

Tom's European Fantasies:
Commodifying Authenticity in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

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In an early scene of Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), the story of murder and stolen identity on the Mediterranean coast of Western Europe, Tom Ripley is given a tour of Dickie Greenleaf's villa in Mongibello, Italy, which, for Tom, "is a pleasant mixture of Italian antique and American bohemian" (49). The son of a wealthy ship-building industrialist from New York City, Dickie has escaped the congested streets of Manhattan to become a painter in Italy, where he copies the styles of postimpressionism and surrealism, and lives off his trust fund, never worrying about earning a wage. Tom, on the other hand, has lived in New York barely scraping by, and was only recently hired by Dickie's father to convince his son to return home to America, a prospect that Dickie has no intention of fulfilling. Tom is seduced by Dickie's cosmopolitan and leisurely life off the coast of Italy with Marge, another American who is in love with Dickie, and is thrilled when Dickie finally shows him his paintings. The paintings, however, are dreadful: "They were all wild and hasty and monotonously similar. The combination of terra cotta and electric blue was in nearly every one, terra cotta roofs and mountains and bright electric-blue seas. It was the blue he had put in Marge's eyes, too" (60). Dickie's "surrealist effort" is especially painful to witness: "It was Marge again, undoubtedly, though with long snakelike hair, and worst of all two horizons in her eyes, with a miniature landscape of Mongibello's houses and mountains in one eye, and the beach in the other full of little red people" (60). The rest of Dickie's home is similarly bare of the refined taste that Tom

was expecting, causing him to reevaluate his appraisal of Dickie's cultivated aura: "[I]t gave Dickie something to do, kept him out trouble, Tom supposed, just as it gave thousands of lousy amateur painters all over America something to do. He was only sorry that Dickie fell into this category as a painter, because he wanted Dickie to be much more" (60). This desire for him "to be much more" germinates into Tom's eventual scheme to murder and replace Dickie by impersonating him. While Dickie failed in his eyes to become a genuine painter of European subjects and fashions, Tom endeavors to refine his own kind of artistry by conducting a high-stakes performance on the international stage of the Cold War, where any miscalculation could end his vivid charade of Dickie's personality. "He felt alone, and yet not at all lonely.... It was... a feeling that everyone was watching him, as if he had an audience of the entire world, a feeling that kept him on his mettle, because to make a mistake would be catastrophic" (131-2). Tom, in a sense, aspires to become a more refined American connoisseur of Europe than Dickie.

As *The Talented Mr. Ripley* unfolds, Tom Ripley not only assimilates the personality and possessions of Dickie Greenleaf, but even more startling, as he acclimates to his newfound dwellings and acquires a taste for select household furnishings, clothes, and books through Dickie's wealth, his European surroundings also reflect his chameleonic image. Through adopting Dickie and his lifestyle, Tom performs the double gesture of transforming himself and his environment, already laid open to him by Western Europe's tourist industry, by erasing both of their histories. As Kelley Wagers observes in "Tom Ripley, Inc.," Tom's reverse immigration from New York Harbor to Europe and his desire for a "clean slate" enacts a particularly American fantasy of effacing one's roots to invent a new future: "Tom founds his American identity not only on a conventionally imagined erasure of his past, but also on the fiction that his is not (yet) an American and must make himself into one" (250). This fantasy of becoming an

American is paradoxically fulfilled when Tom triumphantly arrives in Greece at the novel's end, having successfully evaded suspicion for his murders and acquired Dickie's trust fund: "It was his! Dickie's money and his freedom. And the freedom, like everything else, seemed combined, his and Dickie's combined. He could have a house in Europe and a house in America too, if he chose" (273). Tom's transformation from "a cringing little nobody from Boston" to "a living, breathing, courageous individual" is realized in the socioeconomic context of American hegemony over Western Europe during the Cold War (261). Along with Tom's self-effacement and reinvention enacting a national fantasy of erasing one's roots to begin again, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* allegorizes the American project of rebuilding postwar Europe in its own image, such as through the Marshall Plan in 1948. This economic revitalization and restructuring of European countries such as France and Italy brought the Western side of the continent into closer ties with American capitalism and warded off the insurgence of communism. It is through this setting of American globalization that Tom experiences the freedom to navigate Europe and cultivate himself into a confident and chic expatriate who fashionably redecorates his Venetian palazzo and "sees" Europe through paperback guidebooks.

Much of the critical discussion surrounding Highsmith's novel have engaged with how the representations of authenticity and performativity are connected with the socioeconomic conditions of the mid-twentieth century, but they have not investigated the novel's framing of postwar Europe as a site of cultural authenticity effaced through Tom's cultivation. For Wagers, Tom enacts a national fantasy of corporate personhood during the historic rise of American corporations and corporate culture in the mid-twentieth century. His composite selfhood after absorbing the assets and personality of Dickie, along with his art forgery scheme in Highsmith's sequel *Ripley Under Ground* (1970), exemplifies how "Tom devalues original, consistent

identities in favor of false identities that are open to change and relocation. His performances demand and showcase a nimble adaptability, a willingness to abandon any notion of ‘true’ expression for aesthetic satisfaction and economic advance” (Wagers 259). By having Tom’s self-improvement and expansion through incorporation reveal the collective desires that propel corporate power, Wagers asserts that Highsmith’s novels demystifies the fictionality of the corporate subject and the violence that underpins it, ultimately suggesting the need for alternative imaginings of the national collective. “This recognition further recommends new ways of thinking about a more complex and nuanced practice of collective agency toward which the concept of corporate personhood reaches and falls short” (265). It is not clear, however, what alternative forms of collective agency are suggested in Highsmith’s narrative of cultural conquest and effacement.

Conversely, other critics such as Benjamin Mangrum in “The Age of Anxiety” argue that Tom exemplifies the mid-twentieth century vogue in the American middle class for psychoanalysis and existentialism, which saw subjectivity not as a product of socioeconomic conditions but as an atomized psyche struggling against society. Mangrum highlights how Highsmith’s novels are engrained with the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, influencing her “concerns about authentic existence” (777). According to Mangrum’s reading, Tom experiences a crisis of self-identity that takes shape in his desire to escape from himself and become another, which is, for Kierkegaard, the “lowest” and most comical form of self-despair: “Tom is displaced within endless performativity—an eternal loop of becoming some other self—and thus he suffers a deprivation of personality rather than its authentic expression” (793). Although Mangrum’s assertion that Tom represents the subjective suffering of an existential crisis is opposed to Wagers’ reading of Tom as a corporate subject, Mangrum

nonetheless situates *The Talented Mr. Ripley* during the popular fascination for psychiatry and European philosophy among the American middle-class and the decline of socially progressive ideologies such as naturalism and New Dealism, suggesting that deeper socioeconomic forces are still at work in Highsmith's fiction of self-reinvention.

Like Wagers, I argue that Tom exhibits a sociohistorical dynamic of postwar American hegemony rather than an alienated monad of subjectivity. This dynamic entails the blurring the boundaries between the thing-in-itself, which is associated with the authentic history of civilization in Europe, and appearance, which is associated with the replicated, fetishized, mass-produced commodities of American late capitalism. In *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson argues that an authentic sense of historical time is transformed and effaced by the commodified spatial structure of postmodernism. This commodified space for Jameson is informed by the logic of the "simulacrum, the identical copy for which no original has ever existed" (18). In the consumerist culture of late capitalism, stereotyped styles, such as in the forms of pastiche and nostalgia, replace the past as referent, eroding the sense of historical continuity. Whereas cultural spaces in earlier periods had a sense of historical depth, postmodern space is experienced as an eternal present structured by visual spectacles. As Jameson writes, "[t]he culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced" (18). Instead of history being the "retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future," it becomes "a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum" (18). In commodifying the visuals and styles of the past, the logic of the postmodern simulacrum also forecloses the imaginings of future collective projects, bringing about the sense that the late capitalist present coincides with the "end of history." Although Tom

does not occupy the full-blown world of proliferated images and spectacles of postmodernism proper, the emergence of which Jameson traces back to the late 1950s or early 1960s, Highsmith's novel nonetheless anticipates the postmodern loss of historicity through Tom's self-erasure and reinvention within Europe's cultural landscape.

In *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, Tom personifies the commodification and erasure of European history in the Cold War era. For Tom, authenticity and materiality are tightly bound together, creating a dichotomy between American capitalism and European cultural history that is destabilized through his performance and transformation. When Tom arrives at Greece in the novel's closing chapter, he fully expects a letter from Herbert Greenleaf challenging Dickie's forged will that leaves his trust fund to Tom. Instead, Tom is surprised by Herbert's acceptance of the fraudulent will, even second-guessing that Herbert's response is a "joke" (272). Tom only realizes that he has succeeded in usurping Dickie's wealth when he closely examines the paper of Herbert's letter: "But the Burke-Greenleaf letterpaper in his hand felt authentic—thick and slightly pebbled and the letterhead engraved" (272-3). This emphasis of authenticity on the material make-up of the Burke-Greenleaf letterpaper reveals how Tom is attuned to the connection between authenticity and the materiality of appearances in his postwar social context, and it is this understanding that enables him to successfully seize Dickie's identity and possessions. The connection between authenticity and materiality that Tom internalizes is mapped on to America and Europe, with him repudiating the insubstantiality of New York City and embracing what he sees is the cultural authenticity and rich history of Europe. After accepting the job from Herbert Greenleaf to travel to Italy and convince Dickie to return home to America, Tom has, what is perhaps, a hallucination of New York City, with the "atmosphere" of

Manhattan becoming “strange” and appearing to him as an insubstantial and poorly choreographed performance:

It was as if something had gone out of New York—the realness or the importance of it—and the city was putting on a show just for him, a colossal show with its buses, taxis, and hurrying people on the sidewalks, its television shows in all the Third Avenue bars, its movie marquees lighted up in broad daylight, and its sound effects of thousands of honking horns and human voices, talking for no purpose whatsoever. As if when his boat left the pier on Saturday, the whole city of New York would collapse with a *poof* like a lot of cardboard on a stage. (29)

Not only do the buildings, bars, and taxis of Manhattan confront Tom as special effects, such as the spectacles that appear on the television screens and in the movie marquees across Third Avenue, but even the “human voices” are deprived of their humanity and are construed as mere “sound effects” that “talk... for no purpose whatsoever” (29). Authenticity and human substance are drained in this spectacular rendering of New York City, which, as a synecdoche for the entire nation, is construed as a massive performance with no referent, a simulacrum. Tom’s solipsistic description of New York City adds another layer of immateriality, with the city painted as a giant theater that could “collapse” on itself “like a lot of cardboard” once his consciousness sails away on the Atlantic (29). It is interesting to note that Tom initially moved to New York precisely to become an actor, “but his first three rebuffs had killed his courage and his hopes” (41). While the heft and engravings of Herbert’s letterpaper signal its genuineness, Tom’s hallucination of Manhattan as a cardboard stage, where real life and television blend together into a cacophony of special effects, marks America as an insubstantial space by which Tom is repulsed, but yet, has a close affinity with when he simulates Dickie’s personality and identity.

Tom's reverse immigration from New York to Europe signals his desire for a "clean slate," the American fantasy of charting a new future through erasing one's past, which, for Tom, is the effacement of his poverty and debased American acculturation. While sailing across the Atlantic, Tom imagines his climb in social stature and conquest over the world, exclaiming "Upward and onward!" and reassuring himself that "[h]e was versatile, and the world was wide!" (38). As a clean slate, Tom fantasizes that his new industrious self will be imprinted upon by his European surroundings. When he is met unenthusiastically by Dickie upon his arrival in Mongibello, Tom desperately attempts to fit in by assimilating himself with the cultural life of the beach-side village, such as quickly studying "an Italian conversation book" and crawling on the floor of his hotel room, "following the patches of sunlight that came through his windows, so he wouldn't look so white the next time he came down to the beach" (55). This dream of the clean slate that can be filled in anew, however, characterizes Tom himself, like New York City, as insubstantial. The American culture that Tom imagines he can erase from himself by becoming a "clean slate" paradoxically returns in his very desire to assimilate into Dickie and Marge's expatriate lifestyle, such as their daily routine of "a siesta after the late lunch... then the sail in Dickie's boat at sundown... [t]hen aperitifs at one of the cafés on the beach. They were enjoying a perfectly ordinary day, as if he did not exist at all" (54). Their daily routine reminds Tom of the "unreality" of New York City and his own sense of nonexistence when he is not recognized by others.

But as Dickie warms up to him and they visit Rome together without Marge, Tom is struck by their physical resemblance, as though he were looking into a mirror: "[I]t seemed to Tom that he was looking in a mirror when he looked at Dickie's leg and his propped foot beside him. They were the same height, and very much the same weight... and they wore the same size

bathrobe, socks, and probably shirts” (67). The image of the mirror is a pertinent symbol of the novel, highlighting Tom’s narcissistic desire to see himself through others and, as Mangrum notes, endlessly displace his selfhood, the shallowness of which merely reflects his surroundings. In a critical scene, Tom dresses in Dickie’s clothes and imitates him in front of his mirror, precipitating Tom’s murder and adoption of Dickie’s identity. Here, the mirror becomes the site of Tom’s chameleonic transformation into others and enacts his fantasies of different selfhoods. As Michael Trask argues in “Patricia Highsmith’s Method,” Tom’s assimilation into Dickie aligns with the theories of Method Acting, a school of acting prominent in New York City, which sees “the physical body as a dynamic and pliable interface, a kind of switching-station, between the world at large and the domain of emotion” (596). In front of Dickie’s mirror, Tom not only parts his hair like his but imitates his voice and “mood,” rendering both as sound effects devoid of human substance: “‘Marge, you must understand that I don’t love you,’ Tom said into the mirror in Dickie’s voice, with Dickie’s higher pitch on the emphasized words, with the little growl in his throat at the end of the phrase that be pleasant or unpleasant, intimate or cool, according to Dickie’s mood” (77). This resemblance between the characters is broken, however, in a traumatic scene where Tom loses touch with his self-recognition through Dickie. Here, the image of the mirror appears again, but this time, it reduces Tom’s identification with the mirror’s pure surface:

He stared at Dickie’s blue eyes that were still frowning, the sun-bleached eyebrows white and the eyes themselves shining and empty, nothing but little pieces of blue jelly with a black dot in them, meaningless, without relation to him. You were supposed to see the soul through the eyes, to see love through the eyes, the one place you could look at another human being and see what really went on inside, and in Dickie’s eyes Tom saw

nothing more now than he would have seen if he had looked at the hard, bloodless surface of the mirror. (87)

In this breakdown of identity, Tom no longer recognizes his humanity in Dickie. Instead, the human body reaches an extreme of what Trask notes is its “dynamic and pliable interface,” which for Tom, is “the hard, bloodless surface of the mirror.” Like Tom’s hallucinatory description of New York City, Dickie’s body is broken into heterogenous surfaces without an underlying substance, such as the “little pieces of blue jelly” of Dickie’s soulless eyes. By seeing Dickie in this way, Tom loses touch with his own humanity and selfhood. Tom’s desire to be a “clean slate,” a subject without a past that can swiftly assimilate into a new environment, is horribly realized in this scene. Similar to his fear of water, which he describes as a “deadly emptiness” when he falls in to the Mediterranean Sea after murdering Dickie, Tom suddenly feels “surrounded by strangeness” and “hostility” in the breakdown between himself and Dickie (88). This sense of otherness reflects Tom’s own shallow selfhood—a personified simulacrum that copies and replaces other selves.

Tom’s transformation into Dickie after his murder unveils the legal fictions that underpin the postwar subject, along with the short-circuit connection between the “essence” of personhood with their outward “appearance,” such as Dickie’s signature which Tom mimics almost to perfection. However, Tom does not merely sculpt himself into Dickie by wearing the right clothes or copying the correct hairstyles, although he does go to great lengths to imitate his physical features, such as lightening his hair and adding waves to it, and even putting on “for the inspector’s benefit... [a] rather tense, rather frowning expression of Dickie’s passport photograph” (121). Even more important for Tom is to imitate Dickie’s personal qualities that are far more immaterial than clothes and hair styling: “The main thing about impersonation...

was to maintain the mood and temperament of the person one was impersonating, and to assume the facial features that went with them. The rest fell into place” (127). Trask parallels Tom’s art of impersonation through the copying of “mood” and “temperament” with the theories of Method acting which “understood performance as a habit of being in which the relays between somatic responses and mental states are wholly communicative” (596). The causality of Method’s system is crucial to note: rather than psychological or emotional states acting on the performer’s expressions, it is the outward expressions that cause what the performer internally feels and experiences. As Trask continues, “at its best the Method is understood to induce a reorganization of the performer’s very psyche” (597). Although he is initially heartbroken when compelled to ditch Dickie’s persona after the police suspect him for Freddie’s murder, Tom reflects on a silver-lining: “If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or wistful, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to *act* those things with every gesture” (182). When Tom is understood as a “clean slate,” Dickie is not merely killed, but the immaterial qualities of his inner self which his “moods” and “temperament” express are commodified and ultimately erased through Tom’s eloquent impersonation. If Tom is read as a personified corporation as Wagers does, then the reorganization of his psyche by mimicking Dickie’s moods is analogous to an advertising or branding of the self through wholly commodified affects: “[Tom] was Dickie, good-natured, naïve Dickie, with a smile for everyone and a thousand francs for anyone who asked him” (124). To the international public eye, Herbert and Emily Greenleaf, and the legal-financial fictions of his passport and bank signatures, Dickie Greenleaf is very much alive—effacing both the “Tom from Boston” and the “real” Dickie whose body lies somewhere in the Mediterranean, never to be recovered.

Tom, however, goes much further than absorbing the most intimate and immaterial qualities of Dickie's personality; he also incorporates what he sees as the authentic cultural "atmospheres" of Europe. Like Dickie's "mood" and "temperament," qualities Tom mimics in order to enjoy his new lifestyle, transforming himself to be "full of goodwill, a gentleman, with nothing in his past to blemish his character," he also desires to be molded by the ambiance of European capitals such as Paris and Rome (124). Analogous to Trask's depiction of the Method Actor whose external expressions reconfigure his inner psyche, Tom allows Paris' "atmosphere [to] seep in slowly" and reorganize his inner character: "He walked with his head up and a smile on his face. It was the atmosphere of the city that he loved, the atmosphere that he had always heard about, crooked streets, gray-fronted houses with skylights, noisy car horns, and everywhere public urinals and columns with brightly colored theater notices on them" (121). Minus the hallucinatory rendering, this description of Paris is not too dissimilar from the one given of New York City, with parallels between "noisy car horns" and "honking horns," "theater notices" and "movie marquees." What is different is not only the more solidified presence of Paris that is contrasted with the precarious "lot of cardboard" of New York City that could collapse on itself, but also Tom's act of letting the former's atmosphere "seep in" to his inner self as he performs Dickie's easy-going and cosmopolitan disposition. Tom's performance as Dickie and allowing the city's atmosphere to infiltrate his character is the "special effect" of this scene.

But as Tom ingests the cultural atmospheres of Europe, it becomes clear that the solidity of its cities' descriptions are themselves supported by Tom's anticipatory imagination, which is informed by mass-produced commodities such as guidebooks, maps, and artbooks that are especially catered towards Tom's class of expatriated and tourist Americans. When Tom first passes France on his way to Mongibello, its "lighted café front, complete with rain-streaked

awning, sidewalk tables, and boxes of hedges” appears to him “like a tourist poster illustration” that sparks his interest to return for a proper experience. However, as Tom discovers, it is “anticipation” itself, rather than the authenticity of “experience,” that is truly pleasurable. Strolling through the city of Palermo, he regards a “great Norman-influenced cathedral he had read about, built by the English archbishop Walter-of-the-Mill, he remembered from a guidebook” (171). For Tom, it is “[w]onderful to look at the dusty arches of its façade and to think of going inside tomorrow, to imagine its musty, sweetish smell, composed of the uncounted candles and incense-burnings of hundreds and hundreds of years. Anticipation! It occurred to him that his anticipation is more pleasant to him than his experiencing” (171). Tom’s reverie of the Palermo church, mediated by his guidebooks, suspends authentic experience in favor of the imaginative representations of the real thing. True experience for Tom, to actually go inside the church, threatens the fictive sensations aroused by the church’s “façade.” The “sweetish” and “musty” smells and the visual of countless candles conjured in Tom’s imagination undermine the underlying reality and material history of the church. Tom’s fantasies, trained by his guidebook, turn Europe’s cultural and historical sites into playgrounds for his anticipatory imagination. In another scene, Tom purchases a “beautiful book of van Gogh reproductions” and travels to Lyon and Arles “to see the places van Gogh painted there” (124). Because “he could not take the book out in the rain... he had to make a dozen trips back to his hotel to verify the scenes” (124). In his search for European authenticity, Tom disciplines his vision of reality through the reproductions of classic postimpressionist paintings, with the “referent” of what van Gogh originally painted superseded by its representation. When cold weather and gray clouds empty Menton’s streets of its “gay crowds” during New Year’s Eve, Tom resorts to his more impeccable and evocative imagination, condensing the sites (and sights)

of Monte Carlo and Nice into a single, Fauvist scene: “Tom put the people there... men and women in evening clothes descending the broad steps of the gambling palace in Monte Carlo, people in bright bathing costumes, light and brilliant as a Dufy watercolor, walking under the palms of the Boulevard des Anglais at Nice” (125). In Tom’s cultivation of the rootless self in Europe, representation replaces reality.

As Tom steals the life of Dickie Greenleaf, adopting his cosmopolitan pose and most intimate moods, he also incorporates the cultural “atmospheres” of Europe into his synthetic personality, which extends to the Italian dwelling spaces that he purchases. The vision that Tom cultivates of Europe is both depthless and commodified, where the style of postimpressionist reproductions color his entire perception of the European “referent.” Mirroring his murder and adoption of Dickie’s identity, the “authenticity” of European history is erased as he tries to replicate its cultural “atmospheres” in his Roman apartment and Venetian palazzo. Central to Tom’s allegorical journey from New York City to Greece is the development of his taste in housing décor, which becomes more selective and elite towards the novel’s end. In refining his taste in spatial design throughout Rome and Venice, Tom seeks to rearrange and redefine European space as a whole. In France, Tom is invited to a party in the Avenue Kléber, where the house and its occupants are succumbing to dilapidation—and are short of a heating unit: “The party consisted of thirty or forty people, most of them middle-aged, standing around rather frigidly in a huge, chilly, formal apartment. In Europe, Tom gathered, inadequate heating was a hallmark of chic in winter, like the iceless martini in summer” (122). The presence of servants, such as a butler and a maid, along with a “vast table of pâté en croûte, sliced turkey, and petits fours, and quantities of champagne,” are juxtaposed to the apartment’s general decay: “[T]he upholstery of the sofa and the long drapes at the windows were threadbare and rotting with age”

(122). The deterioration of the apartment's space is paralleled with the aging and unenthused guests of the party, who are both "middle-aged" and members of the nobility: "At least half a dozen of the guests [Tom] had been presented to were counts and countesses" (122). Their dour mood, it is presumed, is because the French girl who invited Tom is marrying an American. Depicted in this allegorical space of the decaying apartment is the usurpation of French identity by Americanization, a force of economic vitality that is juxtaposed to the crumbling stature of the old nobility.

Tom is such a force of American economic vitality in European space, allegorizing American aid and cultural hegemony in postwar Europe. When redesigning his Roman apartment's living room because its original drapes "offended him," Tom "forces" Singora Buffi, the wife of the house superintendent, to take five thousand lire instead of two thousand for the dark velvet drapes she makes for him (131). More than just embodying Dickie's charitable disposition, Tom's behavior signals an entire class of American tourists and expatriates embracing the cultural life of Europe. Americans like Tom are fascinated by the aura of Europe's cultural authenticity, but as revealed in the apartment spaces of the French nobility and the Roman bourgeois couple, Europe is in the postwar state of economic and cultural decline. American economic investment commodifies European cultural spaces that are no longer indicative of an organically evolving history, but instead, are a vast collection of select fine items that one arranges in a living room. Later on, Tom's redecorates a Venetian palazzo that becomes his "ideal of what a civilized bachelor's house should look like," complete with panoramic pictures of Naples from a local antique shop; "furniture that did not resemble furniture at all but an embodiment of cinquecento music"; and where the only thing being "faintly" modern is the bathroom (203). His servants are "a young Italian couple who had worked for an American in

Venice... so that they knew the difference between a Bloody Mary and a crème de menthe frappe” (203). Tom has his servants “polish the carved fronts of the armoires and chests and chairs until they seemed alive with dim lustrous lights that moved as one moved around them” (203). Through his Italian servants, Tom cultivates the illusion that his furniture is alive at the expense of his own humanity. It is precisely through his commodity fetishism, select taste, and erasure of history that Tom finally manages to find comfort in his existence: “He loved possessions, not masses of them, but a select few that he did not part with.... Possessions reminded him that he existed, and made him enjoy his existence” (236).

Patricia Highsmith’s novel of murder and stolen identity captures the American project of restructuring Europe during the Cold War. Having torn itself apart in War World II, Europe’s cultural shards are commodified and rearranged for American pleasure. Tom, initially submerged in the late capitalist culture of New York City, transforms his Venetian palazzo into a spatial simulacrum—a space of commodified images without a sense of historical continuity. In his seamless assimilation and performance of Dickie’s intimate “moods” and Europe’s authentic “atmospheres,” Tom is figured as a competitive, personified commodity that erases the original referent of humanity and history. With Tom’s arrival in Greece, the canonical origins of “Western civilization,” the commodification of “Western History” by late capitalism is complete. Paralleled with this allegory is Tom’s incorporation and erasure of Dickie Greenleaf, signaling the total commodification of what makes a “Human Being.” Tom is a posthuman subject, a “clean slate” of the late capitalist self in its most alienating and destructive dimension.

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