

The Godfather



**How the
Corleones
Became
"Our Gang"**

Chris Messenger

The Godfather
and
American Culture

SUNY series in Italian/American Culture
Fred L. Gardaphe, editor

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Introduction

The Critic's Voice in Popular Fiction Study

Several years ago I became captivated by two scenes in *The Godfather*, which both fascinated and repelled me. The first is the deathbed scene between Vito Corleone and his dying *consigliere* Genco Abbando on Connie Corleone's wedding day; the narrative voice concludes, "as if the Don could truly snatch the life of Genco Abbando back from that most foul and criminal traitor to man" (48). The second scene shows Hollywood producer Jack Woltz in shock to find the severed head of his stallion, Khartoum, bleeding at the foot of his bed; after he stops screaming, he thinks that "there couldn't be any kind of world if people acted this way" (69). Everything about the two scenes is visceral and immediate, yet their respective conclusions seemed to me oddly ameliorating under strange circumstances of narrative agency. In the Genco scene, Mario Puzo ended with the blandest of universals about the power of death. The Woltz scene ended in either a great hypocrisy or a weak irony or both. I was unable to account for the scenes' undeniable power, which culminated in capitulation to slack moralizing about "death" or "capitalism." How *about* a popular writer who could get me going that way! I found myself writing "Puzo" or "Michael" or "Don C" in the margins of critical pieces I read. Everything I was absorbing about history, ideology, aesthetics, the family, dialogue, monologue, best sellers, elite fiction moved me to wander back to *The Godfather* as site.

Some day—and I knew that day might never come—I would be called upon to perform a service, to explain to myself and to a readership the full range of this American popular classic and the contradictions in the long career of its author. The challenge to get *The Godfather* and Puzo done right became the offer I couldn't refuse. Just like Don Corleone's family and its power, *The Godfather* appeared to take root in my critical consciousness. If I had indeed been colonized, like any aware colonial subject, I wanted to convert the language of domination into my own rhetorical capital. In short, I wanted to explain how the Corleones had become "Our Gang" in America, in as complete a takeover as any popular narrative had achieved in the late twentieth century.

Certain subjects kept posing themselves as questions to me: how were readers to grieve for the novel's real victims of the Corleones who

are never mentioned in the novel? I numbered these to be the drug addicts and runners; the victims of bookmakers, prostitution, and loan sharking; those who provided kickbacks for protection; and the honest members of labor unions. How could readers break into Puzo's monologic approval of his "good" murderers when he gives us little choice but to root for them to kill his "bad" murderers? How could I talk of these subjects without losing my objectivity, my critical "distance"? For I didn't feel distanced. At times, I was mad as hell at Puzo's text and wanted him/it to suffer critically for every morally equivocating, prurient, sensationalized piece of literature or film that I'd had put up with, ranging back to early childhood. At other moments, I thrilled to the Corleone victories over their enemies. After all, as a reader I had gone to their children's weddings, watched them cook pasta, and suffered the repeated injustices inflicted on them. When Michael Corleone orchestrated the deaths of the heads of the Five Families, I had to admit they got exactly what they deserved.

In this book I want to reproduce in criticism precisely this swing between the critical reader who disapproves of Puzo's rhetorical maneuvering and the reader in myself who as a child eagerly joined the Saturday matinee crowd cheering as the villains on screen finally bought it in their climactic battle with the white hats. But in this case the white hats had become the Corleones. Both readers, the moral scold and the cheerleader for the plot victories, lived inside my literary-critical self, which purported to or who was told to know better. "Know better" contains in its elite caution everything the trained literary critic knows about advocacy, ethical argument, and evaluation, which the critic is taught belongs to the discourses of law, philosophy, and religion. Such concepts lie behind any possible renderings we can make as critics, but since the New Criticism, they remain in prewriting, to be mined or ground into rational and finally theoretical arguments far from the level of the text or its engendered responses. The injustices done to and by the Corleones were finally matched by my readerly sense of injustice, what I might call "crimes against the narrative" committed by the author for my pleasure and instruction.

Pierre Bourdieu in his postscript to *Distinction* (1979, trans. 1984) summarizes Kant's principle of pure taste as "nothing other than a refusal, a disgust—a disgust for objects which impose enjoyment." Bourdieu adds that "disgust is the paradoxical experience of enjoyment extorted by violence, an enjoyment which arouses horror. This horror, *unknown to those who surrender to sensation* [emphasis mine] results fundamentally from the removal of distance, in which freedom is asserted, between the representation and the thing represented" (488), causing an alienation from the artifact but providing its own peculiar definition of enjoyment, which only the trained critic can truly savor. However, what happens when the critic wants to retain a relation with the large readership of a best seller such as

The Godfather, who wants to retain both a membership in those “attracted” and those “repelled” and needs to sustain this split personality while discussing a work, any work?

I was not above surrendering to sensation but, like most readers and viewers, I wanted to pick my spots, script my own pleasures insofar as possible, and take offense when I wanted to. I supposedly knew how to be disinterested in the highest Kantian sense, to make disgust my hidden friend, to eschew sensation and sentiment when necessary, to refuse the “easy” insight and conclusion. Yet I didn’t want to become some version of the critical police and live constantly with the fear that somewhere some reader or viewer is enjoying *The Godfather*. Well, I thought, Don Corleone knows how to practice this elite distancing. He knows how to serve up revenge, a dish best served cold, he tells us (404). Was there a riddle here? Could the vaunted modernist distancing, the view from “the tower,” the historically conditioned great-grandchild of “emotion recollected in tranquility” be akin to the great calm from which the Don acted in the affairs of men? I presumed I had become somewhat desperate in crafting my critical strategies by analogy to the career of the protagonist whom I wished to explain by the criticism itself. Yet how could I keep my distance from *The Godfather* and mime the way in which Don Corleone keeps his distance from his victims?

I could attempt to kill Puzo with traditional elite critical strategies. However, that was not a very surgical gangland hit. What would I gain by demonstrating that he wasn’t Balzac or Hemingway or Mailer (although he was trying to be all three at different times)? No one was likely to give me an argument there. Then, in an alternate move more in the contemporary critical climate, I could excoriate Puzo as caught in classic false consciousness, a writer purporting to create an ethnic hero, a modern Robin Hood, but a hero who was really the worst that the capitalist system could muster, a murderer who accumulated an excess capital, a fund of trust and obligation that masqueraded as Old World fealty but also had everything to do with corruption of institutions in an open society. Such an analysis seemed overly shrill and not revelatory of *The Godfather’s* power and popular acceptance.

I needed a key to what had always troubled me about popular fiction: its way of speaking about everything that is important in ways that prematurely recontain the subjects in some way or another. Popular literature’s “escape” wasn’t simple as a category. This escape came in a complex series of evasions and deflections about “Freedom,” “America,” and “Destiny” that often appeared to affirm on the level of a novel’s symbolization precisely what I had wished to deny at the level of critique. I had the perennial precritical misgiving about popular literature criticism: how to transfer what I considered an ethical position or an aesthetic quarrel into a critical lingua franca that neither overtly privileged my sympathetic outrage from a secure bourgeois and academic

position nor underscored my negative appraisal of what I considered to be an “inferior” literary product.

So, how to talk about a book and an author that I couldn’t find the rhetoric to talk about? I could tell *why* I as a trained critic could not abide some of Puzo’s novelistic choices. His text often seemed out of his control, both internally chaotic and contradictory. Yet thirty million copies of *The Godfather* were sold in the 1970s, making it by far the best-selling American novel of the decade. *The Godfather* films were stunningly powerful for audiences all over the world. People loved these movies and repeated their lines, until they entered the language (“I’ll make him an offer he can’t refuse”; “he sleeps with the fishes”; “leave the gun—take the cannoli”; “go to the mattresses”). The Corleones, the violent, immoral, misogynist Corleones, were a proto-family for our time, the tightly-knit unit, the family that murdered together stayed together. *The Godfather* posited a truly complete American fantasy, that of New World mobility and power within an Old World identity. The family ventured out into a larger America that it controlled in the hidden *name* of family. Even the morality play of Michael’s dissolution as a melancholy, patriarchal murderer by the end of the second *Godfather* film did nothing to cut the fascination with the Corleone hegemony. Here was an American melodrama that took root in the national imagination as it did on the charts. The Corleone family takeover was both psychic and economic in the American culture. They had in fundamental ways become us. They were “Our Gang.”

Then again, who comprises Puzo’s readership? Surely it cuts and cross-cuts among critically trained readers and consumers who only read best sellers. Many of us consume fiction as a commodity across a wide spectrum of simplicity and difficulty and are capable of appreciating and discriminating between artifacts and their affects without having a crisis of readerly or professional conscience every time we convert our response from, say, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* to Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, two novels of 1936 which should have a miscegenated congress between them. Puzo himself has shown how rigidly he segregated his views of art from the marketplace. Before writing *The Godfather*, Puzo experienced twenty years as a “failed” or “undiscovered” novelist and later wrote that he felt he had been “a true believer in art”: “I didn’t believe in religion or love or women or men. I didn’t believe in society or philosophy. But I believed in art for forty-five years. It gave me a comfort I found in no other place” (“The Making of *The Godfather*” 34). He also admitted he’d written “below his gifts in *The Godfather*” and then made a fortune. Yet his almost totally reified view of art as a godlike force and his immediate negation of all subjects that such art might portray perfectly mirrored the frustrations a reader might have in following out such concepts in his fiction. Puzo’s rhetoric includes large abstractions that contain even greater suggestiveness, but then he prematurely hurls

thunderbolts such as “love” and “philosophy” only to crash them back into place as they relate to his own personal melancholy and “comfort.” Such a grandiose obsessiveness with the inflated led him finally, unerringly, to popular success.

Viewed another way, Puzo’s belief in art and subsequent crisis of belief is revealing on several levels. First, he reproduces the popular readership’s reverence for elite fiction it doesn’t truly understand or even like but to which it is told to aspire. Second, his belief in art can mirror the critic’s belief in criticism, a belief “shaken” when confronting precisely the fiction that Puzo finally produces. The critic has been trained to transact ambiguous, complex, ironic business through in-depth study and ever more philosophical and intellectual tools, rather than assess across a more horizontal field of surfaces the intent and impact that a work such as *The Godfather* has on American culture that converts its literary capital through film and television into language, style, and ideology. As *The Godfather* becomes pervasive on many fronts, it threatens not only to dwarf Puzo himself, who tends to fall away in studies of the films, for example, but it frustrates any critic who would see the works whole, the traditional humanist legacy for contemporary criticism from a critical godfather such as Lionel Trilling.

Thus I write here about an author, a novel, three films, a cultural text, and a set of critical questions. My work will be eclectic, embodying many approaches—structural, dialogic, new historicist, pragmatic, myth-critical, multiethnic—with a considerable degree of critical self-consciousness in the contemporary mode. I want to enter into dialogue what was facing Puzo as a writer after World War II with what facing Puzo causes me to notice in critical revolutions after the New Criticism in my reading choices as critic.

I do not render judgments on Puzo and *The Godfather* as much as situate him and his text, as I attempt to situate myself on several levels of American literary discussion. To decide finally on ways Puzo and *The Godfather* can be approached is to grant the author and his text a different sort of complexity than is usually called for in critical study. It’s not a problem of worrying about Puzo and his novel not being complex enough; it’s making the acknowledgment that *writing about popular authors and their fictions is complex*. The level of difficulty is complicated by the popular writer’s strengths and weaknesses, the culture’s rewards and neglect, the critic’s training and goals. Thus levels of contradiction and irony re-surface at the level of a metacriticism that necessarily will be about “critical thinking on popular phenomena.” For the critic to earn that role, he must bring emotion, reason, and training but also admit his insecurities about illicit reading pleasures as well as his yearnings for wholeness, justice, and closure. I come to Puzo in writerly sympathy but scrutinize his career by critiquing the legend of the Corleones that America has wholeheartedly consumed for decades. I want to bring forth as much as

I can about what the Corleone hegemony reveals about Puzo's fiction, the *Godfather* films, and, by extension, American popular texts, their critics, and general readers.

Siting "The Godfather"

Siting *The Godfather* involves displaying its text in different semantic arguments. I place Puzo's novel in comparison with an elite novel, Doctorow's *Ragtime* (chapter 7), discuss it as fostering a tradition of mob narrative that presently culminates in *The Sopranos* (chapter 9), and hypothesize it as a Cold War text, a mega best-seller, a social melodrama, an ethnic novel, a popular novel. At all times, I'm aware of how the three *Godfather* films became the *Godfather* text for millions. Each such siting changes *The Godfather's* configuration and adds to its status as a narrative phenomenon. Leslie Fiedler comments that a key facet of a true popular narrative is its "transparency," the ease at which it can be transferred from fiction to film (*What Was Literature* 122). A significant popular narrative generally does not have the originality or complexity to master or cover other texts with its uniqueness but instead takes on within its conventionality something of the site in which it is described. *The Godfather* is not a strong text but one that accrues meanings to it. Within this concept is a kind of antidiversity, a magnetizing site that absorbs, much as does Corleone power itself.

Such meanings, cultural formations, and vehicles sited by interaction with *The Godfather* include the concept of the family itself in America, both traditional and contemporary, the social entity with the largest signification; the best-selling novel read by millions, which affirms certain values within both sensational and sentimental frames; film and television in its adaptations; and an ethnic *habitare* or sociological *habitus* that can tell us about a novel or its characters' geographical place or the writer's place within a system of cultural capital. Sites can be social formations (Business, Family, the Mob, Crime); historical and cultural formations (Immigration, Cold War, Self-Made, Success, Pluralism, Isolation, "Old World," "New World," Destiny, Manifest Destiny); as well as literary genres and forms (popular, elite, myth, epic, melodrama, sentiment). A variety of critical paradigms can offer different sitings: New Historicism, Ethnic Criticism, Marxist Criticism, Myth Criticism, Literary Sociology, Cultural Studies, and Reader Response Criticism. Finally, *The Godfather* can now be sited as product and as part of the language. No current American fictional and film text is more quoted in films, television, books, advertising, and through brand names. *The Godfather* is mimed, mined, and strip-mined for its meanings in what has become "Godfather America."

Why *The Godfather* and why now, given the huge plurality of popular narratives extant at any moment? Historically, *The Godfather* is fundamentally a Cold War text about post-World War II with Michael Corleone as the soldier-son coming home first to wage war and then to keep the peace through threat and massive deterrence while presiding over a wary détente with his enemies (the other Families). No other American best seller mythically deals with this tense American period as does *The Godfather*; film counterparts in this vein may be *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), affirmative American visions with hysteric edginess. *The Godfather* narrative is also an uncomplicated ethnic novel, not really dialogized in relation to Italian America as much as it is in thrall to popular melodrama; immigration and urban ethnicity go down easy in its text. When the novel appears in 1969, it does so at a time of enormous stress for the American father and family, at the end of a decade when the Vietnam war split countless fathers and sons and the country itself in debates over patriotism and duty. When the Civil Rights movement had in the 1960s begun to educate Americans in dramatic fashion about the right to claim what is justly yours in the name of oppressed identity on the one hand and American ideals on the other. Vito and Michael Corleone do not grow apart: they unite to kill the bastards and proclaim their family's rights. *The Godfather* may be the very expression of American capitalism with money and murder as constants, with the attendant ironies surrounding the Corleone isolation from or participation in pluralism, the economy, American systems of justice, and politics. Even after three decades, *The Godfather's* continuing reception occurs in a climate of its own powerful shaping, as well as in a critical and social climate of multiethnic consciousness, identity politics, and an ongoing debate about the differences underlying both essentialism and its opposite. *The Godfather* has become a popular classic, exhibiting features of American social life that transcend the era of its writing, filming, and initial reception, as well as deeply situated in an American dialogue that continues to evolve through fresh vehicles such as *The Sopranos*. The constants firmly mixed in *The Godfather* continue to enthrall: America. Citizenship. Family. Ethnicity. Identity. Business. Reason. Murder.

Novels, Films, and Product Disclaimers

I'm not talking in this book about Coppola's three *Godfather* films as separate from Puzo's novel, nor am I particularly interested here in the critical issue of "book into film." Coppola is on record as stating that *The Godfather* was to him an initially unpromising vehicle for adaptation: "I was desperate to give the film class. I felt the book was cheap and sensational" (*New York* 52). Although Puzo shared screenwriting credits with

Coppola, it was Coppola who tightened the family melodrama, straightened out the narrative's chronology, removed some of Puzo's more egregiously sensational moments, such as Lucy Mancini's operation or the satirical brothel of over-aged stars in Hollywood.¹ When Coppola assumed artistic control over *Godfather II* and *Godfather III*, the Corleone saga became ever darker and more melancholy, exceedingly formal in its composition. After completing *Godfather I*, Coppola commented that "it's not really about the Mafia. It could just as well be about the Kennedys or the Rothschilds, about a dynasty which demands personal allegiance to a family that transcends even one's obligations to one's country" (52). Coppola's broad thematizing is much in evidence here. He surpasses in scope anything that Puzo claimed for his novel but actually was quite faithful in transposing Puzo's novel to the screen; there's less disconnect between book and movie than in most such adaptations. For one thing, *The Godfather* as novel was quite free of exposition, character reflection, and subjectivizing. With no novel sequel by Puzo, the saga passed more exclusively into film, to be copied repeatedly by cinema and television in the succeeding decades. No doubt the mob narrative comes down to us visually. Melodrama in its broad strokes and emotional tenor is very vivid in drama, opera, and film. Gangster melodramas have been a staple in film since the earliest days of silent film. In a narrative obsessed with "destiny," it may be that *The Godfather* was destined to leave the page for large and small screens.

Some ground rules should be mentioned about the countless references to *The Godfather* in the succeeding chapters. I will refer to Puzo's novel as *The Godfather* and to the three films as *Godfather I*, *Godfather II*, and *Godfather III*. When I refer to Puzo's novel and Coppola's films as a unit, I'll designate them as *Godfather narrative*. When I want to talk about the entire production of books, films, and their adaptations and spin-offs, I am designating this generic product as *mob narrative*. Beyond such definite namings, *The Godfather* is a site of a heterogeneous pluralism of meanings that has established itself in a culture's styles, language, and advertising; it has become what is marketed and what markets other products and images. Such will be referenced when necessary but a full-field description of this phenomenon is not attempted here. I will have much to say in this book about a "popular narrative," most often in the guise of *The Godfather* but often denoting a text of wide readership and acceptance that flies below the radar screen of the academy and literary criticism but that attracts a huge audience. Some of its properties can be sketched here prefatory to extended discussion.

Fiedler in *What Was Literature* provides perhaps the most pointed descriptions of popular narrative. He finds the narrative residing in the public domain, dealing more in images than words, and capable of passing easily into powerful (if not complex) film. Fiedler—whose prose is always naughty and overheated where pop is concerned—describes popular narrative's messages as more transparent, not meeting aesthetic

or ethical standards beneath their “pious veneer,” but rather “pandering to desires and lusts” (122). I would add that popular narrative also works in hallowed visuals of family and through family rites of passage. To gauge such power, I will repeatedly consider *The Godfather’s* mixture of extreme violence and domestic warmth, again and again the most powerful visual images in *Godfather* narrative. Such is also the most powerful expression of popular narrative, and mob families present it in a most inclusive form.

Some firm product disclaimers are in order in the wake of *The Godfather’s* enormous popularity as novel and films and the resultant penetration into audience consciousness of countless millions:

- The position of “godfather” in traditional religious and family structure is not coextensive with *The Godfather* or invented by Puzo but is a deeply traditional, hallowed, and serious part of extended family and community life. Godparents are not only Catholic and not only Italian.
- Mob narrative is not coextensive with Italian American narrative. The full richness of Italian American life is presented in a literature that is now in full flowering, both in fiction and in criticism (see chapter 4). Without becoming some sort of literary-critical action wing of the anti-defamation police, be it here said that mob narrative is only my copyright and is not code for “Italian American” in its fullness but will have reference to ethnic criticism as well as a host of other criticisms.
- *The Godfather* is not the first or final word on the presence of the Mafia in Italian or Italian American culture and life. Consciousness of the Mafia did not begin in Italian America because of Puzo; rather, Puzo’s writing reflects aspects of Italian America, and he disseminates his interpretation to millions. Italian Americans don’t need to read or view *Godfather* texts to know their heritage or condition, and *The Godfather* did not create any value system that was news to American immigrants from Sicily and southern Italy. Furthermore, I respect Italian American reactions to *Godfather* narrative in their full complexity, whether they secretly admire or openly loathe *The Godfather* or feel a complex mixture of pride, identification, and frustration in its stereotyping. It’s a curious fate to be an “unprotected” ethnic minority where all bets are off in contemporary politically correct discourse.

The Common Languages of Mob Narrative

Remarkable visual examples of the mixture of violence and domestic warmth stud *The Godfather* films. In *Godfather II*, after young Vito

Corleone kills Fanucci, the minor neighborhood "Black Hand" mafioso on the Lower West Side of New York City, he returns home through the busy streets to his own front stoop, where his wife sits with their three small sons, in the midst of other bustling families and lives. The scene is an ethnic tableau; an old grandmother sits on a higher stoop; a man with a mandolin is visible right above Vito's shoulder. Mother holds toddler Fredo. Above her sits three-year-old Sonny dressed in an outfit that looks like soldier's garb; he waves a toy American flag, and Fredo holds another flag in his chubby fist. Vito takes infant Michael still wrapped in his baby blankets and says to him in Italian, "Michael, your father loves you very much, very much." He holds Michael's tiny fingers almost in wonder at such perfection.

Such a scene is a seamless mixture of family love, ethnic type-scene nostalgia, and melodramatic presentation. The young "Mama" Corleone looks off to the side, heedless of the camera. The very young children are fidgeting in anticipatory blankness. The shot almost becomes an extended still photograph in an album of ethnic urban immigration. The scene is evocative of the great photographs of New York tenement life dating back to Jacob Riis. Vito has done his day's work by killing Fanucci, and his family may now prosper. Something amazing has occurred, but it is portrayed in the mundanity of the street. Such a scene takes place in the public domain and is transmitted through the powerful images of patriotism, ethnic richness, family solidarity, and maternal and paternal love. Any ethical imperative against murder is canceled by Vito's strong presence. Here is where his power begins.

Beneath the piety of the young family man with his brood is a killer. Vito steps into full American adulthood by killing a man as will his son Michael. By 2000, Tony Soprano, the struggling inheritor of Vito's tale and responsibilities, kills a mob informant while taking his daughter on a college tour, a new rite of the American upper middle class (*Sopranos* 1, 5). During her admissions interview at Bowdoin, Tony gazes at a wall with an inscription from Nathaniel Hawthorne (Bowdoin 1825): "No Man Can Wear One Face to Himself and Another to the Multitude without Finally Getting Bewhiltered as to Which May Be True." The path from that stoop in Little Italy where the Corleones sit to Tony in the anteroom at Bowdoin is three generations and, *pace* Hawthorne, the Corleones and the Sopranos are getting on rather well in their contradictions. Tony, bewildered, has been "true" in his fashion. In the narrative of manners that *The Sopranos* can become, Tony also makes a belated "moral" decision not to order a hit on his daughter's sexually compromised high school soccer coach, thus intertwining the mob's reach with the suburbs' most upscale current family reality. He tumbles drunkenly into his own living room late at night, mumbling, "I didn't hurt nobody. Call the shrink. Town oughta give her a fuckin' bonus" (*Sopranos* 1, 9). The constants in mob narrative are murder and family; the frames are updated in middle-class scenarios. Film and

television provide such vividness, while the visual images move to fill the silences that *omerta* dictates.

One issue to place under extended discussion is the American audience's extension of sympathy to killer families, to bring them into *our* gang. Family bonds appear to inoculate mob murder against any moral constraints. Once a character is a "made" man, anything is possible in the range of human conduct. The aura of the kill hangs over every human action. Fisher in *Hard Facts* writes of nineteenth-century sentimentality's "experimental extension of humanity" to "prisoners, slaves, madmen, children, and animals" (100), to which we can now add murdering families. Cross DeLena in Puzo's *The Last Don* observes that once he "made his bones," "he should never be subject to the fates of ordinary men" (175), almost as if he becomes another species. Indeed, mob narrative authorized by Puzo is joined by the vampire narratives of Anne Rice to provide nuclear families who live with murder every day, who have it as a necessity, the constant transformative power of murder's violence. Vampire and Mafia families have murder as their "nature," grounding a popular exceptionalism that leads to an extraordinarily unstable moral landscape for the audience. How authors, books, and films negotiate this terrain of killer families will be the business of this book to describe and unpack. What Fisher sees as the "central psychological and social evil" of slavery in family in the nineteenth-century domestic novel (101) becomes the evil of murder for the sake of money in contemporary mob narrative. Murder or its threat keeps the money coming. The Corleone and Soprano destruction of family itself is the primary result of the lives of the murderers themselves and the consequences for the women and children they purport to protect.

The silences of *The Godfather* far outweigh its disclosures and provide a throwback text to Hemingwayesque silent heroism without Hemingway's evoked tension. Jewish American fiction hasn't stopped talking since Saul Bellow announced early in *Dangling Man* (1944), "If you have difficulties, grapple with them silently, goes one of their commandments. To hell with that! I intend to talk about mine, and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time, I still could not do myself justice" (9), and Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy in 1969, the year of *The Godfather's* publication, took the impulse about as far as he could. By the 1960s, the confessional mode had fundamentally taken root in both American fiction and American poetry. Since 1969, most contemporary multiethnicity is also about claiming one's own voice and announcing self through becoming a speaking subject. This insurgent view of power/knowledge also belongs to a fictional revolution of women and gays, to move from being border citizens to the center of fiction. Italian American male silence was one prominent hold-out against the powerful trend and in Puzo, remained inherently conservative simply by its reticence, in the refusal to join in narcissistic subjectivity.²

The Mob has become a region that is a serious sensationalizing and distilling of a larger Italian American experience and culture. Inevitably in this book *The Godfather* rises to dominate both considerations of the serious religious and cultural institution of godparents, as well as a larger Italian American culture that so very clearly is not contained by the boundaries of mob narrative. At the same time, Puzo did not invent out of whole cloth the myth of the Mafia in Italian American life. It's culturally and historically grounded and already glorified and romanticized on a smaller, less mainstream scale over decades and even centuries. An initially excluded and wary immigrant population did not need Puzo to become the fictional laureate of ethnic Robin Hoods. The Corleones may have been introduced to American culture at large via the novel and films. Such minor neighborhood figures were always in the generic Italian American culture, outwitting an inscrutable distant system, doing "what everyone else does," according to their own lights, getting by, getting over, getting on with the business of family and life, and providing *respect*, a commodity in short supply among the urban poor. *The Godfather* creates a common language for America out of this more localized culture; it did not inaugurate the culture itself.³

This common language of mob narrative can be situated in various ways. The history of American fiction also moves beyond the obvious formal categories of Realism, Naturalism, and the Sentimental Novel and becomes the history of various regionalisms that can be broadly defined as that of the "New England Mind," or the "Southern Way of Life" or the "Frontier" (Fisher 241). I want to suggest that mob narrative itself can become a region, one with its own rituals of family marriage and death, ethnic and religious observance, customs in everything from food to conduct, and a world view that is strongly conditioned by both the pre-immigrant experience of oppression in the descent country and the consciousness that must adapt that prior experience in America. Mob narrative is not coextensive with Italian American narrative but is rather an offshoot from it, hybridized by the experience of many ethnic and/or oppressed groups that are suspicious of the law. Mobsters have everything you don't: power, money, women, cars, security, and most of all, a certain leverage. Mob narrative then seeks to link systems of power and authority in the "Old Countr[ies]" with what is perceived in the American social and legal system with the goal of finding out how to survive economically and culturally in a "New World."

**Alan Greenspan and George Bailey:
"Doing It for Strangers"**

An alternative to this parochial, wary, and cautious ethnic narrative does exist. Fisher also conceives of a powerful core culture of American-

ization comprised of public education, economic advancement, and democratic civic culture (241) that provides both an alternative to the regionalisms and an effective absorption of them in what authorizes participation in a public sphere.⁴ Puzo makes some scant obeisances toward this other America when Michael Corleone talks about his family joining the “general American destiny,” but for the most part, mob narrative refuses to believe that things as they are will be changed when played upon America’s schoolrooms, offices, military barracks, and suburbs. Mob narrative usually treats these strong American determinants as inert opposing environments, rather than the coopting forces, the “melting pots” that need to consume the “regions” of anti-American resistance in order to function in power. Mob narrative in general refuses to dialogize with this idealized core America. Whatever else mob narrative accomplishes, it has few illusions about an American business culture that rather piously refuses to see mob narrative’s predations as its own mirror self.

American economic and family culture constantly seeks narratives and heroes to regulate and explain our national life. The culture is constantly engaged in discourses about home, family, money, greed, and security and does not only search for reinforcement and insight through the extreme violence and sensation of mob narrative but also in other more benign and constrained forms. Vito and Michael Corleone are not the only fantasy figures who embody American hopes and economic dreams. Briefly consider two other American heroes: Wall Street’s Alan Greenspan as all-powerful father and Bedford Falls’ George Bailey in *It’s a Wonderful Life* as redeeming son.

Greenspan, the longtime chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, is the most frequently cited patriarchal overseer of the incredible American boom economy and stock market run-up of the 1990s, the man who has unequaled power to keep the American economy on course. Greenspan is a father who will keep his children from being too indulgent, whose job is to calm financial markets and maintain their stability. He’s a publically appointed official operating in the lifeworld at the highest level of government power, which has voluntarily ceded control of the financial system to him. In the early 1960s, Greenspan wrote that “capitalism holds integrity and trustworthiness as cardinal virtues and makes them pay off in the marketplace” (*New Yorker*, 168). Greenspan becomes a benign patriarch of an eagerly acquisitive national family prospering unimaginably under his rule. Greenspan has been candid about his intellectual debt to Ayn Rand with whom he studied as a young man: “What she did . . . was to make me think about why capitalism is not only efficient and practical, but also moral,” he told the *New York Times* in 1974 (Cassidy, *New Yorker* 167). Rand’s long novels such as *Atlas Shrugged* (1943) and *The Fountainhead* (1957) provided a popular fictional account of American capitalism and the priorities of the truly strong men in its

system, matched only by the Corleones. The irony is that Greenspan works for all America. Rand and Puzo's heroes work for themselves and for family, respectively.

George Bailey is the small-town hero of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, who stays at home after his father's death and heroically navigates his struggling savings and loan company against the evil Mr. Potter and his big bank on behalf of the "little people" who need affordable housing during the Great Depression and World War II. George can never break away from Bedford Falls; it's his brother, Harry, who goes off to be a war hero like Michael Corleone. George becomes, by the end of Capra's tale, "the richest man in town" emotionally, one who overcomes a real hysteria about not breaking away from family and home to build and finance homes, to become a hero to people in a nascent melting pot. Finally he is recalled to life after despair, is "touched by an angel" and restored to family, which includes an extended grateful American public. Here is Fisher's dream of an American core culture triumphing since George sacrifices himself for "the people" who are outside any family or specific ethnic group. They are transferred from "customers" into working-class Americans who trust him and redeem him. George Bailey—always about to leave home and always turned back to it—does everything "for strangers," as Don Corleone would say.

This public ethic of sacrifice and service in *It's a Wonderful Life*, a "family classic," a film largely ignored and forgotten after World War II, becomes a television phenomenon in the early 1970s about the time of the *Godfather* takeover of economic life through mob narrative on film. George Bailey, however, is a *benign* capitalist hero. His demons are his own, and his violence is often inner-directed. The hard-working families on whose behalf George Bailey struggles take on a different caste in Italian American culture and narrative. It's crucial to recognize that Puzo hardly invented the hierarchical narrative of Old World suspicion of American life and promises and that the entire system of a "godfather" made perfect sense to immigrant families who were looking for any sort of protection against an American world that was arrayed against their survival. What mob narrative has converted into something sensational and ominous is a traditional serious aspect of Italian and then Italian American social cohesion. How to convert the clannishness of family unity into real power to control the vagaries of life in a new country? Gardaphe cites Richard Gambino's portrayal of that hierarchical Italian American family order:

From top to bottom : 1. family members, "blood of my blood," 2. *compari* and *padrini* and their female equivalents, *commare* and *madrine* ("godparents," a relationship that was by no means limited to those who were godparents in the Catholic religious

rites . . . and which would better translate as “intimate friends” and “venerated elders”), 3. *amici* or *amici di cappello* (friends to whom one tipped one’s hat or said “hello”), meaning those whose family status demanded respect, and 4. *stranieri* (strangers), a designation for all others.” (Gambino, *Blood of My Blood*, in Gardaphe, *Italian Signs, American Streets* 86)

The concept of a ‘godfather’ has been seriously chosen by vulnerable people for protection down through the centuries. Gardaphe conceives it as embracing the nuclear family, that the order of the family works like the walls around a castle (86). This feudal imagery is apt to describe what looks like an archaic structure pragmatically implanted within a modern democratic capitalist society. Thus assumptions about the communal life of a shared American society are nonexistent within this system. Equality is a fiction, consensual law would not protect anyone sufficiently. The differences are stunning.

None of the architecture of this Italian family order would yield any part of its network of relations to a public sphere of institutions and keepers of the public order and law. The one part of a shared sense of liberal freedom that the Italian American family and the American civic family might share would be the ideal of the strong and benevolent father to take care of both family and an unimpeded business life. This common bond cements the huge acceptance of the Corleone and Soprano families by the American readership and viewing audience. By audience vote, they have become Our Gangs.

A Chapter Preview

This book is divided into three parts. Part 1 of “*The Godfather*” and *American Culture* attempts to understand the issues and stakes involved in popular fiction study in the realm of aesthetics and morals and to chronicle and align Puzo’s career with these issues and stakes to establish the critical and authorial backgrounds for reading *The Godfather*. Chapter 1 introduces the major questions to be asked in a study of popular fiction and of *The Godfather* in particular with relation to the history of “taste” and the power of sentiment in moral criticism. Chapter 2 works through Puzo’s long career to gauge his ambitions and achievements. For a writer who became famous depicting the Italian American subject in *The Godfather*, Puzo actually devoted a considerable part of his writing career to avoid being defined by that subject or by popular success itself.

Part 2 of “*The Godfather*” and *American Culture* works through reading paradigms for *The Godfather* that also are models for further criticism of popular fiction. Chapter 3 reads key scenes of confrontation in the

novel by way of Bakhtinian dialogics to ascertain the dynamic of authority and internal persuasion that Puzo nervously allows to surface from time to time in a challenge to the Corleone hegemony. Chapter 4 subjects the Bakhtinian model to criticism by ethnic ensemble to find how the specifically Italian and Sicilian backgrounds and rhetorical language troping as well as cultural analysis can account for facets of the text that seem either underdeveloped or contradictory according to more universal paradigms. Chapter 5 tries by way of reference to Barthes's *Mythologies* to account for the investiture of some loaded ideological messages within specific character zones in *The Godfather*. Part 2 of this book suggests that a critical reader can approach *The Godfather* armed with the most cogent of contemporary critical theories but must be ready to find how these theories illuminate the text and also create problems that place the entire project of reading popular fiction into subjective and intertextual relation.

Part 3 of this study concentrates on positioning *The Godfather* in relation to both elite and popular American fiction and to film and television. Fiction and films that engage countless millions of readers and viewers for decades do so not only by catching the *zeitgeist*, or by their intrinsic properties, however conceived by whatever critical paradigms, but also by existing in a literary-historical era, narrative tradition, and a field of texts. Most important, *The Godfather* exists within structures of feeling, with particular reference to melodrama, sentiment, and American history. I test the potential of *The Godfather* to enter certain established American literary conversations and chart the sustaining course of mob narrative in language, literature, and media. Chapter 6 begins by considering *The Godfather* as the last twentieth-century entry in an American business saga dating to the early 1900s; it looks at *The Godfather* as a late inheritor of a compelling success narrative that America always stands ready to read through melodrama at the level of the popular novel, particularly through the mutation and absorption of traditional female roles by men who do prove able to have it all in the family and in the murderous, perfidious workplace, which become and occupy the same space and entity. Chapter 7 performs a specifically comparative study of *The Godfather* with Doctorow's *Ragtime*, its elite literature twin in many respects. Chapter 8 defines *The Godfather* within Fiedler's concept of the American "inadvertent epic" and surveys how the epic subject informs the novel that has now entered our language, dreams, and culture in many media forms. Chapter 9 concludes the book with an analysis of *The Sopranos* as the most suggestive contemporary inheritor of *The Godfather's* conventions and premises.

Part I

Popular Fiction Criticism and American Careers

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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 not 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*: