

## Part I

### Before 1980

In 1998, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* was published in a fiftieth anniversary edition with a new introduction by the author. With its naturalistic perspective, psychological complexity, and jolting explorations of sexuality and violence, a novel that had marked the debut of a major writer working in the tradition of Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and Richard Wright, yet who possessed a distinctly contemporary political and aesthetic sensibility, had reached the half-century mark. For many, this big, brash, first novel of a draftee recounting the experience of the war in the South Pacific ushered in a new, energetic era of American fiction. As the critic for the *New York Times* put it, the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* was "a triumph of realism [that] ... bears witness to a new and significant talent among American novelists" (Dempsey). The specific "triumph of realism" that the reviewer may have been referring to exists in such passages as these, describing the thoughts of a soldier on patrol:

Croft watched them indifferently. He too had been bothered by Gallagher's speech. He had never forgotten the Japanese charge across the river, and occasionally he would dream of a great wave of water about to fall on him while he lay helpless beneath it. He never connected the dream to the night attack, he intuitively felt the dream signified some weakness in himself. Gallagher had disturbed him, and he thought consciously of his own death for a moment. That's a damn fool thing to kick around in your head, he said to himself. (444)

Croft goes on to remark that he "always saw order in death," and that he does not share "the particular blend of pessimism and fatalism" that

affect some of the other men, but now, facing the fact that “the wheels might be grinding for him,” he is uncertain about the logic of destiny (444–5). The combination of realized setting, colloquialism, philosophical speculation, dream-thought and conscious reflection marks a characteristic style and voice that would reach their acme in one of the premier works of the “new journalism,” Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night* (1968), which recounts the 1967 anti-Vietnam War march on the Pentagon and bears the subtitle of “History as a Novel/The Novel

as History.” Mailer would go on to establish a career known more for its performativity, macho egoism, and spectacular lapses in taste and judgment than for its literary successes. But his first big novel served as an announcement of the importance of understanding the rapidly changing relation between public and private life, and between the political and the personal under the shadow of a second world war whose aftermath would severely test liberal notions about human identity, the social order, and the power of language to represent or distort modern experience.

Only a matter of months later, quietly and without fanfare, a slim novel about wartime and postwar Germany was written by an American ambulance services volunteer that offered a different kind of announcement. In *The Cannibal* (1949), published by the avant-garde New Directions, John Hawkes provided a hellish view of violence and the disintegration of identity in a complex prose style vacillating between the stark clarity of the intrusive nightmare and the aesthetics of a displaced vision that can be regarded as an avatar of postmodern experimentalism (see box). In stark contrast to Mailer’s existential realism, Hawkes’s novel offered an intense,

### Postmodernism

Having introduced the contested and ubiquitous term that is often used to characterize everything from contemporary literary works to architecture and gourmet food, I advise the reader that it is used here and throughout this discussion of contemporary American fiction in a very general sense, as indicative of fiction that foregrounds the significance-bearing qualities of language, the processes of construction or writing, the interplay of author, text, and reader, and intertextuality, or both the horizontal and vertical relation to other fictions and discourses. This sobering description does little to indicate the interest of postmodern fiction in parody and play, nor its historical reach, as Robert Alter has suggested, back to *Don Quixote*. Indeed, within postmodernism, what is not postmodern? This is a not an entirely trivial question that gives rise to postmodernism’s relevance as a discursive or historical marker. But for much more, see Hassan, McHale, and Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

microscopic scrutiny of the war's excesses that limned the capacity of language to articulate the horrors of war and occupation. Reminiscent of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936) and its surrealist exploration of the eccentric lives of Parisian wanderers, *The Cannibal* traces the progress of an assemblage of iconoclasts traversing the landscape of occupied Germany after World War II. The novel is organized as a series of allegorical tableaux populated by characters such as Madame Snow, the fallen aristocrat; the Census Taker; or Zizendorf, the "cannibal" of the novel's title who becomes the fascistic new leader of the locals amidst the chaos and unrelieved violence of the occupied zone. For Hawkes, who would later famously declare that he began writing with the "assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme" (Enck, 149), the description of a house in *The Cannibal* becomes a metaphor of the postwar world, burdened by a brutal, repressive past that can only be escaped or erased via further acts of violence:

The house where the two sisters lived was like an old trunk covered with cracked sharkskin, heavier on top than on the bottom, sealed with iron cornices and covered with shining fins. It was like the curving dolphin's back: fat, wrinkled, hung dry above small swells and waxed bottles; hanging from a thick spike, all foam and wind gone, over many brass catches and rusty studs out in the sunshine. As a figure that breathed immense quantities of air, that shook itself in the wind flinging water down into the streets, as a figure that cracked open and drank in all of a day's sunshine in one breath, it was more selfish than an old General, more secret than a nun, more monstrous than the fattest shark. (61)

Regarding this image of domestic space as nightmarish and cannibalistic, we can gauge the contrast between Mailer's journalistic realism combined with the probing of individual psychologies and Hawkes's linguistic experimentalism which dissolves the border between waking and dreaming. Two novels of war; two authors who can be seen to represent in split view but a few of the diverse possibilities of contemporary American writing from its onset: the discursive sweep of *The Naked and the Dead*, with its exposure of private life in the theater of war, compared to *The Cannibal's* piercing explorations of the cultural unconscious in a language pastiche replete with irony and hyperbolic excess. From the beginning, contemporary American fiction as a body

of work produced after World War II was remarkable for its heterogeneity, both its recapitulation of and its break from what had come before, its multifaceted negotiation of the relation between the social and imaginary orders.<sup>1</sup>

There were other vital, young writers whose energies bespoke the diversity and inventiveness of contemporary postwar writing emerging in the relatively brief period that followed World War II and preceded the Korean War which began in June, 1950 when the North Korean army crossed the 38th parallel, thus initiating the “Cold War” whose effects continue to be felt in contemporary American writing. During the months that extended between the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Cannibal*, a little-known young writer from Milledgeville, Georgia began publishing the chapters of a novel that would become *Wise Blood* (1952) in such venues as *Mademoiselle* and *Partisan Review*, respectively, amongst the premier “women’s” and progressive literary magazines of the day. In what continues to be one of the best essays written on Flannery O’Connor, John Hawkes compares the work of his literary fellow-traveler to that of Nathanael West, whose iconoclastic *The Day of the Locust* (1939) offers an infamous satirical portrait of Hollywood greed and the cult of personality: “I would propose that West and Flannery O’Connor are very nearly alone today in their pure creation of ‘aesthetic authority,’ and ... that they are very nearly alone in their employment of the devil’s voice as vehicle for their satire or for what we may call their true (or accurate) vision of our godless actuality” (“Flannery O’Connor’s Devil,” 397). O’Connor, a devout, if somewhat unorthodox Catholic her entire, short life – she died at the age of 39 after a long struggle with lupus – would disagree with the notion that she employs “the devil’s voice” in her fiction. Debating with Hawkes in their correspondence of several years’ duration about matters of style, voice, and philosophy, O’Connor wrote that “[m]ore than in the Devil I am interested in the indication of Grace, the moment when Grace has been offered and accepted. ... These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances” (*Habit of Being*, 367–8).

In *Wise Blood*, the protagonist, Hazel Motes, an itinerant preacher and founder of the “church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified” (55), deliberately blinds himself in an act of inverse revelation in a city where only false prophets walk the streets and false gods are worshiped as mundane signs and material objects are taken for wonders. Perhaps

Hazel Motes is a true prophet whose radical wake-up call can be delivered only through masochistic violence in a materialistic universe filled with the distractions and junk of contemporary culture that Haze encounters in the city: “When he got to Taulkinham, as soon as he stepped off the train, he began to see signs and lights. PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, TAXI, HOTEL, CANDY. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically” (29). Or, as his name might indicate, perhaps he is merely a random mote floating chaotically through the “haze” of time and space. The conclusion is indeterminate in a novel where we last view the protagonist through the shut eyes of his landlady who “felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn’t begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness, until he was [a] pin point of light” (232). As O’Connor consistently argued in her essays and letters, the manifestation of the sacred in the “Christ-haunted,” unredeemed landscape of the contemporary South (rapidly becoming the high-tech “New South,” even in O’Connor’s lifetime) will inevitably appear to be ambiguously scandalous, but as several of her critics have suggested, what might seem the idiosyncratic fiction of a Catholic writer taking place in a regionalist setting clearly has broader implications for contemporary writing emerging in the midst of the Manichaean struggles of the Cold War and the encroachments of secularism and what social theorist Neil Postman terms “technocratic capitalism” (41).<sup>2</sup> Like speaking with the devil’s voice, this is not a formulation that O’Connor would encourage, yet the strains of her writing as it envisions the spiritual progress of a radical anti-hero across a bifurcated landscape littered with the signs of materialist excess and the ruins of “nature” (both human and botanical) mark her own work as prophetic of much that is to come.

In the same year of *The Cannibal*’s publication, James Baldwin, a Harlem-born expatriate who had just begun to garner attention for his commentaries on race and African American history in high-profile venues such as the *Nation*, the *New Leader*, and *Commentary*, published “Everybody’s Protest Novel” in the Moroccan *Zero* and, in the United States, in the *Partisan Review*, the leading progressive journal of the day. In revolt against his literary mentor, Richard Wright, Baldwin critiques both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) as works that – despite their liberal or revolutionary intentions – reinforce black stereotypes and remain trapped in the

“sunlit prison of the American dream” (582) because they view race relations in terms of the “theological terror” (581) of the Manichaean battle between good and evil, oppressor and oppressed. In questioning this logic, Baldwin says of *Native Son*, which continues to be widely regarded as a novel that reveals and protests against the violence and brutality of black–white relations, that

[b]elow the surface of this novel there lies ... a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. Bigger [the protagonist of *Native Son* who accidentally murders a white woman and, thus, whose fate is sealed] is Uncle Tom’s descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle. (584)

At this moment, Baldwin is about to embark on his own career as a novelist with the publication of the autobiographical *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), and the controversial *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), with its portrayal of a protagonist exploring the alterities of his own sexual identity. In this essay, he enunciated many of the terms of the debate that will take place in the proliferation of multiethnic literatures in the United States following World War II about the nature of racial identity and ethnicity. From the beginning of his career, Baldwin thus served as a crucial, if controversial source for those writers invested in portraying the role of race in the formation of the social order, the status of race as “prison” or source of empowerment, and the complicated relationship between racial identity and sexuality.

The candor of Baldwin’s critique of how race is portrayed, even in the fiction of those he admires, will be matched by the candor of his portrayals of protagonists struggling with identity in the novels to come. Indeed, the early post-war writing of Mailer, Hawkes, O’Connor, and Baldwin can be viewed as significantly building upon the “open” tradition of American literature – from Walt Whitman’s homoerotic poetry of the open road and the underclass to Kathy Acker’s blasphemous satires on Western religious values and sexual norms – which continues to challenge the decorousness of the literary and to open up new terrain for imaginative exploration. One charismatic exemplar of this tendency, supposedly written in three weeks in 1951 (apocryphally, on rolls of toilet paper, but actually on sheets of tracing paper

taped together into a 120-foot roll) is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The novel, not published until 1957, would quickly attain cult status as an avatar of "Beat" literature which celebrates openness, jazz-like improvisation, spontaneity, and alternative lifestyles. The story of the peripatetic journey of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty through an American landscape populated by the alienated and the dispossessed captures both Whitman's sense of the "open road" – the endless possibilities of American life – and that of "the other America" characterized by Michael Harrington in his 1962 book of that title about the lives of impoverished citizens and migrant workers. Kerouac's celebration of jazz in the novel through the cadences of a distinctive prose style that would become the hallmark of "Beat" literature is evident in Sal's description of a group of young musicians:

The leader was a slender, drooping, curly-haired, pursy-mouthed tenor-man, thin of shoulder, draped loose in a sport shirt, cool in the warm night, self-indulgence written in his eyes ... Then there was Prez, a husky, handsome blond like a freckled boxer, meticulously wrapped inside his sharkskin plaid suit with the long drape and the collar falling back and the tie undone for exact sharpness and casualness, sweating and hitching up his horn and writhing into it, and a tone just like Lester Young himself. ... The third sax was an alto, eighteen-year-old cool, contemplative Charlie-Parker-type Negro ... He raised his horn and blew into it quietly and thoughtfully and elicited birdlike phrases and architectural Miles Davis logics. These were the children of the great bop innovators. (239)

The legend of Kerouac's writing the novel "on the roll," while untrue, serves as an apt metaphor for both the style and subject of *On the Road*, where drifting and wandering, "phrasing" and style are elevated into an ethos for navigating life's perils and contingencies.

In the same year that Kerouac was writing *On the Road*, another novel that extended the open tradition, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, garnered immediate attention upon its publication and has remained, along with Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), a source of continuous controversy. Like *On the Road*, *Catcher* is comparable to those American novels, particularly its nineteenth-century predecessor, *Huckleberry Finn*, that promote forms of vernacular candor and challenge middle-class pieties and decorum. Indeed, so controversial is the speech of the novel's 17-year-old narrator, Holden Caulfield, that it became "the

most frequently banned book in schools between 1966 and 1975” (Sova, 70). Holden’s remarkable opening lines set the tone for his diatribe against education, adulthood, and American success:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. (1)

In telling his tale of rebellion, Holden’s liberal use of words such as “phony,” “lousy,” “crap,” “goddam,” and, famously, “fug” for the four-letter word which could not be printed at the time, offers only the most superficial explanation for the novel’s banning from provincial high-school classrooms (while, contradictorily, being embraced as a “classic” taught to generations of American high-school students). Instead, it is Holden’s charismatic and unrelenting attack on authority, rules of all kinds, and adult hypocrisy that doubtless landed the novel in hot water with local school boards. Authored by the most reclusive writer in the annals of contemporary American literature, Salinger’s novel effectively gave voice to the emerging youth culture of the postwar generation – perhaps, according to the retrospective view of *Washington Post* book critic Jonathan Yardley, in ways not always for the best:

a case can be made that “The Catcher in the Rye” created adolescence as we now know it ... [Salinger] established whining rebellion as essential to adolescence and it has remained such ever since. It was a short leap indeed from “The Catcher in the Rye” to “The Blackboard Jungle” to “Rebel Without a Cause” to Valley Girls to the multibillion-dollar industry that adolescent angst is today.

Whether one regards *Catcher* as the contemporary equivalent to *Huckleberry Finn* or as a galling foreshadowing of Generation X, the influence of Salinger’s sole novel on the readership of contemporary American fiction is undeniable.

If Kerouac and Salinger defined a new generation of readers of contemporary American fiction, with the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952, Ralph Ellison, along with Baldwin, set forth many of the terms of writing about race and identity for the generations of writers to come who are part of the explosion of ethnic literatures in the



United States from the 1960s to the present. *Invisible Man* is many things. It is a *Bildungsroman* set along classical lines that traces the progress of its protagonist from his childhood and education in the rural South to city-life in Harlem. Equally, it is an anti-*Bildungsroman* that traces this same progress as a movement toward invisibility and a return to the womb/underground of an urban basement. In the novel's ambiguous conclusion, the novel's unnamed central figure can be viewed as a social lackey-cum-violent revolutionary awaiting rebirth; or, as a subversive con man who resists the dominance of white, capitalist society by maintaining his invisibility while, literally, stealing power from "the man"; or, as a messianic visionary who will usher in a new era of racial relations amidst the social strife depicted in the race riot that leads to the protagonist's flight underground. *Invisible Man* is, also, an encyclopedic narrative that, in part, stages the narrator's quest for place and identity as pastiche that conjoins ancestral literary works and genres, from the Bible and African American folklore to *Moby-Dick*, the social protest novel, and the symbolic narratives of Proust or Mann.

The question of what constitutes race and racial identity central to *Invisible Man* – Ellison's only published novel, despite the fact that he continued writing until his death in 1994 – is raised through a series of transformative episodes described in metaphorical detail by the novel's unnamed narrator, the "invisible man" of the title. These include a "battle royal" where, seeking a college scholarship, he speaks before a group of white businessmen, but only after having endured a humiliating boxing match with other black aspirants for the prize of a scholarship; a dreamlike journey in which he visits the symbolically named Trueblood, a black man who has committed incest with his daughter and who is viewed by a racist white community as the embodiment of black degradation; his employment in a paint factory making a white paint that attains its "purity" via the admixture of a drop of black color; his involvement with "the Brotherhood," a political organization that resembles the Black Muslim movement of the 1930s and 1940s in Harlem and Detroit; and his subsequent flight into the dark basement of a building during a race riot where he remains, a dark figure rendered invisible by the blinding white light he steals from the power company. Ellison's rich, analogical novel, with its reflexive portrayal of the relation between black and white on multiple levels, from the linguistic to the political, represents a defining

moment in the progression of a racial discourse. Toni Morrison describes the history of this discourse in American writing as moving “from its simplistic, though menacing, purposes of establishing hierarchic difference, to its surrogate properties as self-reflexive meditations on the loss of difference, to its lush and fully blossomed existence in the rhetoric of dread and desire” (*Playing in the Dark*, 64). Ellison’s novel, in effect, touches upon all of the stages of this discursive progression in the narrative of a man who is invisible because he is a black man whose “color” and identity are both defined by and vanish before the white light of the dominant culture of postwar America.

Mailer, Hawkes, O’Connor, Baldwin, Kerouac, Salinger, Ellison: all surfaced as distinctive new voices in the period between the conclusion of World War II and the commencement of a ceasefire on the Korean Peninsula in July, 1953. Along with the likes of Mary McCarthy, Chester Himes, and Eudora Welty, who began publishing by the mid-1940s and whose status as major authors began to be established in the postwar decades, and others such as Vladimir Nabokov, Saul Bellow, and William Burroughs, who gained visibility as major new “American” writers during the 1950s (Bellow was born and raised in Canada, and Nabokov is a Russian who had begun his career with the publication of *Mashen’ka* [*Mary*] in 1926), these authors charted the course for the proliferate American fiction of the last half of the century. The small number of women in this list is notable: one literary historian has remarked that “according to Elaine Showalter, [the decade of the 1950s] was literally the low point for American women writers in this century. For these were the years when medical and media Freudians emphasized ‘the tragedy of American women’ and ‘domestic experts’ urged their ‘return to the kitchens and the nurseries.’ In college texts and anthologies of American literature, Showalter adds, ‘women averaged only about 3 per cent of the writers represented’” (Siegel, 37). Equally notable is the fact that both Grace Paley and Tillie Olson, who both started publishing their writing only after many years of raising children and laboring in the workforce, and who would become catalysts for the explosion of women’s writing and the feminist movement in the 1960s, were establishing the foundations for their powerful renditions of women’s lives and speech during this decade. Jean Stafford, one of the writers of the 1940s and 1950s who Showalter effectively recovers in *A Jury of Her Peers*, an essential history of women’s writing in America, published an important novel,

*The Catherine Wheel*, in 1952, and her *Collected Stories* in 1969. Working across the 1950s and into the 1960s on the novel she began in 1945 – perhaps the most undeservedly ignored major work in the annals of modern and contemporary American fiction – there is Marguerite Young, whose poetic and labyrinthine *Miss MacIntosh, My Darling* (1965) meticulously records the dreams, perceptions, relationships, and affective engagements of its remarkable title character as an intersubjective agent in a cast of dozens. The emerging work in progress of these frequently overlooked writers is essential to the founding of contemporary American writing.

An “era” does not have an actual beginning or end: it is an heuristic convenience we use to indicate paradigmatic shifts that overlap and proceed at variable rates. In the same decade that the writers I have discussed were establishing the ground for contemporary American fiction, modernist writers more often associated with the period between the two world wars were producing significant work. In the 1950s, William Faulkner, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949 and who continues to serve as the major influence for a host of contemporary writers and movements, published *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), *A Fable* (1954, which won the National Book Award in that year), and the final two volumes of “the Hamlet” trilogy (*The Town*, 1957; and *The Mansion*, 1959). Faulkner’s fellow Southerner, Katherine Anne Porter, was in the process of completing her last novel, *Ship of Fools* (1962). John Dos Passos published six new books, including a novel, a memoir, and a biography of Thomas Jefferson, and Edna Ferber published the penultimate novels of her career in *Giant* (1952) and *Ice Palace* (1958). Scribner’s brought out Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), the last major work of his fiction to appear during his lifetime; and in the same year, John Steinbeck published his last major novel, *East of Eden* (1952). Yet if we consider the work of new and emergent writers of the American 1950s, or the work of a slightly older generation of writers that will come to full prominence in the years between 1950 and 1980, there is an observable sea-change following World War II. A new sexual candor and exploration of the role of gender and sexuality in the representation of life in fiction; a growing sense of the importance of race in America and the possibilities to be explored in the tracing of ethnic identities; a fascination with linguistic play, encyclopedic scope, and the parody of form that has its roots in Joycean modernism and that will gain in intensity

as the writing of contemporary American fiction proceeds under the rubric of postmodernism; innovations in realist narrative strategies that enabled explorations of subjects taking place against the backdrop of the Cold War and the proliferation of the suburban middle class in America; a continuous reflection on existentialist notions of self and agency that can be traced to Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, especially as these are related to violence and the limits of the human; the rise of new technologies and mass media that fuel a recognition of the degree to which cultural discourses are becoming increasingly intermedial such that the act of reading is as much a matter of viewing and performing as it is of literacy and interpretation – all of these intensities can be said to characterize the uniqueness of contemporary writing in terms of both continuity and innovation. In the chapters to follow, I will be discussing how the post-1980s novel develops according to these and related tendencies. Having elicited some of these strains in contemporary writing following closely upon World War II, I will suggest in the remainder of this chapter how they are reflected in a number of notable instances, across the range of the contemporary American novel before 1980, that navigate between the status of fiction as a production of language and fiction as a mirror of reality.

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“Oh, my *Lolita*, I only have words to play with” (32). Thus laments Humbert Humbert, the narrator and protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, ostensibly the “Confession of a White Widowed Male” (3) relating in meticulous detail his obsession with a 12-year-old “nymphet” and the tragicomic circumstances of their relationship. A Russian-born exile, Nabokov had produced nine major novels in Russian before turning to English and composing what many consider to be amongst the most linguistically dexterous novels ever written in that language. *Lolita* was published in 1955 with the alternative Olympia Press in Paris because no American publisher at that time would touch a novel portraying sexual intimacies between a child and an adult, though this is to take at face value a kaleidoscopic narrative that is both the diary of a self-described “monster” and a love story, both an elaborate verbal artifice (just “words ... to play with”) and a trenchant depiction of the burgeoning mid-century American road culture and the infelicities of domesticity. As related in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi’s

poignant account of her attempt to read and discuss the novel with a small group of women in Iran, the novel has continued to generate controversy, admiration, and censure world-wide. Perhaps this is because of the double nature of a narrative that is replete with phantoms, doubles, and mirrors; *Lolita* can be read simultaneously as an elaborate language game and a tragic account of an irretrievably lost childhood. In *Lolita*, the elasticity of the English language is explored both texturally and thematically, and the reader is encouraged to become an active participant in the novel's many word games, far-flung verbal coincidences, and evolving patterns of significance. Does the appearance of such names as "Aubrey McFate," "Grace Angel," "Ted Falter," and "Anthony Miranda" in the list of students in Lolita's eighth-grade class (which the paranoid Humbert keeps as "evidence" that his elaborate pursuit of Lolita both at home and on the road is all part of a larger plot manufactured by his dark alter ego, Clare Quilty) indicate the work of chance or design? And if the latter, imposed by whom – Humbert? The author? Providence? Is Humbert's "nymphet" a "real girl" (but only to the extent that any character in a fiction can be "real") or the fantastic creation of desire run amok? Is *Lolita* mere "play" or the work of a serious moral imagination plumbing the ugly depths of an obsession, or indeed, both at once? Nabokov's fascination with what John Shade, the poet of Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), refers to as the "combinatorial delight" (69) of language calls upon us to actively interpret, evaluate, and judge what the author has left behind as a record of the human imagination's astonishing capacity to alternate freely between beauty and monstrosity, and to find one in the other.

Nabokov is one of many modern and contemporary writers for whom linguistic play, narrative complexity, saturated intertextual reference and encyclopedic range mark the primacy of language as the constitutive element of all fiction: internationally, Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Georges Perec, and Italo Calvino are part of this company. Literary movements in France such as OULIPO (the acronym for the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or Workshop for Potential Literature, which included Calvino and Perec) and that of the "new novel" evidenced in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Duras, as well as philosophical and theoretical movements such as the "Tel Quel" school which included such figures as Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, and Roland Barthes,

and the arrival of “deconstruction” in America in the work of Jacques Derrida at “The Structuralist Controversy Symposium” of 1966, help to inform intensifying focus on the “work” of language in contemporary American fiction from *Lolita*’s publication in the United States in 1958 to the current moment.

In considering novels that foreground language as a transformative force, whether redemptive or destructive, one can follow a number of trajectories from mid-century American fiction to the 1980s. One extends from Nabokov to a novelist as different from him as Kathy Acker, whose novels began appearing in the 1970s with titles like *Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* (1973), *I Dreamt I was a Maniac: Imagining* (1974), and *Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1978). Acker was clearly influenced by William S. Burroughs, whose *Naked Lunch* (1959), published by the same French press that had first published *Lolita*, has been an icon of “underground” writing in America since its publication. While the novels of Burroughs and Acker, which have often been viewed as “obscene” and “pornographic” in their scathing critiques of American capitalism and patriarchy, may seem a far cry from Nabokov’s aestheticism and his well-known rejection of politics (“I am neither a didacticist nor an allegoriser. Politics and economics, atomic bombs, primitive and abstract art forms, the entire Orient, symptoms of ‘thaw’ in Soviet Russia, the Future of Mankind, and so on, leave me supremely indifferent,” he once wrote [cited in de la Durantaye, 308]), all three authors share an interest in showing the degree to which figurative language can control, distort, or change reality. Burroughs, indebted to the Beat tradition, attacks 1950s middle-class values in scenes of sexual degradation, drug-induced hallucinations, and scandalous, parodic renditions of the politician’s speech and the salesman’s pitch in a world where heroin (“junk”) is the only real commodity. In later work, he would develop the “cut-up” technique to rearrange fragments of received or traditional linear discourse into new patterns that would subvert dominant modes of thought. For Burroughs, “America” is a disorderly system of conflicting discourses that contend for empowerment. Similarly, for Acker, “the West” is represented in collage-like narratives as an assemblage of speech acts that vocalize territorial disputes, impositions of authority, and jarring attempts to reconstruct the male-dominated social order by shouting in a different tongue. I will return to Acker’s fiction of the 1980s in a later chapter, but it is interesting to note in

what ways the early novels of a writer identified with the French “Theater of the Absurd” typified in the plays of Antonin Artaud, postmodern “punk” and performance art are comparable to those of a Russian exile whose novels are often viewed as exemplars of modernist elitism and aestheticism. For both Nabokov and Acker, “Language! It’s a virus!,” to cite the work of one of Acker’s colleagues, performance artist Laurie Anderson, who is “borrowing” from Burroughs in the same way that Burroughs (and Acker) challenge authorial control by “borrowing” (plagiarizing) the work of previous writers (*Home of the Brave*). Nabokov is primarily interested in the perceptual deceits and linguistic fabrications of the individual madman, author, or magician, while Burroughs and Acker characteristically portray identity as a Frankensteinian sociolinguistic construct. But for all three writers, at the level of grammar and syntax, by means of its figures and affect, language has the power to construct reality as well as to contaminate thought, to gain a purchase on the ideal through perverse means or to destroy the idealizations of the status quo through parody and theft.

The linguistic turn in contemporary American fiction can be seen in dozens of significant writers and works published between World War II and 1980, and as we shall see, it continues to be a major element of the writing since the mid-1980s.<sup>3</sup> To name a few examples: there is Richard Brautigan, now nearly forgotten but once attaining counter-cultural status in the 1960s and 1970s as a “hippie” successor to the Beats. Brautigan offered strange, translucent figures of speech and the laid-back patois of characters drifting through a twilight of drugs and mysticism in such novels as *Trout Fishing in America* (1967) and *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968), works that helped to chart the alienations of a generation. While she wrote no novels, in the assemblage of her short stories Grace Paley structured the relation between talking, loss, and the passing of time amongst the working-class denizens of her native Brooklyn. In language experiments that stretch the boundaries of fiction, Raymond Federman (*Double or Nothing*, 1971), Walter Abish (*Alphabetical Africa*, 1974), and Donald Barthelme (*The Dead Father*, 1975) seized upon language itself as the object of fiction’s study. Like Brautigan and Paley, Stanley Elkin, certainly amongst the most undervalued of major contemporary American writers, is interested in speech, patois, the power of the turn of phrase, and the vocabulary of vocation. In *The Dick Gibson Show* (1971) and *The Franchiser* (1976), Elkin portrays characters who, like Ben Flesh of



the latter novel, live by their wits and their speech, and evidence the degree to which identity is a matter of linguistic expression. Ben Flesh is a traveling salesman and franchise king; as he travels, he talks incessantly on every topic under the sun, becoming one of the most remarkable “voices” in contemporary American writing:

I drive the road. I go up and down it. I stay in motels and watch the local eyewitness news at ten. Murders are done, town councils don't know what to do about porno flicks, everywhere cops have blue flu, farmers nose-dive from threshers, supply and demand don't work the way they used to ... The left hand don't know what the right is doing and only the weather report touches us all. The time and the temperature. What we have for community. ... We should take over the stations and put out the real news. For everyone murdered a million unscathed, for every fallen farmer so many upright. We would put it out. Bulletin: Prisoners use sugar in their coffee! Do you see the sweet significance? We argue the death penalty and even convicts eat dessert. The cooks do the best they can. The have their eyes out for the good fruit and the green vegetables. Oh the astonishing manifestations of love! ... The state's bark always worse than its bite, brothers, and goodness living in the pores of the System, and Convenience, thank you, God, the measure of mankind. Nobody, nobody, nobody ever had it so good. Take heed. A franchiser tells you. (64)

This is but a fragment of the running conversation Elkin's protagonist conducts with the reader, who is engaged as a rhetorical interlocutor in “making up” Flesh's character as a highly idiosyncratic embodiment of collective elocutions and desires.

If the fiction of Stanley Elkin represents the multiple ways in which the self can be externalized through language, then that of his long-time friend and colleague at Washington University in St. Louis, the philosopher/novelist/essayist William H. Gass, portrays selves and worlds formally contained within the language of their own making, believing that, in the words of one critic, “the work is a closed spatial construction with, at best, an indirect relationship to the world” (Caramello, 99). The title of Gass's monumental work of over two decades, *The Tunnel* (1995) – to be discussed in a later chapter – indicates the constructivist turn of his formalist narratives. His earlier novels, including the *Omensetter's Luck* (1962) and *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* (1968), and the short-story collection, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* (1968), all exhibit the principle enunciated



in his essay, “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction”: “the worlds which the writer creates ... are only imaginatively possible ones; they need not be at all like any real one, and the metaphysics which any fiction implies is likely to be meaningless or false if taken as nature’s own” (*Figures*, 9–10). In direct contrast to the realist traditions of the novel, Gass advocates in his fiction and several volumes of essays, including *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1970), *The World Within the Word* (1978), and *Finding a Form* (1996), that novels and stories be self-contained, formally consistent imaginative entities that offer “additions to reality” rather than being regarded merely as “ways of viewing reality” which results in a “refusing [of] experience” (*Figures*, 25).

Gass coined the term “metafiction” for the kind of writing that embodies “only imaginatively possible” worlds, or writing “in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed” (*Figures*, 25).<sup>4</sup> Often conflated with the conceptualizations of postmodern fiction characterized (reductively, in his view) by John Barth as “merely emphas[izing] the ‘performing’ self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness of modernism, in a spirit of cultural subversiveness and anarchy ... a fiction that is more and more about its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world” (*Friday Book*, 200), “metafiction” has been broadly used to describe the novels of Robert Coover, Joseph McElroy, John Hawkes, Max Apple, and Donald Barthelme, in addition to those of Elkin, Gass, and Barth.<sup>5</sup> The fact that every writer thus mentioned is white and male, and that most have ties to the academy, has led to the perception that metafiction is elitist and abstract, taking place in a rarified domain severed from the harsh realities of life on the planet during a time of violent social change and conflict. A work that is often considered to be an exemplary metafiction, Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice*, was published in 1968, the year of the Tet offensive at the height of the Vietnam War. Barth’s assemblage (neither, simply, a collection of short stories, nor a novel in any traditional sense) is remarkable both for its prophetic intermediality as well as its metafictional inventions of a sperm describing its ascent up the uterus and depictions of the act of writing fiction itself in terms of blockage, exhaustion, and renewal.<sup>6</sup> The signal interests of *Lost in the Funhouse* – identity struggling to be born, the writer agonizing over the title of a book he has not yet begun, the contest between the projections of voice (Echo) and the involutions of the self (Narcissus) – superficially

at least, suggest the degree to which metafiction is chiefly concerned with its own making.

Literary war broke out between advocates of the metafictional ethos such as Gass and Barth, and surprisingly, John Gardner, the author of a retelling of the Beowulf legend in *Grendel* (1971) and the fantastical *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972) shortly after the publication of Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* (1978). The notorious "Gardner-Gass debates" of the late 1970s occurred when the two novelists faced off in print on matters of aesthetics, the ethics of fiction, realism, and the work of the imagination. The debates between a writer who staunchly defended his view that fiction must be regarded as a linguistic object and one who felt that "ethical" fiction must compel the reader to make moral choices amidst competing realities took place against the backdrop of the ongoing Cold War, the rising and falling chances for peace in the Middle East during the Carter administration, and continued social upheaval in the struggle for civil rights. Although the debates offer a set of complex agreements and disagreements over the social purpose of art, they have been received in a rather reductive mode as a contestation between postmodernism's investments in parody, play, construction, and self-reflexivity and more traditional concerns with mirroring reality or the modernist interest in constructing a purchase on reality through acts of perception. Reduced even further, this becomes a familiar argument in American literature writ large, between freedom of the imagination to invent "possible worlds" and the constraint of literature's responsibility to reflect and judge the social contract.

To be sure, as Barth himself argues, to regard metafiction or postmodern fiction as solely or primarily about itself is to ignore its capacity for achieving "the synthesis or transcension of ... antithesis": "My ideal postmodernist author," Barth writes, "neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents." "The ideal postmodern novel," he continues, "will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism,' pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction" (*Friday Book*, 203).<sup>7</sup> And as Gayle Greene, among others, has demonstrated, postmodern "metafiction" is in fact hardly the purview of white, male intellectuals. Many contemporary novels by women, she suggests, have strong metafictional tendencies, including Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), and Gayle Godwin's *The*

*Odd Woman* (1974); from Britain, Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall* (1969); from Canada, Margaret Lawrence's *The Diviners* (1974) and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976); and from South Africa, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962). The list of metafictionists also includes British writer Angela Carter, the author of postmodern fantasies in such assemblages as *Fireworks* (1974), *The Blood Chamber* (1979), and *Nights at the Circus* (1984), and Clarence Major, an African American writer whose *All-Night Visitors* (1969), *Reflex and Bone Structure* (1976) and *Emergency Exit* (1979) placed him at the forefront of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

The novel has always been a genre doubly engaged in reflexive questions about form, language, and narrative strategy as well as about its role as a medium for reflecting reality and an agent for social change. The writing of the contemporary American novel reflects this duality both within the novels and careers of individual authors and in the larger trajectories across writers and subjects that I will be considering in this volume. Appositely significant novels written within the vein of traditional realism continued to appear amidst evolving postmodern and metafictional experiments. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Hubert Selby, Jr.'s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964), Dow Mossman's *The Stones of Summer* (1972), or John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969) offer prominent examples of realism's continuance, and in a subsequent chapter, I will consider a group of post-1980 novels that extend and revise traditional realism. At the same time, a number of postmodern narrative strategies can be observed in contemporary American novels before 1980 whose distancing from or proximity to social and historical reality are as variable as that of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), which both represents growing up black in a Midwestern city and portrays a mythological return to origins; Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), a phantasmagoric exploration of the postwar landscape and the apocalyptic "Zone" of contemporary existence; Susan Sontag's *Death Kit* (1967), which combines documentary, fantasy, and monologue in the story of a suicide; William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), perhaps the last great modernist American novel in its encyclopedic, labyrinthine portrayal of an art forger making his way through a world of simulacra; or Joan Didion's *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), a novel portraying the lives of two women who become involved in the radical politics of an imaginary Central American republic.

The “story” of contemporary American writing in this regard is one of aggregations and parallels, and one where no matter how “realistic” or “metafictional” the work may be, on some level, it is attentive to and reflective about its status as a construction of language. The linguistic turn I have described is thoroughly consonant with novels invested in representing contemporary society such as *Herzog* (1964), Saul Bellow’s semi-epistolary novel about midlife crisis; John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the first of the decadal “Rabbit” tetralogy portraying the alienated life and relationships of its middle-class protagonist, Harry Angstrom; Joyce Carol Oates’s *them* (1969), which explores the plight of working-class characters in Detroit from the 1930s to the mid-1960s; Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961), whose central figure, Binx Bolling, might be said to be suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder after his return home from the Korean War in search of a calling; *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), William Styron’s divisive novel of the legendary leader of a slave revolt told in the voice of Nat Turner (Styron was criticized on all sides for presuming, as a white Southerner, to ventriloquize the voice of a black slave at a point in time when the Black Power and Black Arts Movements were coming into their own); Mary McCarthy’s *The Group* (1962), a satirical portrait of a group of New England women coming to adulthood in the 1930s which, like the more popular, but less substantial *Peyton Place* (Grace Metalious, 1956) generated controversy as it touched on “taboo” subjects such as homosexuality, unwed mothers, and abortion; John Rechy’s *City of Night* (1963), a landmark gay novel whose protagonist is a hustler who moves from one urban dystopia to another in search of identity; or N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the Pulitzer Prize-winning first novel by the leading contemporary Native American writer that relates the story of the protagonist’s escape from and return to family and community on the reservation.

If we turn to the proliferation of contemporary ethnic literatures in the United States before 1980 (a proliferation that has continued to accelerate since the mid-1980s), we find here as well a double engagement with the kinds of linguistic and generic experimentation often identified with postmodernism combined with representations of the social order, not as viewed through the reflections of a mirror, but rendered with an awareness that language is at the foundation of that order. From the Berkeley free-speech movements of the mid-1960s to

the militant revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s, from the inheritance of existentialism to deconstruction, the recognitions of the multiple connections between language, power, and cultural identity have continued to inform the construction of ethnicity in contemporary American fiction. The novels of Philip Roth in the 1960s and 1970s, from early, more realist novels such as *Letting Go* (1962) and *When She Was Good* (1967), to the notorious novel about growing up Jewish, *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), to metafictional works such as *My Life as Man* (1974) and the first "Zuckerman" novel, *The Ghost Writer* (1979), depict Jewish American identity in crisis as the result of tumultuous cultural changes in family, community, and sexuality. Rudolpho Anaya's landmark *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) makes use of myth, symbol, and folklore in relating the story of a young man's worldly and spiritual education at the hands of a healer. For many years, Anaya's novel was published by a small press and, until the mid-1990s, was far less visible than the now-faded *The Teachings of Don Juan: The Yacqui Way of Knowledge* (1968), Carlos Castaneda's novel/autobiography/anthropological tract; in contrast, *Bless Me, Ultima* now claims a wide following as one of the first significant Chicano/Latino novels in the United States. Toni Morrison's early novels – *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1972), and *Song of Solomon* – all have affiliations with the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez or Alejo Carpentier in their portrayals of the violent and alienating social conditions that afflict the lives of her characters. In *The Woman Warrior: Memories of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), Maxine Hong Kingston creates a pastiche of autobiography, ghost tale, myth, and social commentary to tell interlacing stories of growing up as a second-generation Chinese American girl growing up in Stockton, California. Similarly, Ishmael Reed's early fiction, particularly *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), employs a variety of literary forms and linguistic styles to touch upon a multitude of contemporary issues from conspiracy theory to Black militancy. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) blends storytelling, poetry, and journalism in the narrative of a young man returning from the trauma of war to a new life on the Laguna reservation. In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), Paule Marshall, another second-generation American born to parents from Barbados, portrays complex relationships between the land, language, politics, identity, and the distribution of power on a fictional island located in the Caribbean; her work is part of a wave of important novels to come written by American writers with

Caribbean origins who are part of the postcolonial diaspora, including Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticat, and Michelle Cliff.

In the narrative of the contemporary American novel, literary theory and developments in the writing of fiction seem to run on parallel tracks. There is a vital connection between Derridean deconstruction, which fundamentally questions how language signifies, and some of the most important novelists of the 1960s and 1970s – Barthelme, Hawkes, Acker, Gass, and Nabokov among them – who investigate the multiple ways in which language constructs reality, rather than the other way around.<sup>8</sup> I have already touched upon metafiction's theoretical leanings: the theory/fiction connection is equally manifest if we compare the language and gender theories of the key French feminists, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, which arrived in the United States as part of the “explosion of theory” of the 1970s, and the consonant fiction of several novelists concerned with the role of gender in the construction of identity. Collectively, the French feminists demonstrated the extent to which language is gendered and serves as a medium of patriarchal transmissions of power; at the same time, they argued, language contains within itself the capacity to mock and disrupt patriarchy. From early to late, as I've indicated, Kathy Acker's novels contribute to the project of mockery and disruption in fictional pastiches that combine the surrealist and satiric in their attacks upon capitalism and power. Interestingly, fantasy and science fiction have offered contemporary writers of the 1960s and 1970s generic modes that allowed them to explore the lineaments of gender and the gendering of language. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) depicts the relationships between four women from different worlds, one of them from a planet where a plague has killed off all of the men, and women must reproduce using technology. The novel allows Russ to explore through the conversations of her characters a host of stereotypes and alternative lifestyles and sexualities – from that of the “woman warrior” to the female submissive. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ursula K. LeGuin offers a political fable in which the representative of a federation of planets attempts to establish diplomatic relations with the world of Gethen, inhabited by a hermaphroditic people who are, for the major part of a lunar month, gender-neutral, but for two days of each month, become male or female depending upon the sexual interests of their partner. This device allows LeGuin to explore the relationship between gender and language as highly

mutable and, yet, constrained by time and culture. Samuel R. Delaney's massive *Dhalgren* (1975), an apocalyptic novel set in a Midwestern city that has been totally isolated owing to some unknown global catastrophe, depicts the adventures of a bisexual protagonist whose speech and perceptions change radically as he performs varying sexual and gender roles. And while not technically science fiction, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is the story of a woman supposedly suffering from schizophrenia who encounters a woman from a future civilization where the progressive feminist agendas of the 1960s and 1970s have been realized, yet where class hierarchies and repressive regimes remain in place. Together, these novels provide imaginative bases for continued examinations of the multiform connections between language, gender, and sexuality occurring in post-1980 American fiction, especially as it intersects with new work in gender theory by the philosopher, Judith Butler, whose *Gender Trouble* (1990) serves as a watershed in viewing gender and sexuality as culturally constructed, ritualistic, and performative.

Much of what constitutes gender theory rests upon the assumption that both the grammar and history of language have social consequences. Behind this assumption lie the larger contextual questions, "What is history?" as a form of narrative discourse, and "Whose history?" as a narrative inflected by ideological pursuits.<sup>9</sup> These questions are of particular relevance to an era in which the first "television war," Vietnam, was portrayed as a nightly event on the living-room TV screen, when the illusion of historical progress continued to be battered by everything from apocalyptic fears about a third world war to a string of political assassinations in the 1960s that significantly changed the course of American history, and when new histories of women, working-class people, and ethnic minorities, formerly suppressed, began to be unearthed, formulated, and taught. These developments and others led to increasing reflection in the contemporary novel on the relation between narrative and history. Linda Hutcheon has coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to characterize contemporary fictions that both instantiate one or multiple narrative histories and simultaneously question the terms of their own making.

So intensely felt is the importance of the relationship between fiction and history by contemporary writers that the list of works published before 1980 that could fall under the rubric of "historiographic metafiction" is enormous. The list becomes even larger when one



considers works that fall into the more traditional category of the historical novel such as Gore Vidal's *Julien* (1964), about the Roman emperor, Flavius Claudius Julianos, or *Burr* (1973), about the man who was Vice-President of the United States during Thomas Jefferson's first term; James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), which depicts the relation between the present and the past on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation; Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), a narrative of a great-granddaughter's search for the truth of her ancestral past as a descendant of slaves; and Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* (1971), based on the letters of the pioneer storyteller and poet, Mary Hallock Foote. There are, as well, any number of "hybrid" works combining historical and essayistic writing, reportage, and storytelling consonant with the emergence of "the new journalism" typified in Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* with such works as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), about murderers of a Kansas farm family in 1959; Joan Didion's *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (1968), a collection of essays and fictional riffs about counter-culture, eccentricity, and the cult of personality in the California of the 1960s; Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), a series of reflections on nature from a self-conscious narrative perspective; and Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* (1979), a fictionalized documentary about the Mercury 7 astronauts. In the past two decades, "creative non-fiction" has emerged as a rubric for the hybrid writing visible in these works that blend autobiography, documentary, history, and fiction.

One of the hallmarks of historiographic metafiction, E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, when published in 1975, leapt to the forefront as a narrative about the making of history in its rendition of American history and family life in the era of its title (between the turn of the century and World War I) with its insertions of such historical figures as Harry Houdini, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford and Sigmund Freud into the life of its fictional characters. Adapted into a film directed by Miloš Forman in 1981, *Ragtime* was hugely popular, much more so than John Barth's earlier *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), an assemblage of interlinked historical and fictional tales of pre-revolutionary Maryland and Virginia, including a hilarious retelling of the Captain John Smith-Pocahontas legend. Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) offers an hallucinatory rendition of Cold War politics and history during the McCarthy era in recounting events that lead up to the execution of



Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, accused of being spies, Communists, and selling atomic weapons secrets to the Soviet Union (Doctorow also had portrayed some of these events in *The Book of Daniel* [1971], told from the perspective of one of the Rosenbergs' surviving sons). *The Public Burning* is notable for its skewering of the then Vice-President of the United States, Richard M. Nixon. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) uses the science-fiction device of time travel to portray the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, witnessing the firebombing of Dresden and its aftermath in one of the most harrowing scenes of contemporary American fiction. Two novels of the Vietnam War, Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978), combine autobiography, reportage, and historical accounts to portray the war in ways that challenge the received mediation of the conflict via television and the press. Finally, there is the much-overlooked *Rabbit Boss* (1973), Thomas Sanchez's multi-generation novel of a Washo Indian family that recounts over a century of Native American history from a pastiche-like perspective comprising poetry, myth, historical rendition, and personal experience both hallucinatory and painfully realistic.

The intensities of contemporary American fiction before 1980 proliferate in the writing that comes after: the constructive power of language, the relation between fiction and history, the complex intertwining of affect and social experience in the production of narrative – all give rise to filiations that will be of interest to us in the remainder of this volume. In concluding this brief overview of contemporary American fiction before 1980, I will provide preliminary readings of three major novels – Bellow's *Herzog*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Morrison's *Song of Solomon* – that incorporate many of these intensities as a means of introducing the symptomatic method of reading post-1980 fiction in the chapters to follow. In so doing, I intend to discuss within each chapter a selective group of novels not as merely representative of some tendency or significant development in recent fiction, but as indicative of the "condition" of contemporary writing, manifesting its most deeply felt quandaries, fraught excursions into the territory beyond its own imagined limits, and complex recognitions of the wavering interface between the real and the imaginary.

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When Saul Bellow published *Herzog* in 1964, it came as clear signal that he had changed directions. The well-known author of the vigorous, picaresque journeys of Augie March (*The Adventures of Augie March*, 1953) and Eugene Henderson (*Henderson the Rain King*, 1959) had published an inward-looking, meditative novel about a middle-aged man writing hundreds of letters never sent, agonizing over his failed marriages and his alienated children, his stalled career, and the small matters of an aging body and mortality. It would be the first of a succession of Bellow's novels portraying the agonies of consciousness, including *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), *Humboldt's Gift* (1975), and *Ravelstein* (2000). *Herzog* may not necessarily be the source for the term "midlife crisis," but it certainly is one of the most penetrating portrayals of the fabled condition that seems to afflict American males between the ages of 45 and 55. The onset of the crisis comes for Moses Herzog, alone in his abandoned summer home in the Berkshires, as he begins to obsess about his second wife's affair with another man – an obsession dispelled when he transforms the murderous intention to kill his wife's lover into an acceptance of existence and his own flawed nature in all of their contrariety. Unlike Augie and Henderson, the odyssey of the erudite and sophisticated Moses Herzog is primarily a mental one structured not by road or sea-lane but by the fragments of the undelivered letters that he writes to his ex-wives, friends and enemies, political leaders and functionaries of every stripe, real and fictional correspondents from the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Teilhard de Chardin to his second wife's psychiatrist and the Monsignor of his girlfriend's parish.

A rambling letter to "General Eisenhower," who at the time of the letter's writing had been succeeded by John F. Kennedy as President of the United States, offers a singular example of Herzog's missives:

Dear General Eisenhower. In private life perhaps you have the leisure and inclination to reflect on matters for which, as Chief Executive, you obviously had not time. The pressures of the Cold War ... which now so many people agree was a phase of political hysteria, and the journeys and speeches of Mr. Dulles rapidly changing in this age of shifting perspectives of statesmanship to one of American wastefulness. ... Perhaps you will be asking yourself who your present correspondent is, wither a liberal, an egghead, a bleeding heart, a nut of some kind. So let us say he is a thoughtful person who believes in civil usefulness. Intelligent people without influence feel a certain self-contempt,

reflecting the contempt of those who hold real political or social power, or think they do. ... The old proposition of Pascal (1623–1662) that man is a reed, but a thinking reed, might be taken with a different emphasis, by the modern citizen of democracy. He thinks, but he feels like a reed bending before centrally generated winds. Ike would certainly pay no attention to this. Herzog tried another approach. (199–201)

Herzog's letter written to a public figure who has retired into private life touches directly on a concern pursued throughout the novel: the relation between public and private identity; the gap extending between politics in the hands of the powerful blowing "centrally generated winds" and the reed of the individual, liberal self, who has the choice to engage (and perhaps change) his own powerlessness, or retreat into a reclusive mode of being that includes writing unsent letters in an empty house. To extend the metaphor of the "thinking reed," this self is the "hollow man" of T. S. Eliot's poem, existentially aware of an emptiness at the core that, paradoxically, drives thought and begets agency. In other terms, Herzog is an embodiment of the self before death. Herzog's letters are replete with reflections on mortality, yet he cogitates and writes endlessly, almost as if mere thinking and talking were a defense against the onset of change and death. The novel concludes with Herzog lapsing into silence, now that the "spell" of his fixation on his wife's adultery is over, and one might read the novel as redemptive, yet Bellow is careful to dramatize in *Herzog* the dilemma of consciousness, which is only "conscious" to the degree that it is aware of its own means and ends.

Herzog assumes central importance in the narrative of the American novel before 1980, and not just only because its author won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. What is, arguably, Bellow's finest novel offers one of the most compelling portraits available of what it means to be "a thinking reed" in the latter half of twentieth-century America, where identity, divided between privacy in the faltering domestic realm and the inadequacies of public life, verges on a form of schizophrenia typified in Herzog's temporary madness and letter-writing mania. Phillip Roth, who regards Bellow as something of a mentor, once wrote that:

the American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even

a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our own talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (*Reading Myself*, 120)

Roth could have been describing Moses Herzog in this passage as well as Saul Bellow: the subtle conflation of author and protagonist, consciousness and self-consciousness that *Herzog* stages provides one of the most powerful fictional renditions we have of living in a condition where reality outstrips the imagination. This will become of increasing concern in contemporary American writing where reality, as perceived, continues to overtake our capacity to represent it.

No two novels are more different from each other than *Herzog* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, the third novel by Thomas Pynchon, a writer whom Rick Moody praised in glowing terms in his 1997 review of Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*:

The novelist Robert Coover, speaking of influences in American fiction, once remarked that apprentices of his generation found themselves (in the 1950s) grappling with two very different models of what the novel might be. One, Coover said, was Saul Bellow's realistic if picaresque *Adventures of Augie March*; the other was William Gaddis's encyclopedic *Recognitions*. Writers my age (mid-thirties), however, don't have the luxury of a choice. Our problem is how to confront the influence of a single novelist: Thomas Pynchon.

The most influential writer of a generation is notorious for the labyrinthine complexity of his fictions, even that of the relatively short and approachable (thus, often-taught) *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), a novel of cults, conspiracies, and satirical attacks on 1960s California white suburban culture. Set in wartime Britain, Germany, and a postwar "Zone" of indeterminate geography, *Gravity's Rainbow* bears reference to such predecessors as Joseph Heller's satiric *Catch-22* (1961), a send-up of the bureaucracy and brutality of war set in the Mediterranean during World War II, and Jerzy Kosinski's surrealistic *The Painted Bird* (1965), which describes the nightmarish journey of a child through the theater of World War II Europe. Both of these novels are often viewed as sharing similarities with fiction of the absurd and black humor such as Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), set in an insane asylum, Terry Southern's screenplay for

*Dr. Strangelove*, a comic/satiric envisioning of nuclear holocaust, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963), which satirizes a Cold War that produced such "policies" as MAD ("mutually assured destruction") that, in effect, globalized the mind game of the prisoner's dilemma.

Yet *Gravity's Rainbow* is not exactly a novel of World War II (or Vietnam, the "closer" war to the novel's writing), nor is it exactly an absurdist rendering of Cold War and apocalypse (though it ends with a vision of nuclear bombs hitting an American movie theater), nor can it be wholly encapsulated by Scott Simmon's prescient characterization of the novel as our most comprehensive contemporary "historical and cultural synthesis of Western actions and fantasies" (55). From its infamous opening line – "A screaming comes across the sky" (3), announcing the arrival of a V-2 rocket striking the City of London – to its closing, apocalyptic strains penned by William Slothrop, the Colonial ancestor of the novel's titular protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop, proclaiming that "There is a hand to turn the time / Though thy Glass today be run, / Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low / Find the last poor Pret'rite one ... " (760), *Gravity's Rainbow* charts the fluctuations of force, capital, and desire that circulate through the postwar era. Scanning that final hymn, it is impossible to overlook the novel's eerily prophetic cast: no post-9/11 reader could avoid interpolating current history into the stunningly clairvoyant line, "Till the Light hath brought the Towers low."

Perhaps the most elaborate example of encyclopedic narrative in contemporary American literature and a rival to *Moby-Dick* in that regard, *Gravity's Rainbow* references the history of rocket science, ballistics, theology, astronomy, the occult, thermodynamics, the mechanics of plumbing, German Expressionist film, and sexology, to name but a few of the disciplinary trajectories pursued in the novel. Moreover, it invents new subdisciplines of its own in its intricate catalogues of exotic candies, urban detritus, obscure sexual practices, or modes of extrasensory perception. Appositely, the first English translations of the work of social theorist Michel Foucault were making their way to American shores near the time of the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow: Madness and Civilization* (1965), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), *The Order of Things* (1973), and *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) established Foucault in the United States, along with Derrida, as the leading presence in poststructuralist thought. Both Foucault and Pynchon share a fascination with the ways in which knowledge is

organized, and how the organization of knowledge underlies politics, war, crime, and madness; both are fascinated with a singular “idea of order” as a principle that informs seeming opposites – as Foucault shows in *Madness and Civilization*, reason and madness, as social, political, and juridical categories, share the same logic. As one of Pynchon’s recurrent characters, Pig Bodine, opines, “‘*Everything* is some kind of plot’” (603), and certainly Pynchon is concerned throughout his work to disclose multiple and intersecting plots, partial or paranoid, as the connective tissue of the social order.

Accordingly, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is about plots of all kinds, from political conspiracies to those of our dreams, and about what lies outside of plots in what one character describes as “‘an Ellipse of Uncertainty’” (427) bordering the area where the disciplining and categorization of knowledge cannot go. There are characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow* – dozens of them – and there is a protagonist who disappears and whose identity is scattered across a postwar “Zone” populated by nomads and outcasts, historical accidents and conspiracies gone awry. But the novel skews such elements as chronology, character development, and narrative progress in order to reveal the ways in which “self” and “world” are fabricated out of our need for order and our fear of entropy. Indeed, *Gravity’s Rainbow* defies any attempts to organize its multiple logics, or to explain all of the connections between its manifold narratives, while pressing questions about the plots of history, knowledge, and the social order, and the extent to which they implicate “us,” only definable in relation to “them.” In its sheer anatomization of contemporary reality, *Gravity’s Rainbow* remains the signal occurrence of the late twentieth-century American novel.

Set in an unnamed Midwestern metropolis (one that resembles the environs of Detroit or Cleveland, the latter close to her native Loraine, Ohio), Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* follows the logic of the classic *Bildungsroman* – the novel of a young man moving through childhood and adolescence to adulthood – save that its central figure, Macon “Milkman” Dead III, is a case of arrested development who is compelled by the violence around him and the consequences of his own selfishness to journey to the site of his ancestral origins in order to discover “himself.” The symbolically named protagonist of the novel acquires his nickname when he is observed still feeding from his mother’s breast well beyond an age that might be considered normal;

his legal name has been bestowed upon him as an inheritance from his grandfather whose original family name has been skewed by the drunken scrawl of a white Yankee soldier on an identity card. A descendant of slaves who have been forcibly transported from their homeland and who have migrated to Northern cities following the Civil War, Milkman bears names that are both patriarchal and matriarchal, but none the true ancestral name which, as for many African Americans, was destroyed by the slave system when African names were replaced by those derived from plantation owners, the Bible, localities, or distorted pronunciations and records. Literally and symbolically dead at the beginning of the novel where he is lost in a solipsistic maze of self-gratification, misogyny, and failed ambition, Milkman begins a quest for identity that is inextricably linked to a recovery of the past and his own family history. To do so, he must engage in a series of historical reversals, including a return to the South and the scene of his ancestry.

Unlike *Roots* (1976), Alex Haley's immensely popular tracking of an African American family genealogy back to its African origins (a novel published just one year earlier and subsequently exposed to claims of plagiarism), *Song of Solomon* is not an historical fiction but, rather, a blending of myth, folklore, symbolism, realism, and the history of slavery in a novel intensively focused on questions of identity:<sup>10</sup> what kind of identity does Milkman have without a proper name? To what degree is his identity a simulacrum of cultural desires that arise out of loss and alienation? To what extent is his selfhood a matter of his race, ancestry, and historical experience, and how have these both shaped and, to some degree, imprisoned him? In its portrayal of the quest for identity of its black, male protagonist, Morrison's novel is responsive to the specific context of the continuing impact of the Black Power movement born in the 1960s and Afrocentric movements that have their origins in nineteenth-century America; at the same time, it references the stories of Oedipus and Icarus, and the African folkloric traditions of the flying ancestor, in the narration of Milkman's journey from city to country, North to South, present to past. The capaciousness of Morrison's narrative resides in its capacity to unearth connections between Western mythologies and African folkloric traditions, and between the specificities of regional or national social circumstances and the deeper historical strains to be traced across time and location.

Through much of the first half of the novel, Milkman is one of the most unlikable characters in contemporary fiction: he treats his mother, sisters, and lover as disposable objects; save for one transformative instant, he cowers before his domineering father, accepting his arbitrary beneficence without question while secretly hating him; most of his time is spent finding ways to enhance his vanity or fulfill his personal desires while, all around him, racism, violence, and degradation abound. And even as he commences a ritualistic journey that will – at least symbolically – reunite him with the legacy of his ancestors, his betrayed aunt Pilate, and his closest friend, Guitar, who, as a violent revolutionary, has rejected Milkman for his narcissism and apoliticism, it is unclear at the novel's end to what degree Milkman gains new life or cancels himself out. Is his jump across the chasm of Solomon's Leap and into the arms of Guitar, who has shot and killed Pilate in an attempt to take revenge upon Milkman for, supposedly, cheating him out of a nonexistent hoard of gold, an act of suicide, revenge, or self-sacrifice?:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees – he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it. (337)

The ambivalent cast of *Song of Solomon* is an aspect of its power, for in this novel of coming-to-identity, Morrison forthrightly addresses the paradoxical aspects of what it means to be black in contemporary America and an environment where the impulse to escape historical reality is as strong as the impulse toward self-transformation within history. She will continue to do so in the triad of novels that trace the lives of African American women from slavery to modern times (*Beloved*, 1987; *Jazz*, 1992; *Paradise*, 1999) through a centrality of vision that led to her winning the Nobel Prize in 1993.

The arc that extends from *Invisible Man* to *Song of Solomon*, and from Ellison's unnamed protagonist surviving in an urban basement on stolen light and power to Macon Dead III flying, like his African ancestors, across a chasm in an act which may be one of self-sacrifice or murder figures a critical trajectory in contemporary American fiction that negotiates the relation between race, body, history, identity, and



language. As we have seen, in different ways, *Herzog*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Song of Solomon* equally consider how contemporary identity comprises “only words,” but the gravity of this equation is to be found in the relation between language and reality, and how the former reflects, distorts, or transforms the latter. In Part II, I will consider how post-1980 American fiction regards this relation in a diverse array of novels that run the gamut from embodiments of new realism to postmodern experiments.