PERFORMANCE ISSUES: ENACTED AGE/ESSENTIAL GENDER IN RAVELSTEIN, THE DYING ANIMAL, ELEGY, AND BEGINNERS

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis will set about examining four twenty-first century, elderly male, literary and filmic figures: Abe Ravelstein of Saul Bellow’s Ravelstein (2000); David Kepesh of Phillip Roth’s The Dying Animal (2001). David Kepesh of Elegy (2008, dir. by Elizabeth Coixet); and Hal Fields of Beginners (2010, dir. by Mike Mills). By examining the intellectual and bodily conduct of these figures, it will be argued that each attempts to ply a performative consideration of age. Concurrently, though, they look to reinsert themselves into loci of patriarchal power. Attending this process, and undermining the notion of age as enacted and achieved, is a largely regressive conception of essentialized gender behaviors. Sensing an erosion of their subjective relevance, largely by virtue of their advancing years, each figure deploys various dominative strategies in a quest for patriarchal redemption.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: The Intellectual Barrage</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Physical Onslaught</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not too many years ago, there was a ready-made way to be old, just as there was a ready-made way to be young. Neither obtains any longer. (Roth 35)
David Kepesh, *The Dying Animal*

Add the blue pill and literature's a whole new ball game, my old cock.
John Sutherland, “Viagra gives rise to literature?”

**INTRODUCTION**

“The Bi-Sexual,” a 2011 episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, finds protagonist, Larry David, embroiled in a battle with Rosie O’Donnell (playing herself) for the affections of a much younger woman. As is the show’s wont, the process involves systematically jostling social scripts. David, a sixty-something, sporadically employed (though financially robust), Jewish man vies with homosexual O’Donnell for the sexual attentions of a glamorous, bisexual woman. The former is victorious, achieving coitus with his conquest on multiple occasions. Crucial to his success, though, are potency-enhancing pills; this triumph, borne of his sexual, penile supremacy over O’Donnell, is artificially achieved. Of course, David’s partner discovers his shameful deceit and summarily discards him, in spite of his protestations and insistence that his sexual performance is not dependent on “juicing” (Mandel).

The episode functions as an instructive microcosm for the present topic, the elderly male figure at the turn of the twenty-first century. David’s socio-sexual ambition is consumptive; he will do anything – blue pills included – to beat fellow (albeit alternately) marginal figure, O’Donnell, to the female, sexual prize. True to his assertions, David is not in need of pills to achieve or maintain an erection. In previous episodes, he is shown engaged in often-vigorous sex with predominantly younger
It is, rather, the social perception of him as an older man that compels him to seek pharmaceutical assistance. Notably, his younger friend and accomplice, Leon Black (played by J.B. Smoove), insists that “he can’t go into a fuckfight with no goddamn weapon – jump rope hanging from your pants” (Mandel); his potential mate, too, exerts pressure, albeit implicit, by virtue of her femininity and relative youth.

Playing himself, renowned and acclaimed writer and comedian, David is undeniably potent in a verbal sense. And yet, in spite of this assurance, he is gripped by the notion that bolstering his body, more specifically his penis, is imperative if he is to defeat O’Donnell and claim his fleshly spoils. In a programme that predominantly sets about unpacking and satirizing normative social conduct, “The Bi-Sexual” serves to aptly contextualize one vision of the elderly male figure in the twenty-first century. It is a vision that finds aging men confounded by rigidly constructed behavioral expectations that serve to socially marginalize and disenfranchise them. Specifically, they contest the idea that the elderly male is intellectually inept and, more broadly, socially onerous. It is, however, also a vision that is consistently greeted with a problematic, largely hypocritical response. Said hypocrisy emerges where patriarchal ejection meets with a patriarchal reaction. Four subjects, and their particular configurations of this reaction, will occupy the focus of the present project. As to the personnel involved: the title character of Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein* (2000); David Kepesh of Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal* (2001); Ben Kingsley’s David Kepesh in Elizabeth Coixet’s adaptation of Roth’s text, *Elegy* (2008); and Hal Fields (Christopher Plummer) in writer-director Mike Mills’ *Beginners* (2010) will act as our subjects.
The strategies of the two Kepesh incarnations are perhaps most easily detailed. Both are white, upper middle-class, heterosexual men; both are intent on flaunting their intellectual and sexual credentials. Roth’s original Kepesh-ian manifestation, in particular, is all polemics, seducing reader and young lover Consuela Castillo with his vast and impressive cultural arsenal. He reviews plays on television; he plays classical piano; he has an authentic Kafka manuscript – all of which are deployed in a bid to reclaim some stake in a patriarchy lost by virtue of his advanced years. Of course, his seduction of Castillo is in a bid to have sex with her. This climactic act of fucking (to adopt his telling vocabulary) is aimed at firmly subjugating his partner, which, it is hoped, will cement Kepesh’s patriarchal credentials. The Kepesh envisioned in Coixet’s Elegy, adapted from Roth’s text by Nicholas Meyer, exhibits similar behaviors. He is ideologically obtrusive, likewise capturing Castillo with a deft and shrewd use of his insistently superior mental clout. Evolving beyond its foundational text, Elegy places an increased emphasis on Kingsley’s body. Persistently, unabashedly exposed, Kepesh’s torso visually entrenches his adamant, enduring potency of mind and flesh; both, again, are imbricated in his particular patriarchal quest.

Abe Ravelstein, it might be argued, resists similar patriarchal charges by virtue of his homosexuality. In actual fact, he is a self-defined “invert,” preferring to tout an endemically normative brand of transcendental love as the central tenet of his internationally revered philosophy (Bellow 160). This, in itself, is by no means insidious. However, this return to transcendental, romantic form attends an insistence on a regressive conception of the ideal, normative, nuclear family. It is also attended by an inescapably essential interpretation of gender. Surmounting and touting this paternal
ideology is the belligerent and dominative figure of Ravelstein himself, manipulating and dominating at every turn, in the service of accommodating the elderly male within existing patriarchal models.

Last of this elderly male quartet is Hal Fields of Mike Mills’ *Beginners*. Fields is less explicitly infatuated with the reclamation of patriarchal power than are his contemporary literary figures. Primarily, as a formerly closeted and heterosexually married gay man, he is focused on exploring his freshly liberated homosexuality. According to his personal advert, he is, innocuously it might seem, interested in “mutual soft stuff” and whatever else might stem from it. Sifting through his interactions with lover Andy, in particular, though, uncovers some alarmingly patriarchal behaviors. Fields is less efficient at renouncing past oppressive tendencies than he or Mills may have their audience believe, in that he persistently subjects his young lover to an inescapably paternal brand of control.

Perhaps it is, in this moment, helpful (albeit problematic) to defer to a conglomerated simplification of these elderly male figures’ ideological projects. Broadly, they all deploy their intellects and bodies in the service of eroding prevalent, detrimental, and limiting perceptions of the elderly male. More specifically, it will be posited that the Kepeshes, Ravelstein, and Fields are interested in touting a view of age as constructed, performed and achieved. By this understanding, one’s calendar years are every bit as constraining and arbitrary as one’s interpellated gender. Undermining this project, though, is a deference to patriarchal models that serve to essentialize and marginalize others, particularly women. This tension will draw much of the focus in the following pages.
CHAPTER 1: THE INTELLECTUAL BARRAGE

The ideological conquests of the elderly males in question begin, perhaps unsurprisingly, on a verbal plane. Through their speech and ideas, they attempt to convey power. The import of this particular level of patriarchal obtrusion – before turning to the attendant, intricately related bodily obtrusion – is multiple. Simplistically, albeit crucially, in the case of each of the four figures, verbal lucidity serves to actively resist prevalent visions of an intellectually depleted elderly subject. Further, and less simply parsed out, these elderly male figures’ intellects – their voices – can serve to either compensate for or bolster the patriarchal case made by the specific body in question. The former scenario largely pertains to Fields of Beginners, and Ravelstein; their verbal powers serve to transcend their bodily destitution. In the case of the Kepeshes, intellectual potency serves to precede and supplement subsequent, corporeal-patriarchal strategies. Unifying all four figures, though, is a sense of ideological despotism in the service of the elderly male’s return to patriarchal form.

Predominantly – and as part of a two-pronged, verbal and corporeal strategy – the David Kepesh of Roth’s The Dying Animal is at pains to quash the association of advancing years with mental deterioration. In this sense, his is a project that recognizes age as performed, as achieved. He all but directly cites the work of sociologists like Cheryl Laz, who pioneer this vision of age’s constructedness. Laz uses as template Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman’s “Doing Gender,” to reason that age is similarly done. Laz writes:

When we say "act your age" we press for behavior that conforms to norms. However, the saying also expresses a common-sense
understanding that age is not natural or fixed, and it implies that age requires work… (86)

So when Kepesh bemoans the fact that, in cavorting with a much younger woman, “you note the [age] difference every step of the way,” he grapples with these norms, these expectations (Roth 34). He is not bemoaning the difference in calendar years between he and Consuela, rather he is bemoaning the fact that he is forced to recognize the difference, that, as part of a broader social construct, he is expected to note the discrepancy. There is a placation, of sorts, in that he is not “sitting on the sidelines” (Roth 34). He asks for more, though. Having leveraged himself into the great patriarchal game, he laments the sense that a sexually active, elderly male is culturally deviant: “maybe it’s still a bit of an affront to people, to fail to abide by the old clock of life” (Roth 35-37). As a participant – intellectual and physical – he asks that the dominant fiction’s remit acquiesce to include he and his contemporaries. In this rhetorical act, he begins to establish a performative understanding of age. Here, the relationship between one’s enacted age and one’s calendar years is profoundly subjective. Further, any notion of a normative relationship between the two is exposed as social construction; the sooner it is recognized as such the better for Kepesh et al. At the time of narration, he is seventy years old, but continues to have cause, will, strength and means to participate in the “carnal aspect of the human comedy” (Roth 36). This disjuncture between expectation and subjective reality forces a reappraisal of the behavioral scripts American society expects the elderly male to abide by, and against which the elderly male is socially appraised.
Undermining this largely progressive project is a stratified approach to gender relations, one that hinges on a troublingly familiar male dominance countered by female subservience. “How do I capture Consuela?” muses Kepesh; as professor, he instinctively begins with his intellect (Roth 40). He argues for inclusion within a phallic dominator model, before turning to the task of penetrative domination. Where his intellectual conduct betrays hints of patriarchal intent, it is in Kepesh’s physical activity (and his approach to others’ bodies) that his stark gender essentialism comes to the fore. And it is, of course, in this essentialism that his treatise in favor of age-as-performed begins to crumple under its own hypocrisy.

Remaining with his verbal conduct for the moment, Kepesh is involved in two projects. Chronologically, his first project is seducing Consuela Castillo, student, Cuban-American, and twenty-four years old to his sixty-two. As he is wont to do – Kepesh delights in reporting – he selects his target early, maintains his distance over the course of their class together, then makes his move at a semester’s end party he throws, the sole purpose of which is to better facilitate his fucking a female student. The charade is flaunted to his readers, and barely concealed to Consuela:

The French art of being flirtatious is of no interest to me. The savage urge is. No, this is not seduction. This is comedy… This is the instant conventionalizing… the trying to transform lust into something socially appropriate. (Roth 16)

Kepesh’s is a compulsive, methodical approach to coitus and to the control he hopes attends it. His second project is a rhetorical one and is less readily defined. Briefly condensed and enumerated, it is his narrative quest for his audience’s sympathies, respect, and awe. Of
course, the two projects are not so easily compartmentalized; Kepesh looks to awe Consuela and uses her to awe the reader. He is, at every turn, measured and manipulative.

Kepesh revels in his seductive charade, in spite of assertions to the contrary. Indeed, he is, at times, adamant that it is only in the carnal ends that he delights: “I want to fuck this girl,” he writes, “and yes, I’ll have to put up with some sort of veiling, but it’s a means to an end” (Roth 17). These protestations form part of a vast and intricate nexus of subversive verbal orchestration. For it is in the process of seduction, it is through his elaborate verbiage, that Kepesh establishes his authority. Where else but in his language might he trump biology so resolutely?¹

“How much of this is cunning,” he muses, “I like to think all of it is” (Roth 17). The ultimate penetration alone, perhaps unsurprisingly, fails to gratify Kepesh in the way he hopes it would. It fails in its promise of power. In *The Will to Change*, bell hooks cites addictive sexuality as a means by which men – particularly disenfranchised, marginalized men – hope to obtain patriarchal succor. “For the patriarchal male,” writes hooks, “be he straight or gay, addictive sexuality is fundamentally about the need to constantly affirm and reaffirm one’s selfhood” (82). Of course, the release of semen is hardly substantive enough to offer any real catharsis to these patriarchally ejected figures. Kepesh proves this rule.

In spite of the supposed succor he draws from his steady stream of sexual conquests, Kepesh’s annual student hunt seems much too dry, much too methodical to

¹ This dyad of body and subjectivity is more rigorously interrogated below. Suffice it to say, in the present moment, that Kepesh’s flesh is robust but, as he aversely notes, markedly inferior to that of younger, male patriarchal competitors.
offer significant, lasting satisfaction. There is an elaborate process of verbal priming, of verbal foreplay, whereby the cunning prior to the deed serves to bolster his self-worth, just as does the deed itself. The question of whether they contribute to a more enduring assurance is less easily answered. Steve Bearman questions the ability of epidemic and casual sexual encounters to provide subjective succor, in “Why Men Are So Obsessed With Sex.” As part of the patriarchal trade-off – a sort of inconvenient by-product of social superiority – in exchange for dominance, men are expected to disavow a large section of their emotional landscape (Bearman 217). Kepesh is a victim of this disavowal, which is not to say that he is not the perpetrator of it in the same instance. His narrative is a private, controlled release of pent up frustrations and anxieties.  

Publicly, he is intellectually impressive and robust; physically, as is more intricately considered below, he is forthright to the point of despotism; but internally, he is repressed and tormented. When he actively discusses the social perils of old age, he attunes his audience to this teeming, unseen emotional mass:

Can you imagine old age? Of course you can’t… Observing one’s decay all the while (if one is fortunate as I am), one has, by virtue of one’s continuing vitality, considerable distance from one’s decay… And the ferocity of the objectivity is brutal. (Roth 35)

This process of distancing encompasses the gamut of Kepesh’s emotions. By establishing himself as a detached and superior scholar and lover, he forfeits the ability and opportunity to adequately express and interrogate his latent frustrations. Just as

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2 In one instance, he positively seethes, “Can I endure at this age that mania of uncertainty? Do I dare relapse into that frenzied trance? Can that possibly be good for my longevity?” (Roth 124).
Bearman suggests, his maintenance of power is dependent on a systematic and personal denial of “feminine” emotions and frailties in favor of a decidedly “masculine” approach to manhood. Concurrently, he looks to emphasize the reverse in Castillo. Stoicism is the name of the game. Of course, this leaves a sizeable dent in his emotional wellbeing; the compensation comes through recourse to sex. Bearman writes:

As [men] stood facing the possibility that we would have to cope with the loneliness of isolation, the emptiness of lost feeling, the dullness of disembodiment, just then, intimacy, passion, and sensuality were offered back to us in one, solitary form. Sex, we were told, is the answer.³ (217)

Kepesh’s mechanical seduction is utterly sterile, void of emotional consequence, a condition he insists upon but is ultimately confounded by. He selects his “meat” during the semester; he makes his approach at an end of year cocktail party; and, climactically, he sleeps with them; the process is repeated annually (Roth 2). In “Against Wisdom,” Kathleen Woodward has it that the cultural association of wisdom with the elderly serves to emotionally nullify and dehumanize them (198). Kepesh, in fact, co-opts this emotional dilution that attends wisdom, and appropriates it to his own patriarchal ends. As one major component of a broader project, the unfeeling seduction prior to the carnal act is of just as much consequence as the sexual act that Bearman so lambasts – it betrays Kepesh’s emotional impotence, his intellectual despotism, and it sets the stage for the ultimate penetrative act of domination.

There is, throughout Kepesh’s narrative, a relentless jockeying for position – pre-eminence is key. He yearns – explicitly and implicitly – for verbal ascendancy as

³ It should be noted that Bearman, to his discredit, makes only faint efforts to account for the conglomerate nature of his vision of masculinity.
adamantly as he yearns for Castillo’s verbal submission, Castillo, “who never, even insincerely, could bring herself to whisper, “I desire you, I want you so – I cannot live without your cock” (Roth 23). It is the mere absence of a whisper, then, that so plagues Kepesh throughout The Dying Animal. His physical, sexual ascendancy is rarely in doubt. However, it is verbal compliance, acquiescence articulated, that would placate him, that would ultimately gratify his urge for dominance. This being noted, Kepesh does insist upon, and look to revel in, Consuela’s supposed intellectual inferiority; it is one of his major reservoirs of strength and self-affirmation. It is a tool by which he aims to access the past promise of patriarchy. Consuela, according to Kepesh, is passably bright, in that she finds culture “important and wonderful as nothing else she knows is” (Roth 4); she has a superficial appreciation of culture (a vast, ill-defined conglomerate) and its import. However, she cannot access it in the manner that Kepesh is able to. Kepesh is every bit in and of the cultural realm; he operates within its exalted boundaries and has a steady command of its artifacts. Consuela, on the other hand, is confounded by it. She might stand afore:

… a Cubist Picasso. Trying with all her might to get the idea. She stands there waiting for the surprising new sensation, the new thought, the new emotion, and when it won’t come, ever, she chides herself for being inadequate and lacking… what? She chides herself for not even knowing what it is she lacks. (Roth 4)

Kepesh, of course, delights in this lack, he finds it charming, alluring and, most importantly, bolstering. In this intellectual locus, Kepesh flaunts his superiority and taps it to his patriarchal ends. Usefully, Consuela “finds culture important in a reverential,
old-fashioned way” (Roth 4). Kepesh, as a self-molded, popularly recognized ambassador for all that is cultural, looks to become the recipient of her reverence. He flaunts his access to various cultural milieus; he invites her to join him as he reviews a play; he shows off an authentic Kafka manuscript; he plays “a Dvorak string quintet for her – electrifying music easy enough to grasp” (Roth 20); and finally – his cultural trump card – he plays the piano for her: “it was all part of the intoxication – for both of us” (Roth 21). Kepesh revels in the childlike delight Castillo takes in his classical music. Even the mere playing of a CD has her rapt: “she sometimes would yield to the irresistible urge to stand and move her arms playfully about in the air, as though it were she and not Bernstein conducting” (Roth 19). She is intoxicated by his cultural clout, “she marveled – her word – at what my life was, my coherent, composed cultural life” (Roth 11). He, for his part, is intoxicated by the power that attends it, as well as the way her breasts move when she larks, “somewhat like a performing child” (Roth 19).

It would be problematic and woefully inaccurate to settle on Kepesh’s patriarchal approach as merely that of teacher – an attempt to parse out different strands of his dominator model is imperative. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Kepesh’s relationship with Consuela is very quickly tinged with a decidedly paternal flavor. Kaja Silverman’s work on patriarchy, the dominant fiction, and the centrality of belief to these constructs is particularly instructive regarding this strain of Kepesh’s behavior. In Male Subjectivity at the Margins, Silverman argues that Lacan’s Name-of-the-Father dominant fiction is intrinsic to the process of soliciting popular belief in phallic patriarchy (40-41). In The Dying Animal, Kepesh is primarily concerned with fostering this belief societally, as a public intellectual, and locally, through his relationship with
Castillo. Of course, he must also argue for a broadening of social expectations, a restructuring of whom is considered qualified to act as members of this patriarchy. Traditionally, Kepesh’s age disqualifies him from popular notions of the middle-aged patriarch. If paternalism is taken as central to this system of domination – as Silverman argues it must – then the elderly male ostensibly fails to meet its criteria, given that he exists outwith a conventional childrearing age range. Castillo – and the younger lovers of Ravelstein, Kepesh (of Elegy) and Fields – is used as an instrument to counteract this glaring inadequacy.

Kepesh, in The Dying Animal, fixes his lover in trenchantly, inescapably youthful terms. That he is establishing himself as an acutely paternal patriarch is beyond doubt:

A good heart, a lovely face, a gaze at once inviting and removed, gorgeous breasts, and so newly hatched as a woman that to find fragments of broken shell adhering to that ovoid forehead wouldn’t have been a surprise. I saw right away that this was going to be my girl. (Roth 5)

Newly hatched, she is born into Kepesh’s vision of a revised patriarchy, one that comfortably accommodates an intellectually rigorous elderly male. A fresh yet reassuringly traditional woman, she is ripe for ideological manipulation, for domination. She is tooled as justification for, and evidence of, Kepesh’s patriarchal relevance.

So, the trade-off inherent to Kepesh’s vision of the elderly male comes into focus. His is a project, a plea, in favor of taking the elderly male seriously. At the forefront of this project is his belligerent intelligence; his cultural nous is as powerful as
that of any younger man, moreso even. He is a public figure, reviewing plays for prominent publications and appearing on television to air his tastes and ideas. Inherent to these activities is clout and influence. Of course, it is this insistence on power that sullies Kepesh’s project.

The David Kepesh of Elizabeth Coixet’s *Elegy* is, to a limited extent, less regressive than Roth’s original. He seems more willing to engage in a dialogue with the past, to critique the social constraints of precedent times. The movie’s opening scene is instructive, as is its opening line. Spoken from the dark of a blank frame, Ben Kingsley’s Kepesh tells us: “We’re not all descended from the Puritans.” From the darkness emerge Kepesh and an interviewer, and together they hastily parse out a history-of-coitus in the United States.

Kepesh’s speech here is, in fact, a condensation of narrator-Kepesh’s private musings in *The Dying Animal*. Screenwriter Nicholas Meyer’s decision to showcase these ideas in the movie’s opening breath begs critical consideration. That he opted to exhibit these ideas within a talk-show setting is similarly significant. It foregrounds Kepesh’s ideological authority, establishing him as a figure well versed in culture (in its broadest sense) and in human sexuality. Additionally, it figures Kepesh as a proselytizer; he speaks in broad and bold terms, summarizing and cataloging American popular history. In this, Meyers’ first stroke as writer-adaptor, he trumpets Kepesh’s greatest stake in liberal social-politics, his reverence of the 1960s sexual revolution. This liberalism quickly begins to erode – just as it flounders in *The Dying Animal* – but the privilege granted it by virtue of its place in the movie’s opening scene is pertinent nevertheless.
Coixet’s mise-en-scène is conspicuous in this opening sequence, too, in that it is pared back to its bare aesthetic bones. As previously noted, Kepesh’s first line is uttered before the title sequence finishes. The titles themselves are nothing more than white font on a black background. Emitted from this visual vacuum, Kepesh’s voice is privileged over his appearance; his subjectivity trumps his flesh. When he appears, replete with enraptured interviewer, it is attended by an austerity of style, in terms of lighting and set. Coixet opts for a solid black background, paired with bright white light on the two players. Thus, the audience’s attention is acutely focused on the two men talking across an unremarkable round, wooden table. All of the above serves to foreground the ideas of one man, Professor David Kepesh. In the first close-up of the protagonist, a banner appears at the bottom of the screen announcing him simply as “author,” as wielder of words. As to the content of his opening gambits, Meyers’ Kepesh opens strongly, celebrating the hedonism of past minorities and insurgents fighting for the cause of “sexual happiness.” Then came the 1960s, when “it all exploded again all over the place.” In this opening ideological pitch, he makes the case for sexual entropy, for an ostensibly egalitarian anarchy, where one need not beg for sex or endure the servitude of marriage, as Kepesh did (a decision he has “plenty” of regrets about). Historicizing sexuality in this way, he makes the case for its malleability, for its cultural and temporal specificity. He makes his case humorously and deploys historical anecdote in a sequence that begins to pre-empt the argument in favor of a revised, sexually and intellectually potent and relevant elderly male figure.

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4 Noting his ejaculatory word choice hardly seems necessary.
Subsequent scenes serve to compound an increasing appreciation of Kepesh’s intellectual and cultural authority. Coixet places him aside his piano in a spacious Manhattan apartment; afore his class of eager students; then, back to his apartment, where he seduces said students with artifacts, verbal and literary. Chief target of this affectation is again Consuela Castillo, here played by Penelope Cruz. Just as is the case in Roth’s text, Kepesh flaunts his Kafka manuscript as physical evidence of his cultural authority. Divergent from *The Dying Animal*, though, is Consuela’s reaction.

By virtue of both Meyer’s screenplay and Cruz’s performance, Castillo appears much less reticent than in the original text. She urges familiarity – call me “Consuela,” she prompts, “We’re not in class; there’s no need to be so formal.” – and panders to Kepesh’s thinly veiled flirtations. When they go to the theater – or, rather, when Kepesh takes her to the theater – she is effusive about the play and her host. In *The Dying Animal*, Kepesh uses his profile to lure her back to the privacy of his apartment; in *Elegy*, Castillo lays the trap for him, gushing (with delight flashing across Cruz’s face) that she is “just not used to being out with a celebrity.” Back at the apartment, she applauds his charm. Kepesh continues to assail her with cultural nous, and then takes her, inevitably, to his bed.

Importantly, it is his intellect that allows him to seduce Castillo, and it is by his intellect that he hopes to control her. Kingsley’s hands continually dominate Coixet’s frame. Prior to their first kiss, Kepesh grasps first Castillo’s wrist – a wrist that rests on top of his Velazquez book – next her chin, and finally, ambidextrously, her whole face. Peering at her solemnly, he rests a thumb on her lips, silencing her and, dominance asserted, he finally kisses her. Kingsley’s hands serve to symbolize experience and
control. They are the hands of an older man, weathered as one might expect, but they are deft – he wields them assertively as they traverse her anatomy. He handles her firmly but carefully, just as he might handle any other cultural artifact. Post-coital, Kepesh again appraises Castillo. Tracing her features with fingers and thumbs, he proclaims her “a work of art.” Kepesh need not be labeled as the owner of this particular work. Coixet leaves us in little doubt.

Just as is the case in The Dying Animal, in Elegy, Kepesh’s advancing years appear to have done little to blunt his intellectual clout. He brandishes it readily and expertly; the results of his decidedly highbrow seductions speak for themselves. In this, Kepesh argues against normative notions regarding the elderly male, he resists the social constructs made available to him. Introducing his friend George O’Hearn at a public reading, Kepesh touts the poet’s voice as “vigorously masculine.” Kepesh’s intellectual displays throughout Elegy tout his own brand of vigorous masculinity. Regrettably, it comes at the expense of a largely docile and submissive femininity. The uncomfortable disparity between a progressive, performative understanding of age, and a regressive, essential conception of gender surfaces, just as is the case in The Dying Animal.

If Kepesh’s intellectual domination of Castillo in The Dying Animal is notable (not to mention disquieting) for its mixture of conceit and deceit, Abe Ravelstein’s intellect is notable for its bluntness and its scope. He wields his ideas like a sledgehammer, reveling in their offensive energy. His are used in the service of ideological intimidation, where the Kepeshes deploy ideas in the service of seduction. These ideas are revered as ardently by their followers as they are admonished by their
detractors. His book, in particular—although rarely more than vaguely described—brings international acclaim as well as censure. Ravelstein’s staunchest supporter, friend, and biographer, our narrator, Chick, is effusive in his praise for the text:

[Ravelstein] had written a book—difficult but popular—a spirited, intelligent, warlike book… The thing had been done quickly but in real earnest: no cheap concessions, no popularizing, no mental monkey business, no apologetics, no patrician airs… His intellect had made a millionaire of him. It’s no small matter to become rich and famous by saying exactly what you think—to say it in your own words, without compromise. (Bellow 4)

Ravelstein’s ideas are inherently combative, “warlike” in their intensity, cant, unapologetic and, perhaps above all else, imperious. Through the cogency of his ideas—hazily defined as they are—Ravelstein makes a broader argument in favor of the elderly male figure. This political vigor directly counters visions of the elderly as void of social utility, or, further, as a social and fiscal inconvenience. Only by doing so can the elderly male begin to re-stake a claim in patriarchy’s power loci.

Crucially, the professor is not satisfied with ideas for their own sake; his is teleological discourse. The end towards which he brandishes his ideas is undoubtedly that of influence. He is out to convert to the cause of Ravelstein, provided potential adherents are worthy of his ideas. Again, Chick sparsely defines these ideas, in spite of

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5 Sara Arber and Jay Ginn go so far as to suggest that “later life” is a largely invisible category in social discourse. Further, they contend that, even in sociological conversations, there is a “social-problem focus,” at the expense of a more holistic consideration of elderly subjectivity (Arber and Ginn 264). Ravelstein’s aggressive polemics counter this invisibility.
his ardent belief in them. From the little that can be gleaned, Ravelstein condemns twentieth-century indeterminacy, in favor of more objective Truths pertaining to human nature. In one instance, he contends, with typical intellectual impetuousness, that “one reason why violence is so popular may be that psychiatric insights have worn us out and we get satisfaction from seeing them blown away with automatic weapons” (Bellow 43). He tires of subjective intricacies and inadequacies, and instead favors a broad and robust commitment to longing and (ultimately) love. Further – and in spite of his own homosexuality – Ravelstein touts the spiritual import of heterosexual love. In its simplicity, it underpins his vast ideological remit: “Spirited men and women, the young above all,” such as his devotees, “were devoted to the pursuit of love” (Bellow 25). Chick’s narrative, established as a hazy overview of man and ideas, returns persistently to longing, “the neediness, the awareness of incompleteness, the longing for wholeness, and how the pains of Eros were joined to the most ecstatic pleasures” (95). The search to quench this longing, to find a heterosexual partner to conquer it, is a life’s work. Ravelstein the “invert” – lest one mistakes him for homosexual – transcends this search, preferring to explain and ascribe it to protégés (Bellow 160). As father to his cadre of acolytes, he is primarily interested in fostering power relations. He personally exercises an efficient sway over them, having “produced (indoctrinated) three or four generations of graduates” (Bellow 58). In this process of indoctrination, Ravelstein imparts the necessary tools for a replication of his exemplary patriarchy – a patriarchy that serves to include him as elderly male, but, aside from this minor revision, is largely recognizable.

6 The seeds of his gender essentialism perhaps lie in this tendency towards universalizing, in his faith in Truths.
Ravelstein attempts to substantiate a return to the normative, nuclear family model begot of heterosexual, platonic love. His is a sort of anti-Lyotardian view of the world, an insistence on the continued viability of objectivity. Gone is any incredulity towards grand narratives; Ravelstein attempts to muster belief in and dependence on an ahistoric, transcendental articulation of love. “We have to keep life going, one way or another,” he has it; in the face of rampant subjective wandering and indeterminacy, “Marriages must be made” (Bellow 83). Deferring again to Kaja Silverman, the patriarchal world – as envisioned in a Name-of-the-Father dominant fiction – depends utterly on family and phallus (48). In kind, Ravelstein’s insistence on a profoundly normative conception of familial structure serves to foreground his infatuation with patriarchal power. He is a man of “Great Politics,” of trans-historical influence, from Thucydides to Churchill (Bellow 62). He sets about handpicking his own, local, patriarchal cadre. For, although his influence reaches the upper echelons of Western political power, his alumni are the tendrils by which he penetrates these echelons. He has, in other words, his group of intellectual devotees by which he transmits his particular brand of social politics. One of Chick’s many references to this ongoing ideological relationship is particularly instructive. He writes, simply, that “what mattered was that [Ravelstein] should remain in charge somehow of the ongoing political education of his old boys” (Bellow 12). Firstly, that he is “in charge” weighs heavily on the present purpose, the chronicling of his intellectual despotism. Control is everything. Not content to present ideas for adoption or dismissal as an individual might see fit, Ravelstein’s ideas are there to be imbibed unflinchingly and followed dogmatically. Secondly, and of equal import, is Chick’s moniker for Ravelstein’s
troupe, the “old boys.” This, the grave business of philosophy, of parsing out the very nature of life itself, is male business.

More than that, it is patriarchal male business. Just as Kepesh of The Dying Animal insists on his own ideological authority as critic, narrator and lover, Ravelstein is similarly insistent as philosopher and professor, as leader of men. Kaja Silverman is (once again) neatly instructive in considering this insistence. Of the commensurability of penis and phallus in patriarchal society, she writes that it is not ahistoric nor immovable, but rather is “produced by the dominant fiction and sustained by collective belief” (Silverman 44). Ravelstein, of course, pedals a partially augmented brand of the dominant fiction, the Name-of-the-Father, that allows for the inclusion of the elderly male figure. In this vision, the patriarch’s potency – verbal and penile – does not wane with advancing years.

Of course, pedaling this idea is all for naught if Silverman’s collective belief cannot be mustered and maintained. Ravelstein seems acutely aware of this, and exercises a compulsive regulation of his alumni. As Chick has it, “Ravelstein, though his hands were unsteady, controlled his instruments like a Prospero” (Bellow 12). Whether from his “monastic-luxurious apartment” on the Midwestern university campus, or an opulent suite at the Parisian Hotel Crillon, Ravelstein is rarely far from the telephone, that mechanical instrument that allows perpetual control of his network of human instruments (Bellow 63). Charged with his belligerent ideology, said instruments – the aforementioned “old boys” – serve to affirm Ravelstein’s inclusion within the loci of patriarchal power and, in a sort of feedback loop, recycle his teachings (Bellow 12).
Ravelstein’s family-clique allows for the replication of patriarchal imperatives. By proselytizing to his disciples, he bolsters his intellectual stake in autocracy. West and Zimmerman emphasize the centrality of family and, more generally, social structures and interaction to the perpetuation of gender norms. In “Doing Gender,” they write: “If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category” (West and Zimmerman 146). Whereas Ravelstein ostensibly resists traditional, familial models, he merely positions himself as a surrogate patriarch:

Ravelstein urged his young men to rid themselves of their parents. But in the community that formed around him his role became, bit by bit, that of a father. Of course, if they weren’t going to make it he didn’t hesitate to throw them out. But once they became his intimates he planned their futures. (Bellow 27)

Again, just as is the case with Kepesh, a potentially progressive act flounders. In insisting upon the continued social relevance of the elderly male figure, Ravelstein is, on the surface at the very least, engaging in a democratic political struggle. However, by merely inserting himself – as ambassador for the elderly male – into an all-too familiar patriarchal model, he merely succeeds in treading ideological water, in regurgitating stagnant phallic norms.

This notion gains yet more credence through Ravelstein’s cast of female characters – if that near-comically flimsy, disparate cluster can be considered a cast at all. Chick’s wives, past and present, form the basis of said collective. The pair is comprised of malevolent ex-wife, Vela, and insipid current-wife, Rosamund. The latter
is perhaps best dealt with first, in that she fits neatly into Ravelstein’s patriarchal model, as detailed above. Rosamund is pleasantly compliant and quiet, not to mention young. As a former pupil of Ravelstein’s – yet not one of his “old boys,” who seamlessly move in and about corridors of power – she is well versed in remaining ideologically cowed (Bellow 12). When Chick becomes progressively and dangerously ill, for instance, his insistence on verbal dominance becomes all the more explicit. His sickness is a strangely incongruous incident towards the book’s close – significant in that it forces the narrator to reckon with his increasingly unavoidable mortality. Observing that the elderly “do feel that we are speeding earthward, crashing into our graves,” the importance of verbal subjugation is heightened (Bellow 192). He begins to flaunt his intellectual superiority as per the example of his late leader. Rosamund, for her part, is quietly subservient, tending Chick and suffering his curt polemics. Just as did Ravelstein, Chick operates as conversational sculptor, jostling his subservient to-and-fro. Retrospectively repentant, he pities his wife-nurse: “Poor Rosamund, she had to listen to such stuff night after night” (Bellow 192). She does so obediently.

In this, her intellectual and subjective nonentity, Rosamund figures as an efficient, submissive foil to Chick’s first wife, Vela, whom Ravelstein finds utterly repellant. Primarily, this is because of her intellectual potency and her subversion of traditional, familial order (and, by extension, female subordination). In the case of Vela, “the idea of leading a warm family life is her number one antipremise” (Bellow 88). This is what makes her so objectionable; in this resistance to normativity, she jars with Ravelstein’s social politics; for this reason, he sympathizes with Chick, palliating thus: “I don’t blame you for demanding that she should behave as a wife ought, according to
your lights” (Bellow 87). Additionally, lest her intelligence is flattered with the reverence afforded Ravelstein’s cognitive clout, the pair’s brains are substantially, persistently contrasted. Where the latter’s intelligence is vast in scope and depth, the former’s intelligence is exacting and rigid in its parameters. Hers is all science, his philosophy. Chick – as ever, religiously imbibing Ravelstein’s perspectives – acknowledges this dyad: “… Vela had a major league brain. The scientific part of it deserved particular respect. Ravelstein, however, held that examples of great personalities among scientists were scarce” (108). The remit of the female brain, it seems, is ill attuned to the great socio-political ideas to which Ravelstein’s male brain is accustomed. Vela’s intelligence, robust as it is, can merely focus on the minutiae of physical science. As for the personality attendant to these feminine wiles, well that is largely non-existent in its more flattering instances. At its worst, it is utterly unpalatable.

Ultimately, Vela is disparaged so roundly because she fails at feminine subservience. She is sexually and intellectually forthright, with a “major league brain” and a tendency for superiority (Bellow 108, 105). Essentially, Ravelstein’s patriarchal activity is projected onto her. Vela’s sterile, scientific nous is foiled against his philosophical, intellectual autocracy. She is denounced as despotic; these tendencies are physically marked, on her “stiff upper lip” (Bellow 123). She bullies Chick throughout their marriage, withholding sex, preferring to verbally ravage him. By way of defense (or counterattack), “Ravelstein said [he] should have had more pride and that it was phony of [him] to be so meek” (Bellow 105). Were they to have remained together, according to Ravelstein, this meekness would have eventually led to Chick murdering
his wife. To Ravelstein, “the thought of such a murder was a good thing. It did [him] credit” (Bellow 128).

Vela’s verbal and intellectual authority is nothing short of audacious. Planted between Chick’s vision of her – arbiter of the educated, middle-aged woman – and his vision of Ravelstein – arbiter of the educated, elderly man – there is little doubt as to the primacy of the latter. Better seen than heard, the former “was especially beautiful when she was silent. Silent, she seemed to be praying to her beauty” (Bellow 103). Ravelstein, whose physical “frailties were visible” (Bellow 20), is seen and heard, his clothes as lavish as his ideas.

Vela’s gravest sin, that which condemns her outright as a failed woman, is that, according to Chick:

She had a way of leading you, of showing you how to be a male. This tendency is more common among women than you might suppose. Either she had in mind men she had liked in the past, or she had some male principle of her own to follow, a Jungian masculine counterpart, her particular animus or inborn vision of a man – (Bellow 123-124)

In this moment, Chick gets at the issue skirted above. In this moment, we see the glaring failing at the heart of these elderly males’ pleas for social inclusion and relevance. For, Ravelstein’s intellectual clout – and that of his contemporary elderly males – might be forgiven, lauded even, if it were not at the expense of women. The masculine cogency pedaled throughout Ravelstein is counterbalanced and legitimated in a large part by a subservient femininity. RW Connell notes that the “later and crazier works” of Jung were often incorporated into twentieth-century pop psychologies that
sought to emphasize an inherent, “deep masculine,” movements that were little more than “re-runs of discredited patriarchies” (5-6). Chick, using Ravelstein as his ideological crutch, yearns for inclusion within said discredited patriarchies, and incorporates similar psychoanalytic bastardizations. Vela is so distasteful because she dares to act male; she dares to flaunt her masculine animus, which is much more assertive than either Chick or Ravelstein are comfortable with. Chick – whose name provides a clue if ever it were needed – struggles to repress his feminine anima. His leader provides the model; Ravelstein, who, but for his homosexual tendencies (considered in greater depth below), is trenchantly masculine as per a patriarchal dominator model.

Perhaps it is best to close the present consideration of Ravelstein with his own ideology, with an excerpt that condenses much of the above, regarding a novel conception of age as performed – with its attendant, robust elder male as arbiter – and a regressive gender essentialism. With respect to younger women, of which Vela and Rosamund are but two, Ravelstein contends that: “Nature… gave them a longing for children, and therefore for marriage, for the stability requisite for family life. And this, together with a mass of other things, disabled them for philosophy” (Bellow 140).

Hal Fields and Ravelstein are kindred in sexuality and, to a certain extent, in profession. Ravelstein is, as already discussed, a veritable Prospero, a conspicuous wielder of cultural, ideological and human capital. Fields (played by Christopher Plummer), for his part, wielded similar powers as a museum curator in Los Angeles. However, as he is gradually paralleled with his contemporaries – Kepesh, Ravelstein, and Kepesh – it quickly becomes apparent that Fields’ potency is of a subtler, less
readily denounced brand. The social milieu from which he has emerged has a large hand in this. Fields appears more cognizant of past patriarchal associations and, ostensibly at least, aims to discard them. His subjective project, though, is sullied by oppressive behaviors just as are the remaining three elderly males’. Fields’ intellectual and physical conduct is definitely patriarchally tinged, faint though that dominative flavor may be.

Again, intrinsic to Fields’ ideological makeup is his having emerged directly from major patriarchal structures. Prior to retirement and coming out as gay, he was every bit the quintessential patriarchal candidate: white, middle-aged, professional, father and husband to a nuclear family. Save the first of these characteristics, the Fields the audience meets between 1999 and 2003 – the Fields who occupies the bulk of the audience’s attention – is scarcely recognizable from his predecessor, married in 1955 and subsequently a father to Oliver (played by Ewan McGregor). By virtue of both circumstance – his advanced years – and personal agency – his sexual transformation – Hal Fields all but entirely graduates from conventional patriarchal loci, most notably the heterosexual nuclear family (preserve of Lacan’s Name-of-the-Father dominant fiction), as well as its attendant capitalist employment sphere.

Couching an examination of Fields on the above terms, there is a danger that certain lines of inquiry can become obscured, or even discarded. In other words, in distancing this elderly male figure from systems of patriarchy, a certain blindness to patriarchal behaviors can become comfortable. To reiterate, though, the twenty-first century Fields, though *distanced* from an inherently patriarchal past, is by no means wholly innocent of patriarchal tendencies. In his personal bid for social legitimacy, he
often shows glimpses of the domineering behavior so intrinsic to patriarchy. Returning to West and Zimmerman for the moment, gender – that precursor to the Name-of-the-Father dominant fiction – is every bit the “product of social doings” (129). Naturally then, Fields’ relationships (familial, homosexual and homosocial) are instructive.

Fields’ relationship with his young lover, Andy, is full of patriarchal consequence. Indeed, the most striking facet of their pairing is the calendar-years age difference. Actors Christopher Plummer and Goran Visnjic, who plays Andy, have an off-screen age difference of some forty-four years. In Beginners, only Fields’ age is articulated – he dies at the age of seventy-five. Yet more telling is Andy’s explanation for his attraction to Fields. “Since I came out to my father,” says Andy, “he never speaks to me. That’s why I’m [sic] always been attracted to older men.” All subsequent perceptions of Fields are thus channeled through a paternal lens. And, justifiably or otherwise, all perceptions of the pair’s relationship are thus channeled through a patriarchal lens. In light of both Mike Mills’ characterization of Andy and Visnjic’s interpretation of the character, the patriarchal question is imperative. Mills’ introduction to Fields’ lover – his first line is as quoted immediately above – sows disconcerting seeds. Immediately curtailing Andy’s explanation, directed to the camera, Hal laughs, grasping his shoulder. The surrounding men, most of them much closer to Hal’s age than Andy’s, laugh too. The object of their mirth is less amused; in actual fact, Andy’s face drops and he even mouths the beginning of a word or a sentence (defensive perhaps), but stops short. In this moment, verbally silenced, communicating merely through a look, Visnjic gestures towards a patriarchal undercurrent. As would-be son in their complex, sexualized, pseudo-father-son relationship, Andy is cowed from the very
beginning. He is cowed verbally, by Fields’ laughter, and physically, by the hand that grasps his shoulder. From the outset, then, he is marked as subservient within the relationship. Concurrently, Fields is marked as dominant.

This stands in opposition to their profoundly non-normative relationship (by virtue of its homosexual and heterogenerational qualities); it is important that this subjective abjection not dilute or obscure Hal’s patently patriarchal behavior, and Andy’s attendant subjugation. bell hooks warns against this social complacency within same-sex relationships, the notion that homosexuality is somehow immune to patriarchy. Further, she highlights (and condemns) the perpetuation of domineering behaviors between homosexual men, noting the worrying trend of repression that can pervade gay relationships, just as it does within the more traditional patriarchal milieu of heterosexual union (hooks 127). Fields lapses into these sorts of trends, and does so almost instinctively. He need not look to Andy before grasping his shoulder – he knows where to look, and how to silence. In other instances, albeit fleeting ones, flashes of patriarchal behavior again surface. In one of many hospital scenes, Andy, facing no objections, feels it necessary to defend his presence in the ward. “You know I have the right to be here as much as anyone else,” he rants uncertainly to a bemused nurse; Fields insists that he “go take a walk, calm yourself.” Fulfilling the role of paternal-protector, he then asks that a similarly bemused Oliver “be nice” to Andy. Oliver, for his part, cuts the figure of a forlorn, frustrated older brother. He critiques Andy with exasperated looks, and defers to Hal for judgment on this juvenile force that seems
intent on disrupting his resurgent son-father relationship.\footnote{An alternate reading might have it that Oliver is exasperated by his father’s uncomfortably paternal relationship with Andy. Ewan McGregor is, indeed, repeatedly, visibly confounded by the couple’s interactions. His subsequent relationship with Anna is marked by an emotional parity, perhaps resulting from the disparity in his father’s final example.} One might argue that he is jealous, just as a child resents the division of parental affections on the arrival of a younger sibling.

Ultimately, though, at a verbal, non-carnal level, Fields and Andy appear to achieve relative parity by the movie’s close. Facilitated by the former’s increasing debilitation, the two grow to mutually nurture one another, dancing together, laughing together. As Hal has it, in one of he and Oliver’s private moments together, he likes Andy “because he isn’t like me. He’s fun.” Fun is central to their relationship, something that can scarcely be said for the relationships of Kepesh, Ravelstein and Kepesh. The act of playing rejuvenates Fields, in spite of the rigors of cancer. On one hand, this play, playing at being young, calls into question conventional visions of the elderly male, and does so less cantankerously than Ravelstein’s polemics, less insidiously than Kepesh’s hyper-sexed tenor in \textit{The Dying Animal} and \textit{Elegy}. On the other, less celebratory hand, perhaps Fields uses Andy’s juvenile, fun nature as a patriarchal crutch. There is, latent in the characterization of the younger as whimsical and the elder as relatively stern, the potential for subjective stratification. Just as does Kepesh, of \textit{The Dying Animal} in particular, Fields actively obscures personal emotional fragility from his partner. In so doing, he emotionally guards himself and, simultaneously, aims at subjective ascendancy within their relationship. This process of
disavowing weakness in the service of patriarchy is mirrored in Fields’ response to his cancer diagnosis, considered further in the subsequent chapter.

On a more deliberately thematic footing, Beginners interrogates normative conceptions of gender and age much more transparently than do Ravelstein, The Dying Animal and Elegy. Writer-director Mike Mills instantiates a very simple vision of generational change from the movie’s outset, historicizing everything from sun, moon and stars, to kissing, happiness and sadness. In one montage, he sets up a stills-based dyad of 1955 and 2003. In each, he posits quintessential visions of life alongside temporal markers (US Presidents and cars, for instance). Thus, the audience is instantly attuned to social performance. The dog Oliver inherits from his father serves to calcify these ideas as central to the Mills’ text. In the park, surrounded by his own, the dog appears lost. Noting this, Oliver sympathizes thus:

And you’re a Jack Russell and that’s a breed. Your personality was created by this guy John Russell; he was a hunting enthusiast in the 1800s. And he bred your ancestors for their stamina and courage for the hunt. You think you’re you, and you wanna chase the foxes, but other people planted that in you years ago.

The dog, of course, finds itself in the same predicament as Oliver’s late father, who masqueraded through forty-four years of stifling, heterosexual marriage. The transparency of Mills’ engagement with social performance does not obscure Hal’s patriarchal tendencies, though. At best, it mitigates said lapses by consciously acknowledging the structures they are, simultaneously, borne of and contributing to. Ultimately, his quest is as charged with hypocrisy as are the Kepeshes’ and

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Ravelstein’s, in that in one breath he ardently bids for a revision of elderly male behavioral expectations, and in another uses oppressive, patriarchal tactics to do so. Whilst the irony in Hal’s instance is less readily recognizable, it is no less heady.

There is an inherently contradictory vein, then, at the heart of these elderly figures’ ideologies. In one strand, they ask – or, perhaps more aptly, insist – that the elderly, white male be taken seriously; they are, at a cognitive level, firing on all cylinders. The socially distanced, excentric position from which they wage their ideological campaign, though, seems to have implications for the strategies they use in its name. To an extent, this notion of distance is deployed as a weapon in itself. Kepesh, Kepesh, Ravelstein and Fields appear to translate social distance into emotional distance, and subsequently use this stoicism as a patriarchal tool. Woodward, of course, makes entirely the opposite argument, decreeing a moratorium on wisdom, a historicized emotion she believes implies a detrimental “transcendence of the social world” (205-206). Above, an entirely contrary argument has been deployed. The elderly male figures in question are, in fact, seen to co-opt this emotional distance – which, paired with their intellectual authority, is analogous to wisdom – in a bid to reclaim social, patriarchal consequence. Furthermore, it is paired with an alarming denigration of female subjectivity. This distanced, dominative stratification becomes all the more pertinent as the elderly males’ bodies, and bodily practices, come into focus.
CHAPTER 2: THE PHYSICAL ONSLAUGHT

The bid for the elderly male’s social legitimacy – as advanced by Kepesh, Kepesh, Ravelstein and Fields – is an ideological one. Simplistically, it is a plea for a dismantling of the confining and disenfranchising behavioral parameters available to the elderly male. Of course, as has been argued above, this search for authority frequently lapses into authoritarianism; it is consistently caught up in the patriarchal practices that necessitate it. As enumerated in the opening chapter, these practices include polemics, as well as social and intellectual coercion. Significantly, they also include corporeal and, by extension, sexual practices. And again, these aging figures co-opt the strategies that serve to perpetuate a patriarchal hegemony defining them as abject. This is all the more intriguing – and, perhaps, all the less surprising – given that the elderly body is socially figured as incapacitated, both pathologically and sexually.

Each of these elderly male protagonists is mindful of his body – not to mention its physical and sexual capacities – in his pursuit of social inclusion. Each wields his body (and penis) in a unique fashion, albeit to familiar ends. The strategies diverge, but the bid for subjective redemption, at the cost of other marginal subjects, is true of each elderly male figure.

In matters of the flesh, Hal Fields’ death and the decline that precedes it are ubiquitous. Beginners’ opening scene finds Oliver disposing of his effects, the material remnants of a late subject and a defunct body. Prior to this demise, his bid to return from exile at the societal margins is largely thwarted by his cancer-ridden form. The

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8 Edward H. Thompson, Jr. apportions a great deal of blame for this on the medical industrial complex, which he argues “for two decades... has profited handsomely by medicalizing elderly men’s lives more than meeting elderly men’s and women’s needs” (8). He goes on to note the losses that stereotypically attend old age: “[men’s] occupational role, their livelihood and community of coworkers, their health and independence and their masculinity” (Thompson, Jr. 13).
audience is attuned to these frustrations each time he rails against the practical constraints of his condition and its treatment. In Mills’ first hospital montage – one of many sequences mapping Fields’ decline – Hal pleads with Oliver to remove his ventilator; he is quickly strapped down by a nurse. With his young lover Andy, too, he is consistently frustrated. Andy is a physical trainer – representative of the biological vitality of youth – and cajoles Hal into exercise when he is released from the hospital. Hal obscures the gravity of his condition, apparently too emotionally injured by it to be wholly honest with his physically ascendant partner. The inescapable notion that, in spite of his cognitive vitality, Hal inhabits a failing body, impedes his re-inclusion in potential arenas of power exchange, such as employment or sex. Constrained by a hospital bed, prescription medications, and medical apparatus, he is physically demarcated and distanced from normative public discourse. By extension, Hal’s visibly aging form succeeds in eroding his ability to control, an ability central to patriarchal masculinity. It succeeds in unmanning him (Thompson 13).

This unmanning seeps into the sexual sphere. To a large extent, Fields is as flummoxed by sexual patriarchy – stratification and subjugation – as he is by the aforementioned ideological, intellectual domination involved. He bemoans these constructs, but he is also seen to be bound up in them (rather desperately, it should be noted). Fields’ complicity in patriarchal sexual behaviors is, then, as contradictory as is his complicity in acts of intellectual patriarchy. In much the same way as he asks for intellectual recognition at the same time as engaging in acts of paternalist domination, Fields is also complicit in veiled instances of corporeal patriarchal behavior. The contradiction – or, to err closer to outright indictment, hypocrisy – surfaces in that
Fields rails against the disenfranchisement that attends his bodily waste, even as he puts said body towards patriarchal ends. In this sense, his activity within the carnal, homosexual milieu to which he has gained access – a largely unfamiliar space, given his aforementioned heterosexual marriage – proves as problematic as his disconcertingly patriarchal discursive tendencies with partner Andy. The same tenuous line is tread between poignantly vying for inclusion within mainstream sexual and social discourse, and attempting to legitimate that inclusion using acts of domination.

Hal’s personal advert, one of his primary modes of contact with a frustratingly, dauntingly youthful sexual world, emphasizes his willingness to participate in said world. In fact it is bookended with unabashed declarations of sexual intent. It starts by announcing Hal as “an old senior guy, 78,” albeit “attractive and horny,” and concludes with “If you’re willing to try an older guy, let’s meet and see what happens.” Of course, none of the above is suggestive of patriarchal leanings; before Fields sets about vying for patriarchal reinsertion, he looks to about descry his exclusion. His plea for inclusion within the younger man’s sexual arena is, therefore, an indictment of a system that persistently shuns those perceived as elderly and, more broadly, non-normative.

Writer-director Mills seems at pains to foreground this callous, prohibitive social and sexual insistence on normativity, particularly given that it presents itself within a group – male homosexuals – traditionally considered excentric. This being the case, Fields’ introduction to the gay world is fraught with rejection and hurt. In the most visible instance, having returned home after a night at a gay bar, Fields calls Oliver to relate his attempts to access the homosexual world. He initially seems excited and proud of his efforts, declaring, “I’m not sorry I woke you!” He then goes on to quiz his son on
the music played at the bar, comically mimicking what Oliver suggests may be house music. Hal is anxious to scribble this down for future reference; he is desperate to learn the trappings of youthful behavior, “wonderfully loud music” being one such trapping.

Very quickly, Hal’s enthusiasm dwindles and vanishes, and Mills seems focused on overtly broaching perceived faults at the heart of gay culture, faults that find their very root in heterosexual masculinity. Oliver asks his father if he met anyone, to which Hal replies, “No… young gay men don’t go for older gay men.” In this, Mills’ script takes sociopolitical umbrage with male homosexual discourse. Immediately following the above line, the camera cuts to a shot of Hal in the gay bar. He sits alone amidst the crowded revelry of a much younger, male, homosexual group.

Two facets of this sequence are important. The first lies in Christopher Plummer’s performance – he self-consciously, agitatedly purses his lips, then shows a shadow of a wince before looking down at his drink. The second lies with said drink – an almost fluorescent pink beverage in a martini glass – that acts as a focal point for the movie’s prevalent concern with social performance. Hal’s drink is important in that it plays quite overtly into gay male stereotypes. It is self-consciously flamboyant, at odds with its owner. In this moment, situated in an avowedly gay, decidedly youthful space, Fields is at his most vulnerable. Its sexually unaccommodating atmosphere seems more ruthless than the cancer that ultimately kills him. In an earlier shot, he finds himself at the heart of the dance floor, surrounded by younger men, who laugh, court, and dance together. Fields dances alone. It is important to note, however, that Mills does not merely indict gay culture for its patriarchal, exclusionary denigration of the elderly. The montage of shots melds away from Hal’s experience to Oliver’s, with father assuring
son that “you have it easy.” The “you” refers directly to the individual at the other end of the receiver, but extends further to include the “young” as a whole, specifically young, white, heterosexual men, a population Oliver is incontrovertibly a member of.

So, the patriarchal, sexual-romantic world – gay and straight – is critiqued in Beginners, but what of Hal’s performance within it? Is he merely a victim of this world; is there a degree of complicity at stake; or, more troublingly, does Hal engage in his own acts of sexual patriarchy? The answer, contentious as it may be, seems to float between the latter two possibilities. Hal is undeniably ostracized by this system of sexual patriarchy, but also finds himself inexorably drawn to patriarchal behaviors, largely by way of riposte. It is a disheartening dyad. The audience is told very early in the movie that Hal no longer wishes to be “theoretically gay,” rather he wants “to do something about it.” This is succeeded by the aforementioned trip to the gay bar – his innocuous desire to become involved in sexual activity is summarily thwarted, in spite of his despairing performative acts. Ultimately, though, Hal achieves his goal through Andy – he makes contact with the youthful, cloistered sexual realm. The two frequently display physical affection towards one another. They dance, hug, and kiss, publicly and ardently, even when Hal is close to succumbing to cancer. In this sense, he triumphs over bodily waste; his person is privileged in spite of bodily decline.

As to the more erotic tenets of what Kepesh (of The Dying Animal) calls “the carnal aspect of the human comedy,” Mills’ screenplay and direction err on the side of allusion (Roth 36). The most sexually suggestive configuration in which Hal and Andy appear is, in actual fact, fully clothed, lying side-by-side on the elder’s living room floor. Their sexual relationship is verbally acknowledged on just two occasions. The
first is rather oblique and indecipherable. Hal asks that Oliver tell Andy of his father’s terminal prognosis. Instead of talking about cancer, Andy diverts the conversational tack to his homosexuality, awkwardly assuring Oliver that, as a straight man, he need not feel threatened. Oliver stumbles through his own verbal assurance – “Hey, I… I don’t have a problem with gay guys” – before Andy suggests that what he does, “most people wouldn’t even call it sex anyway.” This remark would seem to suggest that Andy merely provides oral and manual gratification, rather than penetrative sex. Inherent in this pronouncement is that Andy is a provider of sexual gratification. “What I do,” (my emphasis) is suggestive of one-way sexual traffic. Again, by this reading, Hal assumes the role of served, Andy as subservient, akin to Ravelstein and Nikki’s relationship. A greater theoretical leap might lead to the conclusion that Andy is sexual receiver, and, as such, does not consider his role as conducive to “real” sex. Kaja Silverman suggests that the recipient in gay anal sex can serve to activate a female, submissive subject position (350). This role of acted-upon, rather than enacting, may occupy a devalued status in Andy’s patriarch-seeking mindset.

In the second glimpse into their carnal interactions, Hal suggests Oliver take out a personal advert to improve his romantic situation. When Oliver is scornful of the idea, Hal reveals his own advert, with the justification that, “if Andy wasn’t going to be monogamous, why should I be?” The balance to Hal’s logic is hard to discredit. If his younger lover insists upon the right to polygamy, that sexual dividend should be available to his elder boyfriend. This is just the sort of age-related socio-sexual justice that the Kepeshes and Ravelstein consistently advocate. However, in his insistence on matching his partner’s promiscuity, rather than contesting it, Fields plays into a
competitive, faintly patriarchal sexual theatre of conduct. This move controverts a somewhat cathartic removal from heterosexual normativity; Hal and Andy’s relationship contains a great deal of play and nurture, worthy of utopic, egalitarian visions of human interactivity.\(^9\) In spite of this, Hal endorses a suspiciously patriarchal process of sexual competition; if Andy will brazenly speak of other boyfriends in front of his partner, said partner will use an advert – the avowedly commercial overtones of the mere phrase “personal advert” should be duly noted – to enter into an arena Kepesh (again in *The Dying Animal*) terms the “milk-and-honey society of free-market sex” (Roth 41). Kaja Silverman credits this rampant, aggressive competitiveness at the heart of capitalism as reliant upon and perpetuating a patriarchal dominant fiction (49). *The Dying Animal’s* Kepesh’s sexual terminology is summarily commoditizing, largely legitimating these claims. Fields, for his part, finds himself problematically associated with this system, one that has treated him so desperately, both as a middle-aged, closeted homosexual, and as an out, older homosexual.

Unlike Fields, *The Dying Animal’s* David Kepesh does little to obscure his relationship with this sexual free-market. This being the case, and in the confines of the current project, the question of valuing the elderly male body becomes insistent, particularly within a realm where flesh is apparently so blissfully, casually plied. It is important to note, from the outset, that Kepesh’s fleshly condition is utterly superior to that of Fields. Thus, predictably, Kepesh’s treatment of his flesh – both physically and

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\(^9\) Bearman asks that, having spurned sex as a conduit for men’s emotional faculties, they “play like [they] did as a boy, when no one had to teach [them] how. Play hard and play soft, inventing new ways to be in exuberant contact with everyone in your life” (Bearman 221). Hal and Andy often appear to subscribe to this model. The latter teases the former with real and imagined bugs; they host parties and dance; and they delight in fireworks (Andy is training to get his pyrotechnics license).
in his verbal musings – is entirely different from that of his contemporary elderly male.

As opposed to his oft-lavish descriptions of Castillo’s “good flesh,” Kepesh largely errs away from considering his own bodily condition (Roth 24). Ignorance, perhaps, is what serves to recommend the carnal, corporeal realm so strongly; it allows for an unremitting fetishization of Consuela’s form (her breasts in particular), which, in turn, negates the need for a contemplation of the relative deterioration of his own sixty-something figure. In fact, in one instance, Kepesh has the self-assurance to attest that he is “in good shape” (Roth 21). However, he immediately, tacitly qualifies this assertion, noting that he gets “tired after a while” (Roth 21). Broadly, he avoids either bemoaning or espousing his bodily capabilities, in what is a self-conscious gesture towards transcending cultural depictions of elderly bodies, as either subhuman or parahuman (Peberdy 151). Kepesh is neither physically incapacitated, nor physically remarkable. In fact, ironically, it is his body’s unremarkable quality that serves to distinguish it, and its subject. That he notes the difference in condition between he and Castillo’s forms is an uncomfortable admission, but “at least [he’s] not sitting on the sidelines” (Roth 34). At least he is still capable of participating in sexual sport; at least, at seventy by narrative’s end, and in spite of societal protestations, he is “still involved in the carnal aspect of the human comedy” (Roth 36). Acknowledging that “maybe it’s still a bit of an affront to people, to fail to abide by the old clock of life,” Kepesh nevertheless argues for change (Roth 37). His physical rebuttal of life’s old clock is a primary vehicle for this argument.

Regrettably – and, perhaps, unsurprisingly at this stage in the thesial process – this bid for inclusion is attended by the same patriarchal trappings as attend Kepesh’s
social conduct. With a typically Kepesh-ian hypocrisy, in one breath he lauds an unfeeling, capitalist-carnal milieu, and in another bemoans its inherently exclusionary practices. Drawing comparisons with Beginners, it will be instructive to turn to the latter strand of this hypocritical dyad first. Kepesh certainly displays the same disconcertion as Hal, albeit disconcertion rooted only in aged alterity, as opposed to Hal’s alterity with regards to age and sexuality. He consistently decries his position with respect to the patriarchal sex market, a position that is variously within, on the margins, or even outwith said market:

How do I capture Consuela? The thought of it is morally humiliating, yet there it is. I’m certainly not going to hold her by promising marriage, but how else can you hold a young woman at my age? … I am rapt, I am enthralled, and yet I am enthralled outside the frame. What is it that puts me outside? It is age. The wound of age. (Roth 40-41)

In this instance, clearly, Kepesh is external to systems of patriarchy; firstly, he initiated self-exile by destroying his marriage; secondly, he has been ejected based on his advancing years. Subsequent to the above excerpt, he sets up a foil who will inevitably steal Consuela, a young man who “will find her and take her away” (Roth 42). Kepesh fears this man so severely because it is the memory of himself at twenty-five, it is Kepesh “in the raw” (Roth 42). The irony is utterly dense; Kepesh plays to readers’

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10 Silverman is at pains to stress the significance of alterity in the maintenance of the Name-of-the-Father, patriarchal dominant fiction. Regarding the marginal homosexual subject, she writes: “The ego or moi is put in place through the subject’s identification with images which have, at the level of the psyche, only a “virtual” existence, and which are profoundly marked by alterity” (my emphasis) (Silverman 353).
sympathies, and subsequently pleads to be reinserted into that system that has treated
him so malevolently, a system of which he was once, of course, an integral component.

Kepesh’s vision of himself as external to systems of domination seems every bit
a part of his aforementioned process of intellectual manipulation. It stands in incandescent contrast to his prior assertion that Consuela allows him access to the great patriarchal game:

It’s like playing baseball with a bunch of twenty-year-olds. It isn’t that
you feel twenty because you’re playing with them. You note the
difference every second of the game. But at least you’re not sitting on the
sidelines. (Roth 34)

It is through their sexual encounters that Kepesh wreaks his most avowedly dominative strategies. It is through penetration that he aims to exert his most palpable, incontrovertible authority. Kepesh craves Castillo’s outright submission – it is the utopia, the fiction by which he might achieve subjective sustenance, by which he might gain full, unmitigated access to patriarchal dominion. bell hooks, in The Will to Change, aptly summarizes Kepesh’s desperate crusade, arguing that “for the patriarchal male, be
he straight or gay, addictive sexuality is fundamentally about the need to constantly affirm and reaffirm one’s selfhood” (82). His perpetual promiscuity serves as sporadic reaffirmation of self. This strategy, though, seems especially unsatisfying now that, as
an elderly man, he is all too easily marked as abject with respect to a normative ideal insistent on youth. As Kepesh begrudgingly, self-deprecatingly acknowledges, “the decomposing corpse is no longer quite so well concealed as it is with the men at my
gym who managed not to be born before Roosevelt took office” (Roth 138).
Consuela Castillo, however, still seems to harbor the promise of masculine redemption, moreso than did his other student-conquests. She seems to hearken back to a time more accommodating to patriarchy, a time in which men’s dominion was very much de rigueur. Indeed, Kepesh’s quest is wholly nostalgic; he figures neatly within what Anthony Rotundo terms a trans-historic “search to recover a lost sense of manliness” (2). “She truly was of a bygone era,” observes Kepesh with palpable delight, “a throwback to a more mannerly time” (Roth 11), and so he seduces her with his Old World, Euro-centric culture – Velazquez, Kafka, Beethoven and Chopin predominate – and attempts to ratify the submission in bed. Though he is pleased by her dutiful comportment in public, Kepesh needs a more animal, brutish dominance in private:

One night Consuela moved beyond the confines of her comforting, mannerly, habitual efficiency, progressed beyond the tutorial into the unknown adventure… I leaned into her face and rhythmically, without letup, I fucked her mouth… to shock her, I kept her fixed there, kept her steady by holding her hair, by turning a twist of hair in one hand and wrapping it round my fist like a thong, like a strap, like the reins that fasten to the bit of a bridle. (Roth 31)

The roughness is startling. Whilst Consuela is compliant in the broader sexual process, she is not compliant in Kepesh’s specific act of enforced fellatio. He reins her in, an animal to be broken in, to be brought under his control. With the dual strength of his body and his erection, he pins her and he fucks her mouth. At the very least, the episode, as related by Kepesh, alludes to rape. The line between forced and enforced is certainly tenuous, and he does not hesitate to flirt with that line, describing the process
as outright “domination” (Roth 31). This illicit, dubiously legal (not to mention moral) act of sexual control, and the subsequent retelling of the event, is a major locus of power. Kepesh succeeds in momentary dominance, as unadulterated as he experiences throughout their affair and throughout the text. This comfort is no more than a fleeting one, though.

This act of sexual oppression functions as a microcosm of a broader argument for the irrefutable commensurability of penis and phallus. Kepesh wields his penis-as-phallus in a bid to garner belief in this fiction’s irrevocability (Silverman 15-16). Kepesh’s individual faith bares itself with startling clarity in his conversations with his son, Kenny. In self-imposed exile from the nuclear family that promises a great deal of paternal power, when Kepesh does occasionally interact with Kenny, it provides a fleeting opportunity to reaffirm his ascendancy, to argue for the inherent potency of the father, of the phallus. Kenny engages in sexual transgressions of his own – specifically, extramarital transgressions. When he does, he returns to the father, largely using the elder Kepesh’s promiscuity to foil his own. His father’s response is typically staunch; he does not “care to feign the feminine need to which Kenny has no defense” (Roth 84). Instead, he demands that Kenny “confront [his] father as a reality. Confront at long last your father’s prick. This is the reality of a father” (Roth 86). The father’s reality finds its locus in the penis. Now that Kenny has come of age, has become a father himself, he is compelled to recognize the prick’s centrality, its inescapability, its supremacy. Kepesh privileges this by shoehorning Kenny’s dependence into the narrative. This instance disrupts Kepesh and Castillo’s largely linear affair, and the former’s largely linear narrative. As such, he cudgels his audience with his paternal inescapability.
Though the elder Kepesh’s language is founded in dated Freudian allusion – in one instance, he notes that, faced with an irresistible yearning for a father he despises, Kenny “cauterized the wound by turning himself into a prig” (Roth 80) – his post-coital fragility is inextricably rooted in the post-1960s masculinity crisis. For, as touched upon above, his triumphant, sexual dominance is short-lived. Faced with insurgency from the feminine counterpoint integral to the negative definition of manhood (i.e. “not womanhood”), Kepesh’s confidence wilts. Immediately following the aggressive, sadistically triumphant fellatio, Castillo punctures her captor’s authority, highlighting the ease with which she might decimate his masculinity. Perhaps more accurately, she shows that she is perfectly capable of decimating that masculinity, of decimating Kepesh’s penis (and, consequently, his phallus). He kneels astride her, semen carelessly dripping onto her much-lauded breasts (that biologized locus of her femininity).

Castillo looks up at him:

– we were looking each other cold in the eye, when, after swallowing hard, she snapped her teeth. Suddenly. Cruelly. At me. It wasn’t an act. It was instinctive. It was snapping her teeth by using the full force of the masticatory muscles to violently raise the lower jaw. It was as though

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11 In Taking Care of Men, Anthony McMahon warns against undue sympathy for men reeling in the aftermath of this crisis, writing that, “men can appear in a distinctly tragic light. In some cases the claim seems to be that men have a monopoly on suffering” (McMahon 199).

12 Michael S. Kimmel has an interesting take on the societal implications of the orgasm. He contends that, “as a culture, we abhor sex and are terrified by it because we believe that the iconoclastic anarchy of the orgasm threatens all forces of authority – political, social, economic, and familial” (Kimmel 269). Kepesh, in this moment, finds himself in a liminal space, betwixt phallic dominance and post-coital anarchy and vulnerability.
she were saying, That’s what I could have done, that’s what I wanted to
do, and that’s what I didn’t do. (Roth 31)

The bite haunts Kepesh. Her bite is her resistance; her bite represents that audacious
potential to undermine the utopic, outright patriarchal dominance that Kepesh so
relentlessly pursues. Indeed, it is a threat that plagues all normative subscribers to said
patriarchy, but one that corrodes Kepesh’s regressive quest all the more rampantly. He
recognizes the irony inherent in this moment, bemoaning the fact that he is to blame,
that he is “the author of her mastery” (Roth 32). The bite has such an astonishing,
corrosively powerful effect on Kepesh because it punctures the gender essentialism that
constitutes the rather flimsy core of his patriarchal mission. Castillo’s moment of
mutiny is incredibly timely, launched, as noted, as her would-be ruler kneels astride her,
sexually spent, dripping semen onto her breasts. The configuration starkly foils their
most prized physical assets – his consistently potent penis with her fetishized breasts.
The configuration also neatly visualizes the Kepesh-ian model of gender relations,
complete with male-conqueror and female-conquered.

Of course, it is this notion that undermines Kepesh’s insistence upon the
performativity of age – based on his avowedly non-normative, intellectual and sexual
vigor. This insistence upon an unmoving, reductive, ahistoric conception of the two
sexes undermines his ostensibly progressive social project. His language is consistently
couched in terms that serve to essentialize masculinity and femininity, in terms that
evade the very notion of social, gendered performance. As evidenced above, this dyadic
tendency is most starkly evident in Kepesh and Castillo’s sexual encounters. In coitus,
he does not merely betray his latent patriarchal tendencies, but he also betrays an
attendant, conglomerated view of sex and gender, as well as an insistence on sexual
difference. When he and Castillo first have sex – prior to the fellatio – his consideration
of her immediately brings this regressive ideology to the fore. “Yes I pulled back the
covers and she came into my bed,” says Kepesh, “Consuela Castillo, superclassically
the fertile female of our mammalian species” (Roth 28). Both superclassical and
mammalian, Castillo, or at least the Castillo Kepesh envisages throughout his narrative,
is the tidy embodiment of femininity. She is a “fertile female,” ripe for impregnation,
ripe for patriarchal insemination and incorporation into a paternal social model. Though
Kepesh is self-confessedly revolted by the prospect of further child rearing, his potency
insists that he is entirely equipped to fulfill that role, should he choose to do so. And,
whereas Hal Fields’ brand of paternalism is sporadically concerned with nurture,
Kepesh’s is rooted in intellectual and sexual despotism – it is rooted in his supposedly
inexorable “savage urge” (Roth 16). Akin with his contemporary, Ravelstein, this urge
is attended by little in the way of apologetics. In Kepesh’s words, “there’s no way of
getting around the act of domination that is going on, that must go on, that lets them
[women] think, it’s just what I imagined sex to be. It is brutish – this guy’s not a brute
but he’s on to the brutishness” (Roth 31). He even goes so far as to suggest that brutish
behavior does not render the man a brute – it is something natural, part of the man’s
(every man’s) wiring, his genetic makeup. It is entirely feasible for a man to live an
intellectually impressive, socially engaging public life and, simultaneously, to brutally

13 See, for instance, Michael S. Kimmel’s “Fuel for Fantasy,” on masculine ideology,
lust and repression.
14 Indeed, if this urge is as inherent as Kepesh imagines it to be, what would be the point
of apologetics?
dominate a partner sexually, without the latter sulllying the former. That this is seemingly possible is confirmed in Kepesh himself.

All too often, Kepesh trumpets the liberalism of the sexual revolution as a veil to obscure these aggressive, patriarchal emphases at the heart of his plea for a revised understanding of what it is to be an elderly male. He attempts to obfuscate his incessantly oppressive sexual conduct, envisaging it as liberated rather than regressive. Indeed, Kepesh is explicitly an arbiter of the 1960s’ “long-delayed explosion” (Roth 51-52) – the sexual revolution. He claims to revere its advocates, particularly those he taught, the “Gutter Girls,” from whom he imbibed that decade’s permissive socio-sexual politics (Roth 50). Of Janie Wyatt, their leader, and her adherents, Kepesh is effusive:

Having those girls in class was my education: seeing how they got themselves up, watching them jettison their manners and uncover their crudeness… observing the swagger and appetite and excitement of the Janies who were without the biological terror of the erection, without the fear of the phallic transformation of the man. (Roth 56-57)

The girls, as Kepesh has it, turn educators, schooling their professor in the art of promiscuity, narcotic, musical and sexual. He is an eager student, it seems, full of admiration for his tutors, their pedagogy, and, most of all, their syllabus. Indeed, that Kepesh admits to being taught by women – not to mention that they are younger women – is a stark contrast to his one-way didactical intercourse with Castillo. However, in parsing out his favored facets of this particular education, the seeming humility and gender deference ultimately flounders. What, in fact, he enjoys most about this
particular revolutionary troupe is their preference for sexual rather than socio-political liberation. This is indemnified in his omnipresent conflation of phallus and penis. The erection is an insurmountable locus of power. That these young women do not fear it may seem refreshing, but it does not discount his insistence on the penis’s ability to dominate, its ability to dominate his infantilized teachers. Rather, the 1960s, according to Kepesh, seem merely to have allowed for a more readily accessible sexual experience; patriarchy remains an integral facet of heterosexual relations. Feminism is largely invisible. His relationship with Consuela provides this assurance, as does his supplementary sexual ballast, Carolyn.

Indeed, Kepesh enjoys just one facet of the 1960s – the increased ease with which a man might obtain casual sexual gratification. As to the movement’s female population, he specifically singles them out as “a generation of astonishing fellators” (Roth 9); the same pause and praise are not given to the social and economic gains achieved. Symbolically, this celebration of the proliferation of oral sex – along with a concurrent silence regarding socio-economic progress – maps neatly onto Kepesh’s overall patriarchal project. He uses his rarely flaccid penis to silence women; he ecstatically accepts their sexual liberation and emphatically halts their ability to vie for broader empowerment. By some miraculous physical and rhetorical trickery, Kepesh manages to manipulate feminism towards his own patriarchal ends.15

15 In his discussion of feminist Object Relations Theory – a school of thought he dismisses as a “relatively harmless” critique of patriarchy – Anthony McMahon cites a similarly patriarchal bastardization of feminist politics, noting that men are often willing to reap the increased availability of emotional attention, whilst remaining unwilling to sacrifice political and economic dominance (202). This process and Kepesh’s bespoke ideology are, in actual fact, as patriarchal as those ideologies feminism sought to trounce.
Partly by virtue of his homosexuality and largely by virtue of his latent hypocrisy, Ravelstein’s sexual ideology is less simply parsed out than Kepesh’s. His primary carnal relationship, however, is straightforward, in that it is broadly suggestive of a heavily entrenched patriarchy (that same patriarchy that so overwhelms his social and pedagogical interactions). Ravelstein’s position with regards to his lover, Nikki, is unassailably paternal in hue; indeed, narrator Chick explicitly designates Nikki as “Ravelstein’s Chinese son” (Bellow 177). As per this model of interaction, Ravelstein coddles his lover, indulging his whims, even sending him to school – an extravagant culinary institution in Switzerland. In his most lavish fatherly gesture, he buys Nikki a custom BMW: “Ravelstein of course wanted to divert Nikki from the medical facts [of his HIV] with this tremendous toy” (Bellow 78). Nikki becomes a child, protected from the bodily degeneration of a parent, obscured from reality. His juvenile behavior extends further; the text’s opening scene betrays his position as Ravelstein’s intellectual and social deferent. Housed in a “coveted suite” of Paris’ Hotel Crillon, Ravelstein eats brioches and wild strawberries, “stoking his system and nourishing his ideas” (Bellow 3-5). Contrarily, Nikki remains in bed – a pseudo-adolescent late sleeper – on account of the fact that he was up most of the night watching Singaporean kung fu films. So that Nikki’s “silken slumber” is not interrupted, the waiter closes the bedroom door, physically demarcating and distancing the thirty-year-old, fanciful boy from the elderly, ideologically robust men (Bellow 5).

It is important to explicitly pose and answer the question of what it is that Nikki offers Ravelstein, in return for extravagant suites and automobiles. Does the former merely serve to affirm the latter’s sense of patriarchal self? Is he an object of display,
affirming this self to onlookers (and readers)? Or, does he offer a carnal component to the relationship; does he offer sexual confirmation of Ravelstein’s dominance, similar to Kepesh and Castillo in *The Dying Animal*? Answering this question can be confounding. For the most part, Chick’s descriptions of Ravelstein’s sexual endeavors are relatively oblique; indeed, Ravelstein himself is atypically coy in this regard. Here, parallels with Hal and Andy’s relationship in *Beginners* become self-evident. The homosexual carnal act, in both texts, seems to be treated with a deliberate imprecision. In fact, in one instance, Ravelstein denies that he and Nikki’s relationship is in the least bit carnal, saying, “there was no intimacy between them, ‘More father and son’” (Bellow 69). This reaffirms Ravelstein’s paternalist emphasis; concurrently, though, it would seem to quash the notion that sex is wielded as a patriarchal weapon. It erodes the contention that this specific elderly male figure uses his belligerently potent penis to argue for his reinsertion into a normative hegemony. Indeed, at times, Ravelstein insists upon a sexual restraint largely at odds with his own past practices. Chick paraphrases his great leader’s late-twentieth-century philosophy thus: “Nothing in the sexual line is prohibited anymore, but the challenge is to hold your own against the sexual anarchy” (Bellow 143). This restraint is promoted in spite of Ravelstein’s own sexual conduct, which is described alternately as fatally “irregular” and “reckless” (Bellow 160, 189). The latter of these labels betrays Ravelstein’s laissez-faire approach to coitus. In this, he diverges most sharply from the methodical and compulsive Kepesh. For Ravelstein, sex is less a tool by which to leverage access to patriarchal theatres of conduct – as it is in the case of Kepesh – and more a mere trapping of these theatres. Nikki functions as an artifact, in much the same way as do Ravelstein’s opulent costumes – he is “a
handsome, smooth-skinned, black-haired, Oriental, graceful, boyish man,” fit to adorn the cultural colossus whose authority he defers to (Bellow 68). His sexual function appears cursory; he periodically sates a libido, keeping Ravelstein’s biologically erratic bodily vessel adequately serviced. When Chick asks him about his unflinching urges, “about the persistence of sexual feelings” (Bellow 137), Ravelstein confesses that it is just handjobs now that he is “fatally polluted” (Bellow 138). The sexual capital runs, again, in only one direction.

All of the elderly male figures at play in the current project seek to assert their sexual and intellectual authority to a greater or lesser extent. However, fascinatingly, each is utterly divergent in his approach to the body from which he attempts to exert said authority. Ravelstein’s relationship between subject and body is notable for the disregard shown by the former for the latter. Ideologically unapologetic, he is similarly unapologetic when it comes to his vast, unwieldy frame. Where Kepesh – of the Dying Animal – is dismally and reluctantly aware of his bodily decline, Ravelstein is careless. In fact, he seems to revel in his increasingly inescapable mortality; it grants intellectual license, adding yet more gravitas to his lofty ideas. Ravelstein treats his body “like a vehicle – a motorbike that he raced at top speed along the rim of the Grand Canyon” (Bellow 10). His impending systematic failure – in this moment not yet diagnosed, merely ominous – has a direct impact on his ideological economy. The imminent scarcity of his polemics increases their value – every word becomes sacred. Ravelstein is acutely mindful of this fact. On his deathbed, his teachings become all the more lofty,

Clothing so impressive, “young blacks would stop him in the street to ask about his suit or his topcoat, his fedora. They were familiar with high fashion. They talked to him about Ferre, Lanvin, about his Jermyn Street shirter maker… his heart warmed toward such connoisseurs – lovers of elegance” (Bellow 46-47).
all the more messianic. He moves beyond the trifles of Plato and Thucydides and “was full of Scripture now. He talked about religion and the difficult project of being a man in the fullest sense, of becoming man and nothing but man” (Bellow 178). This is, of course, Ravelstein’s great concern: becoming a man, becoming a patriarch. The two are synonymous. In death, and in Chick’s subsequent text, he arguably transcends mortal manhood. Importantly, too, his death is a borne of his sexual activity, is borne of his immovable potency. The exact origin of his HIV/AIDS is never broached. As to the disease’s implications, Ravelstein is no less than a martyr; Chick is “inclined to think he had Homeric ideas of being cut down early” (Bellow 64). Through his unflinching libido and ideology, he becomes the model against which his mentee obsessively compares himself. His ideas are canonized, his stature – as an intellectually and sexually potent elderly male – calcified: “You don’t easily give up a creature like Ravelstein to death” (Bellow 233).

Where Ravelstein scorns the limitations of his flesh, the Kepesh in Coixet’s *Elegy* is as bold of body as he is of mind. He repeatedly parades his flesh for Consuela and for viewers. Ben Kingsley, for his part, is quite trim. His musculature is well developed, suggesting the gym-time explicitly noted in the movie’s source text. Importantly, in the context of their first sexual encounter, Kepesh achieves a state of undress before his younger lover Consuela does. He is brash in his nudity, asking that she recognize his elderly body, visually and sexually. His movements are significant,

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17 Indeed, both Ravelstein and Fields figure as martyrs for elderly, gay male potency. Both are doomed to die from the inceptions of their respective narratives. The contrast with the Kepeshes’ rebuttal of mortality – they who are “overtaken” by their young lovers – is intriguing (Roth 148). Mills and Bellow seem little able to sustain these figures’ elderly, queer potency, preferring to kill them off in their subjective primes.
too. He fixes her against the wall, and then draws her towards his exposed flesh. The control is his, in spite of (or more aptly because of) his bare, elderly body. The following scene sees Kepesh discuss these carnal happenings with his elderly male companion, George O’Hearn. They appear to agree that Kepesh is merely an intriguing, novel experience for Castillo, in his words the “old guy who gave her some culture along the way.” The exchange concludes on an altogether different footing. O’Hearn tells Kepesh to be thankful for such a “one shot encounter;” Kepesh wistfully responds that it was no such thing, to which O’Hearn replies – visibly astounded – “she came back for more?” The subsequent scene, effectively bookending the elderly male exchange of O’Hearn and Kepesh with the latter’s bare torso, features the climax of the opening sexual encounter between Castillo and the aging protagonist. Mid and post-coitus, Kepesh’s sexual techniques betray his broader patriarchal quest. Elegy’s cinematography – coordinated by Jean-Claude Larrieu – insists on their importance. During their sex, Kepesh’s hands – prominent throughout the picture – dominate the frame’s lower half, serving as a foundation of sorts. He is predominately on top of his young lover, using his hands to fix her arm, to pin her, to announce his corporeal authority. Where it is much less startlingly explicit than its text-source (the aforementioned fellatio), the scene, nevertheless, visibly foregrounds Kepesh’s insistence on bodily control. As argued in chapter one, the dialogue that serves as epilogue to this physical exchange is yet more telling; having exerted his continued physical cogency, Kepesh claims this human artwork as his own.

Unsurprisingly, this sexual strategy is as fraught with difficulty and insecurity as it is in The Dying Animal. Intercourse with Consuela serves not merely as a site for the
reclamation of patriarchal power, but, simultaneously, as a pyre with which to mourn the loss of said power. In Kepesh’s words: “When you make love to a woman, you get revenge for all the things that defeated you in life.” That he persistently wields his penis as a patriarchal weapon is difficult to refute; that this weapon proves every bit a double-edged sword is similarly inescapable. In another post-coital scene, for instance, Castillo probes Kepesh on his prior sexual endeavors; in his answers there is a troubled mix of bravado and vulnerability. Asked whether he has had more or less than fifty sexual partners, Kepesh responds, derisorily, with “More!” The retort, verbal and facial, is adolescent in its ostentation. Kingsley’s Kepesh unmistakably, self-consciously revels in his promiscuous ascendency. This feeling is short-lived, as Kepesh reflexively turns the inquiry on Castillo, who gamely begins to count up from “cinquenta” (fifty). In fact, she has had just five sexual partners – “five boyfriends” – but this does little to quell Kepesh’s anxiety. The following scene sees him quiz her further. In the kitchen, Castillo pours a glass of wine whilst Kepesh stands shirtless, visibly, self-consciously tensing his abdominal muscles. He asks if her past lovers were young, “younger than me,” to which she replies, “of course they were younger, they were boys.” She then touches his bare chest, a gesture intent on placating her elderly lover, intent on restoring masculine certitude in spite of his calendar years. Kepesh’s response – “boys, sure…” – and his subsequent narration, reveal that he remains extraordinarily vexed: “In that moment my terrible jealousy was born.”

In his incessant quest for domination – no more incandescent than in his sexual conduct – Kepesh merely invites increased anxiety. This is the dramatic irony at the heart of his patriarchal project. Where Ravelstein largely transcends the sexual realm,
Kepesh is utterly infatuated by it, and, more importantly, is utterly plagued by it. By way of reprieve, he would do well to heed bell hooks’ caution, that “being the boss does not require any man to be emotionally healthy, able to give and receive love” (65). It is in his insistence on penis-as-phallus, in his sexual patriarchy, that Kepesh suffers his severest psychic injury; it is surely for this reason that Kepesh – of both *Elegy* and *The Dying Animal* – suffers greater torment than the less sexually active, eponymous Ravelstein and Fields of *Beginners*.

Significantly, however, Coixet offers Kepesh more by way of reprieve than he is afforded in the movie’s source text. Carolyn – Kepesh’s ex-student and middle-aged, casual sexual partner – features more heavily in *Elegy* than she does in *The Dying Animal*, for instance. In the latter, she serves as a reminder of Kepesh’s halcyon days, long since past; she is a biological point of contact with his erotic baptism in the sixties. She and her fellow campus revolutionaries stewarded their professor from marital destitution to coital enlightenment. Indeed, in *The Dying Animal*, these remembrances – personified in a fatter, older Carolyn – are undoubtedly tinged by a pained nostalgia. In *Elegy*, in the stead of this emotional strain, Carolyn provides a great deal more succor. She acts as a conciliatory foil for Kepesh, largely endorsing his prized patriarchal dividend, namely that elapsed time need not bring about the demise of a man’s sex life as swiftly as it might a woman’s. Carolyn is envisaged by Kepesh as an age contemporary, in spite of being an alumna; indeed, he homogenizes their ages, regardless of Ben Kingsley’s sixteen-year seniority relative to Patricia Clarkson. Speaking after George O’Hearn’s funeral, in a rare moment of what appears to be remorse, he suggests that he and Carolyn have “been acting like teenagers all our life.”
That it is “life” as opposed to “lives” suggests that the two are on the same chronological footing. Kepesh then goes on to critique Carolyn’s choices, a past abortion in particular; little incision or specificity is offered with regard to his own decisions. Her subsequent disappearance from the picture’s narrative, combined with Kepesh’s redemption (discussed at greater length below), serve to further insist upon the primacy of the elderly male. Perhaps this victory explains Kepesh’s narration of: “Thank god for Carolyn… Carolyn is my only point of contact with the self-confident man I used to be.” In fact, it seems that, aside from merely reminding Kepesh of his past ascendancy, she serves to spur the patriarchal resurgence he so pines for. In this respect, Carolyn features as yet another female figure exploited in a large-scale bid for dominance.

The picture’s conclusion essentially, uneasily justifies that which came before. Kepesh’s rampantly patriarchal behavior is rewarded with his fleshly spoils, as subservient as he imagined. Where The Dying Animal leaves its audience alongside its protagonist in an anxious limbo, Elegy’s final scene is disconcerting in its simplicity. Nicholas Meyer’s screenplay finds Kepesh at Castillo’s bedside, post-mastectomy. She is, at last, physically and emotionally dependent upon him; he fulfills the role of caregiver, subverting normative perceptions of the invalid elderly. Here, her body is ravaged by disease, and he is asked to nurture and provide. Her breast cancer – that unequivocally female sickness – grants Kepesh the outright ascendancy he has long yearned for. She submits to it, willingly. He even manages to school her once more, likening her condition to Hippolyta’s, who was “no slouch.” Castillo is placated – his affections are at once teacherly and fatherly. At the scene’s and picture’s very
conclusion, Consuela meekly tells Kepesh that she will miss him, prompting him to approach her, shadowing her in almost total darkness. He tells her, simply, “I’m here,” before kissing her from above, all across her face. So, by the close of Coixet’s work, Kepesh the elderly male looms large. And yet, most disconcertingly of all, there is definite utility in his doing so – Castillo is placated, she is in need of his vaguely ominous, paternal overtures. Kepesh is relied upon physically, emotionally and intellectually. He is indispensable. Gone is the pathetic, somewhat sadistic glee with which Kepesh greets Consuela’s plea for help in *The Dying Animal*. Nor is there the unrepentant yet unabashed browbeating of Ravelstein. At *Elegy*’s close, Meyer’s screenplay and Coixet’s blocking of the two players serve to mitigate the insidious, dominating gestures of earlier in the text, and insist upon Kepesh’s legitimacy as patriarch. Of course, this comes at the expense of Castillo, who is thoroughly beaten.

The conflation of penis and phallus, and that combination’s implication in patriarchal practices of domination, seem stubbornly present in the activity of these elderly male figures. In spite of suggestions that the aged might undermine patriarchy from its perimeters, in these instances, the remit of patriarchy succeeds in sullying the behavior of those marginal subjects it denounces. In a certain respect, there is, of course, a radical strain to these ideologues. Broadly, albeit in different ways, each vies for a societal recognition of age-as-performed. Their obdurate resistance to pervasive notions regarding the elderly male as socially and physically burdensome is fundamentally laudable. Regrettably, however, this liberal, radical streak is undermined

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by consistently essentialized perceptions of gender, and inescapably patriarchal bodily conduct.
CONCLUSION

The slow but largely inevitable marginalization that attends a subject’s entry into that vast, ill-defined conglomerate known as “the elderly” would seem to be a particular point of concern in rapidly aging societies, such as those in the twenty-first century, Western world. Patriarchy, of course, thrives on negative definition, on the subjugation of the abject, the marginal. It depends upon these processes. So, to see the proportion of society bearing the brunt of this domination increase steadily is, surely, an alarming trend. If ever a historical moment presented itself as ripe for a pro-elderly social revolution, the early twenty-first century, a period that will serve to usher the baby-boomer generation into a pensionable age, would surely be it. It may even seem incumbent upon the members of that generation – such as those elderly males examined above – to reclaim that subjective legitimacy previously relinquished. Further, this salvage attempt would appear especially apt for, and likely from, those who stand to lose most. This process, though, is all too easily sullied by power. That is, those who formerly operated within concentrations of social dominance are all too likely to vie for a reinsertion into those concentrations. Simply, aging patriarchs are likely to vie for the patriarchy being stripped from them, as illustrated throughout the precedent pages.

But this is not the only potentiality offered by an aging society. In fact, certain critical and sociological accounts tout this vast demographic change as a potential social remedy, recommending the elderly as salves for the wound of patriarchy. bell hooks is one such optimist. Countering the behaviors of the Kepeshes, Ravelstein and Fields, she insists that:
Many men who have retired from jobs, particularly men over sixty in our culture, often feel that aging allows them to break free of the patriarchy. With time on their hands, they are often compelled by extreme loneliness, alienation, a crisis of meaning, or other circumstances, to develop emotional selves. They are the elders who can speak to younger generations of men, debunking the patriarchal myth of work; those voices need to be heard. (hooks 105)

Combining hooks’ vision with Alice S. Rossi’s insistence on the “dramatic blurring of sex and gender differences in the second half of life,” serves to open up a vast, revelatory prospect for the elderly (144). As per this model, the elderly, and predominantly the elderly male, can serve to call patriarchy’s great gender fiction into further, and more public disrepute. In so doing, this increasingly visible swathe of society might, potentially, serve as effectors of radical social upheaval.

Of course, currently at the very least, this is all utopic speculation. With regards to the elderly figures operating in *The Dying Animal*, *Ravelstein*, *Elegy*, and *Beginners* there is little to suggest a will to erode existing gender norms. In fact, all the more disconcertingly, these white, male figures are seen to use gender essentialist strategies as crutches by which to better spur their reclamation of patriarchal recognition. In this lies the great irony of each project. Arguing for a performative understanding of age, and, subsequently, for an improved valuation of the elderly male, they simultaneously seek a limited and denigrated feminine subject. This irony is compounded by the notion that they do so in an effort to prove their own subjective viability. Ultimately,
Ravelstein, the Kepeshes, and Fields’ bodily and intellectual endeavors are wholly, confoundingly regressive.
Works Cited


