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Anthony Macris

Love Goes to Market

Work in Progress

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Love and Capitalism

When, in the mid 1990s, I started writing my second novel, *Great Western Highway* (*Capital*, Volume One, Part Two), I knew I wanted to deal with two things: love and capitalism. Neither is easy to write about, the first because it has been written about so much, the second because 'capitalism' is such a polarising term, and one that belongs more to economics and politics than literature. But I persevered, mainly because I had no choice. Most writers don't choose what they want to write about: it chooses them. What starts as an unconscious preoccupation soon becomes a full-blown obsession, and once it has reached that stage you know you've got something strong enough to see you through the marathon that is the writing of a novel. Anything less compulsive can't be taken seriously. It simply won't go the distance, and, even worse, it won't be artistically true.

Love, like all big themes, has its paradoxes. On the one hand it's universal, invariable, a given of what it is to be human. Yet love is also different in its every concrete embodiment, the effects of place, time and persons involved inflecting it with their particularity. The job of the novelist is to choose some of these particularities, and to make a satisfy-

ing narrative and dramatic form out of them. The love story in my novel is structurally very simple. It has two main characters, Nick and Penny, eternal boy and girl, early thirty-somethings living in the inner West of Sydney. It has a ground situation: both Nick and Penny are single, ready to form a lasting relationship, perhaps even start a family. And it has a complication: Penny loves Nick, and Nick wants to love Penny, but Nick finds himself blocked. He's still stuck on Christina, the long-term girlfriend who dumped him years ago. I think of Nick and Penny as inhabiting a stage I call 'pre-oedipalisation'. They've long been out of any family structure in the traditional sense, having spent most of their adult lives either in share houses or living with boy- or girlfriends they couldn't bring themselves to call partners. Yet after only a decade out of the mummy-daddy-me hothouse they find themselves, to their confused amazement, on the threshold of wanting to create a family of their own. It's a classic situation: they're getting older, their lives seem adrift, and the call of blood ties has started to sound.

They soon find that call amplified, to a deafening pitch, by the media culture that surrounds them. Images of happy families constantly assail them: on the TV in the form of home-loan advertisements with their fecund couples; in Hollywood movies with their imperilled toddlers, brutally deployed plot devices who are always reunited with their parent-protagonists by the end of the screening. It is these kinds of images and sub-narratives that form the portals through which my other main theme enters: that of capital. Nick and Penny live in a world saturated by media culture, full of idealised and contradictory images of how they should act, look, and think. For the most part these images are driven by market imperatives and, I would argue, have reached a stage of interpenetration with everyday life that marks out our time as something quite new. In my novel I've tried to capture how such developments impact on a particular life scenario, that of two Sydneysiders uncertain about taking on one of life's major commitments.

Great Western Highway

My novel's main settings are small in number: Nick and Penny's drama is largely played out in a handful of suburban rooms (and one open-plan workplace), rooms that invariably contain some kind of screen

through which the world of media images pours into their lives. Linking all these rooms is one of the novel's main settings: Parramatta Road. The stretch I chose is in Sydney's Inner West, and goes from Strathfield to Petersham. It's one of the most built-up urban areas in Australia. Its six narrow lanes are permanently choked with heavy traffic, their fumes trapped in a canyon of shop fronts and advertising imagery that stretches for as far as the eye can see. I chose Parramatta Road because it struck me as the perfect metaphor for a contemporary Australian city, a totally commercialised space that contained all of our society in miniature.

In dramatic terms, it's the spine that connects my two heroes: Penny lives in a share house on a side street at the Stanmore end of Parramatta Road, Nick in a one-bedroom flat off the highway at the Petersham end. It's a strip Nick often walks when he goes to visit Penny in the evenings, brooding over his difficult love, his thoughts enmeshed in the brutal, totally commodified setting that overpowers his senses. After three disastrous months as boyfriend and girlfriend, they are now 'just friends'. Here's Nick early on in the novel, on his way to Penny's place for what is sure to be a fraught dinner.

He stared at the tail-lights that streaked before him, one red comet after another, and felt the empty space where Penny had walked beside him, her steps always fast, light, accurate. While he pounded the street, she floated above it. When they walked together she always made him feel heavy, inert: he was the cracked concrete tiles; he was the thick, dusty windowpanes; he was the rubbish bins and the manhole covers and the rusted iron grilles of the stormwater drains. She had an affinity with movement itself: she was the pool of light that drifted over car bonnets; she was the gleaming tangle of cassette tape that wrapped itself around street poles and whipped in the wind; she was the flashing neon sign and the restaurant waterfall and the hum of idling engines as they waited for the lights to change. It was only when he was alone that he flew, just as he flew now, beside the rusting mustard Lantras, the toiling Toyota Corollas, the bull-barred Ford Festivas; it was only when he was alone that he flew past the glass and aluminium shop fronts of Avco Finance and Insurance, Rosetta's Hair Artistry, Montano Realty, Young Murat's

Furniture; it was only when he was alone that he did what he did at that moment, take a kick at the crushed Benson & Hedges packet lying in the middle of the footpath and watch it soar into the evening air.

My intention here was to write a bitter-sweet love song. There are all kinds of love songs – celebratory, playful, passionate – but perhaps the most affecting are those tinged with melancholy. The particular tone of melancholy I tried to achieve here is characteristic of night-time urban spaces, those empty film sets purpose-built for lonely meditations. I wanted love, or at least the possibility of love, to rise out of the very physicality of the setting, to make the depersonalised and inhuman sing with the most treasured aspect of the human: the rendering of another person as the loved. I wanted this conveyed in a rush of movement: the movement of Nick's perceptions and consciousness as he moved through the cityscape, the movement of shop fronts as he passes them by, the movement of the cars as they in turn pass him buy, the movement of emotion that courses through him. The novel as a whole is in a sense built on these flows of emotions and commodities, a melding of the flow of objects as commercialised entities, and the flow of feeling that shapes our lives and binds us to both people and places. It's a curious type of belonging, this belonging to urban spaces that are constantly being altered by relentless development and technological change, a process mirrored in the changes wrought in the people who live in them, their beliefs and expectations also undergoing transformations as they respond, often unwittingly, to the ubiquitous media their environment has become saturated with.

Penny at JobClub

The shifting quicksand of commercial imagery isn't the only kind of instability Nick and Penny are confronted with. There's another, more concrete, form: casualised employment. By the time those born in the 1960s had entered the workforce twenty years later, the social contract had changed. The notion of the job-for-life with a variety of benefits, enjoyed by the previous generation, had been replaced by a new flexible labour market characterised by short-term contacts and part-time work.[1] Both Nick and Penny work under these types of conditions, but

it is Penny who becomes the novel's main case study for their personal and social effects. She works at a government-funded community organisation called JobClub, whose brief is to assist the unemployed. Penny herself is employed on a part-time, casual basis, and the majority of jobs she places her clients in are offered on that basis as well. Equipped with a modest computer and an array of outdated resources, Penny, herself expendable at a moment's notice, helps her clients compete against one another for the scraps of work that have been thrown their way by the private-provider databases sponsored by the government.

This is the material basis on which Penny is trying to create her own share of happiness. Her love-life, too, is on unsure footing. Sitting at her computer, desperately trying to keep up with the flood of email that assails her, she reflects on her relationship with Nick, punctuating her thoughts with taps of the delete key.

As Penny scrolled through her email she found it hard to concentrate on the messages: she kept thinking about how she and Nick were now 'friends'. Being friends meant awkward conversations in cafés where they had once canoodled, it meant evening walks as a pair of singles in parks full of hand-holding couples, it meant diffident kisses before they went home, alone, to their hugely empty beds. After a few weeks it had got all too much for both of them. Their calls had spread out at greater and greater intervals, and they hadn't spoken for a month until they bumped into each another in the city. After no less than fifteen minutes of gentle brinkmanship over who would invite whom, they decided to have dinner. At Penny's. Sometime next week. Which was tonight. And tonight they would play at being friends, rather than masquerading as a couple.

```
Subject: Marketing employment opportunities: new
approaches, new paradigms.
Delete.
Subject: MS project: update your project management skills.
Delete.
Subject: The work/life balance: issues for women and return
to work after childbirth.
Delete.
```

Couple: it was a term she intensely disliked. It suggested relationships where the parties concerned had bonded so closely that they answered questions at the same time and unconsciously picked from each other's plates in public. It suggested a social universe of terrifying conformity where pairs of people, offended by the mere possibility of asymmetry, only interacted with other pairs of people, where more and more toddlers appeared in tandem with bigger and bigger cars: anything to keep the balance, to maintain the status quo, to be able to walk into a room for a cosy dinner party or a Sunday morning brunch and be amongst people exactly like you. If *that* was the couple, then Penny didn't believe in it.

```
Subject: Hospitality induction courses for the mentally
disabled.
Delete.
Subject: Flexible Delivery. Rationalising labour in a
resource-scarce environment.
Delete.
Subject: Tricorne Fund: last donations.
Delete.
Subject: Training the trainer: TQM strategies.
Delete.
```

In passages like these, I have tried once again to link my two themes, love and capitalism. In terms of content my intention has been to map out the framing contexts that make up a life: job, partners, ideologies, aspirations. In terms of novelistic form, I've tried to find inventive ways of relating this material. A technique I use a great deal in *Great Western Highway* is intercutting, as demonstrated above by the use of the emails. The origins of the technique can be found in the famous 'Agricultural Show' episode in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.[2] In it Emma and her lover, Rodolphe, are tramping through the muddy field where Yonville's annual fair is being held. As they walk they conduct a conversation full of unrequited passion and romantic yearning, which Flaubert intercuts with detail from the prize-giving ceremony unfolding in the background: awards for fattest pig, biggest pumpkin, most faithful servant, and so on. This pioneering use of 'montage' has always

fascinated me and is a technique I've often used not only in *Great Western Highway*, but also its predecessor, *Capital, Volume One*. In the course of my writing I have tried to build on this technique, to relate it to contemporary concerns by the use of actual textual artefacts, where possible. The emails above aren't simply units of prose: they are concrete texts that have been inserted into the narrative. In this way, I have embedded actual fragments of market processes into the book itself in an attempt to demonstrate how, in a very real way, they literally have become part of the fabric of everyday life.

But Penny's problems don't end here. We meet Penny on the day she is to be evaluated by her rather authoritarian boss, Joy Somerville. Even though Penny is employed under such poor conditions, she is still expected to undergo regular evaluations, all the more nerve-racking because of her lack of job security. To make matters worse, she strongly suspects her co-worker, Lawrence, is trying to undermine her. Penny has asked him for advice on the possible topics Joy might cover, and Penny strongly suspects he may be misinforming her, setting her up to fail. This is all the more galling because Lawrence is JobClub's only full-award, permanent staff member, and, in Penny's estimation, an undeserving one at that. Here's Lawrence 'advising' an anxious Penny on how to handle the interview.

Lawrence came over for a brief chat.

'I was just thinking,' he said to Penny. 'You know the evaluation isn't just a demonstration. There's the exit interview after. And it won't be just a jolly little chinwag. Joy is a little more demanding than that.'

'I thought you said Joy was a pussy cat.'

'A very demanding pussy cat. She'll want you to demonstrate a knowledge of policy and new industry developments.'

'You're kidding. Like what?'

'Well, you should already know, shouldn't you?'

'Well, I don't, so maybe you could enlighten me.'

Lawrence leaned against her desk and said, in mock-conspiratorial tones:

'Joy is into flexible delivery in a big way.'

'Flexible delivery? I've heard of it. I couldn't be sure of what it is. Not exactly.'

'Do you want the long answer or the short answer?'

'I want the answer that will help me keep my job.'

'Flexible delivery, in this humble service provider's understanding, is a way of maximising delivery of information and services by using human resources and infrastructure more...'

Even before he had finished his first sentence Penny found herself glazing over. Thinking about Nick had upset her: she was feeling fragile. But now was not the time to indulge in feeling fragile. If she lost her job, what then? It didn't pay to be too confident with these things. It was galling to give Lawrence the satisfaction of her interest, but what choice did she have?

'How do you know it will figure in the interview?'

'I heard she asked Melissa the other day. She asked Melissa where she stood on flexible delivery.'

'And what did Melissa answer?'

'Melissa did not answer anything because Melissa did not know what flexible delivery was.'

'Did it matter?'

'Oh yes, it mattered. Joy was not pleased. She told Melissa she found it exasperating that people did not bother to keep themselves informed of the most important trends in the industry.'

'Flexible delivery. How are we supposed to know about these things?'

'The email. You get them all the time.'

'Nobody checks all their email. You could waste your entire life with all that email.' She felt her voice rising.

'Well, now you know. Don't ever say Lawrence doesn't do anything for you. Say thank you for the flexible delivery.'

She thought he was kidding. She studied his face for a moment. No, he was not kidding.

'Thank you Lawrence for the flexible delivery.' She tried her best to sound cute, and Lawrence's beaming smile told her she had succeeded. She felt like gagging.

Lawrence, suddenly bored, went off to find another CV to edit.

The conflict between Lawrence and Penny provides the chapter with

one of its major plot-lines. Thematically, its purpose is to show how contemporary employment practices – casualisation coupled with the evaluation process – can lead to the war of all against all, an environment of constant competition where people are kept so busy holding on to what they've got that they have little time or inclination even to think about alternative ways in which their lives might be lived.

Margaret Thatcher Soliloquy

When I was planning *Great Western Highway* I knew I wanted to write a novel of the everyday, but one that also had a panoramic dimension. I wanted to write something that had a love story, that dealt with the textures of lived experience, but that would also encapsulate the larger social and political developments of our times in new ways. The standard way of incorporating the political in the novel is to have your main characters directly caught up in tumultuous events: you make them activists, advocates for a cause, tragic victims of the system, etc. There is no shortage of successful novels conceived in this way, but it wasn't what I wanted for Nick and Penny. Yes, I wanted them to be caught up in recent events of major importance, I wanted their lives to be somewhat difficult, but I didn't want them to be overly tumultuous. Rather I wanted to depict what I call the 'microfacisms' of the everyday, the small betrayals of conscience, the minor humiliations, the acts of unwilling complicity, the seemingly inconsequential deferrals to power we seem to be undergoing more and more with every new development in this era of corporate managerialism. But apart from this depiction of the minutiae of the operations of market power, I also wanted the book to have a more 'epic' dimension. This proved to be a problem. How was I to keep my main characters within the limits of the ordinary, but still sustain a novel of wide political scope?

Many epics have two main ingredients: a great tragic figure, and a war. I decided to put both into my novel. The great tragic figure I chose for *Great Western Highway* was Margaret Thatcher. The war I chose was the Gulf War of 1991: more on that later. The idea of using Margaret Thatcher came about by chance. One night in the mid-1990s I was watching the ABC's television current affairs show *Lateline*, then hosted by Kerry O'Brien. It was a special episode taken up entirely by

an interview with Margaret Thatcher. Within seconds of watching I knew she belonged in the novel. At first it was simply visual. In look and demeanour there was something utterly riveting about her: with her waves of auburn hair and her Gloriana Imperatrix outfits, she had become a stylised version of herself, an über-Baronness striding the global stage.[3] In political terms, she represented the most distilled essence conceivable of the new triumphalist capitalism that had swept through the world for the last two decades. Also, I was struck by what an innately sad figure she had become. Deposed from power, yet more potent than ever, she was a lethal animal confined to prowling a gilded cage: the international speaking circuit for former world leaders determined to carry on their work. But, to little avail: her own party had kicked her out of office, and that was that. She was the only one who didn't seem to realise it.

Structurally, she is incorporated into the novel in a very simple way. On the night of their dinner Nick and Penny, struck dumb by emotional tension, decide to watch the interview on television. Yet instead of simply presenting the interview, I take the story behind the looking glass, so to speak, and narrate not only her interview responses, but also the interior monologue of The Lady as she parries with O'Brien.[4] Many of the topics she addresses related directly to Nick and Penny's dilemmas: the nature of the family, the restructuring of the workforce, the transformation in personal values.[5]

...go on Mr O'Brien blame the market for everything...blame the stresses of job instability blame the wedge driven between people by the pressures of modern life high interest rates and whatever else you might be able think up...the couple has always had to chart its course through the choppy waters of economic survival there is nothing new about that...such difficulties are the test of a union...such struggles as do exist can be the very making of a successful marriage...it was collectivist thinking that weakened the commitment of the married couple that eroded mutual financial responsibility...the first obligation of a spouse is to their opposite number to their children to their immediate relatives not to some abstract idea of socialist humanity...that is why we lowered taxes to put money back into people's pockets so they could better serve

those they were best placed to serve...the married couple that realises it has to operate as an economic unit wherein both parties closely cooperate as business partners no matter how their labours are distributed...the married couple that realises its children are long-term investments to be carefully nurtured for both the sake of family and nation...these couples will flourish will prosper will have every chance of great success in life...the Mr O'Briens of the world find such realities harsh...it was what previous generations spared the fripperies of modern life knew for centuries... – *Mr O'Brien, if there is economic pressure on couples these days you can rest assured that the blame lies not with this government, but with the legacy of those who criminally mismanaged the economy, the Labour Party and their union colleagues. They raised wages so high that businesses could no longer compete. They allowed inflation to soar and purchasing power to plunge. They made it a crime to produce wealth by taxing it within an inch of its life and handing over what was left to be frittered away by a collective who didn't value it. They prevented innovation in the labour market and destroyed millions of jobs. I can think of no better recipe for destroying the family. Yes, of course we had to say no to all of these things, in order to save the family from the poisonous economic and moral conditions that were destroying it. We had to say no to social permissiveness, we had to say no to the mistaken belief that rights are more important than responsibilities, we had to say no to the excesses of the welfare state. It's all very well to want Shangri-la, but who's going to pay for it?*

Those familiar with James Joyce's *Ulysses* will immediately recognise a stylistic plundering at work here. The main literary model for my 'Margaret Thatcher Soliloquy' is the 'Penelope' episode from Joyce's *Ulysses*, a chapter better known as the 'Molly Bloom Soliloquy'. At approximately 27,000 words, my Thatcher monologue is much the same length as Molly's. Formally, they are similar, but not identical. Molly's soliloquy is a stream-of-consciousness monologue, an attempt at the pure narration of the unfettered thoughts that run through her mind as she tries to sleep. In the 'Margaret Thatcher Soliloquy' I wanted to turn such a notion on its head. Margaret Thatcher's mind, as depicted in my characterisation, has very few hidden thoughts. Inside there is nothing but the outside: a maelstrom of policy documents, speeches, cabinet meetings, television interviews,

working-party minutes, sound bites, slogans, etc. My Margaret Thatcher is less an individual in her own right than a nodal point traversed by the currents of political power.

In this way I also hope to have achieved one of my novel's main goals: a materialist rewrite of part of Joyce's *Ulysses*. The great affirmative 'yes' of that novel is a 'yes' to love, to marriage, to the family: at heart Joyce is a humanist. Margaret Thatcher too, at least in her own esteem and those of her followers, is something of a humanist, and in her own unique way. The 'yes' I have her say at the end of the soliloquy is, perversely, directed at the same goals as Joyce: if she says a full-throated 'yes' to the market, to popular capitalism, it is not just because she is a right-wing politician who simply wants to line the pockets of the already wealthy. She also genuinely believes that it is the market that can best promote the family and lay the foundation for a stable, prosperous society for all.

The soliloquy plays a crucial role in the *Capital* novels as a whole. It is the statement of the case of the Right. I wouldn't have felt justified in using the title of *Capital* unless I had included a comprehensive representation of 'popular capitalism': after all, electorates in Britain and Australia have been voting for it for decades, be it under the label of Tory, Labo(u)r or Liberal, Democrat or Republican. Embedded in the centre of *Great Western Highway*, the chapter acts as a kind of ideological whirlpool that flows and eddies throughout, the storm of the eye, rather than the eye of the storm.

Gulf War One

There is a sense in which we can claim that the third millennium began not on 1 January 2000, but nearly a decade earlier, at one a.m., 17 February 1991, to be precise, when a US-led military coalition began its attack on Iraq in order to liberate Kuwait. Why claim a different start date for the new millennium? There is little doubt that the most significant transformation in our time has been the rise of digital technologies: their personal, social and political impact has been enormous. And nowhere have the implications of the uses of this technology been more tellingly illustrated than in the first major war of the digital era. In a concentrated burst of military might that lasted

barely a hundred hours, the West demonstrated an entirely new application of force, force it used for the first time in the pursuit of protecting one of its key commercial interests: the world oil supply. The blunt instrument of nuclear threat was relegated to the background and the new smart technologies of precision bombing and real-time battlefield management were here, making previously unimaginable dreams of conquest a reality.[6]

The Gulf War also happens to occur at a critical juncture in the life of one of my main characters. In 1991 Nick was living in London with his previous girlfriend, Christina. A week before the war starts, she leaves him. To make matters worse, he is also thrown out of his job as an English Language Teacher for a private college: the flow of students immediately dries up once Britain goes to war. Nick is devastated by this double blow. He and Christina had been together for nearly ten years, and even though their relationship had been in not-so-gentle decline for the last two of them, life is still inconceivable without her. Nick's immediate reaction is predictable, if not particularly noble: he freaks out. He barely sleeps for the next two nights, overtaken by a storm of feeling that includes everything from angry reproach to paralysing guilt to overwhelming loss.

Here's a strung-out Nick a couple of days after Christina's departure.

You desperately want to say sorry to her. You want to pick up the phone next to your bed, punch in her number, say sorry, beg her forgiveness. You want to do it right now. There's nothing stopping you. You have no idea what time it is back in Australia. That doesn't matter. You might wake up her mother or her father or her sister and you are probably the last person they want to hear from, oh no, there's that loser again, hasn't he hurt our little girl enough, and they'll be polite and cold but still grudgingly go and get her. You don't care about how they respond. They'll change their tune once they know how sorry you are.

But you don't call. You know something isn't right. You feel like a schoolboy who's in terrible, terrible trouble, and will do anything to get out of it. You know it's the wrong way to feel. But there's no feeling you can have that doesn't make you disgusted with yourself. There's no

> feeling you can have that doesn't fill you with remorse and regret and self-hate, a self-hate so intense that for a moment you think you're going mad. You know that you must stop thinking about her, or you'll go mad. You lie there, trapped like a rat inside yourself. You order yourself not to think about her. And that's when you feel it, you feel her presence shift from something sharp and detailed and sensory to something much less immediate, something vaguer but also completely overwhelming. It's like a moment of fusing, the burn of sulphur on a vulcanised bicycle patch. The rubber melts, the blue smoke disperses, the surfaces cool. And there, there she is, fused into your every atom. Into your tongue, your eyes, your hair. Frozen inside you, ageless, changeless.

In thematic terms, the above extract is yet another song, a kind of lament that deals with the reverse side of love: the damage, the hurt, the regrets and self-reproaches. I thought long and hard about how I wanted to relate this kind of 'confessional' material. The point-of-view technique used here is second-person (the 'you' voice), and the tense is in the simple present. These two techniques are perhaps the favourite whipping boys for those who dislike stylistic tricks and, in many ways, I agree: no amount of quirky technique will make up for poor writing. But after a dozen false starts with the chapter, this was the formal combination that seemed to work best. The use of 'you' made it possible for my character to conduct what amounts to a self-analysis-exorcism-catharsis. With it, I was able to have Nick split himself in two: he becomes subject and object, the space in between filled with Christina and the Gulf War.[7]

Your girlfriend leaves you, the first war of the digital age enjoys saturation live-coverage on television: two occurrences that have no apparent connection, no real concrete interaction. Sure, Britain and Australia are part of the Allied Force, but you have no direct involvement. Yet such events can be intimately linked in contemporary lived experience in curious ways. One of these involves the way we have become consumers of stories. Unemployed, alone, depressed, Nick becomes an avid consumer of the cheapest, most easily digestible story forms: television. And there he finds the entire universe transposed, the whole circus of human endeavour neatly processed into quick-n-easy

emotional experiences – love, death, whimsy, sex, jealousy, murder – it's all there on the box, and it forms the perfect escape from his crumbling life. What's more, and most importantly for my novel, one of these narratives in particular is underpinned by the real, but is never quite in reach. Perched up in his third-floor London flat, Nick listens for the roar of B-52s, the howls of air-raid sirens, sounds that never come: it's just the TV.

Also, there seems to be no lack of stories that speak, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, to his dilemma. Nick can't help himself from entertaining thoughts of winning Christina back, even though in his heart of hearts he knows it can't happen. The night the war starts, a TV station is also screening a film with a win-back-that-girl scenario: *The Graduate*. It's this film's emotional scenario that frames the start of the war.

You're up late watching *The Graduate* when they start to bomb Baghdad. A young Dustin Hoffman stands in the corner of the laundry. It's his 21st birthday. He's decked out in the diving gear his parents have given him, complete with mask, full-length wetsuit, oxygen tank, even a harpoon. It's comical, the way he waddles over to the pool in his flippers, applauded by assembled relatives. He's the ultimate upper middle-class anti-hero: well-to-do parents, an Ivy League yearbook studded with achievements, but a heart that has been troubled by the 60s counterculture. Career? He's not so sure. The family elders, naturally, are concerned. Plastics, one of them has told him. The future is in plastics.

The ad break starts. It's headed by a newsflash. An anchorwoman announces that the Iraqi capital, as well as other targets in Iraq and Kuwait, are undergoing heavy aerial bombardment. So, finally, the war has started. You sit upright in bed, filled with anticipation. She throws live to her correspondent at the al-Rashid hotel in downtown Baghdad.

The screen fills with what looks like some kind of night-time blizzard, a surging mass of luminous green particles. Flashes of white light, edged in bright green, flare up and reveal a sky, a horizon, the medium-rise sprawl of a modern Arab city. A male voice, the voice of a journalist, is ad-libbing above the sound of explosions, some distant,

some near. He tells you that just a few minutes ago the Iraqis started putting up a barrage of anti-aircraft fire, filling the sky with missiles, shells, bullets. All you can see are beams and orbs of light swimming in the field of green particles. It's surprisingly delicate, surprisingly elegant, this movement of light. In the foreground, spraying up from the tops of office buildings, streaks of white light crisscross each other as they glide up at sharp angles. Higher up, in the huge spread of sky, arcs of tracer fire emerge as if from nowhere, brilliant globes that seem to drift like phosphorescent sea creatures in murky waters. Some globes of light steadily rise: others seem to follow each other until they suddenly explode and die.

You know what's going on. You know people are dying in that aquarium behind the thick glass of the TV screen. You know that above this firestorm an armada of Allied aircraft – B52s, F-6s, F-15s, F-16s, F-111s, F-117s, Hornets, Nighthawks, Ravens, Wild Weasels, or whatever else they call them – are delivering their deadly payloads.

The report ends and after the ads *The Graduate* comes back on. You don't want to watch it: you want to watch the war. You do a quick surf: nothing. You go back to the movie, eagerly awaiting the updates from the Gulf in the ad breaks. Dustin Hoffman works through his premature mid-life crisis. The Allies bomb Iraq into submission. George Bush, Colin Powell, Stormin' Norman soundbite for the cameras. You stick with the movie until the end, even though you're dead tired. You watch Dustin Hoffman, in a moment of high drama, snatch Elaine from the altar, from the man she should never have even thought of marrying. You keep falling asleep, but you want to see the movie's final sequence, which is just perfect, very sweet, very touching. Finally it comes: the shot of Dustin Hoffman and his bride sitting at the back of the bus, panting, exhilarated by their narrow escape. Then, to your complete amazement, you realise the woman sitting there is Christina, and beside her it's not Dustin Hoffman, it's you. Love has prevailed. Against all the odds, you're back together: you've managed to woo Christina back. Then the reverse shot of the passengers, their heads twisted around, staring bug-eyed at the both of you: after all, she is in a wedding dress.

You jerk up from the bed, suddenly wide-awake. The film credits roll.

Queuing up behind the scrolling names, waiting in a satellite

feed ready to be switched over at any minute, a city is being bombed back to the Stone Age, and a new era in history has begun.

Passages like this are an attempt to take the simpler embedding used in previous scenes such as the one where Penny is at her computer reading through her emails, and push it on to a greater level of complexity. In this passage I wanted to weave together into a seamless whole various types of texts, experiences and themes. The central image, the night-vision footage of the bombing of Baghdad, is one of the iconic images of our times, and one I've always found uniquely haunting. It is a representation of death and destruction made possible by new technologies and their degree of convergence: the digital infra-red camera networked with the live satellite feed, and so on. In it, death is reduced to a play of ethereal green light, a bloodless dance of pixels. It is an image that sums up all the claims made for the new era of warfare: the sanitised war where smart weapons ensure that only buildings and weapons are destroyed, where no one dies, no one suffers, and those that do perish are somehow to blame: after all, they were given plenty of warning.[8]

Around these live images of war I wove footage from a thirty-year-old comedy of love and morality with more than just an edge of biting social satire. In the perceptions of Nick, my narrator, all these images converge: the images of war queued up behind the images of newfound love, the fusing of them in the sleepy (and thus unreliable) narrator's consciousness as he transposes himself into the film. A global war, one person's feeling of loss: they come together, flattened on to the plane of an everyday life that is part real lived experience, part real-time media event. For me, these are some of the ways in which capital can be seen to dominate our everyday lives, and penetrate into the very heart of our emotions.[9]

For some decades now, there has been a seemingly irresistible tendency to adopt market practices in every aspect of our lives. Yet there seems to be little awareness that we are conducting a great social experiment, or that we are yet to grasp what the effects of these changes will be in personal terms. The desire to capture somehow the strange, complex, problematic new society born of this transformation is what compelled me to write *Great Western Highway*. In this novel, I wanted

to ask some very simple, fundamental questions. What happens to the human need for belonging in a world that is committed to the permanent revolution of market innovation? What happens to the most fundamental relationships between people when they are asked to build their lives on quicksand? What is it like to live and love in the time of contemporary capitalism?

Notes

1 See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) for an account of how labour markets have been transformed since the 'Fordist' period.

2 Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller, (London: Everyman, 1993), chapter 8.

3 This is a term used by Hugo Young in his biography of Thatcher, *One of Us* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

4 These responses are, of course, my own reconstruction.

5 I consulted a large variety of sources for constructing her voice. The most helpful were the two volumes of her autobiography, *The Downing Street Years*, 1993, and *The Path to Power*, 1995 (London: HarperCollins).

6 This optimism seems to have dulled somewhat with Gulf War Two. The Coalition of the Willing's 'shock and awe' onslaught may have led to the successful invasion of Iraq, but the political outcome of the occupation is yet to be seen.

7 Two novels written entirely in the 'you' voice are Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter Night a Traveller*, trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1993) and Michel Butor's *La modification* (Paris: Minuit, 1958). My use of the 'you' voice is somewhat different to these authors. My interest wasn't in playing with metafictional constructs, textual levels etc. Rather, I wanted to find a narrative mode that could incorporate an element of self-interrogation, as well as sustain a narrative and tell a story.

8 For more on 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims, see ch. 2 of Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

9 This notion of market forces penetrating everyday life owes much to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the 'capitalist axiomatic'. See *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: Minnesota Univ. Press, 1987).