insecure a youth's masculine status, the likelier it

becomes that he should overcompensate and resort not only to violence but ... 'ultraviolence'⁸⁴. Roy's response to this insecurity is an engagement with the "ultraviolence" of hypermasculinity, looking to dominate his peers lest they dominate him. His resolution that "it was going to be different" develops into a compulsion to build and sustain a reputation for violent behaviour (MSN 88). He strives for a generalised recognition of his masculine status, to establish an implicit sense in those around him that "you didnae fuck aroond with Roy Strang" (MSN 98). When victimised by a group of older boys, he is at once determined not to yield to their subordination of him and tormented by his inability to dominate: "I knew at any time I could have stopped this nightmare by saying: Tony Strang's my brar, but I didnae want tae ... All I felt was anger at [the boys], and anger at masel fir being too weak tae oppose the cunt[s]" (MSN 101). His frustration here stems from the fact that he is unable to act on the "ugly impulse" within him, to contest his status as victim in a way which reflects the fact that "This was me. This was Roy Strang we were talking about. Roy Strang" (MSN 101). His victimisation develops into a driving need for retaliation, as his identity revolves around the performance of contestation; Roy yearns to respond in kind to what amounts to an assault on his masculine identity. Years later, he remains driven by the need to "get revenge" (MSN 102): in an encounter with the bully, he recounts, "I broke his nose ... and opened up his cheek with my Stanley ... It was just ma wey ay saying tae the cunt: My name is Roy Strang" (MSN 178 - 179).

As Roy continues to move through his social environment, he remains increasingly conscious of this need, persistently alert to the slightest affront and always primed for a violent response. When teased by his family, for instance, his immediate response is one of rage: "I felt my head pound and my pulse quicken ... Ah'm fuckin Roy Strang. Ah'm fuckin... I took a deep breath and pulled myself together" (MSN 141). His trained hypermasculinity thus informs a standardised, naturalised mode

of response, and, discursively instructed and socially trained in the practice of dominant autonomy, Roy finds that mere economic empowerment is insufficient in satisfying his drive for a socially authoritative masculine status. Though his job as a computer consultant has effectively elevated him from the poverty of his childhood background, allowing him to make "mair poppy than any of the cheeky schemie peasants who had once tried to torment him", he finds its regulatory effects turning his life into "a bit of a drag" (MSN 116). Kelly argues that Roy's frustration here stems from "his inability to reconcile the masculine myths of empowerment and conquest with the ... entrapments of his social environment"⁸⁵. As a counter to these behavioural regulations, he seeks out a social circle in which he may exhibit and enjoy a degree of autonomous, distinctly hyper-masculine achievement. And so, although he "was never really intae fitba", and "had gone to a few Hibs games as a kid ..., but always got bored quickly", he finds the arena of football hooliganism as the most attractive option (MSN 116 - 117). Realising that his choices are limited to football-related violence and tame conformity, he "sort of came to the conclusion that the best possibility for me in having a good crack was with the cashies ... and I started to listen to some of their stories with interest" (MSN 116 - 117).

Roy is attracted to the violence of the "casuals" as it represents for him a realm of explicitly hierarchical gender achievement. The logic which underpins their collective performance of violence is one which infuses Roy's own consciousness, and he seems to ascend the pecking order simply by enacting an already naturalised, socialised perspective of dominance. In his "first away run" with the gang of casuals, Roy learns the system of reward and repercussion which directs normative "casuals" behaviour from Lexo, who declares that as "the hardest crew in Europe", "we dinnae fuckin run": "nae cunt better shite oot. Remember, a cunt that messes is a cunt that dies" (MSN 133). Roy later witnesses this system in action,

noticing that Dexy, who "had not acquitted himself well in the swedge tonight", is labelled a "fuckin wanker" and "dismissed" from the inner circle of approval, departing from the group "looking like a timid dog" (MSN 134). In contrast, "the albino-looking guy named Ghostie" is acknowledged for a particularly brutal display of violence, and is thus welcomed into the inner ring and labelled "a crazy radge" (MSN 134). Setting a standard of hypermasculine behaviour, Ghostie becomes a target of social praise and admiration, and Roy himself describes how he had "never seen anything so fast, so ruthless and powerful"(MSN 135). This hierarchy is established by a sense of what is required from "a top boy", and policed by those "top boys" themselves (MSN 135). Roy is thus engaged with the project of establishing and confirming his own position upon the "casuals" pecking order, both a means of acquiring masculine recognition and avoiding social humiliation.

Having internalised and practised the central principles of football hooliganism from an early age, he is accepted and acknowledged within the "casuals" fairly quickly and easily, finding that "the season was in its infancy and I was already known tae the top boys" (MSN 135). Fighting with the "cashies" offers Roy an effective means of achieving and asserting masculine status, and he begins his involvement "determined to make an impression", taking to this "new situation" of violent performance in a manner which displays an obvious aptitude: "I steamed in swinging, kicking and biting. This cunt I was hitting was hitting me back but it was like I couldn't feel a thing and ... his eyes were filling with fear and it was the best feeling on earth" (MSN 133, 134). His enjoyment of such activity illustrates the extent to which he is invested within it, as a form of engagement with both self and others, and the fighting, or "swedgin", becomes for him a ritual of catharsis, as it triggers and enables a learned, violent impulse: "the violence was brilliant ... the excitement, the buzz, the feeling of your body charged up with it all ... I preferred a

swedge rush to anything" (MSN 152). He continues to involve himself despite the risk of serious injury, learning to "get past your fear and pain and ... keep swinging and booting at anything that came your way, and inspect the damage later" (MSN 153). It becomes clear that Roy's investment in life as a "casual" revolves solely around the fighting itself, and although "there was plenty of opportunity tae make money wi the cashies, ... I was only really interested in the swedgin" (MSN 137).

It is this violence, ultimately, which grants him a sense of private validity and social recognition as a man of hegemonic masculine status. The inner system of hierarchy which arranges the makeup of the "casuals" indicates the manner in which Roy's "crew" functions as an organisation. Roy's team of "casuals" have long since recognised that their violent behaviour has little relation to football itself: "*the bigotry, the posturing, the pageantry. That was just shite fae us. We wir here oan business*" (MSN 171, original italics). The "*badges and the buntings*" are perceived as a sort of "*excuse, a silly toytown reason to muster up the kind ay force we'd learned tae love fir its ain sake, tae have on tap*" (MSN 171). This is the business of masculine performance, the "casuals" effectively managing the commerce of identity; Roy strives to have his gendered performance recognised and praised, seeking to establish and maintain his own identity as a "hard cunt" (MSN 140). After one particularly vicious incident, Roy reveals the underlying concern of his violent excess, screaming to the world at large, "**ROY STRANG'S THE FUCKIN NAME! REMEMBER THAT FUCKIN NAME! ROY STRANG ... EUROPE'S NUMERO UNO!**" (MSN 173). The objective of his "casual" violence, then, is to establish, before a general social audience, the fact of his masculine identity. The status of "Roy Strang", in this sense, is determined by the measure of his violent dominance.

Roy notes that from an early age, he "wanted to be the top fuckin brass" (MSN 107). This is a status of power built from within the organising structures of hegemonic

masculine violence, Roy's dominance effectively surviving on the sustained subordination of others: "that was it with the power, ... you just had to take it. When you took it, you had to hold onto it" (MSN 106). The successive pattern of violence is illustrated most effectively in the cycle of abuse committed against and perpetuated through Roy's body. While in South Africa, Roy is continually sexually abused by Gordon, who would blackmail him into silence. On his return to Scotland, Roy turns this abuse outward, transforming his own victimisation into a corresponding victimisation of a boy he names "Dressed-By-His-Ma-Cunt" (MSN 108). Roy forces this boy, at knifepoint, to "wank [him] off", and "savoured the pain and trepidation which filled his eyes" (MSN 108 - 109). Years later, Roy notices that "Dressed-By-His-Ma-Cunt", has in his turn developed this abuse into the further abuse of others, having joined the "casuals" "top table": "he was a huge bulky bastard with a real mouth and a big swagger ... His face looked the same but his eyes were different ... they were now still, intense and focused" (MSN 248, 249). In his violence toward those around him, Roy perpetuates the cycle of abuse into which he has been socialised. Ultimately, this is a format of interaction which encircles him within a cyclical dichotomy of abuse, tying him to an inescapable, binarist logic of beating and being beaten.

5. The trouble with "my fuckin entitlement": recognising cyclical harm

Roy's behaviour amounts to a cyclical dichotomy of violence, as he is driven, at all times, to impose his masculine identity upon and at the expense of others. His behaviour in this regard serves to continue the motions of hegemonic masculine dominance. This tendency culminates in the novel's central scene, in which Roy and his group of "casuals" gang-rape a young woman named Kirsty Chalmers. I will explore this scene as a moment of interrelational power exchange, in which male characters regulate their relative masculine standings through the assault and subordination of the female figure. This pattern of regulation accounts for Roy's own participatory approach(es) to the rape itself, describing his behaviour and narration within the context of a hegemonic framework of masculine performance: as either complicit witness or principal instigator, he is involved in the act of female domination from within the violent power relations of his hierarchical gender system. The subsequent trial illustrates the extent of Roy's involvement in a generalised system of power, and exposes him to a sense of himself within its workings. The procedure of this trial serves to cement the logic of hegemonic masculinity as a cultural standard, involving its parties in a hierarchy of social legitimacy and ultimately acquitting the "casuals" of any wrongdoing. Roy ultimately comes to an awareness of his own harmful role as a component of power, as the hegemony of masculine dominance is allowed to work through his body, upon others, in a cycle of continuation.

From his position at the pinnacle of masculine achievement, as one of the "top boys", Roy is involved in the business of social dominance. Within the equation of his endless search for masculine esteem, women are regarded as eternally subordinate objects through which he and other men may exhibit a format of normative, hegemonic authority. From within the hegemonic cycle of masculine

dominance, he is granted "access to half the decent fanny in the toon" simply by virtue of his involvement in "cashie activities" (MSN 153). This is an attitude which suffuses the scene in which Kirsty is gang-raped by Roy and his group of "casuals". This incident is begun with an observation from inside the group that Kirsty "fancied herself as the top girl, a big fuckin cock tease", who "hung around wi the boys but nae cunt could git intae her keks" (MSN 177). Kirsty's rejection of the "casuals" advances in this sense amounts to a form of insubordination, a failure or refusal to recognise the sexual authority of their masculine position. Lexo declares, to this end, that "a sow's goat tae realise that if they hing around wi top boys, they huv tae dae the biz. Examples must be made" (MSN 179). The rationale behind their abuse of Kirsty is thus founded upon a sense of legitimation, the sense that "the boys are entitled tae a line up" (MSN 178). She is relegated by this thinking to the rank of "lovely piece ay meat" (MSN 180). During the protracted rape scene, Kirsty is made a literal object, sandwiched between two men who are engaged in using her body in an establishment of their dominance: "Dempsey and Lexo were up her cunt and arse at the same time, their balls pushed together. - Ah kin feel your cock, Lexo, Demps gasped" (MSN 190).

In his initial version of events, Roy's participation in the rape scene reflects the extent to which he is directed to impose his normative masculine identity, upon others, through violence. Within the strictures of this hegemonic hierarchy, as much as "slags ... huv tae fuckin learn lessons", so are these men involved in a process of instructing each other (MSN 185). Roy is made aware of the act of rape as one which is utilised as a form of arrangement: whereas Kirsty is relegated to the position of "top boy's perk", her body functions as a means of ordering the statuses and behaviours of the men "entitled" to the abuse of it (MSN 182). The men around him make clear to Roy that his participation is a necessary part of the rape proceedings, that this event marks his induction into the "top boys" club:

"Think ay this as yir initiation, Ozzy said. – Aye, yuv no been done yit, Demps smiled" (MSN 178). Roy is thus motivated to perform his abusive role out of a concern for his hierarchical masculine standing, coming to a sense of such abuse as an activity of standardised "top boys" practice. He recognises in this regard that throughout the incident he is "terrified ... shit-scared": "If I shat out I was dead" (MSN 189, 182). His attempted refusal to contribute to Kirsty's degradation is blocked by Lexo's warning that "Nae cunt shites oot", and his eventual, reluctant effort is mocked by his "cashie" colleagues: "Ah dinnae think the earth exactly moved for it thair, Strangy, Dempsey laughed, as I gave a weak grunt ... – Last ay the rid hoat lovers right enough, Lexo said scornfully" (MSN 184). He is similarly advised not to "go aw poofy oan ays" when he expresses concern for her health, greeted with "withering scorn" when he protests that the abuse "might fuck her up", and told to regard it as "an education fir the sow" (MSN 185).

Roy affirms this hierarchical interaction as one which is representative of both his masculine environment and his own perspective. He is revealed, later, as the principal instigator of the event, the man "RUNNING THIS GIG!", directing the "casuals" in a formation of violent domination (MSN 262). Kirsty presents for him a natural target of such aggression: "I knew the type exactly ... slags like that have to be taught a lesson, or they'll pish all over you" (MSN 177). He regards her performance of femininity within the terminology of hegemonic masculine ascendancy, and the "lesson" he speaks of is his compulsion to have her revere his masculine influence, in line with the expectations of his "entitlement": "She looked so fuckin cool and proud the way she danced ... her mouth in that pout that seemed tae spit out contempt for all the world" (MSN 182). In accordance with the pattern of hegemonic masculine dominance, he seeks to negate her sense of agency by stamping his superiority upon her body. Kirsty presents for him, in this way, an object through which he must renew his "top boy" status through sexual violence:

“naebody takes the pish ootay me, nae cunt. I thought of her finally getting it, watching her hurt, watching her bleed, watching her say please” (MSN 178). Kirsty herself later recounts the actual manner of Roy’s involvement, stating that he “wanted me to see Roy Strang ... wanted me to feel what happens to any cunt that fucks about with Roy Strang” (MSN 259). His rape of her is thus revealed to be conducted with the purpose of imposing upon and within her a sense of her own helplessness, in relation to his masculine dominance.

Roy’s sense of his participation in Kirsty’s rape as a format of interrelational power dynamics is extended in the trial that follows. From the beginning, Roy and the “casuals” are ambivalent in the construction of their own defence, recognising that Kirsty’s legal team “had no case. We just had to keep our nerve” (MSN 191). Armed only with “exemplary behaviour”, the “top boys” are positioned at an immediate advantage by the same system which reduces Kirsty’s own case to a “minefield”, from which “she has two chances: slim and none” (MSN 207). Roy’s attorney, Conrad Donaldson, makes clear that a conviction is an ultimately unlikely result, as Kirsty herself faces a legal system prejudiced against her: “the rapist who goes to jail is a most unfortunate sod ... [and] the odds are heavily weighted against that happening” (MSN 206). Roy relates how “it was evident right from the start that she was the one on trial”, as the outcome hinges on “her word against the four of us” (MSN 211, 207). Roy describes the direction of predisposition which ultimately favours his own defence against her claims, noting that Kirsty “failed to gain any empathy with the court”, to the extent where “it became like she was the one on trial; her past, her sexuality, her behaviour” (MSN 208). In a slip which exposes the degree to which Kirsty’s own culture is tilted against her, Donaldson predicts that he and the “casuals” will not simply be exonerated but “give her a damn good shafting” (MSN 207). Roy and his group of fellow rapists are thus vindicated by a standardised cultural environment which upholds an ideology of masculine

hegemony. As becomes clear, this vindication becomes problematic for Roy, as he begins to conceive of himself within a violent cycle. In identifying the onset of this conception, Kelly points to Welsh's own observation that "rape isn't a big problem for the rapists, as it wasn't for Roy and his gang at the time. It only becomes a big problem when you become sensitised, when you open up your feelings"⁸⁶.

Roy is struck with a sense of moral responsibility immediately after he and the "casuals" eventually cease their abuse of Kirsty. In the aftermath of the rape scene, he "realised what we had done, what we had taken ... It was her confidence, her pride, her vivacity, her lack of fear, her attitude ... It was her self, or her sense of it" (*MSN* 190). He likens her in this respect to the victim of a moral assault, with himself and the court as chief transgressors: "I remember seeing a documentary about some animal being eaten from behind while its face seemed to register disbelief, fear, and self-hate at its own impotence. That was what she reminded me of" (*MSN* 183). He observes that Kirsty appeared "like one of the female prisoners in concentration camp films ... she was so compliant, looked so destroyed and wretched, that I felt it would've been better if we'd topped her" (*MSN* 190). This expression of relative sympathy is heightened as the meaning of the act continues to impact upon his moral consciousness, reaching a degree of panicked anxiety, and he reacts in horror: "We had no right. We didnae realise ... ah didnae think ..." (*MSN* 190). In the course of Kirsty's rape and the trial which follows, he is exposed to a sense of himself – more specifically, his quest for "respect ... my fuckin entitlement" – as an exponent of systematic exploitation (*MSN* 179). It is only through this perception that he is able to see himself as perpetuating a specific system of power, which ties his body and those he acts against to a continuing circle of violation.

6. "It's all just one big Z": the dead-end of hegemonic masculinity

Roy finds his functional masculine identity dependent upon continued dominance, and in so doing becomes aware that the dichotomy which exists in this equation between absolute dominance and outright subordination constitutes an utterly encompassing system of power. As a product of the hegemonic system of masculine identity, he finds himself unable to account for factors which point to its contradiction, and ultimately lacking in the capacity for any meaningful change to its structures. I will explore here the ways in which he describes an inability to reconcile his remorse over his role in Kirsty's rape with the doctrine of his dominant masculine identity. This incapacity is compounded by his exposure to the reality of his position, in the form of a media campaign for a "Zero Tolerance" social policy toward the abuse of women. His moral recognition of what his masculine identity entails yields within him a profound sense of depression, and he seeks to remove himself from the cycle of power which surrounds and involves his body. His attempted suicide fails to grant him a route of escape, however, and he is denied redemption by the same systemic logic which directs his own retributive behaviour. Kirsty's drive to enact a form of revenge upon his comatose body illustrates the extent to which the hegemonic cycle of gender identity encircles the both of them, with her accomplishment of vengeance tying both her and Roy to the dichotomy of dominance.

Roy gives an account of the ways in which the cycle of power has directed his performance of gender identity and in so doing tied him to an inescapable narrative of progressive violence. He states that he has spent his life "running away from sensitivity, from feelings, from love. Running away because a fuckin schemie, a nobody, shouldnae have these feelings because there's fuckin naewhair for them to go, naewhair for them tae be expressed and if you open up every cunt will tear you

apart" (*MSN* 254). He has become inured to a violent existence through competition for masculine status, discarding sentiment in favour of brutality: "you lash out at them and hurt them. You do this because you think if you're hurting them you can't be hurt" (*MSN* 254 - 255). This adoption of aggression as a form of interrelation binds him to a cyclical violence committed against him: "it's bullshit, because you just hurt even mair until you learn to become an animal" (*MSN* 255). Ultimately, Roy finds that from this position, there is little possibility of avoidance: "if you can't fuckin learn that properly you run. Sometimes you can't run though, you can't sidestep and you can't duck and weave, because sometimes it all just travels along with you, inside your fuckin skull" (*MSN* 255). This procedure of gender identification constitutes an involvement within a system of power which effectively renders Roy incapable of meaningful compassion, and he finds himself unable to "understand why I felt so bad" (*MSN* 193). The language of his cultural environment and social education, being "inside [his] fuckin skull", equip him only with a necessarily violent bigotry, with which he struggles to reconcile a burgeoning empathic guilt: "I hated that slag, I hated every cunt: everyone who fucked me around. It was me against them. Me. Roy Strang. I didn't understand why whenever I thought of her I wanted to die" (*MSN* 193).

Roy's predicament is amplified by his exposure to a media campaign which serves as a challenge to the dogma of hegemonic masculine authority. Roy encounters posters bearing the catchphrases of this policy when already in a state of significant crisis, and they plunge him deeper into despair: "MALE ABUSE OF POWER IS A CRIME", "WHEN SHE SAYS NO SHE MEANS NO", "NO MAN HAS THE RIGHT", and "THERE IS NO EXCUSE" (*MSN* 198 - 199). He finds himself responding to them in a manner of crazed, remorseful alarm, shouting, "THEY DINNAE KEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES! THEY DINNAE KEN WHAT IT'S LIKE!" (*MSN* 198). His every desperate instinct for justification is negated by the simplicity of

moral righteousness, and he begins to understand how it is that his contentions – “IT WASNAE MY FUCKIN FAULT ... The wey you carried oan ... asked fir it ... wi wir aw pished” – are opposed and finally undone: “BLAME THE WOMEN BLAME THE DRINK BLAME THE WEATHER ... THERE IS NO EXCUSE” (MSN 227). Roy admits that as each “slogan ripped through me like a psychic machete”, they necessarily give voice to the already-existing inner sense of himself as an “interbred mutant fuckup sick psychopathic rapist” (MSN 198, 195). These slogans thus serve to both “knock the bottom out of my world and remind me who I was” (MSN 240). It is in this psychological condition, “beyond transitory depression”, that Roy sets his sights on the possibility of “Self-Deliverance With A Plastic Bag”: “I wanted to die. I thought I would die. It felt like the time. It had felt like the time for a while” (MSN 254, 255, 254). He believes suicide to offer him a route toward moral redemption, declaring that “this wasn’t about opting out. This was the only resolution that made sense. Death was the way forward” (MSN 255). His failure to end his own life in this regard illustrates the extent to which, even from a state of remorseful awareness, Roy remains rooted in the system of hegemonic masculine power, stuck in the reality of “only incompetence”: “I had opened up my emotions and I couldn’t go back into self-denial, into that lower form of existence, but I couldn’t go forward until I’d settled my debt” (MSN 253, 154).

The extent to which Roy remains cemented in the power system of his gender identity is emphasised further by the actions of Kirsty. His attempted suicide in this way might represent a moment in which he has attempted to “shite oot” of his masculine responsibilities and expectations. In accordance with the hegemonic hierarchy, he has suffered the symbolic consequences, embodying a distinct passivity in relation to Kirsty’s dominance. Roy observes the reversal of hegemonic power positioning here, remarking that from his comatose state, “I’m at her mercy in the same way she was at ours” (MSN 227). He expresses here the way in which,

within the cycle of power, the symbolic positions of masculine and feminine performance are both equally bound to the same dichotomy of dominance, and he wonders, "How will she exercise her power? Will she show compassion or is she just the same as us? Is she what we made her?" (MSN 227). Kirsty illustrates the binding nature of a hegemonic arrangement of gendered authority when she displays a profound desire for violent revenge. In this way, she is indicative of a gender identity encircled in the dualism of beating and being beaten: speaking directly to an apparently unconscious Roy, she reveals that the experience – "you raped me once, and with the help of the courts you raped me again" – has left her wanting "to get them all": "You probably have no idea how you changed my life ... I've found me" (MSN 259, 223, 229). This "me" she refers to is the product of the violence done against her: "You've made me just like you ... You all wanted to teach me, Roy, to teach me a lesson ... You taught me that you had the right simply by taking it" (MSN 259, 260). She becomes, in a reversal of hierarchical organisation, the perpetrator of retributive violence, the violated turned violator, in a cycle of hegemonic, forceful dominance: "I don't know who fucked you up, what happened to make you the sad, wretched excuse for a human being that you are and I don't care ... Now I'm your problem. Might is right. You *take* the right. I'm taking the right, Roy, taking the right to fuck you off" (MSN 260).

Roy's recognition of the processes in which his body has become implicated in the continuing cycle of cultural power fails to offer him a route toward any meaningful change of them. His past behaviour delimits his end, as Kirsty exacts her revenge in accordance with the cycle of violence which Roy himself has enforced upon her. Just as Roy's abuse of Kirsty asserted a specific arrangement of gendered authority, so Kirsty's murder of Roy cements the both of them to the inescapable equation of dominance. In this, Roy declares, are they both entirely typical of their environment. He comes to the conclusion that he himself "wasn't a psychopath; ...

just a fool and a coward" (MSN 254). He finds, too, that he "understand[s] her, her pain, how it all just has to come out" (MSN 264). This "pain" is something which binds them to each other, in an eternal cycle of gendered individuals hurting each other: "It just goes round and round, the hurt" (MSN 264). Although both he and Kirsty "understand everything", this acknowledgement takes them only as far as a theoretical dead-end: "It takes an exceptionally strong person to just say: no more ... I'm not an exceptionally strong person. Nor is Kirsty. We're both just ordinary and this is shite" (MSN 264). Schoene-Harwood states that in this conclusion, Welsh fails to offer any "possible alternative responses facilitated, for example, by the faculties of forgiveness and rehabilitation"⁸⁷. Both Roy and Kirsty serve to "consolidate" the hegemonic power of exploitative domination, and Roy is refused any "possible regenerative reconstitution of himself as a man"⁸⁸. Kelly defines this refusal as the novel's "blanket pessimism", noting that "male hegemony does come out on top", with these characters finally "silenced" by its "deadening logic"⁸⁹. Rather than a weakness of the novel, however, this refusal denotes the final nature of their dystopian social system to exclude opportunities for identity construction outside of the dominance dichotomy. As a victim, Kirsty may only turn victimiser, while Roy may only go from dominant to dominated. This is the dead-end of hegemonic masculinity, an environment of interpersonal governance in which "power always goes on and on" (MSN 219).

The final note in this respect might be taken from near the end of the novel, when Roy meets his "boss's boss", and is unable to act upon his mounting aggression toward him (MSN 200). He describes how "It all came taw ays wi clarity; *these are the cunts we should be hurtin*, no the boys wi knock fuck oot ay the fitba, no the birds wi fuck aboot, no oor ain Ma n Dad, oor ain brothers n sisters, oor ain neighbors, oor ain mates. These cunts" (MSN 200 – 201, my emphasis). He realises that his violent behaviour, as a product of a system of power, has been

misdirected: "we terrorise oor ain people. These cunts though: these cunts wi dinnae even fuckin see" (MSN 201). He recognises here that his violent efforts to construct a functional identity have simply involved him as a component of power relations, and begins to imagine a re-direction of that violence toward his social superiors; significantly, this mode remains rooted in retaliation, and he remains implicated in the same system of power distribution. In his appreciation of this misdirection, Roy mirrors the opening logic of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, longing to exact a measure of change within his own self and upon his environment, through a violent assault upon figures of government and commercial organisation.

**“Show them freedom by enslaving them”: the limits of masculine subversion
in *Fight Club***

SUBHEADINGS

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1. *Fight Club*: an introduction to the novel

The anonymous protagonist of *Fight Club* begins the novel in a state of considerable crisis. Dissatisfied with both his static career and his mechanical lifestyle, within an unspecified but distinctly middle-class, American environment, he suffers from chronic insomnia.

On his doctor's advice, the narrator attends a support group for men suffering from testicular cancer. Here he finds a sort of emotional comfort, and is able to cure his insomnia by pretending to relate to the distress around him, quickly becoming reliant upon these weekly events as a means of achieving meaningful human closeness. While he himself is not dying, he progressively attends more and more of these meetings, and is only found out when he meets a woman by the name of Marla Singer. Much like the narrator, she has become emotionally dependent on these meetings, and the comfort they offer her. When he confronts her, they agree to visit separate groups, so as to avoid each other's company.

The narrator meets Tyler Durden, apparently, while visiting a nudist beach. Later, he arrives back from a work assignment to find his apartment destroyed by what appears to have been an explosion. With nowhere to go, he decides to call Tyler and ask if he may stay at his house. Tyler agrees on the condition that the narrator punch him, as hard as possible, in an empty parking lot. The fight that ensues attracts a crowd of onlookers, and rapidly develops into the weekly ritual of "fight club": a form of group therapy conducted through bare-knuckles fighting. This combat is governed by an intricate set of rules, and the club itself is apparently supervised by both Tyler and the narrator.

The club's numbers swell, gradually expanding into other cities across the country. Tyler manages this growing presence as a means of initiating a number of

sophisticated acts of organised violence against the general public. He is eventually able to form an elite group of club members, or "space monkeys", which he names "Project Mayhem", and which he develops into an army designed for systematic, social change. This organisation represents the club's "next step", and is bound by an entirely new set of rules.

Though initially in favour and in co-command of Project Mayhem and its revolutionary objectives, the narrator quickly becomes discomfited by their progressively damaging and disturbing activities, particularly when one of their members is killed. He resolves to stop Tyler, only realising that he cannot, and that Tyler's teachings have set in place an irreversible sequence of events.

The narrator's efforts to prevent these events are made increasingly difficult, and he proceeds to attempt to shoot himself, on the basis that doing so might remove Tyler for good, and awakens some time later in hospital, imagining himself having transcended to heaven.

The novel ends with the narrator recognising various employees in the hospital as members of fight club, each of them referring to him as Tyler Durden, and each of them intent on fulfilling the insurgent objectives of Project Mayhem.

2. "Your life comes down to nothing": applying "the formula"

The manner in which *Fight Club's* unnamed narrator is positioned as an individual component of stringent cultural forces, presents an especially useful route into the novel's exploration into the troubles, possibilities and final limits of contemporary masculinity. He is, in this sense, representative of Roy Strang's concluding dilemma in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, encircled within the strategic operations of systematic political and economic power. I will investigate his consumerist lifestyle as one which arises from the social instructions of a greater cultural imperative. This way of life illustrates the extent to which he is disconnected from a sense of autonomous identity by the institutions of an inaccessible power system. I will explore, too, the reality of his routine existence as compounded by the nature of his career, tying him to the cycle of powerless monotony and to the logic of cultural doctrine. I will read his initial physical condition and psychic state as effects of these isolating practices, as he suffers under the weight of a formulaic restriction. Finally, his efforts to alleviate this affliction lead him to a form of therapy which illustrates the scope of his identity disorder, involving him in a form of interaction which relates a specific understanding of his own masculinity. By the logic of his cultural arrangement, the narrator is functionally emasculated, capable of perceiving yet unable to alter the static, subordinate nature of his social and cultural circumstances.

The narrator of *Fight Club* is implicated in a model of existence which upholds consumption as the principal means of identity formation. His home becomes intricately and abundantly festooned with an array of material possessions, their collection occurring less from a sense of usefulness than from an irrational compulsion: "The Vild hall clock made of galvanised steel, oh, I had to have that. The Klipsk shelving unit, oh, yeah. Hemlig hat boxes. Yes ... It took my whole life to buy this stuff"⁹⁰. This driving need to attain almost indiscriminately is presented as

a social affliction, as he describes how he “wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue ... We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper” (FC 43). He explains both the rationale behind this impulse and its capacity to regulate behaviour: “You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need. Buy the sofa, then for a couple of years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got the sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed ... Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you own, now they own you” (FC 44). This format of identification through consumption ties him to a sense of his possessions as manifest parts of his own self: “I loved my condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The television was me” (FC 110 + 111). The narrator here mirrors the sense of consumption as an act of prescriptive behaviour, investing in the commercial properties of things he doesn’t need: “If you don’t know what you want, ... you end with a lot you don’t” (FC 46). As such, he exists as a point of effective emasculation, and his consumption exhibits the way in which he is unable to act upon any real, unprompted desire. His lifestyle displays an alienated existence, in which he is continually blind to the potential of his own agency.

Significant in the pattern of the narrator’s positioning within a cultural arrangement is the regulatory nature of his career in the “Compliance and Liability” department of an unnamed car company (FC 137). From the outset, he describes his career as one which is directed from outside himself: “I go to meetings my boss doesn’t want to attend. I take notes. I’ll get back to you” (FC 30). As a “recall campaign coordinator”, the narrator feels as though he is “working toward a career

as a dishwasher”, conceiving of his own employment position as one entirely lacking in any real productive value (*FC* 31). Acting as his direct regulator in this performance of conformity is his “boss, with his extra-starched shirts and standing appointment for a haircut every Tuesday ... his midlife spread and family photo on his desk and his dreams about early retirement and winters spent at a trailer-park hook-up in some Arizona desert” (*FC* 96). His given purpose within the occupation involves an application of “simple arithmetic”, “a story problem”, revolving around issues such as: “If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago travelling west at sixty miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall?” (*FC* 30). The decision here is removed from the narrator’s authority by the “liability formula”, from which, “if X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don’t recall” (*FC* 95, 30). The value of human life is here determined by the economics of a corporate equation, the narrator himself acting as a component of a moral calculator, which has decided that to “pay off a lot of grieving families” is more cost-efficient than to manufacture safer cars (*FC* 96).

The narrator is positioned, by his lifestyle and the regulatory effects of his career, in isolation from both the people around him and any alternative format of living. His lifestyle has served to remove him from a sense of living in constant communal interaction, segregating him within a particular routine. M. Iocco notes that the narrator is “conditioned by the almost (but not quite, as it turns out) irresistible force of financial power, a world reduced to a series of formulae, from how to decorate one’s apartment to the cost of a human life”⁹¹. He is emasculated, in this respect, by a condition of entrapment. He relates that “home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing-cabinet for widows and young professionals” (*FC* 41). The isolating effect of such a living space is clear, and he

occupies a space of distinct seclusion: "the marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned-up television" (FC 41). This enclosure is akin to a state of imprisonment, and in this respect is similar to the conditions of his working environment: "Everything where I work is floor-to-ceiling glass ... a maze of cubicles boxed in with fences of upholstered plywood" (FC 136 - 137). This format of directed, hemmed-in living and working is shown to be fundamentally harmful to both his physical condition and his psychic sense of identity. He suffers from severe spells of insomnia, finding at times that he "can't remember sleeping since three nights ago" (FC 96). This state of sleeplessness enforces a perception of what he names the "insomnia distance of everything", in which "everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy" (FC 21). He finds that "three weeks without sleep, and everything becomes an out-of-body experience" (FC 19). He lives in a state of closed-off isolation, cognizant of the factors which prescribe his lifestyle and general social movement, yet is unable to engage with them from a position where "you can't touch anything, and nothing can touch you" (FC 21). In this regard he is profoundly symptomatic of a social system where "everyone feels like the centre of attention but completely cut off from participating with anyone else" (FC 88).

Informed by his doctor that "nobody ever died from lack of sleep", he is advised to seek out and attend support groups for those suffering from terminal diseases (FC 162). It is here, where "everyone smiles with that invisible gun to their head", that the narrator is able to "relax and give up" (FC 19, 18). He describes how it is only through the "therapeutic physical contact" of these groups that he is able to feel connected to either the people around him or his own sense of self: "This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention ... When the two of you talked, you were building something, and afterward you both different than before" (FC 107). This simple connectedness

affords him some sense of inner "freedom": "Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I'd ever felt. I wasn't host to cancer or blood parasites; I was the little warm centre that the life of the world crowded around" (FC 22). He is instructed in these gatherings to seek out an inner "cave", to imagine himself "lost ... dark and silent and complete": "This is when I'd cry because right now, your life comes down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion" (FC 20, 22, 17). It is at one such group, "Remaining Men Together", for men suffering with testicular cancer, that the narrator meets Bob, a former body builder whose testicles have been removed, and who "loves me because he thinks my testicles were removed, too" (FC 18, 17). Bob's identity crisis enables the narrator to exhibit a degree of emotional response: "I've been coming here every week for two years, and every week Bob wraps his arms around me, and I cry (FC 18, 24, 17). These support groups serve a dual function, both curing his insomnia and removing him further from a functional sense of his masculine identity. By these means is he isolated within his own "pain", able to sleep but as yet unable to exercise any sense of autonomous identity (FC 20).

He continues to live what he refers to as a "tiny life", which comprises both the rigid prescriptions of a job founded upon a mathematical formula and a mechanical lifestyle of compulsive consumption; his only relief from the psychic restriction of these practices is in the "oblivion" of his "vacation" time in support groups (FC 28, 20). His narration of his frequent travelling is significantly conscious of this cycle and descriptive of his general format of existence. He relates that the workings of this format are hidden to him, that he is guided by forces outside of his own authority: "You wake up at O' Hare. You wake up at LaGuardia. You wake up at Logan" (FC 25). Independence is displaced by demand, in an equation of collective organisation which reduces interpersonal relation to the passing making of "single-use friend[s]": "tiny friendships with the people sitting beside me from Logan to

Krissy to Willow Run" (FC 31). With both the destination and the purpose of his journey out of his hands, the narrator finds that "sometimes, you wake up and have to ask where you are" (FC 33). In a moment which exhibits the extent to which he is mindful of the cyclical nature of his life and, perhaps, a burgeoning desire for change, he likens his perspective to that of "one of those space monkeys": "You do the little job you're trained to do. Pull a lever. Push a button. You don't understand any of it, and then you just die" (FC 12). Encircled by the management operations of cultural and economic systems of power, the narrator of *Fight Club* lives within an effectively static sense of personal autonomy. His sense of identity, in this respect, has been displaced, as he responds only to the immediate demands of his enclosed environment and is alienated from the possibilities of his own influence. As O. Lizardo has noticed, it is from this position of "structural effeminisation" that the narrator is driven to a form of "rebellion against the ... emasculating influences of the culture industry influences of the culture industry"⁹².

3. "Deliver me": the quest for masculine autonomy

As he perceives that his existence is governed by the stipulations of an external administration, emasculated by the economic principles which drive his lifestyle and career, the narrator of *Fight Club* comes to a sense of his own limitations. Conscious of the manner and extent to which the autonomy of his identity has been harmed, he becomes increasingly receptive to notions of subversive transformation. He is concerned with the subversion of his own standardised self as a means toward achieving a greater degree of personal authority. Problematically, this authority is performed through a mode of dominant masculinity. I will explore this unconscious desire as it becomes manifest in the form of Tyler Durden, a figure whose character allows the narrator to enact a model of masculine conviction. The narrator accomplishes a sense of personal and social influence through the act of interrelational fighting, engaging with other men within a homosocial model of violent physical dominance. The "fight club" which arises from this growing practice represents a formation of hegemonic masculinity, in which men relate to themselves and each other through violent competition. As such, it is founded upon a conception of violence committed against the self as something which affords a route toward the construction and exhibition of individual identity. The club rapidly develops into a community of self-construction, its members conforming to new standards of personal understanding and social interaction.

The narrator's account of Tyler represents a moment where he is able to imagine a more constructive model of identity. The narrator imagines that Tyler will enable him with a greater sense of self-determination and a greater degree of social authority: "I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn't see any way to change things ... I felt trapped" (FC 172). The narrator

here conceives of a way out of this entrapment, a form of escape through self-transformation. In looking to transform himself and his sense of personal potential, he takes aim at the philosophy of self-improvement which directs his consumerist behaviour. Tyler embodies the narrator's antithesis, socially dissident where the narrator is continually dependent and subdued. His rendering of Tyler thus presents his conception of idealised masculinity, and is thus focused upon notions of freedom and sovereign authority: "I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not" (FC 174). He seeks in Tyler's figure a model of identity in which he may be liberated from the confines of his commodified existence, and in this sense strives to enact an idealised imagery of autonomous masculine identity: "Oh, Tyler, please rescue me ... Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art" (FC 46). His desire for masculine autonomy entails a rejection of consumerist self-enhancement, and he looks to Tyler to enable him to do so: "May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect. Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete" (FC 46).

Tyler endows the narrator with a sense of his autonomous capabilities through the act of physical, one-on-one fighting. The narrator suggests that this violent demonstration arises from within his own imagination: "If you've never been in a fight, you wonder. About getting hurt, about what you're capable of doing against another guy" (FC 52). He expresses a desire to explore and discover the limits of his agency, and looks to do so through a mode of violent aggression. This inner desire becomes manifest in Tyler's instruction to "do me a favour. I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (FC 52). The narrator thus positions Tyler as educator in the art of identity reconstruction, describing how "I didn't want to, but Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only

professionals fight, and wanting to know more about himself" (FC 52). In placing Tyler in the role of teacher, the narrator can produce the conditions of his education in physical, interpersonal combat. He and Tyler commence their first fight in an empty parking lot, with Tyler instructing the narrator to "Surprise me ... go crazy, man" (FC 52). This first fight is instructive, representing the narrator's introduction to violent combat and, generally, to a mode of striving for hegemonic masculine authority; after the initial exchange of blows, "we both stood there, ... both of us knowing we'd gotten somewhere we'd never been and like the cat and mouse in cartoons, we were still alive and wanted to see how far we could take this thing and still be alive" (FC 53). Through combat, the narrator is infused with an acknowledgement of his personal potential: "Instead of Tyler, I felt I could finally get my hands on everything that didn't work, my cleaning ... the bank ... my job" (FC 53). This opening exchange thus leads to more, in an ever-increasing cycle of violence: "I hit him, a girl's wide roundhouse to right of his ear, and Tyler shoved me back and stomped the heel of his shoe in my stomach. What happened next and after that didn't happen in words, but the bar closed and people came out and shouted around us" (FC 53). This first fight initiates a more communal pursuit: while "the first fight club was Tyler and I pounding on each other", the narrator finds that "now I go to meetings or conferences and see ... accountants and junior executives or attorneys with broken noses ... or they have a couple stitches under an eye or a jaw wired shut" (FC 53, 54).

Such expansion sees Tyler and the narrator institute a number of set regulations for the members and activities of the fight club. These rules affirm the budding nature of fight club as a variety of secret society: "the first rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club ... the second rule is you don't talk about fight club ... when someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he's just faking it, the fight is over ... only two guys to a fight. One fight at a time. They fight without shirts or shoes. The

fight goes on as long as they have to ... [And] if this is your first night at fight club, you have to fight" (FC 49, 50, 51). This organisation develops the core idea – to “go crazy” – into a format of regulated violence, as the members of this club develop a sense of identity grounded in the institution of collective masculine behaviour. The narrator relates the sense that what began as an experiment in self-exploration has developed into a larger pursuit of hegemonic, masculine self-determination: “the kid who works in the copy centre, a month ago you saw this kid who can’t remember to three-hole-punch an order or put coloured slips between the copy packets, but this kid was a god for ten minutes when you saw him kick air out of an account representative twice his size” (FC 49). The members of fight club are engaged in a profoundly systematic self-realisation, and, as such, “who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world. Even if you told the kid in the copy centre that he had a good fight, you wouldn’t be talking to the same man” (FC 49). Here, the “kid” who began the transformative procedure of fight club has become a “man”, in a suggestion that to “be a man” means to engage in the violence of masculine domination. This sense of identity arises from a regulated format of violent performance, its target being a mode of conformity: “Who I am in fight club is not someone my boss knows ... [we] are the quiet young men who listen until it’s time to decide” (FC 49, 54).

The attraction of fight club, then, resides in its capacity to serve as a model of subversion: “After a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off. Your word is law, and if other people break that law or question you, even that doesn’t piss you off” (FC 49). Its members are ultimately participating in an interrelational system from which they attain a sense of masculine capability distinctly and consciously separated from their muted, domesticated, “real world” function. The fighting itself grants its participants an original manner of regarding their own bodies and the limitations of their life’s

position: "You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle anything" (FC 51). The narrator notes how fight club affords an opportunity to transcend lived limitations, a way of embodying hegemonic authority. The fighting in fight club acts as a form of ritualised self-establishment, a sort of stamping upon the self of masculine, autonomy: "You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club. When it's you and one other guy under that one light in the middle of all those watching ... there's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved" (FC 51). H. A. Giroux takes issue with this declaration, arguing that "the violence associated with ... [a] hypermasculine stereotype" informs the "political limits" of the novel's thesis⁹³. He states that this form of violence serves to "reinscribe forms of male identity within a warrior mentality"⁹⁴. K. L. Ashcraft and L. A. Flores argue that in its depiction of this violence, the novel is concerned with addressing the idea that the "antithesis of masculinity is the man afraid to fight, controlled by social demands rather than raw instinct"⁹⁵. In a similar way, S. Clark has noted that the "representation of violent acts" here is able to render a space of "some public discussion" around it⁹⁶. L. M. Ta agrees, describing how the violence in this novel works toward "exposing the contradictions of normative gender relations"⁹⁷. Ultimately, it is only through a portrayal of such violence that the novel may address the hegemonic power relations that direct and delimit its meaning.

The practice of fighting serves to posit destruction over the monotony of repeated consumerist improvement: "At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better of ourselves" (FC 52). He relates that the fighting presents possibilities of a new life's direction: "It used to be enough that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn't toeing my

five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I'd be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and car ... Since fight club, I can wiggle half the teeth in my jaw" (FC 49). The contestants within the fight club are endowed with the sense that through fighting, they are re-establishing their masculine identities and re-directing the course of their lives. Fight club institutes a community of men, engaged with each other, in an arena where violent masculine performance is formalised and regulated. In this sense, the ceremony of fight club is akin to the therapy of the support group, offering the narrator a means away from isolation. He imagines himself and the men around him to have acted against their alienation, and to be involved in a necessary process of self-expression. This process is a problematic one, grounding male identity in exaggerated practices of interpersonal violence. The desire to escape emasculated conformity is expressed and enacted in the terms of masculine domination. Accordingly, the hegemony of masculine violence is reproduced through the men in fight club. Confronted with the stasis of an emasculated, purposeless lifestyle, these men turn to the hegemonic model of masculinity as offered in the fight clubs, acting upon the philosophy of "maybe self-improvement isn't the answer ... Maybe self-destruction is" (FC 49).

4. "This is our world now": from dominance to revolution

Through fight club, the narrator is able to construct a means of establishing and asserting a sense of masculine autonomy, defined through other male participants and in relation to the immobility of his standardised lifestyle. This autonomy, learned and expressed in the act of fighting, develops into a shared endeavour of communal proportions, with a number of fight clubs arising from a generalised desire for self-transformation. In this way, what begins in the fight club as a mode of self-realisation gradually becomes a means of changing the way of the world, as its members graduate from fighting each other to concerning themselves with matters of cultural and political transgression. This change serves to involve them in a formation of instruction, whereby the conformity of consumption is replaced by the conformity of ritualised violence. I will explore how Tyler proliferates the ideology of "hitting bottom", an hypothesis which drives the focus of the fight club from an interrelational form of self-realisation to a more rebellious mode of cultural engagement. The narrator engages with this notion and directs it toward others. Ultimately, he finds that he is driven to an increasing desire for social revolution through cultural destruction.

From the perspective of personal autonomy, the narrator is able to express the sentiment of "hitting bottom", declaring that "it's only after you've lost everything, ... that you're free to do anything" (*FC* 70). This is the belief in the utter annihilation of one way of living in order to fashion another, and in this sense, it entails a form of violence against the self, an imposed devastation: "If I don't fall all the way, I can't be saved ... I shouldn't just abandon money and property and knowledge ... I should run from self-improvement, and I should be running toward disaster" (*FC* 70). The objective here lies in establishing and expanding an original format of personal identity: "If you lose your nerve before you hit the bottom, ...

you'll never really succeed ... Only after disaster can we be resurrected" (FC 70). This objective disguises the manner in which male autonomy is predicated on violent dominance: "you have to give up ... Think about the animals used in product testing. Think about the monkeys shot into space ... Without their death, their pain, their sacrifice, ... we would have nothing" (FC 78). The members of fight club are endowed by this propagandist logic with a particular notion of social responsibility, directed to conceive of themselves in the role of "the liberator who destroys my property ... fighting to save my spirit. The teacher who clears all possessions from my path will set me free" (FC 110). The narrator himself, through Tyler, seeks to inspire the newly-independent participants in fight club in the project of social expansion, as a means toward cultural amendment: "Getting fired ... is the best thing that could happen to any of us. That way, we'd quit treading water and do something with our lives" (FC 83).

The novel reveals that narrator is employed by the "Pressman Hotel", in an evening-shift position in addition to his day-time job with an unnamed car company (FC 113). It is through Tyler, ultimately, that he is able to utilise this position as a means of rebellion, aimed at the people to whom Roy Strang in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* refers as "these cunts [who] wi dinnae even fuckin see" (MSN 201). The narrator relates how, from the perspective of the service class, his social superiors are perceived as "titans ... wearing diamonds bigger than I feel" (FC 80). For these individuals, who "just want to see you run around for their money", the narrator is "just a cockroach" who is treated "like dirt" (FC 80, 81, 80). Acting upon his own, supposedly autonomous masculine authority, the narrator begins to construct moments of rebellion directed at both those he serves and the system that encloses him within that relationship: "I'd been peeing into soup, farting into bruleés, sneezing on braised endive, and now I wanted the hotel to send me a check every week ... In return, I wouldn't come to work anymore, and I wouldn't go to the

newspapers or the public health people" (FC 114). He strives, then, with Tyler's help, to perform the role of "service industry terrorist", or "minimum-wage despoiler", as a way of subverting his position of "pawn of the world, everybody's trash" and the emasculating cultural structures which render him "nobody" (FC 84, 113). From this format of masculine identity, the narrator becomes driven to exert the violence of his masculine authority upon the lives of other men, with the aim of educating them in a sense of their own capabilities for violent destruction. In doing so, he is incriminated in extending the hegemonic structure of fight club to encompass his general social system.

He and the other members of fight club seek out "human sacrifices", those people forcibly made to "quit treading water" (FC 151). The narrator recounts his own targeting of a man named Raymond Hessel, conducted in the style of a night-time robbery. In this incident, he is concerned with forcing Raymond to confront the reality of "hitting bottom": "Probably he figured I was after his money, his minimum wage ... Oh, Raymond Hessel, all twenty-three years of you, when you started crying, tears rolling down the barrel of my gun pressed to your temple, no, this wasn't about money" (FC 152). He asks, "What does Raymond Hessel want to be when he grows up ... how did you want to spend your life? If you could do anything in the world?" (FC 153 - 154). When Raymond concedes that his dream, of being veterinarian, "means too much school", the narrator warns, "You could be in school working your ass off, ... or you could be dead. You choose" (FC 154). Raymond is thus advised to "go back to school", on pain of death: "I'm keeping your license, and I'm going to check on you, ... in a year, and if you aren't back in school and on your way to being a veterinarian, you will be dead" (FC 154). He seeks to destroy the trappings which tie Raymond to his static lifestyle, as a means to self-reimagination, and to institute an awareness upon both him and a general public the principle of "you're not your sad little wallet" (FC 152). The narrator's bullying

of Raymond illustrates his own willingness to carry out the ideology of "hitting bottom" upon a public sphere. Seizing upon Tyler's impression that "a man on the street will do anything not to fight", he resolves to forcibly arrange a collection of men engaged with the strategies and practices which encompass them (FC 119). He is thus occupied with transporting his own sense of liberation toward his general social class: "the idea is to take some Joe on the street who's never been in a fight and recruit him. Let him experience winning for the first time in his life. Get him to explode" (FC 120). He calls upon the members of the fight clubs to seek out and enlist public citizens, to educate them in the benefits of self-recognition and social rebellion: "What we have to do, people, ... is remind these guys what kind of power they still have" (FC 120). Significantly, he remains focussed on "guys", and on expanding his immediate, hegemonic system to implicate a larger population in a similar hierarchy of masculine dominance.

This sentiment is distributed with the objective of enculturating a general practice of civil disobedience, a working-class community of supposedly "enlightened" male individuals, each invested in a larger goal of cultural revolt (FC 64). If fight club enables the narrator to attain a sense of his own capabilities, then this sense becomes expanded by Tyler's assertion that "everything is more fun as a shared activity", and he looks to create a male population of "guerrilla terrorists of the service industry" (FC 84, 81). He assembles the members of the fight clubs and directs them to "teach each man ... that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world" (FC 122). This principle is conveyed throughout in a vocabulary which is "pure Tyler Durden": "I see the strongest and the smartest men who have ever lived ... and these men are pumping gas and waiting tables ... You have a class of these young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something" (FC 149). In intimidating such individuals into an enforced lifestyle of "hitting bottom", he seeks to generate within them the

conviction that "this is our world now, our world" (FC 14). It is through Tyler that the narrator becomes conscious of the need to impose an ideology of "hitting bottom" upon a public masculine population. He professes that "advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes ... Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need" (FC 149). He seeks to direct these men toward addressing their social conditions: "We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit ... The great depression is our lives" (FC 149).

The narrator imagines the potential for social revolt and cultural change "if we could put these men in training camps and finish raising them": "Imagine, when we call a strike and everyone refuses to work until we redistribute the wealth of the world" (FC 149). This extension of fight club amounts to "a great revolution against the culture", and forms part of the need to "take fight club up a notch" (FC 149, 123). The logic of the fight club, by which men are driven to assert themselves, for themselves, becomes abstracted into a larger formation of socially rebellious, cultural influence, with those men being driven to impress the scale of their masculine identities upon their surrounding networks. This idea of "something bigger", then, becomes manifest in the construction of an army, as Tyler and the narrator seek to impose upon the men of fight club a sort of "freedom by enslaving them, ... [to] show them courage by frightening them" (FC 149). Here it is made explicit that what might appear as "freedom" is in actuality simply a mode of entrapment. In their institution of a hypermasculine model of violent, interpersonal relation, the men of fight club engage with other in the awareness that their environment revolves around the fact of dominance. As these men identify themselves as "real men", so they reproduce that binary equation; much like Roy and the "casuals" in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, the men of fight club continue the paradigm of power by moving from subsidiary to authoritarian.

5. In charge of "Monkeys": the "bureaucracy of anarchy"

Having realised a degree of violent, masculine domination, the narrator learns to turn this influence outward, as a way of imposing the potential of his identity upon others. This procedure develops into a situation where collections of men strive to serve a singular objective of social rebellion and cultural revolution. The principle which drives them is of autonomy, a belief that through a recognition of their masculine identities, they can effect social change. I will explore here the way in which these men are recruited to serve the function of Tyler's vision, coming to comprise a revolutionary army of supposedly autonomous individuals. In accordance with Tyler's instructions, these men begin to inflict their violent masculine identities upon their surroundings, targeting figures and institutions of America's corporate sector. I will describe the manner in which these violent activities become increasingly removed from the narrator's control, as exercises of revolt become reduced to practices of indiscriminate violence. From their education into a form of masculine identity, the members of fight club become involved and encircled in a format of further systematic restriction, their bodies directed to naturalised acts of destruction by greater forces of command.

The narrator conceives of "something bigger" arising from the fight club community, and "it was that morning, [that] Tyler invented Project Mayhem" (*FC* 123). This enterprise also represents the moment in which his measure of control over these violent proceedings begins to shrink. In the same way that fight club presents an avenue of original construction through conscious destruction, so Tyler and the narrator imagine a new social system arising from the ruins of the old: "like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilisation so we can make something better out of the world" (*FC* 125). The history of human development is conceived of here as a misdirected undertaking, and Project

Mayhem arises from the need to revert: "It's Project Mayhem that's going to save the world. A cultural ice age. A prematurely induced dark age ... [it] will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover" (FC 125). Project Mayhem thus presents an enterprise engaged with bringing about a re-imagined cultural landscape: "picture yourself planting radishes and seed potatoes on the fifteenth green of a forgotten golf course ... you'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life, and you'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower" (FC 124 - 125). This venture assumes as its principal target both the foremost symbols of human advancement and the population organised by that civilising ideology: "We'll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what's left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection" (FC 124).

Project Mayhem is conducted as a homosocial, members-only club, with a set format of entry and expected behaviour. At Tyler's behest, the narrator distributes amongst the members of the fight clubs a list pertaining to the Project's requirements of an applicant: "the applicant has to arrive with the following: Two black shirts. Two black pair of trousers. One pair of heavy black shoes. Two pair of black socks and two pair of plain underwear ... This includes the clothes the applicant has on his back" (FC 128). Tyler explains the process of determining which individuals achieve entry: "You tell the applicant to go away, and if his resolve is so strong that he waits at the entrance without food or shelter or encouragement for three days, then and only then can he enter and begin the training" (FC 129). The narrator describes how "this happens every day for a while, and sometimes the applicants will leave, but most times, the applicants stick it out until the third day, until most of the seventy-two bunk beds Tyler and I bought and set up in the basement are full" (FC 130). The accepted applicants, labelled "space monkeys", are divided into "committees" of insurgence, which function in a similar

manner to support groups: "Arson meets on Monday. Assault meets on Tuesday. Mischief meets on Wednesday. And Misinformation meets on Thursday" (FC 133, 119). Each of these committees is bound by a single set of regulations, which allude to the rules of the fight clubs and oblige a standardised practice of absolute submission: both the first and second rules of Project Mayhem are, "you don't ask questions" (FC 119, 122). This is masculinity as a totalitarian regime, the men within it attracted to the possibility of moving beyond static meaningless into a format of naturalised male authority. The sense of movement here is a circular one, involving conflicting positions within a cycle of violence. From a system of emasculation, in which their identity is reduced to blind compliance, the men of fight club have travelled not to a utopian sphere of eternal, original autonomy but to an outward performance of aggressive destruction.

From the meetings of these committees, Tyler issues instructions in the form of "homework assignments" (FC 119). Such assignments involve the members of Project Mayhem in a mode of interrelational, masculine expectation, and tie them to a sense of rebellion as training. Rather than the insubordinate activities of autonomous masculine individuals, these "homework" responsibilities represent a sequence of aligned events designed to achieve an abstracted end. The "homework" appointments are devised and distributed by Tyler alone: "Nobody except Tyler knows what all the proposals are ... Later that week, you might read in the newspaper about an unidentified man, downtown, jumping the driver of a Jaguar convertible and steering the car into a fountain" (FC 120). Similar missions yield increasingly violent results, and each one is carried out in the service of the mysterious strategy of Project Mayhem. The narrator recounts how he and the other members are increasingly kept in the dark as to the nature of Tyler's grand plot: "What comes next in Project Mayhem, nobody except Tyler knows" (FC 125). In the meantime, acts of seemingly random violence continue to occur, with the

narrator himself incapable of halting their regularity: "It's in the newspaper today how somebody broke into the ... tenth and fifteenth floors of the Hein Tower, and ... painted the south side of the building with a grinning five-story mask ... People cried with their heads thrown back. What did it mean? And who would do this?" (FC 118). Such activities incriminate the space monkeys in a format of random violence; as Tyler relates, "every time we do these little homework assignments, ... those fight club men with nothing to lose are a little more invested in Project Mayhem" (FC 167).

This is the "bureaucracy of anarchy", centred around a principle of dominance: "No questions. No excuses and no lies. The fifth rule about Project Mayhem is you have to trust Tyler" (FC 130). The narrator relates how Tyler's conception of Project Mayhem "had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn't care if other people got hurt or not" (FC 122). This is evident in his specification that aspiring members of Project Mayhem retain upon them "exactly five hundred dollars cash for personal burial money" (FC 127). Revealing the extent to which these men are ultimately expendable in the larger picture of the Tyler's final objective, he declares that "this money must always be carried in the student's shoe so if the student is ever killed, his death will not be a burden on Project Mayhem", and that "anyone who dies without at least this much money, their body goes to an autopsy class" (FC 127). Similarly, the accepted "space monkeys" are educated in a manner of continual self-effacement, trained to regard themselves and their colleagues as "the shit and infectious human waste of creation" (FC 170). This schooling engenders a sense of necessary submission to the doctrine of Project Mayhem as a means to eventual, outright social and cultural transformation. Ultimately, these men are invested in a system which privileges obedience over independence: "You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as anyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile ... Individually, we are nothing" (FC 134).

Fight club itself, as an arena in which men construct and display a degree of hegemonic masculine authority, has served to negate autonomy and encircle them instead within a formation of violent dominance. In the same way that the narrator is made complicit in the unethical practices of his car company, rendered compliant in the overarching logic of power, so Project Mayhem implicates its members in a similar cycle of acquiescent conformity.

As it proceeds, Project Mayhem is revealed to bear the hallmarks of the system of power it is attempting to undermine. A stringent arrangement of its members into singular tasks combines with a sense of indiscriminate violence to constitute an equation of "organised chaos" (FC 119). The men implicated in this initiative are trained to both engage in random acts of violence and consider themselves as subordinate to the growing automaton of Project Mayhem. This "clockwork of silent men", is a part of the logic of Project Mayhem, whereby "they all know what to do ... No one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one small task perfectly" (FC 130). In this respect is the Project run in an identical manner to the narrator's original career: "trained monkeys, cooking and working and sleeping in teams. Pull a lever. Push a button" (FC 130). This activity combines with the fact that "everybody on Project Mayhem wants to know what's next. Where are we going? What is there to look forward to?" (FC 135). This blindness is the position of subordination, and these men are directed to function without a sense of themselves as significant elements in the unfolding, inevitable course of events. P. Mathews finds in this the suggestion that a "decentralisation of power hardly guarantees an end to tyranny", as what proceeds as an alternative to obedience functions by a call to submission⁹⁸.

6. "What happens just happens": swallowed in the "full circle"

The narrator of *Fight Club* imagines in Tyler all the possibilities of autonomous masculine performance denied to his own static position. In following Tyler's teaching, he exhibits a desire to transcend this position and subvert the systems of power which fasten him to it. Fight club thus represents both a moment of attempted private self-realisation and a collective effort toward the initiation of general revolution. Moreover, this club presents an arena in which masculine hegemony becomes naturalised, encircling its members in further networks of supervision. Ultimately, the members of fight club have been liberated from one format of regulation only to be re-implicated in the same structure, directed toward a type of blinded submission by abstracted forces of control. The narrator, in particular, has travelled from a naturalised regulation of his body, through a recognition of his masculine identity, to an explicit format of managed passivity. I will explore here this tendency of fight club to exhibit the cyclical nature of violent dominance, as one system of power simply works to contest another. This cycle and its involvement of the masculine individual is illustrated effectively in the story of Bob. Finally, I will describe the extent to which the narrator is helpless to prevent the series of events which he initiated, and how his attempt to resolve the issue is swallowed in the dead-end of hegemonic masculinity.

The logic of fight club is a narrative of progressive violence, whereby fighting is thought of as a form of masculine identity construction, directed at and conducted through other men. The extension of this logic to a format of social revolt, under the name of Project Mayhem, represents a moment in which that identity becomes imposed upon greater social networks, and utilised as a means of undermining cultural oppression. Involved within a system of hegemonic masculinity, its members continually convey a specific sense of subordinate personal identity: "I am

the all-singing, all-dancing crap of this world ... I am the toxic waste by-product of God's creation" (FC 169). This in itself arises as a function of their education into the system of hegemonic masculinity, a pattern of direction in which they are told, "As long as you're in fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not what you tell yourself ... You're not your name" (FC 143). This procedure effectively denies them a sense of autonomous identity, binding them to the structures and expectations of the Project. They are by these means involved in a paradigm of violent dominance, in which their bodies are assigned and directed toward a particular role of naturalised transgression. Coupled with their instructed submission are lessons on the practice of cultural transgression, and in particular a regular tutoring on the manufacture and operation of napalm, nerve gases and car bombs (FC 13, 170). The members of fight club are thus recruited and trained with the purpose of adhering to an abstracted, subversive logic, one which involves a generalised profusion of "anarchy": "This was the goal of Project Mayhem, ... the complete and right-away destruction of civilisation" (FC 125).

The narrator recounts the involvement within this process of a man he names "mister angel face" (FC 123). A "first-timer" at fight club, his introduction to this activity immediately situates him within its system of violent dominance: "that night at fight club I hit our first-timer and hammered that beautiful mister angel face, first with the bony knuckles of my fist like a pounding molar, and then the knotted tight butt of my fist after my knuckles were raw from his teeth stuck through his lips. Then the kid fell through my arms in a heap" (FC 123). This introduction is designed to impose upon his newcomer identity a sense of its initial placement within the hegemonic system of masculinity, and serves to foster within him an aspiration to greater achievement within its violent terms. Accordingly, he returns to this system aiming to be enlisted in Project Mayhem, and in this sense

has internalised the logic of fight club, believing that this format of interrelation presents him with a medium of self-expression. In effect, he has moved from one mode of government to another: "even with his two black eyes and blond crew cut, you see his tough pretty scowl without wrinkles or scars ... Mister angel just stands his toes against the front door, just looks straight ahead into the splintering wood with his hands at his sides, wearing black shoes, black shirt, black pair of trousers" (FC 128). He is thus encircled in the system of hegemonic masculinity as it operates in fight club, becoming inured to the outward use of violence as a means of displaying his normative identity and serving the Project's ends.

The narrator remarks, "all we were left was the shit and the trash of the world": entirely engaged in the violent service of an abstracted purpose, the space monkeys are rendered "worker bees" by their blind adherence to activities of aggressive dominance (FC 165, 63). Illustrative of this arrangement is "Big Bob", a man initially befriended by the narrator in his visits to cancer support groups. A former bodybuilder, Bob has been emasculated and bankrupted by testicular cancer: "his big moosie chin on his chest, his eyes already shrink-wrapped in tears. Shuffling his feet, knees-together invisible steps, Bob slid himself across the basement floor to heave himself on me" (FC 21). Bob's next appearance is as an applicant to Project Mayhem, having climbed the hegemonic ranks of fight club: "'The first rule of Project Mayhem," Bob says with his heels together and his back ramrod straight, "is you don't ask questions about Project Mayhem"' (FC 131). He becomes a prototype space monkey, blindly invested in a commodifying system of power: "Bob's sculpted hair had been shaved off and his fingerprints had been burned off with lye. And it was better to get hurt than arrested, because if you were arrested, you were off Project Mayhem" (FC 177). Bob is killed while on a "regulation chill-and-drill homework assignment", which involves him sabotaging public telephones and bank ATMs, by police who mistake his electric hand drill for a gun (FC 176).

He has thus come “full circle”, transported from one arena of subordinate identity to another, and illustrates the manner in which this cycle may end only in death: “there was nothing to tie Big Bob to Project Mayhem or to fight club ... One minute, Robert Paulson was the warm centre that the life of the world crowded around, and the next moment, Robert Paulson was an object” (*FC* 170, 177 – 178).

It is in this moment that the narrator recognises the full destructiveness of fight club, recognising it as a network of power which encompasses men in a harmful cycle of identity construction and demonstration. Having joined fight club as a means to achieving greater personal autonomy, Bob and the other participants are quickly implicated in a system which places the value of their identities in the practices of mindless violence. Fight club in this sense is revealed to perform in the manner of just another power network, locking its members in a sequence of progressively violent events. The hegemonic system has yielded not a form of liberation but a further mode of enclosure, as the narrator finds himself, like Roy Strang, compelled to undo the harm directed from his own body. Recognising the way in which fight club has brought its members in a “full circle” of subordination, he endeavours to “rush around and undo the damage” (*FC* 170, 175). He enters the fight club to “shut it down”: “I suggest, why don’t we all just call it a night ... Project Mayhem is cancelled ... A man is dead, I say. This game is over” (*FC* 178). He begins to realise the extent of his powerlessness in the face of a system which he initiated: “I invented fight club. Fight club is mine. I wrote those rules. None of you would be here if it wasn’t for me. And I say it ends here!” (*FC* 179). The narrator finds his authority negated by the logic of fight club itself, and he is cut short by “established fight club procedure”, as “a voice out of the darkness” instructs the surrounding members to “prepare to evict the member in three, two, one” (*FC* 179). His command is meaningless in the face of the power system fight club has become: “Project Mayhem was my idea. You can’t throw me out. I’m in

control here ... I fly slowly out of the door and into the night ... and I settle into the parking lot concrete ... a door shuts behind me, and a bolt snaps shut. In a hundred cities, fight club goes on without me" (FC 180).

The rules of fight club have instilled in its members a naturalised, violent mode of engagement. They have learned to construct a sense of private and collective selfhood from a pattern of organised brutality, directed through men and pointed toward networks of social administration. This procedure is compounded in the similar rules of Project Mayhem, which cement an ideology of anonymous submission and a practice of naturalised violence both against and from the male body. In their blind adherence to these regulations, the members of fight club have travelled from one mode of compliance to another, and their level of investment is such that the only possible outcome of their behaviour is death: "only in death do we have names. Only in death are we no longer part of Project Mayhem" (FC 201). A system which was begun as a means of liberation has thus been revealed as one which produces a perspective of further subservience, its members effectually arranged and directed to "See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil" (FC 138). The narrator finds that this logic has taken him from a sense of social authority to a reality where "we have no control, no choice, no direction, and no escape and we're dead" (FC 146). This sense of impossibility is linked to Roy Strang's impression of the limitations of being "ordinary". At the end of *Fight Club*, the narrator is fully conscious of the way in which his identity is irrevocably bound to encompassing cycles of power: "We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. We just are, and what happens just happens" (FC 207). This is the limit of hegemonic masculinity, as the power which "goes on and on" continues to move through and around the narrator's body. *Fight Club* illustrates the extent to which the system of hegemony absorbs the challenge of a revolutionary formation, involving its participants within the dichotomy of violent dominance.

Conclusion: the restricting paradigm of masculine identity

The characters in both *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* are obliged to interact with their social environments from within the structures of cultural supervision. As per Butler's model of performativity, Roy and the narrator construct their masculine identities in accordance with the limits and potential offered by normative gender relations. Their perceptions of gender difference arise in relation to an ideology of naturalised male authority, reproducing the dichotomy of a power system which establishes one social group dominant of others. They are located, by these means, upon a cultural standard of gender performance. In this way, Connell's paradigm of hegemonic masculinity offers a comprehensive framework in which to position and account for the perspectives and activities of these characters. I argue that their environments compel them toward an enactment of hegemonic dominance as a means to maintaining a measure of normative masculinity. As has been shown, this is a identity which performs through a naturalised mode of male authority, and is translated into socially problematic practices of physical violence.

The narrators of *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* are concerned with exercising this power, through violence, with the aim of establishing themselves as socially dominant. These men are linked in a perception of their respective environments as those which operate along similar alignments of power distribution, and both men strive to assert themselves through parallel practices of physical aggression. The hegemonic framework as described by Connell and utilised here operates upon and through the male body, directing it to an exercise of progressive, cyclical brutality. I have drawn on the term "hypermasculinity" to label this behavioural format: the male characters of *Fight Club* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* engage with their social environments through a continual exertion of

violent male dominance. Both men are involved, by this performance, in an encompassing system of power which works upon their inner sense of gender identity to reproduce structures of dominance. The hegemonic model has in this sense served to institute within them a sense that male violence is a principal and necessary means of identity construction and self-expression. Hypermasculinity here represents a form of self-regulation, supervising the behaviours of men *via* the directives of an internalised masculine normativity.

In *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, Roy imagines himself within a mode of naturalised authority. The imagery of his dream-state illustrates the extent to which he has internalised the perspective of hegemony, and his imagination is accordingly peppered with various forms of hypermasculine brutality, revealing the degree of his implication in a model of violent, corrupt masculine performance. From the outset of his upbringing, Roy is socialised into an understanding of his identity as one which requires both an original, violent declaration and a continually brutal re-assertion. In this is he conscious of the fact that his environment necessitates active dominance as a means to avoiding passive subordination. In his life-long performance of exploitative violence, Roy makes clear that the hegemony of dominant masculinity has instilled within him a philosophy of instinctive competition and superiority. He finds himself unable to live with the fact of his escalating outward violation, yet equally unable to enact an alternative form of masculine identity; his environment of hegemony has limited him to an enclosed binary of violence and/or violation. Welsh refuses Roy a direction out of this equation, choosing instead to delineate the pressures and compulsions which limit the scope of his agency. Roy exists in this context to reproduce a system of power, by allowing the cycle of violence to work against, through, and from his body. Welsh is concerned here with presenting the extent to which a model of hegemonic

masculinity arranges Roy, by administering his desires and governing his actions, into the "dead-end" of hegemonic masculine dominance.

Fight Club presents a male protagonist whose identity and behaviour is governed by forces outside of his body. From the beginning, he is made aware of the structures and impulses which reduce his function to the mechanical following of an economic principle. He is involved within a system which positions his body according to his performance: he exists, as such, in a mode of either static compliance or violently dominating self-expression. Palahniuk presents the narrator's sole direction toward personal autonomy as being through an embodiment of violent, hegemonic dominance. He illustrates, too, the extent to which this performance ties the narrator to progressive practices of violence. Tyler endows the narrator with a sense of his autonomous capabilities through the act of physical, one-on-one fighting. In this way, the narrator engages with a model of hegemonic masculine dominance, believing that this model offers him a route toward greater control of his own decisions and opportunities. Through fighting he discovers a degree of indestructibility, and determines to turn his new physical capabilities into a force for social change. Having taken jurisdiction of his own body, he resolves to utilise that control in a format of revolution, involving members of fight club in a system of cultural insurrection. These members, ostensibly engaged with the violence of hegemonic masculinity as a means toward personal self-realisation, are rendered collectively subordinate to the totalitarian logic of Project Mayhem. The narrator himself is made ineffective by the same logic that freed him from the conformity of indiscriminate consumerism, and is revealed here to be an exponent of oppressive, hegemonic power relations.

The narrator of *Fight Club* remains bound by the same system that binds Roy in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, limited to a performance of physical domination as a

way out of being structurally subordinated. Together, these men indicate the desires and compulsions under which they labour as components of a system of male hegemony. These novels relate to one another in the sense that they present an environment which restricts their male characters to a performance of vicious masculine superiority. Just as Roy struggles to live with the moral implications of his violent behaviour, so the anonymous narrator finds himself incapable of halting the motions of power which work through him. In different ways, then, they come to appreciate the ultimately problematic nature of a male autonomy grounded in violence. In these ways, both Welsh and Palahniuk describe the ways and means in which "power always goes on and on" (MSN 219).

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