



chapter one

Popular Fiction: Taste, Sentiment, and the Culture of Criticism

Taste is basically an ability to judge the [way in which] moral ideas are made sensible ([it judges this] by means of a certain analogy in our reflection about [these ideas and their renderings in sensibility]); the pleasure that taste declares valid for mankind as such and not just for each person's private feeling must indeed derive from this [link] and from the resulting increase in our receptivity for the feeling that arises from moral ideas (and is called moral feeling).

—Immanuel Kant, "On Methodology Concerning Taste"
in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*

It is natural for us to seek a standard of taste; a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.

—David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste"

Our interpretation of a work and our experience of its value are mutually dependent, and each depends upon what might be called the psychological "set" of our encounter with it: not the "setting" of the work, or in the narrow sense, its context, but rather the nature and potency of our own assumptions, expectations, capacities, and interest in respect to it—our "prejudices" if you like, but hardly to be distinguished from our identity (or who, in fact we are) at the time of the encounter.

—Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value*

I begin by establishing certain questions to be asked of Puzo's incredible success in *The Godfather* and, by extension, that of any phenomenal best seller. What draws me as critic to this popular writer and to this

narrative phenomenon? What training and praxis inform both the way I frame my questions and the evidence I choose to examine? I want to chart the inevitable questions and false starts that face the literary critic when confronting a work of such massive popularity as *The Godfather* with the goal of beginning to outline my rationale for a particular set of readings at a number of sites. The largest questions about these issues have everything to do with establishing a rationale for moral criticism in a pluralist culture that enables sentiment to be a powerful arbiter of judgment without completely privileging its contingent quality.

To set the issues in their purest form, I return briefly to the eighteenth-century debate over reason and sentiment as they inform judgments of taste in moral philosophy. The two most cogent figures must be Kant and Hume, the prominent architects of our modern view of feelings and judgments and the ways in which they form our concepts of the beautiful, the moral, and the ethical. Kant credits Hume with his awakening to the primacy of the world of experience over the world of ideas. Much of what would underwrite the authority of criticism in our time takes its shape through Kant's majestic formulations of the aesthetic, the beautiful, and the sublime and how the critic is vested or "disinterested" in the judgments. Such maxims in Kant's Critiques have licensed a twentieth-century pursuit of "art for art's sake," a denial of historicizing, a formalization of the critical power, an austerity beyond the sensible into a realm where art is perceived as higher and higher. No elite judgment of critical consistency can be truly made without Kantian underwriting. Yet Kant also provides the strongest basis for our inquiry into moral judgments that cohere within and without the aesthetic impulse.

Hume's more visceral and hedonistic embracing of the sentimental as a basis for moral apprehensions and evaluations is where Kant and Hume part company in the extreme. Hume calls for a more subjective and capacious view of the human responding imagination, one that reflects a "broader discipline of reflection on human nature" (Baier *Progress* 25). In an appendix to *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* entitled "Concerning Moral Sentiment," Hume wrote, "But though reason, when fully assisted and improved, be sufficient to instruct us in the pernicious or useful tendency of qualities and actions; it is not alone sufficient to produce any moral blame or approbation. . . . It is requisite a *sentiment* [italics Hume] should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery" (125). For writers who are conscious advocates, either moral or ethical about justice, equality, and freedom within society, Hume gives great cause. The credo about sentiments as moral guides leads not only to the ideals of a document such as the American Declaration of Independence ("happiness of mankind"/"pursuit of happi-

ness") but to an identification with society and its social arrangements and inequities ("resentment of their misery").

Hume is willing to undertake a dangerous tacking amidst issues, scenes, and effects. The critic's lot is always to feel he is overstepping emotional bounds and to pull back in this or that stay against his full range of feeling. Hume knew this when he wrote, "I am uneasy to think that I approve of one object and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed" (Baier 22). Although it is impossible to graft fully the sentiments of a great eighteenth-century philosopher onto a current debate about the uses and modes of literary criticism, it's the methodological "uneasiness" Hume knew as he constructed his case for sentiment that is fully repeated in the contemporary critical establishment and was a staple of largely negative comment throughout the twentieth century. Modernism's brilliant refashioning of historical, moral, and social chaos in the church of its literature in the first half of the twentieth century was met and often influenced and enhanced by an equally powerful and austere set of formalisms led by the Anglo-American New Criticism as well as by various avant garde manifestos in Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism. Modernism canceled sentiment by rigor, formalism, and experimentalism both in succession and in concert. Postmodernism tends to treat Hume's "uneasiness" in a more relaxed pluralism of canonical and popular and refrains from judgment when it can in favor of flattening out questions of the "moral" and the "true" into equilibrated images and icons in fractured response.

Another powerful initiative in our critical climate is a committed social and gender-based multicultural fiction and criticism that counters postmodernism's more easily won pluralism with an instinctive commitment to diversity. No period since the midnineteenth century is producing fiction or criticism of sentiment to a wider acclaim. In allied initiatives, feminist criticism, New Historicism, and multiethnic criticism rise to suggest that we re-read the last century and a half to find countermovements in fiction through feeling as well as reason. Literary and culture critics resurrect women's domestic texts, slave narratives, and long forgotten best sellers, and attempt to chart the feelings of the reading public as exhibited in what they wholly embraced as consumers. As critics we may read in an attempt to find out what moves us, often not in a fiction of great depth but rather in a fiction of varied surfaces where we attempt to ascertain how our critical responses themselves can be considered complex across a breadth of literary forms, social issues, and moral imaginings. Therefore we constantly seek ways to integrate our reading selves in differing contexts in which we confront our most elite and popular texts. Hume conceived the two areas of sentiment and reason as they might work together uneasily in our critical imaginings: "What is

honourable, what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it. What is intelligible, what is evident, what is probable, what is true, procures only the cool assent of the understanding; and gratifying a speculative curiosity, puts an end to our researches" (Hume 15). Hume anticipates, albeit pejoratively, Kant's "disinterestedness" in which such judgment shall not function beyond the identification of beauty or the sublime. To Hume, a "speculative" inquiry is not enough; the "end to our researches" cannot be allowed to forget what our "heart" tells us is "true."

To apply this maxim to a contemporary reading of *The Godfather*, it's therefore not enough to count the novel's sales, label its genres, talk about its myths, and carve its niche in a postmodern set of images, language, gestures, and copies. Puzo's novel, the three *Godfather* films, and the numerous extensions of mob narrative speak to a wide range of moral issues, chaotically raising vexing questions in our society about what are "honor," "fairness," and "generosity": our heart, as Hume knows, is fully engaged by such material. Is Vito Corleone justified in taking that first life on the Lower East Side of New York City? After the first Sicilian American death, is there no other? Does all justification, all blessing flow from this initial action? Yet, doesn't Vito Corleone's "generous heart" come from his power and authority? Is this power not authorized by the fact that he will take your life, demand, as Michael so indelicately relates it, your "brains or [your] signature on that paper"? Finally, isn't the Don acting for one of the most noble of reasons, the familial? We inquire into the nature of these arrangements and respond not only with our reason but our visceral reaction to what we believe is happening in such a powerful narrative transaction as *The Godfather*, one that is compelling not because of its symbolic intricacy or ironic commentary but because questions about our sympathies and affiliations are put so directly to us and by us as readers that we cannot deny the challenge to our public morality and private identities as parents, children, and family members in a plurality of roles. Should fiction, particularly popular fiction, be held to account for its commentary on such matters, and what would this account have to do with literary criticism?

Hume shows wit as well as a philosopher's courage in commenting on such dilemmas. He states that, "in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment" (15). As critics, we can almost always find a formalist rhetoric to demonstrate what affect we need to find. As teachers, we can and do tell fiction and film classes words to the effect that "you'll notice when Sonny Corleone died in a hail of bullets at the toll booth (or when Fredo was shot to death on Lake Tahoe), how Coppola and Puzo achieved effects by depicting the scene as 'caught in the middle,' paying and paying, 'taking its toll,' between Long Island and New York City, neither here nor there (or died saying 'Hail Marys,' as a fisher of

men, with Michael looking on ‘through a glass darkly’),” how an author or director achieved distancing by depicting a scene (in a flashback, in a dream sequence, stream-of-consciousness, through the music, through a first-person narration, in slow motion). We call such motions establishing a critical perspective as we perform the repertoire of critical rhetoric’s power to demonstrate the aesthetics of any work over and above what shatters us in the scene’s content and context. However, suppose we want to stop and ask about agency. Who killed these Corleone sons, and what will flow from that action? Who is guilty of what in this family, and how does it relate to our lives? What are the consequences for the novel and films and for society? Often the goal here in recounting such examples will be to describe fully the art of rendering the patterns of death in *The Godfather* to show how Puzo imaginatively and rhetorically attempts to make us understand and feel those patterns. How does the understanding connect to the feeling? What do both have to do with the reader-viewer’s pleasure and instruction?

Once again, Hume to the front. His hypothesis is “that morality is determined by sentiment. It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*” (italics Hume) (85). Sentiment itself is directly linked to the proving of the good and the true, nor can there be any way to achieve the perception of these ends without feeling. Hume continues: “it appears evident, that the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by *reason* [emphasis Hume], but recommend themselves entirely to the sentiments and affections of mankind, without any dependence on the intellectual faculties” (87). Morality and sentiment cannot be severed, and it follows that if sentiment is discounted or discredited, any moral statement in a critical judgment will be very hard to mount or sustain before the disinterestedness that is seen to be proper when appraising art for its beauty and truth. Therefore, not only might it traditionally be seen as bad form to respond critically to *The Godfather* in the first place as a questionable artifact, but it would also be a compounded crime to take seriously its moral imaginings when sentiment is cancelled and morality is out of bounds for criticism.

The sheer breadth of individual response through sentiment is potentially limitless. Kant quotes Hume in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, specifically in book 2, “Analytic of the Sublime,” in a note observing that “there is a considerable diversity in the sentiments of beauty and worth, and that education, custom, prejudice, caprice, and humour frequently vary our taste of this kind” and that “beauty and worth are merely of a relative nature and consist in an agreeable sentiment, produced by an object in a particular mind, according to the peculiar structure and constitution of that mind” (Hume in Kant 149). This extended note on Hume’s more relaxed and expansive view of sentiment appears to open a space for Kant through structures of feeling that

allow a critic to retain sentiments within aesthetic judgments. However, Kant is actually more interested in demonstrating his seconding of Hume regarding the absolute difference between each and every subject's responding imagination.

Moreover, Kant's one extended passage on "sentimentality" in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* is a strongly negative attack on its excesses and one that sets a strong precedent for later criticism. Although Kant acknowledges that "affects" are beautiful and sensible, he delineates them into categories of the "vigorous" and the "languorous." Two centuries later it is difficult not to code these affects immediately into male and female, respectively, and to gauge the power and damage that such bifurcation has caused and continues to cause in the appraisal of feelings. According to Kant, "vigorous affects" make us conscious that "we have forces to overcome any resistance" and are "aesthetically sublime," even those of "desperation," as long as that desperation is "indignant" rather than "despondent." However, an affect of the "languid kind," which never resists, "has nothing noble about it." A further distinction between "spirited emotions" and "tender ones" yields Kant's view that when the tender increases to the level of affects, "they are utterly useless: and a propensity toward them is called *sentimentality*" (italics Kant) (Kant 133). Kant thus installs a test of intensity for emotions. When that intensity gives rise to an imbalance of feeling over reason, it is dangerously enervating. *Sentimentality* will become the "bad" noun, triumphing over its more respectable male parent *sentiment* and always associated with over-indulgence, lassitude, and superficiality.

Kant immediately tells his readers where to look for such a syndrome: where emotion as affect "creates a soul that is gentle but also weak and that shows a beautiful side," "fanciful" but not "enthusiastic." Such souls are addicted to "romances and maudlin plays; insipid moral precepts that dally with (falsely) so-called noble attitudes but that in fact make the heart languid and insensitive to the stern precept of duty." (133). Kant could here be describing Emma Bovary's reading program or that of Rousseau. Popular fiction in its highest form or on its best day could never rise to Kant's occasion, certainly no fiction that evinced any passivity or tender openness, that by extension was written for and by women. Kant in his Puritanism reads out any passionately personal enjoyment: we'll have none of that being carried away by heroes and heroines here. Kant's suspicions go as far back as Plato's rhetorical conceit in the *Republic* of banishing poets from his ideal Republic on account of their imitation of virtue and their stirring up of the citizenry to no good purpose.

Kant continues with criticisms that the sentimental is harmful to our self-reliance and leads to a false humility, a sort of craven Christianity (anticipating Nietzschean discontents). Such "impetuous agitations" must lead to a "pure intellectual purposiveness," or else we are merely

aroused gratuitously; sentimentality may be bad foreplay indeed. Thus Kant's own doctrine of "disinterestedness" when applied to taste and beauty will not be allowed to apply to affects. To signify, such affects must be placed in a purposive economy. Any sort of strong feeling of the sublime must have reference "to our *way of thinking*" (italics Kant), to "maxims directed to providing the intellectual [side in us] and our rational ideas with supremacy over sensibility" (134–35). It's difficult to overestimate the influence of Kantian philosophy on all aspects of judgment and taste in the literary culture of the twentieth century. Not only did Kant call for the suppression of unregulated feeling in any system of judgment, he also cast into sharp distinction the aesthetic power of judgment set against the intellectual power of judgment, while again stressing the need for both judgments to be rooted in "disinterest." Kant wrote, "And hence it seems not only that the feeling for the beautiful is distinct in kind from moral feeling (as it indeed actually is), but also that it is difficult to reconcile the interest which can be connected with the beautiful with the moral interest, and that it is impossible to do this by an alleged intrinsic affinity between the two" ("On Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful" 165).

Such a summary judgment on these two forms of judgment inheres in the critical presuppositions and operational stances of some of the most brilliant culture critics of the late twentieth century. For example, Roland Barthes at the conclusion of *Mythologies* concludes that we are doomed to speak "excessively" about reality, that the critic of culture must either "poetize" or "ideologize" (158), must either work in aesthetics or the political. Bourdieu after heroic labor through the intricate sociological cataloguing of capital in *Distinction*, admits to a methodological necessity in his "Postscript: Towards a 'Vulgar' Critique of 'Pure' Critiques" when he quotes Proust to stand for his own choices: "I have had to struggle here with my dearest aesthetic impressions, endeavoring to push intellectual honesty to to its ultimate cruelest limits" (485). Bourdieu practices an austerity to match that of Kant on a different plane with different goals. He refuses to believe in art even as Kant had crafted a sensationless pleasure and writes of having to cultivate a "deliberate amnesia," a "readiness to renounce the whole corpus of cultivated discourse on culture" (485). Even though Bourdieu's "Postscript" is a critique of Kantian critique, it is nonetheless caught in the terms that Kant had set forth, in the perceptual "distinctions" that enable *Distinction* as a text and theoretical program to come into being. Bourdieu defines the "aesthetic disposition" as "a generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary agencies and to bracket off particular ends" (54), and such would appear to be a widely accepted estimate of Kantian critique in our time. Bourdieu understands the "aesthetic sense as the sense of distinction itself" (56), the ensemble of the various ways in which literature study validates its discipline and takes to a high ground that knows not its own designation

but that moves surely to expunge any taint of historicizing or politicizing on behalf of any critical rhetoric that would open new texts or new spaces in canonical texts.

Reading the Popular: Aesthetics, Morals, Taste

In the arsenal of elite critical tools descended from Kant and invigorated by Hume, what can be of practical use in approaching Puzo's novel? Defiantly materialistic, melodramatic rather than ironic, sensational rather than realistic, pedestrian in style rather than intricate, often sexist, parochial, vulgar—*The Godfather* resists traditional critical overtures and attempts to speak of its power and value. Perhaps its "distinction" lies precisely in having reached so many varied audiences without any of the approved modes of distinction through literary capital, without an approved "poetizing" critique. Yet the narrative of *The Godfather* in novel and films remains as an extraordinary fact and influence on millions of readers and viewers all over the world. What is needed in its study is to seek a supple "standard of taste," in which the "various sentiments of men may be reconciled" (Hume "Of the Standard of Taste" 309), and the "propadeutic," which Kant called for "that will truly establish our taste" and aid in "developing our moral ideas and in cultivating moral feeling" (232). Such a challenge in popular fiction criticism means nothing less than striving for a re-association of sensibility between reason and feeling in the service of raising issues about the moral transactions of mob narrative in the life world of *The Godfather*.

Kantian aesthetic value is phenomenologically quite thin as opposed to the Humean account of aesthetics, which casts the formation in this more social realm (Railton 88–90). Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts it best when she comments, "As Hume's detailing of the conditions affecting human performance becomes richer and more subtle, his claim that there is an objective standard of taste grounded in nature becomes weaker. As Kant's speculations of what would make a judgment of taste totally objective becomes tighter, purer, and more foolproof, his demonstration becomes more remote from conditions of any sublunary world" (70). For the most part, I too will cast my vote with the party of Hume as realizing more of taste and sentiment's subjectivities in the belief that narratives crucially depend on eliciting our moral beliefs and feelings to reach us as readers (Carroll 141). Such activation of feelings will not yield a criticism that is tidy or conclusive. This criticism will involve coming to understand that the interrogation of a work such as *The Godfather* is perhaps to question the very base of our moral understanding in the way fiction plays us as readers. Noel Carroll identifies a class of narratives "that pervert and confuse moral understanding by connecting moral principles, concepts, and emotions to dubious particulars" (150). Hume himself had

been troubled by works “where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation;” he said that “we are displeased to find the limits of vice and virtue so much confused” (315). *The Godfather* is a laboratory for such moral conflicts in reader identification, with so much mayhem from the heroes while readers’ concepts of the larger society and citizenship are overturned, crime inscribed as business and vice versa, and the hallowed and universal signification of family invoked whenever necessary. The catalogue of what the Family can become in *The Godfather* is almost endless in its slippage: justification for any action, security for its members, outlaw band, prison house, immigrant cadre, heroic American business, murderous corporation, fulfillment of the American Dream, myth of a “Founding Father” and descendants.

Carroll cites Martha Nussbaum who contends of the novel genre that it “generally constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship,” yet Carroll knows that the novel is not always “beneficent” (156), that as an inclusive narrative of society, there are moments in novels that trouble us greatly even as we are absorbed and carried along by the plot and identification with the characters. Beryl Gaut tries to relativize aesthetics when she writes, “A work of art may be judged to be aesthetically good *insofar* as it’s beautiful, is formally unified and strongly expressive, but aesthetically bad *insofar* as it trivializes the issues with which it deals and manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes” (184). To adapt this maxim to *The Godfather* is complicated for the novel’s melodramatic form is always overexpressive; the family is formally unified, but the text is sprawling. Unity often becomes repetition in which the same speeches on “destiny” or “cunning” are given indiscriminately to different characters in a tedium of resemblances rather than a delight of recognitions for the reader desiring to synthesize judgments and make them whole. To show the relative trivializing of the moral and ethical in *The Godfather* will be the business of chapters 3 and 5 here but in the context of attempting to account for such inscription in any novel and how we make sense of it, according to a host of factors. I don’t want to jettison aesthetics in this study but to make moral judgments part of the judging of aesthetic judgment, to suggest that our “distaste” may arise from a palpable sense that the form of the text through its language can, in ways often hard to identify with precision, abuse our view of the rightness of the sentiments expressed, the reasons posited in the life-world of the novel.

Hume would caution at the outset of such an errand that “taste is not able to distinguish all the particular flavors amidst the disorder in which they are presented” (311) and the continuum of taste would run from its delicacy in the work of a master through the most sensational and vacuous production of popular literature. *Approbation* is Hume’s hard-working noun. Over and over again, he shows us *the act of proving true*:

true to the lifeworld of the characters, the sentiments of the author, the shape of their civil society. All is played against and through the emotional mindset of the reader, the genre in which it is cast, the times in which it is read, and the critical sign under which it resides in a particular commentary. Hume observes the sheer diversity of taste and why we almost always choose “a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition,” but his conclusion that “such preferences are innocent and unavoidable and can never reasonably be the object of dispute” (314) is absolutely contested in the dialogues that comprise the critical discourse in the ideological climate in which we now read and write at the beginning of the twenty-first century. No ethical judgment of literature is currently seen to be innocent, and our narcissistic critical meditations on our “dispositions” most often rise to eclipse the primary text that nominally spurred us into song. Positioning our identity becomes more important than establishing our viewpoint.

Kant traditionally staves off such performative anxiety. The ethical and the aesthetic are woven together into the moral judgment, nor can residual Kantian legerdemain render them separate in our time. Kant’s weapons remain formidable, and we yearn toward them as powerful traditional magic, even as we subvert their tenets. Kant’s “aesthetic power of judgment,” the “ability to judge forms without using concepts” and to make a “judgment . . . not based on an interest and also gives rise to none” is a perfect double *cordon sanitaire*, absolving a critic from having any ideologically formed positions or presuppositions. Why would he need them since only beauty, perfectly apprehensible and of-and-for-itself is the goal that further absolves the judgment of consequences or agendas, as if the “judgers” did not come marked in so many ways by living in the world. Such license to describe the aesthetic is of course the heritage of Romanticism throughout the variety of heroic artistic individualisms down through the modernists, cohering in every sort of artistic product from Byron’s poetry to the alienated refrains of rock lyricists. Yet the ways in which the aesthetic “covers” life and becomes a substitute for it yields some very strange adherents. Puzo’s earnest statement that “I believed in art for twenty five years. It gave me a comfort I could find in no other place” suggests the fix that aesthetics was and was in by the late twentieth century, a falsely sealed corner where any perception could be indulged without consequence and with enormous formations of exile, self-pity, isolation, and reflexive commentary. Bourdieu writes, “The aestheticism which makes the artistic intention the basis of the ‘art of living’ implies a sort of moral agnosticism, the perfect antithesis of the ethical disposition which subordinates art to the values of the art of living” (47). Bourdieu sentimentally sees that subordination as the empirical wisdom of the working classes who cannot, for example see the artful construction of a prize-winning photograph on poverty but instead shudder at the plight of the human subject as “there but for certain

minor moves in the economy or the grace of God go I" or who just have instinctive sympathy for another human being, not mediated by art.¹

The "moral agnosticism" of aesthetics is of little use when a critic of popular fiction wants to confront Puzo or any popular writer who through sensational and melodramatic action elides the victims of history or confers magically their ability to fly by all nets of social constraint and law to "take vengeance" to "save [my] family."² Thus Kantian aesthetics confers something of the same sense of being above the law as the Corleone "family business" in *The Godfather*. In each case, both in high art and high crime, the gesture is toward an absolutism, a motion that does not recognize laws or morality and considers itself above spatial and temporal constraints as well as dialogue with other forces or constituted collectivities. "Disinterestedness" is inimical to any protest against the morality of fiction. Although Bourdieu writes that morality and agreeableness are the explicit norms of the working class, it must also be the base of the popular readership, what he calls the "popular aesthetic" (41). Yet just as surely, these norms are expressed in a false consciousness. "Disinterestedness" is never an option for the popular readership or for moral or ethical critics, and this, at least, is what they share. Bourdieu writes that "nothing is more alien to popular consciousness than the idea of an aesthetic pleasure that . . . is independent of the charming of the senses," which challenges Kant, who had said that taste that needed "charm" and "emotion" had not emerged from "barbarism" (42).

Therefore popular fiction and the taste culture confront each other over what looks like insurmountable barriers to accommodation and dialogue, complicated by the critic's uneasy relation to assumed identities. I want to call on sentiment to reintroduce feeling into a discussion of Puzo's popular fiction, to become a bit melodramatic myself when need be, to perhaps draw on sentiment as the very tool of the readership itself, and to try to speak through that mask. The only way perhaps to match Puzo's impact is provisionally to mime his effects. If he opts out of the system of elite fiction's creation after *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, why should I hold my ground there as critic since Puzo is talking about the whole host of life-world issues that make me uneasy about my own stubborn residence in formalist criticism? I meet him on the grounds of his fiction when I wish to remain "interested" rather than "disinterested." Writing about morality and ethics is worth doing in relation to *The Godfather* because Puzo himself is raising such issues all the time in this popular narrative. To abandon the search for his meanings because such errands do not fit the historical caste of critical debate or are in debt to the emotions and the sympathies would then suggest that we have no way to engage this writer and fiction in dialogue. To refuse to meet seriously a vastly popular text such as *The Godfather* on the grounds of its largely pedestrian pronouncements about family, destiny, and immigration is to forego an opportunity to understand where millions of people

have had their emotional and rational responses to these huge cultural formations both confirmed and challenged. We cannot afford to wave off *The Godfather's* take on the subjects of American civil society, capitalism, and its arrangements and say that they are all just manifestations of some false consciousness or the "unconscious," political or otherwise, or to be degraded appetites or simplifications. Such is to do violence to the study of this phenomenon. There will be moments when, unavoidably, I will want to describe *The Godfather* in terms of something else, to void its content and replace it with my own, to "expose" its gaps or inconsistencies, but these rhetorical acts need not be primary or definitive. Just as often, I will say that *The Godfather* is about exactly what it appears to be about: Money, Family, Business, Immigrants. Negations and refusals are never the whole story in complex response to popular fiction.

Such a range of critical motion on taste allows for freer speculations on its mediating power. Kant, Bourdieu, and Puzo are caught in varying refusals. Kant demands "sensationless" pleasure. Bourdieu denies himself any aesthetic pleasure and then grimly sets about contextualizing the sensible pleasures of the working class according to their being caught in an economy that rules their response even as it rules that of their critics. Puzo first flees his ethnic family, attempts an elite literature career, goes bad to write an enormous best seller, then dissolves into complacent reprise. In each case they are perhaps exemplifying a "fundamental refusal of the facile" (486), which Kant describes as "pure taste." The taste culture will always be at odds with the popular, and intellectuals and authors will warily affiliate with taste while just as warily maintaining an attraction-repulsion to the facile: Kant through male sentiment, Bourdieu through "rigor," yet sympathy for the consuming class, Puzo through his mystified worship of art where he might be Exhibit A in a Bourdieuan analysis (see chapter 2 in this volume).

Bourdieu is almost lyrical in his negativity and quite sensational when he describes Kant's taste that renounces the facile as "based on the disgust that is often called 'visceral' " (486). He evokes "easy virtue" and the "easy lay," and clearly the terms themselves when transcoded into popular fiction suggest a prostituted or an adulterated text, some betrayal or lie of art, perhaps incarnated through Puzo's declaration "I wrote below my gifts in [*The Godfather*]" or in Michael's famous kiss of death in *Godfather II* in Havana when he passionately declares "I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart." In effect, Michael tells him that he sold out the family for money and respect, got their brother Sonny killed, and was complicituous in the attempt on the life of Michael, Kay, and the children in the Lake Tahoe compound. Michael's disgust is visible, his dis-taste enormous. His judgment is that Fredo has broken the law, which is, in Kant's terms, a law for everyone in the family. Michael's "judgment" gives rise to an "interest," that Fredo must die; in the name of family, Michael must kill family. Within the contorted morality that

The Godfather posits, this is a moral choice, but one made out of disgust, passion, and the power of judgment.

Bourdieu leaves behind his "dearest aesthetic impressions" to practice sociology. Puzo practices popular literature by "writing below his gifts." Michael Corleone "goes bad" by killing Sollozzo and McCluskey and thereby truly joins the family for the first time. Further ironies cross-cut among the critic, the author, and the characters. Don Corleone has "taste," which separates him from his murderous peers. He is strait-laced in matters of sex, and a man of reason, a statesman, full of disgust for the actions of both his supplicants and his headstrong oldest son. To turn the prism, critics know from their earliest training that to paraphrase and transpose Don Corleone, "revenge [interpretation, evaluation] is a dish best served cold." Within the taste culture of aesthetics, even in an era when aesthetics is in relative eclipse, the nominal critical act should not raise one's voice but reason, obfuscate, allude to, reformulate, and eviscerate taste-fully, armed with mighty weapons of philosophy, rhetoric, and language. Who are more mandarin, above the fray, and disinterested than Vito Corleone and his son, Michael? It's Michael who is the family inheritor, not Sonny, the violent, sexually potent son who brawls his way through sensational scenes, a Corleone seemingly on loan from 1930s Warner Brothers brash and visceral gangster epics. He is discredited through dis-taste, as is the Cold War weapons system brute known as Luca Brasi and the child seducer and horse lover Jack Woltz. *The Godfather* pronounces its own distasteful judgment on these figures.

There's no denying the fact that the critic would like to keep his distance from the Corleone empire and its workings analogous to the manner in which Don Corleone "launders" both his orders to kill and the money he amasses. American fiction criticism in general wants to stay away from the physical and material facts of murder and money. These hard facts are resistant to a sustained formalist or ideological criticism through any of the literary-critical tools in vogue at any time. The refusal of criticism to confront a moral and violent muddle has its fictional analogue in Michael Corleone's initial refusal, almost disgust, with his own family. Michael has to wean himself away from Dartmouth, his World War II heroism, and his romance with Kay Adams to get back to the family, where he becomes a success. There's a parable in Michael's trajectory and justifications in what might be called the "Popular Subversive." Kant's "Negative Magnitudes" in *Critique of Judgment* measure pure taste by the intensity of denied impulse, by the highest degree of tension (Bourdieu 490), and here we find something close to a principle of higher prurience, the abstraction of the sensible and the coarse into a more intellectual form. Such a ratcheting up of the emotional denial within the very figure of the example defines quite well the symbolic American Romance Paradigm, the inaugurating critical trope to canonize a run of writers and tropes in the American 1850s (Poe, Melville, Hawthorne,

blackness, whiteness, redness, but no slaves, masters, or Indians) by a criticism taking dominion in the American 1950s. The genius of this intensity centers on the hidden meaning, the symbolic complexity, the ironic layering, the deflections from historical bodies onto “colors”—the move, in short, to taste. Bourdieu quotes Derrida on the “arid pleasure” of Kant’s critique (494, 600), and such a pleasure becomes a cornerstone of the first generation of American Literature study in the academy after World War II. Tellingly, such aridity within a coldly chosen symbolic “pleasure” would make Michael Corleone the popular avatar of an abstract refusal to traffic in the sentimental but to become a mandarin “power of blackness” on his own, to abscond to a tower of his own creation, to deny a common humanity within the murderous family. Such would be an elite critical reading of Michael’s passage with the potential result of making him a metacritical brooder over his inhabited mob narrative. However, Puzo gives scant evidence that such was his intention at all, and such a critical stance would tell us very little about the narrative’s hold on its audience in American culture.

A more useful critical approach would be to attempt a full-field description of the various acts of Puzo and his Corleone family coordinated with readerly and critical acts. What might be the congress among these subjects? Everything about the family is concealed on the surface from America, yet nothing is concealed in Puzo’s writing. The writing holds no secrets, yet the family business is an invisible empire. Within the “Popular Subversive” then would be a series of guilty pleasures that take dead aim at the taste culture and the hegemony of aesthetics, each transgression predicated on the necessity of an action that could be described as “going bad,” which would include:

- Vito and Michael Corleone becoming murderers (Going Bad=Becoming the Godfather)
- Mario Puzo writing the novel (Going Bad=Writing *The Godfather*)
- Readership (Going Bad=Reading and Liking *The Godfather*)
- Critical Act (Going Bad=Writing on *The Godfather*).

In each case, “disinterest” and the “beautiful” are canceled. In the society in which he finds himself in New York around 1920, Vito Corleone cannot see a way to rise in the world. His first obstacle to autonomy and security is the “Black Hand” extortionist, Don Fanucci. Vito Corleone would establish himself as a “made man,” something created or produced beyond natural law, a killer to be feared when he comes speaking reason in a soft voice. It will be in your best *interest* to hear his practical maxims and, upon reflection, to do his bidding. Puzo tries to “escape” his ethnicity in

World War II and during the first years of his writing career. When he writes *The Fortunate Pilgrim* to critical acclaim but little popular success, he says he feels betrayed and thus knows what he must do: "write below his gifts" in the next novel, which, in chronicling the descent into and growth of a great crime empire, is paralleled in the writing change from *The Fortunate Pilgrim* to *The Godfather* in characterization, tone, and complexity. Going bad is going away from the moral norms, the taste culture, ethnic realism, and the standards of critical judgment.

The Godfather counters all the authorities that function like the invisible government of literary culture to keep Puzo from validating his "belief in art" as a talisman to ward off any life-world interference. Puzo goes outside the debate to find his godfather. The Corleone historical situation is such that the "Family" replaces "Art" as the first principle, even as *The Godfather* replaces Puzo's earlier fiction. Puzo believes in Don Corleone as he had in art; he finds in *him* the protection that he could "find in no other place" (*The Godfather Papers* 34). *The Godfather* is Puzo's revision of the power of art to the popular realm where he as author cannot be touched by criticism and because of success.

The innocent or naive transgression in this Popular Subversive series would be that of the popular reader who is consuming the product according to the dictates of the author and can't put the book down or goes to see the films repeatedly. For that audience, "liking" *The Godfather* would include approving of the actions that the Corleones must take outside the law on behalf of the sanctioned family and its survival or simply not taking heed of the issues at all. For the critic going bad, the analysis of a popular work involves many issues that make *The Godfather* compelling. They include the critical positing of a metaphorical-hypothetical relation of author to work, author to character, and author to vocation that must be mediated not only by aesthetics (ironically conceived as the refuge from which Puzo decamps) but also by issues of the critic's choice of subject to study (popular fiction), author (a best-selling author), issues (morality of the text, ethical norms, taking form "seriously" in Puzo's text, history, elite and popular literary relations). Each of these choices, too, suggests a crisis of "belief" on the part of the critic, allowing that it might be outside traditional literary study that he might find the most interesting issues of fiction's rationale and praxis. To analyze *The Godfather* is to become something of a metaphorical Corleone family member, seeing from *cosa nostra* (reconfigured as popular fiction) just what that outside world of elite fiction and criticism looks like from different discriminations and considerations within popular fiction.³ Once uneasily situated, the popular fiction critic is constantly adjusting what Smith in *Contingencies of Value* calls "prejudices" in the best sense ("assumptions, expectations, capacities") that determine critical "identity" during an informed reading (10). And then, having been sucked back in

(to reverse Michael's intimation in *Godfather III*), how do I find my way back *out*, and why would I wish to do so? Within the Popular Subversive, every player becomes something of an outlaw, fostering a new identity.

Reading *The Godfather*: Liberal Pluralist Training and Praxis in the Bourgeois Sphere

Working against the traditional anathematization of the popular, the critic who wishes to confront it faces a complicated task. The two most prominent Anglo-American contemporary schools of criticism of the popular can generally be placed under the headings of the American popular culture movement and the British cultural studies group. These movements have been poles apart in genesis and influences. The American popular culture movement dates from the early 1970s and is an outgrowth of both the American studies content and artifact-based school of analysis and a more media-wise component comprising the study of, in addition to popular fiction, advertising, television, music, and video. The American study has been egalitarian and generally not theoretically based and has shown itself to be descriptive rather than analytical with an antipathy toward evaluation and moral judgment. The British Cultural Studies movement is largely rooted in a Marxist theoretical base that studies all aspects of media culture as revealing multiple false consciousnesses in a variety of rhetorics. The British critics tend to void or replace the content of the popular texts with their suggestive absences, to read affirmative narratives as documents of a hegemonic culture that practices its obfuscations and dominations through the culture industry. The godfathers of such a critical program would undoubtedly include Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, and Raymond Williams, along with the austere works of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. The Cultural Studies movement's critical rhetoric routinely contains implicit moral criticism of the contemporary culture that spawns the popular works.

Along with these critical movements in popular culture study, the criticism of popular fiction has been enhanced by the major speculations on reader response across a range of imaginings from class-based readers to psychoanalytic studies of how we read and for what formations and to gender and race-based reading in the "multiples" that comprise the makeup of the contemporary reading audience. Critics from the more tropological Chicago school of the critical formalist tradition, who branch off from New Criticism toward Kenneth Burke but still honor the text for what it can yield to the responding reader, present a hybrid critical approach. One of the most interesting has been Peter Rabinowitz in *Before Reading* (1987). A critic trained by Wayne Booth to read for irony and figural density, Rabinowitz extends that skill into a set of reading precon-

ceptions held by readers from varying classes of training and professional interest. Rabinowitz is also influenced by the strong and continuing meditations on interpretive communities by writers such as Stanley Fish and aims to understand, as carefully as possible, the ways in which we model an array of preconceptions about a fictional text prior to the act of assembling our judgments when we read the fiction.

One of Rabinowitz's opening observations is that the academy, site of reader training for the American professionalized middle class, will always value complexity over "more formulaic" literature, and, therefore, critics will only find the "formulaic" amidst the noncanonical texts. To drive critics out to the formulaic without any map back to the main line of elite literary criticism, to segregate elite from popular fiction in all critical discourse is to inherently develop a rigid canonical economy, one that in the past few decades has been greatly challenged and one for which conservative critics mourn as they conceive of the decline in "reading standards" and choice of texts during the culture wars. Rabinowitz's good sense yields a maxim that I fully endorse in this book: "It is impossible to examine the mechanism of literary evaluation itself without studying both texts that are highly regarded by our literary judges *and* texts that are generally deemed inferior" (11). If *The Godfather* is to have the range of reference that I hope it to have, I must demonstrate its relevance on a number of fronts, to establish and sustain a dialogue with other popular texts as well as with elite fiction, with other historical periods in American fiction, with major formations in our history such as immigration and the constructed "melting pot" in their relation to the strong American figures of family and business. I want to establish that *The Godfather's* nightmares belong to a national psyche consistently captured by popular fiction but not often touched deeply by literary-critical debates over canonicity and one that rumbles on beneath the critical and academic wars fought about interpretation. Thus I want to historicize Rabinowitz's formalist rules for reading in order to drive down deeper into America's story in mythic and historical imagining.

In his section on "Popular Fiction as a Genre," Rabinowitz examines at some length the problems and contradictions of an ironic mode of interpretation. He knows that when, for example, we find inconsistencies in elite texts, we read them as intentionally crafted or at least coherent in their complexity, but when we find inconsistencies in popular texts, we ignore them or read them as flaws (188). Certainly the popular readership reads for the plot, according to the writer's intent to fill the signifier. The trained critic will indeed arrest the text at any point he chooses to intervene in the author's sequence with a reified excerpt that takes on a life of its own as the critic's purloined text, which he then covers with a meaning. Rabinowitz contends that a "basic rule of coherence" in popular literature is that the "ironic reading . . . whatever its textual grounding, would be wrong as an interpretation of the author's

intentions" (190), adding that it's conceivable that popular and elite reading strategies are "not mutually exclusive," although he suspects "only academics would actually read" a novel in this fashion. Yet it's clear that when an "academic" reads *The Godfather*, he does so with many of the same conflicts and social conditioning as that of a so-called popular reader. He's subject to the same field imaginary of American values and notions of "family" and "business." The academic reader is different in kind rather than degree, as Bourdieu would tell us.

Rabinowitz is most concerned with the ultimate goal of achieving the right or best reading and one that is a single critical act by a trained professional. With a novel of such wide cultural dissemination as *The Godfather*, into so many different areas of national life, it's difficult to know what a "right" reading of it might be. If I acknowledge the fact that I know the rules of the elite critical game, I believe I can and should read against what I deem to be authorial intent for a number of reasons. Rabinowitz suggests that this wouldn't be playing fair, a lingering bias that comes closer to that of Booth and perhaps E. D. Hirsch. I freely admit *The Godfather* fractures my reading responses into conflicting feelings and several judgments, which I continually want to place in an "interested" rather than "disinterested" posture. I read the novel as an American male academic of a certain age and training who believes the comprehension of *The Godfather* is a very complex matter, which reaches deep into the history of American fiction and American configuration of the national errand and family. Although Rabinowitz states that "for any actual act of reading, we must choose one genre or the other" (193), the "actual act" must be qualified in criticism, often line-by-line and chapter-by-chapter as texts and characters contradict themselves.

Such contradictions are apparent all through *The Godfather* and never more prominent than in the Corleones' violent acts in the name of reason and family. Surely a character such as Michael Corleone, his face fractured by Captain McCluskey's blow outside the hospital, his life similarly fractured among Sicilian/American, war hero, Ivy League college boy and family avenger lives overtly under the sign of physical doubleness for much of the novel. The reader lives with Michael's hybridity all the time; he's the ultimate outsider (brooding, isolated, half-assimilated) who also becomes the ultimate insider, the son, the heir from whom all power will flow. We may not always be comfortable when Puzo invokes "Michael the killer" over "Michael the good son" or feel Puzo has artfully and meaningfully transitioned between them, but all readers, not just critical academic ones, are capable of grasping the contradictions of *The Godfather's* discourse. We are asked to accept non-assimilation over the putative melting pot story, where our strong feelings are enlisted on the side of the "good" murderers as they battle the "bad" murderers. Such reading agility is not simply a critic's construct; it's required of all

Godfather readers to suppress parts of a reading self at the expense of others, to lose, for a while, a liberal pluralist view or a First World nonethnic view, to submit to the novel's way with us. I no longer know how to get to the point of a "right" reading without severe commentary on the intent of such a reading. I'm often constructing "a" reading to show a specific facet of *The Godfather's* range or authority within a *critical ensemble*, which might be defined as multiculturalism at its most inclusive at the critical level, not quite a melting pot but capable of a real suppleness. The Aristotelian urge to find *The Godfather's* proper cubbyhole and file it is what I want to resist in order to demonstrate that a novel of wide cultural acceptance as an instinctive "read" can be as interesting to write about as a novel of intellectual depth. To learn how to write on this phenomeon is to write a book on Puzo and *The Godfather*.

Part of that learning involves a nontheoretical attempt to face squarely my own reading temperament, insofar as I can, to know the fundamental predispositions and academic credentials that shape me as a liberal, pluralist, secular reader. My deep background through all pluralistic misgivings about *The Godfather's* hermeticism and conservative family isolation most likely springs from the ideals of the Enlightenment as articulated through a massive descriptive program of Western culture. The pluralist themes of what Richard Bernstein calls an "engaged fallible liberalism" include antifoundationalism, fallibilism, the social character of the self, contingency, and the regulative idea of a critical community (387–88). In their fierce identity, the Corleones believe themselves to be *the* foundation of any order. They are infallible and antisocial; they refuse to recognize that any outside community regulates their conduct or lives; and they guard against contingency, feeling it an insult to their control. It's clear from reading *The Godfather* and other documents that the Enlightenment appears to have missed Sicily.

Jurgen Habermas in the past several decades has defined the "bourgeois public sphere," a culture's common life that is defined and debated through a broadly conceived dialogue that buttresses and modulates legal, political, and economic institutions and their policies. A Corleone or Soprano will always disparage such a culture that they reduce to the "big shots" or the "Carnegies and Rockefellers" as Tony Soprano says, or the *pezzonovantis* and .90 calibers of *The Godfather*, while Michael abstracts the society he might someday join as "some country club crowd, the good simple life of well-to-do Americans" (363). Liberal theorists believe they move in a sphere elevated beyond such suspicion and cliché voiced by the ethnic outsiders. Theories of civil society value a shared code of human conduct and transaction beyond the family or clan and refer back to founding documents that authorize the American and French revolutions of the common man as well, such as Rousseau's "Social Contract" (1762), in which he wrote, "Each of us puts his person and all his power

in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (Miller 220). Here is a partial but crucial beginning of the Enlightenment road to both freedom and justice, says Habermas (Trey 24). John Gray has recently commented that the Enlightenment in America has achieved "the status of a civil religion," and he quotes Richard Rorty in his belief that America gives "democracy priority over philosophy" and that humanism puts "power in the service of love" held together "by nothing less fragile than social hope" (144, 170–71).

John Kekes flatly states that pluralism is a moral theory (12) and one that enlarges our view of justice. He also quotes Michael Sandel to the effect that "society being composed of a plurality of persons . . . is best arranged when it is governed by principles that do not *themselves* presuppose any particular conception of the good. . . . This is the liberalism of Kant" (200). Thus does disinterest as a harbinger of taste wind its way back into moral imagining. Such cultural armature and consensus from the bourgeois life world helps comprise the assumptions in American society that live within the reader who also turns pages of *The Godfather* to revel in the Corleones' sensational and bloody triumphs. This multifaceted reader of prejudices, allegiances, and conditioning is always potentially alive to the contradictions in Puzo's text. John Guillory in *Cultural Capital* defines several of these liberal assumptions, such as "competing interest groups," "balance of societal demands," "democratic civic culture," and "political participation and trust" (4). If I read *The Godfather* in the American society in which the Corleones move, I find most of pluralism's precepts to be antithetical to the ethics and world view of the Corleones.

Pluralism is built into liberalism "as it were on the ground floor" (Kekes 201). Pluralism appears as a more static theory of the tolerance of differences, while liberal influence would animate that tolerance toward a desirable end that liberalism could articulate in a social sphere. A short list of the resulting adversarial positions on major issues might be as follows:

1. Good and Evil

- **Corleones:** The nature of good and evil is universal and natural. Evil is lodged in authority or the state and must be opposed to get justice. The state is always inimical to its citizens [what might be called the "Sicilian world view" according to Puzo].
- **Liberal Pluralist Reader (Me):** Evil is socially and culturally based and can be, should be opposed in service of justice. Evil is not inherently coextensive with the state or with any satanic individual or ethnic group; it is not identified. Evil is, in fact, a hyperbolic embarrassment in sacred/profane rhetoric.