"Transitory Indignities" Trauma and the Commuter Train in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*

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In the Nunnally Johnson-directed film version of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), the protagonist, Tom Rath, bemusedly remarks on the sublime absurdity of his postwar existence saying, "One day a man's catching the 8:26, and then suddenly he's killing people. Then a few weeks later he's catching the 8:26 again." Rath, who killed at least seventeen men in the war, including—in a terrible accident—his best friend (he suspects he killed more, but cannot be sure), is genuinely perplexed by the way things are. It is clear, too, that all these years after the war he is not handling reintegration into life at home well. He struggles constantly with vivid daydreams of his war experiences. At work, others hesitate to approach him because he appears preoccupied; unbeknownst to others he is, in fact, distracted by recurring wartime memories. At home in the evenings, he is distant; he drinks too much; he looks off aimlessly as he performs rote physical activities like drying the dishes; or, he stares at the television screen in the dark after he has shooed his children off to sleep.

In the film, Gregory Peck plays Rath as a steady family man—anxious about things he is supposed to be anxious about, sure—but, one suspects there is more, that his monotone speech and measured movements bely the reality that a kaleidoscope of trauma-related distractions swirls constantly through his mind. He obviously suffers from what medical experts of the time called "war-related neurosis," or, what we might call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) today.

About 1950s fiction and trauma—in the decade's "suspiciously impeccable" short stories in particular—Elizabeth Wheeler writes:

> Like the decade itself, fifties short stories have a smooth and polished surface belying their stressful underpinnings. The smoothness of fifties discourse reflects the psychic numbing that often accompanies post-traumatic stress disorder. We have to read underneath the surface to find postwar shock in structures of flashback and denial (48).

Wheeler, here, has two specific stories in mind, Hisaye Yamamoto's "Wilshire Bus" (1950) and John Cheever's "The Country Husband" (1954), when she writes:

> These stories do not primarily concern themselves with the trauma of World War II or the shock of postwar transition. Rather, they encapsulate the trauma into flashbacks, displace its truths from the content into the narrative structure, and use emotional containment to express uncontrollable emotions (48).

Wheeler's observations, and her language for them, help us better understand the purpose behind the flashbacks and blank stares which are used to great effect in both the novel and film versions of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

Even though Wheeler does not include a close reading of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in her chapter on fifties fiction, it is clear that Tom Rath suffers greatly in this way; that his symptomatic psychic numbness is obvious throughout both the novel and the film versions of the work; and, that a peek beneath his own "smooth and polished"-appearing surface reveals multitudes about him and his fellow, similarly dapper-appearing, daily commuters. Further, this paper illustrates that Rath encounters triggers everywhere, and especially in the three spaces he spends the great majority of his time: home with his wife and children, riding the train to and

from work, and at the office. This paper, where appropriate, identifies a number of daily occurrences that trigger Rath's reveries.

One obvious, but for the most part overlooked, byproduct of Rath's trauma is his drinking. Writing for *The New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell, though he stops short of really investigating alcohol use in the novel, does admit that "by our standards he [Tom Rath] and almost everyone else in the novel look like alcoholics" (Gladwell). The argument could be further made that Rath drinks to suppress intrusive thoughts or visions and that he does so often enough that it puts a strain on things at home. For example, one night after missing his train, he passes time drinking martinis in a bar. An act as common and simple as being late for his ride home gives Rath the excuse, time, and space to indulge in drinking to excess. The next day, wretchedly hungover, he apologizes to his wife, Betsy. She implores him, "Please don't drink anymore . . . I don't like to see you like this. It makes me feel awful" (Wilson 260). He apologizes and says he will stop, but drinks again the next day. At one point early in the novel he soberly admonishes himself to "stop wishing away time" or, as we might put it today, to "be present." His struggle to "stop wishing away time" is constant in both the novel and the film. This is to recognize that Rath might indeed have a drinking problem, which would greatly exacerbate his PTSD symptoms and lead to potentially destructive or self-sabotaging behavior, even though this paper does not treat his drinking thoroughly. More, it serves as an example that something—in this case his unaddressed war trauma—constantly interferes with Rath's life and that drinking is just one of the coping mechanisms he uses; something this paper does investigate.

Gladwell suggests that, in the end, Wilson's novel recognizes that "the past—in all but the worst of cases—sooner or later fades away." And, it is true that studies have shown that as

World War II and Korean War veterans age, their trauma symptoms tended to dissipate (Fontana and Rosenheck; Hunt and Robbins). However, Rath suffered a particularly horrible war experience and, although the phrase was not in use at the time, he displays clear signs of battle-induced PTSD. His inability to stop wishing away time (to stop drinking; to stop daydreaming; to be present at work or at home with Betsy and his children) suggests he is deeply conflicted. He appears to be self-medicating with alcohol and otherwise indulging in expansive and sophisticated daydreams in order to cope with the tremendous guilt he feels about his actions in the war. His station in life as a decently-paid, white-collar commuter with leisure opportunities presents him with constant and enduring opportunities for reflection and what mental health professionals might now recognize as "maladaptive daydreams" induced by war trauma which, although not officially a diagnosis in the DSM-V, are characterized by intense episodes, often triggered by life events, that can occupy as much as 50% (more in very extreme cases) of a person's awake time.

A note about trains in these works. Commuter trains, known familiarly only by their departure times (e.g. the 8:26, the 5:48, the 7:14, the 12:05, etc.), provided spaces for writers to reveal the innerworkings of their characters and/or serve as symbols/images of postwar American life. As such, this essay investigates the ways a number of artists used the commuter train as a space to explore/explain/make sense of postwar life in America. In particular, the paper illustrates the ways the commuter train served as a space for writers to explore the powerful daydreams and pitfalls of traumatized men like Tom Rath.

The primary texts examined here have been alluded to already; they are Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and Nunnally Johnson's film adaptation (1956) of it. While those texts will receive the closest analysis throughout, others, including works by John

Cheever, Richard Yates, Lorraine Hansberry, and more, will supplement the essay's main thesis. Namely, that since the postwar era was a time of exponential economic growth, rapid and confusing societal change, and unprecedented inner-regional movement, the commuter lifestyle and the commuter train were obvious sources and loci for their work. The "train," this paper will illustrate, meant different things to different Americans and those disparities say much about a citizenry still recoiling from the brutalities of the Second World War; that was timorous over war on the Korean Peninsula; and, growing increasingly anxious about containing the creeping threat of Communism.

A body of literature on *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* exists and much of the work on the novel, the film, or both treat the literal flannel suit as a text, reading it as a symbol of postwar American (white male) identity and conformity; Steven Cohan calls it a uniform. And, the suit *does* serve as a pseudo-uniform for men home from the war and (re)joining the workforce and recommitting to family life. Regarding both the novel and film versions, critics focus on Tom Rath's journey toward reintegration where he is "rescued—re-civilized so to speak—by the imposed constraint of domestic life" as indicated by his supposed "revitalized marriage" and life with Betsy (O'Brien 67). Both the novel and the film end with Rath telling Betsy about Maria and his son by her, the establishment (with Betsy's blessing) of a $100/month payment for the boy, and Tom and Betsy preparing to take a trip together, by car, to Vermont. But, by focusing on his archetypal journey toward re-civilization, readers miss the obvious markers that Rath is not well, is frequently triggered by even the slightest things, and that it is unlikely—despite cheery endings—that he will truly be rescued from his trauma.

Consider that the film's penultimate scene includes a line, spoken by Judge Bernstein just after he has agreed to quietly arrange for the Raths to send money to Maria and her son in Italy.

Quite pleased with Tom and Betsy and with the way things turned out for them, he says, "Mr. Rath, it must have been on such a day as this that the poet was moved to sing 'God's in his heaven / all's right with the world!'" The line, and the handshake between the two men just after its utterance, signaled to contemporary viewers that severe trauma and its attendant guilts and anxieties could be gotten over, and that marriages could—in fact, *must only*—survive through rededication to societal and familial norms. Readers of the novel, on the other hand, will recognize the line—originally from Robert Browning's "Song from Pippa Passes" (1841)—as something inscribed on Tom's grandmother's garden bench which he first noticed as a child. It is a phrase he recalls frequently throughout the novel, perhaps most notably when, after killing a young German soldier and on the run with his friend, Hank, the two find themselves hunkering for cover in a crater formed by a crashed plane with a dead man's putrid corpse. "God's in his heaven / all's right with the world!" Rath suddenly exclaims to Hank before "collapsing into the mud at the bottom of the hole" and giving himself over "to almost maniacal laughter." His behavior prompts Hank to ask him, "You nuts?" (76). This is evidence of one of at least two psychic breaks Rath experienced during the war.

With this in mind, this paper contextualizes Rath's war experiences and subsequent trauma using postwar reports on war-related neurosis. It finds that the idleness and general indignity (e.g. rushing, crowding, delays) of the daily commute made the commuter train and its apparatuses enticing vehicles for writers of the 1950s and early 1960s looking to portray war-related trauma in the hundreds of thousands of civilian soldiers trying to reintegrate into life at home after serving overseas.

The Commute: “These Transitory Indignities”

In the United States, the contemporary idea of commuter trains as speeding machines hustling office workers from the suburbs into the business centers of American cities and back again each day matured during the 1950s at just the same time life in the suburbs became the norm for more and more people. The commuter phenomenon was quite something different than anything that had come before it and writers and filmmakers of the postwar era, recognizing this, eagerly used it to investigate American notions of social and economic progress, inner-regional mobility, and personal and national trauma.

There is no mistaking that trains have long played a role in American history and lore; so much so, that at times the railroads and the trains which ride upon them have been central to the idea of what America itself *is*. Leo Marx, in his seminal work, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), observed that the American nation literally developed as the railroads did. And, in reviewing John Stilgoe’s book *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* for the *New York Review of Books* (1984), he wrote: “Of all the great modern innovations, the railroad may well be the one to which historians have accorded the most dramatic and far-reaching influence.” In a 1991 piece for *Railroad History*, Ian Marshall echoed Marx by writing, “Positive depictions of the railroad in American Literature have always been tied in with celebrations of progress and the association of the railroad with the national identity” (Marshall 38).

A few examples from the era will illustrate what the train symbolized for different men in the postwar years. There is the typical romantic notion of the train as a means of escape as seen in the Richard Yates novel *Revolutionary Road* (1961). Set in 1955, Frank Wheeler—an Army veteran and reluctant daily commuter between his home in western Connecticut and Manhattan—recalls secretly planning as a young boy to escape his friendless existence by

“riding the rails to the West Coast” (17). His plan is shot down by a classmate who ridicules the idea and tells young Frank, “Jeez, you kill me Wheeler. How far do you think *you’d* get on a freight train? . . . You know why everyone thinks you’re a jerk? Because you’re a jerk, that’s why” (18). Frank, as an adult does end up riding the train every day, but these rides are no adventures through the “hobo jungles” of America; they only shuttle Frank to work and back home to the “prison” he and his once-Bohemian wife, April, have created for themselves in the suburbs.

Related, during the postwar years there was the notion that the train represented class mobility. For example, Walter Young—a poor black man working as a chauffeur for a wealthy white man—in the Daniel Petrie-directed film adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) pleads with his mother, Lena (Mama Younger), after she refuses to give him a portion of her husband’s insurance money to invest in a liquor store Walter believed would set him on a path to economic independence. “Why didn’t you let me catch my train?” He demands of her. “I don’t think it’s going to ever come again!” Contrast this with the wealthy executive Mr. Blake in an episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* titled “The Five-Forty-Eight” (1961)—adapted from John Cheever’s same-titled *New Yorker* story from April 1954—where, after ducking into a “Gentlemen Only” bar to avoid a woman he wronged in the past, Blake orders a martini and waits her out. He laments that he’ll miss the express train home to Shady Hill, but relents, saying, “OK, so I miss it. I’ll take the 5:48.” The barman replies, “There’s always another train, sir.” The difference here is clear: for certain men only, there’s always another train.

A sketch, drawn by Carl Rose and accompanying an October 6, 1957 *New York Times* piece by James Kelly entitled “Strange Interlude on the 5:28,” shows the profile of a dogged commuter in two panels atop one another. In the top panel an essentially featureless man (though obviously a white male), dressed in business attire and carrying his brief case and the

morning paper, dashes anxiously across a white background as if chased by the face of a clock, its hour and minute hands menacing his backside, in hopes of making his morning train into the city. The bottom panel depicts the exact opposite: the same man, still holding his brief case and now the evening edition, dashes anxiously in the opposite direction across a black background—the clock face with aggressive hands again appearing as if it is about to strike—in hopes of making his train home to the suburbs.

This juxtaposition gives Kelly's opening salvo life where he writes, "The secret endurance of the commuters (those of the morning pink cheeks, the evening ashen face) is being tested these days by a growing chronicle of misery." Then, after listing a number of inconveniences facing commuters (e.g. old, overcrowded rail cars, malfunctioning climate controls, fare increases, and delays upon delays) Kelly continues, "Nobody can say for sure how much damage is done to delicate nervous systems by these transitory indignities" (Kelly). The piece, good humored at its core, maintains the bite of social satire to be sure, but Kelly's peculiar line about "delicate nervous systems" and "these transitory indignities" is, whether intentional or not, quite loaded. The jab at "delicate nervous systems," as Kelly delivers it, is likely intended for the slightly nervous wives waiting to hear from delayed or overnighting husbands. The transitory indignities of constantly hustling, paying rising fares, and eating cold suppers at home might seem small in the grand scheme, but, taken together, the daily piling on of small things coupled with the "delicate nervous systems"—potentially a euphemism for traumatized war veterans—the daily commute becomes something much more sinister and uncomfortable. A far cry from the pristinely clean train cars, with their tidy riders and their neatly attired conductors, presented in the film version of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, true commuter cars were much grimier and this added to the discomfort. By 1955, New York's four principal railroads carried 175,000

commuters daily (Dean). For reference, in "The Five-Forty-Eight" John Cheever twice describes the interior of commuter cars. First:

> The coach was old and smelled oddly like a bomb shelter in which whole families had spent the night. The light that spread from the ceiling down onto their heads and shoulders was dim. The filth on the window glass was streaked with rain from some other journey, and clouds of rank pipe and cigarette smoke had begun to rise from behind each newspaper.

Later, about a different car, he wrote "The car smelled like some dismal classroom. The passengers seemed asleep and apart, and Blake felt that he might never escape the smell of heat and wet clothing and the dimness of the light."

And, while the railroads boasted an impressive 90% on-time record, the volume of train traffic was so great that there were frequent hang-ups and bang-ups and the overall prospect of commuting in and out of the city was so bad for some people that in December 1954 the Board at New Haven, CT solicited ideas from commuters on how to make the experience better. Anecdotes like the following were increasingly commonplace:

> Jammed with standees in every car [the train] crawled into Grand Central thirty-three minutes late yesterday. The train was overfull after leaving South Norwalk, Fairfield County. An extra car was added at Stamford, where more than 200 persons boarded the train to make it even more crowded than before . . . "I think it was only the innate gentility and good manners of most those aboard that prevented an open riot," one commuter reported (Kaplan).

About that 90% on-time record; for the most part officials kept quiet regarding it. Asked why, an executive for one commuter line said: "People just wouldn't believe us" (Dean). Commuting by

rail was potentially dangerous, as well. A number of accidents on trains serving New York City and its surrounds in the early 1950s (including two in 1950 alone, Rockville Centre and Kew Gardens) killed nearly two hundred passengers and injured hundreds more.

"The Most Significant Fact About Me Is": Tom Rath's War Trauma

There are myriad differences—though the idea here is not to point them all out—between Sloan Wilson's novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Nunnally Johnson's film with the same title. There is, however, one very important distinction worth identifying here at the outset. It is that readers learn very early in the novel that Tom Rath has killed seventeen men:

> It had been during the war, of course. He had been a paratrooper. Lots of other people had killed more men than he had. Lots of bomber crews and artillerymen had, but, of course, they never really knew it. Lots of infantrymen and lots of paratroopers had, and most of them knew it. Plenty of men had been dropped behind enemy lines, as Tom had been on five different occasions, and they had to do some of their killing silently, with blackjacks and knives" (12).

Rath confesses the same in the film, but not until nearly the very end of its runtime. This means the reader of the novel operates at all times from a position of knowing exactly how burdensome Tom's war experiences were to him while the viewer of the film, on the other hand, is only afforded glimpses of his difficult time overseas here and there before this truth bursts forth during a culminating fight with Betsy. It is upon learning of his burden that viewers must think back to Rath's flashbacks and all the time he spent staring blankly—involved, no doubt, in some deeply personal psychic remembrance—while on screen to really understand his character.

Rath points out that bomber crews and artillerymen certainly killed more than seventeen people, and that, historically, is an accurate assessment. Rath and his paratroopers killing with rifles or "blackjacks and knives" were not afforded the luxury of distance. In fact, of all Rath's killing experiences, the ones he obsesses over are a young German soldier whose throat he slashed for an overcoat and his friend Hank, whom he killed by prematurely throwing a hand grenade into his defensive position. Both occurred at close range. Both were intensely personal acts.

In both the film and the novel, Rath, while interviewing for a job with United Broadcasting Corporation, is asked to spend one hour writing about the most significant fact about himself. In the novel, he thinks a while before he begins to write a short biography by listing his vitals (wife, number of kids, weight) and his time spent in the Army (4.5 years, basically the entire Second World War). He includes the "statistic" that he killed seventeen men. He switches focus from that to snark and writes that he is nothing but a "cheap cynic." He hates the assignment, clearly, and ultimately just provides a tidy summary of his desire for the job. In the film however, when Rath is alone and struggling to write, he lights a cigarette and looks out the window. He sees an airplane gliding quietly over Manhattan. What follows is an extended daydream of an airdrop into action in the Pacific (a place called Karkow according to the novel) and the moment he accidentally killed his best friend—including the total mental breakdown wherein he refuses to accept that Hank is dead as he carries the man's obliterated body in search of a "real doctor." We see by the clock on the wall that Rath spends fifteen of his sixty allotted minutes in this distracted state.

Rath's total psychic break after killing Hank was his second. And, like the first, it had real-life analogs. For instance, at Dunkirk (1940) where hundreds of thousands of French and British

troops were trapped and besieged by machine gun fire on the beaches, it was reported that, owing to the "long nightmare of exhaustion, hunger, and fear":

> One man stripped to his underclothes and proclaimed himself Mahatma Gandhi. Another lay flat in the sand for hours not stirring. An officer cringed in the dunes clutching a champagne cork, a second lay paralysed [*sic*] with terror, his hands hovering over an imaginary basket of eggs. A soldier ran through the sand crying "Lord have mercy on us, Christ have mercy on us!" One group of men roamed around clutching Teddy Bears, another quietly feasted with imaginary knives and forks (Shephard 169-170).

Rath's Karkow reverie is one of three war-related flashbacks presented to viewers in the first hour of the film. This includes two episodes on an hour-and-a-half train ride into the city. The first, about the German soldier, was triggered by the coat a young man wore. The second is an extended remembrance of his time in Rome with Maria—whom he fell in love with before being shipped to the Pacific. There is nothing in the film to suggest that these sorts of daydreams are foreign to Rath. In fact, the way they come on and how easily his gives his full attention over to them suggests they happen frequently.

In a paper titled "Traumatic War Neuroses Five Years Later" (1951) Samuel Futterman and Eugene Pumpian-Mindlin write, regarding symptoms of neuroses, that:

> The primary symptoms shown by our patients almost without exception include the following: intense anxiety, recurrent battle dreams, startle reaction to sudden or loud noises, tension, depression, guilt, and a tendency to sudden explosive aggressive reactions (401).

Rath's symptoms are evident as early as the first scene of Wilson's novel which observes a large crack in the wall caused by Rath when, upon learning that Betsy spent money frivolously on a "cut glass vase" at the same time he was already anxious about paying $70 for a new suit for work, he "picked up the vase and heaved it against the wall." Wilson writes, "The heavy glass shattered, the plaster cracked, and two laths behind it broke." The resulting question-mark shaped crack "remained as a perpetual reminder of Betsy's moment of extravagance, Tom's moment of violence, and their inability either to fix the walls properly or to pay to have them fixed" (1-2). Later, after dealing with the shady caretaker trying to steal his grandmother's home and property, Edward, Rath admits to Betsy, "I get angry too easily . . . Tonight I had a real impulse to kill Edward. Often I feel as though I'd like to kill Ogden, at the office." Then, alluding to the men—including Hank—he killed in the war, he says, "It's strange that I am permitted to kill only strangers and friends" (125).

Futterman and Pumpian-Mindlin continue:

> The symptoms presented must be thought of in terms of abortive self-cure through a reliving of the original danger in small doses in an effort gradually to master the threat and ultimately remove the conflict . . . In those cases that go on to develop the full-blown picture, which we are discussing here, the trauma combines with the elements already present within the patient.

This finding applies particularly well to Rath who, as we have seen, is continually triggered into daydreams by what seem like innocuous occurrences in both the novel and the film. For instance, at one point in the film, Rath orders his children to bed. As they hurry off, his daughter, commenting on the cowboy program they are watching on television, says "Wow, that's seven dead already!" Other times she asks about her ill sister in a way that forces Rath to tell her "no,

she’s not dead” mimicking his insistences about Hank, that “no, he’s not dead.” As a war veteran Rath already likely “imagines that no civilian, certainly no woman or child, can comprehend his confrontation with evil and death” (Wheeler 52). When his daughter excites over the body count on television Rath turns and stares blankly at the screen which, it appears, he really does not see at all.

One other note about Rath’s seventeen combat kills. Futterman and Pumpian-Mindlin found a “second hitherto unnoted factor” among their patients, namely:

> That of guilt around killing, injuring, or striking a defenseless enemy. As long as the killing of enemy soldiers was done during active combat when it was a question of either “kill or be killed” there was relatively little guilt created. However, if enemy soldiers or noncombatants were shot when they were unarmed, or unprepared for the attack, or while in a seemingly defenseless position, great guilt was engendered (402).

In the novel, Rath does remember a third person he killed during the war. Unable to bring himself to enter his family home one afternoon, Rath wanders over to a stand of pine trees and, again, stares off. In a pique of anxiety over his ability to continue providing for his family should he lose his job, he contemplates finding other work, maybe rejoining the Army, and even killing himself (there is a history of suicide in his family and it is suggested his own father died that way). Triggered thusly, he turns further inward wondering if he should/could remain optimistic in the face of his challenges. Without warning,

> He wondered suddenly whether the young German in the leather jacket who had stood negligently holding his rifle and coughing had been an optimist . . . And how about the other men he had killed? How about the man who had run

> zigzagging across the beach, while Tom moved the machine gun up behind him, the bullets kicking up the sand behind him, until the man had sagged with the blood pouring out of his mouth like a long tongue? . . . He felt someone pulling at his trouser leg and looked down. Janey [his daughter] was there, telling him that his lunch was ready. She had a worried expression on her face (163-164).

Rath had surprised the young German soldier and, out of the necessity to avoid detection, killed him in a very quiet, very personal way by plunging “the knife repeatedly into his throat, ramming it home with all his strength until he almost severed the head from the body” (74). This killing, and his subsequent killing of Hank at Karkow, fit the profile of guilt-inducing killings outlined by Futterman and Pumpian-Midlin. Rath might wonder “what about” the man running on the beach, but because of the physical and emotional distance between the two men and the circumstances (they were engaged in combat), this episode does not needle at him the way the other specifically mentioned killings do. It is possible that of the seventeen men Rath killed, just the young German soldier and Hank’s killings haunt him in this way. As Rath himself thinks to himself about the others, “Such things were just part of the war” (12).

Those other fifteen men, it might be the case as well, Rath had permission to kill; he was fighting in a war. He invoked this “permission” to kill friends and strangers during the war when speaking to Betsy about Edward. In the cases of the young German soldier and Hank, it appears, “the military code and superimposed group conscience” which gave that permission “was quickly dissipated and replaced by the usual civilian morals and conscience, which places limits on such impulses” (Futterman 402-403). In these circumstances “conflict and guilt” would be “quickly generated, and difficult to master” (403).

Early in the film version of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Rath is shown, riding the 8:26 into the city. He is beside his frequent seatmate, Bill, who is reading the paper. The two speak briefly about a potential job opportunity for Rath. Just then Rath looks over to his left and observes a young man across the aisle from him. His gaze lingers on the young man's fur collar and close haircut. In an instant, the film's music turns dark, and Rath is transported back to 1943 and the time he snuck up behind and killed the young German soldier for his overcoat. Bill quipping about the Brooklyn Dodgers being world champions is the only thing that snaps Rath back to reality. But, caught up in the reverie, Rath ignores Bill's comments and segues into a second, more vivid and extended flashback about Maria and his time with her Rome. The two daydreams together occupy twenty minutes of screen time.

Rath's Maria reverie ends with him being shipped to Karkow with his unit—of which he is the commander. Before he leaves, however, he takes a day trip with Maria in an Army Jeep through the bombed-out ruins of Rome in order to have a picnic. Peck plays this sequence unlike any other in the movie. His character is loose and in love and, it appears, rather optimistic. This is a far cry from the sullen fatalism he has displayed so far on screen. At one point he pulls over and stops the jeep. After instructing Maria to drive, he swaps seats with her. The rain pours and the jeep leaks. Still, he takes out his mandolin and, sitting beside Maria as she drives, he sings a raucous rendition of "The Ramblin' Wreck from Georgia Tech" as they both laugh. Later, with Rath sitting beside Betsy in the family car, after having sewed up the Italy business with Judge Bernstein and ready to embark on a trip to Vermont, the image so mirrors the jeep scene with Maria, that given Rath's history, it seems entirely impossible that the experience will not trigger him further. In fact, it is more likely he is thinking about Maria or some other war-related memory as he sits beside Betsy than not.

Conclusion: The 8:26

There is a remarkable line in Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) that gets to the heart of matters here. Translated, it reads: "Terror can be endured so long as a man simply ducks; but it kills, if a man thinks about it" (104). Rath, back in the United States, lives Remarque's truism; the terror of his wartime experience threatens always to destroy him. Only, he cannot simply duck it, as prescribed (the irony of the quote is that, in reality, no one truly can). As much as it might appear he can successfully avoid confronting his war experiences, they continue to intrude upon his life. Everyday occurrences force Rath to relive his life's most intense experiences. While this is most explicitly expressed in the film as we first see Rath riding the 8:26 from Westport, CT to Manhattan's Grand Central Station, evidence of this phenomenon exists throughout.

For men like Tom Rath in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Frank Wheeler in *Revolutionary Road*, Francis Weed in "The Country Husband" or the millions of others whom these characters represented, the postwar-world was full of "transitory indignities" liable at any time to trigger vivid and intrusive daydreams. A commuter from, say Westport, CT or Ossining, NY, spent an average of two to three hours on the train each day Monday through Friday. That is a lot of time to think and to worry and to daydream. Given that these men, deeply affected by their wartime experiences, were thrust back into a world their pre-war selves could not recognize and were expected to fulfill familial and societal functions as if nothing had changed, it is no wonder characters like Rath struggled as they did. Writing on the issue of "soul repair" after war Rita Nakashimi Brock and Gabriella Lettini summarize it like this:

> Those who survive . . . are expected to switch almost seamlessly from a combat zone to life back at home, to shift from the urgencies and traumas of war to

> ordinary civilian life. They step onto a plane or ship transport from war, receive an exit interview, spend a few hours or days in transit, and step into the waiting arms of their families. There is boot camp to prepare for war, but there is no boot camp to reintegrate veterans to civilian life. They were taught reflexive firing, but not how to recover a shredded moral identity (42).

In short, "One day a man's catching the 8:26, and then suddenly he's killing people. Then a few weeks later he's catching the 8:26 again."

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