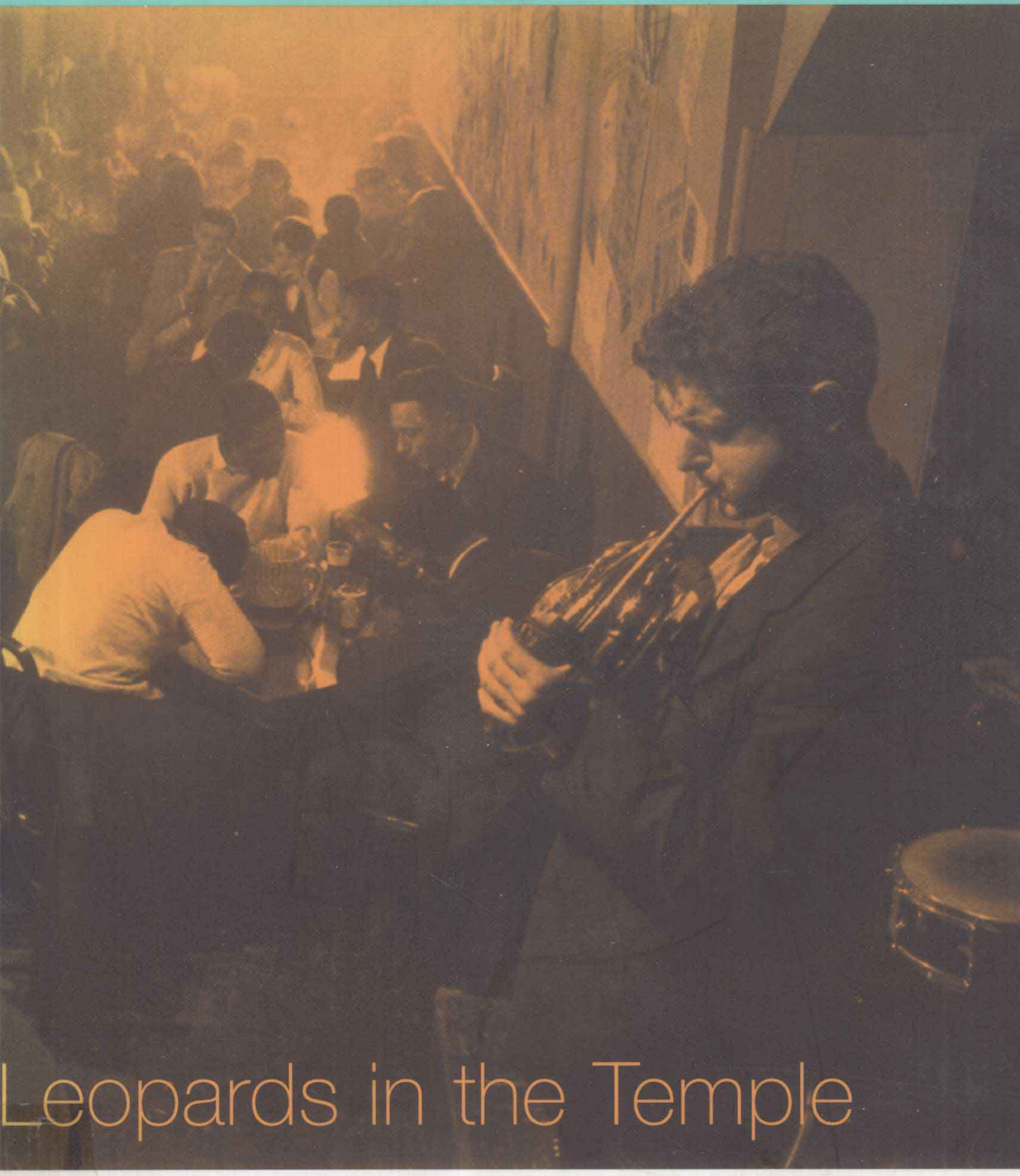
Morris Dickstein



Leopards in the Temple

The Transformation of American Fiction

1945-1970

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Leopards break into the temple and drink to the dregs what is in the sacrificial pitchers; this is repeated over and over again; finally it can be calculated in advance, and it becomes part of the ceremony.

—FRANZ KAFKA, *Parables and Paradoxes*

For Lore again,
with love and gratitude,
and for Jeremy and Rachel

PREFACE

The distant origin of this book, I would guess, was in the passion for fiction that I developed as a teenage boy in suburban Queens in the 1950s. Baseball was my first love, no doubt about it. But thanks to the local public library, which supplied me with a smattering of classics and the latest bestsellers, I became as enamored of novels as kids later did of rock music, movies, or favorite TV shows. I read them mostly for the story—to be lifted out of myself, to rub shoulders with other people in other worlds, to find out what would happen next—but also, I think, to savor the pleasure of the created thing, the well-made artifact. As I got lost in *The Scarlet Letter* or *A Tale of Two Cities* on the long subway ride to school each day, I remember feeling the thrill of something exotic—from the intriguing story and remote setting, but also the finely spun web of language. I recall, too, my sense of amazement at watching Dickens pull all the threads together into a seamless fabric, a perfect piece of craftsmanship, something I felt again many years later as I finished Thomas Pynchon's *V.*

I read a few great books almost by chance, but I was omnivorous and undiscriminating. I'm sure Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* satisfied me almost as much as *Wuthering Heights* and *Old Man Goriot,* and it told a story that hit much closer to home. But it was not until I read Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* and *The Magic Barrel* in the late 1950s that I understood how art could deepen your view of your own world. In my case this was the world of lower-middle-class Jewish families, of New York neighborhoods with their half-assimilated immigrants and roughly Americanized children, of small shopkeepers with huge economic anxieties and young people caught between their own half-understood needs and the religious and moral surveillance that hemmed them in. I had always taken novels personally, given myself up to them and lived inside them, feeling disappointed when they ended, yet they had never reached me in this deep, problematic way. The world of literature was one thing; the world of the Jews I grew up with—my father's days and nights in the store, my mother's operatic anxieties, the synagogue and Hebrew classes where I'd been anointed as the next savior—was quite another. But in Malamud and

Grace Paley, even in Wouk and Leon Uris, these distant worlds came together to show me that fiction could offer more than an escape, could reflect back parts of my daily life I thought I knew intimately. As I grew disenchanted with the religious texts I had grown up on, secular literature became a kind of scripture for me, a continuous commentary on living in the world.

In this book I try to come to terms with the writers who emerged during the most impressionable period of my reading life, not the bestselling authors who pleased me then, whose work would be of mostly sociological interest today, but the writers who have enriched our culture for the last half century, even as fiction itself has declined in importance. Though they were compared invidiously to Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald when they first appeared, the best writers who began publishing after the war, like the leading painters, playwrights, and musicians, eventually became some of the longest running acts of the twentieth century. This goes not only for those still writing in the new millennium, including Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Philip Roth, and John Updike, but for others who died sooner or whose work foundered, among them Flannery O'Connor, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Jack Kerouac, James Jones, J. D. Salinger, Vladimir Nabokov, and Bernard Malamud. I grew up with these writers, inhabited their mental space for most of my life. Their very voices rang in my ear as I followed the unfolding drama of their careers from book to book. My aim in this group portrait is to show how they transformed American writing, how they interacted with their own times, but also why the work of these latecomers, who arrived at the tail-end of the modernist comet, proved so imposing and long-lasting.

Some of this influence and staying power was simply due to their own gifts, which still astonish me as I teach and reread their work. But part of it came about because they were outsiders, which was how I saw myself when I first read them. Instead of old-stock Protestants from New England or the Midwest, many of the newcomers were urban Jews or blacks only a generation or two from the shtetl or the plantation; one was a serious Catholic in the Protestant South; others were gays half-emerging from the closet or Harvard men who came from humble backgrounds. They didn't always mind their manners or try to fit in; they brought their histories with them. They were like Kafka's ravenous leopards, invading and disrupting the sheltered precincts of our literary culture. They brought sex out into the open in an unprecedented way. Because of the war, they also were witnesses to extremity, violence, and inhumanity, the story of the twentieth century. This was a moment when outsiders were becoming insiders, when Ameri-

can literature, like the society it reflected, was becoming decentered, or multicentered, feeding on new energies from the periphery, as it had done many times before.

The seemingly tranquil postwar period was a turning point that saw many far-reaching developments we still feel today, from unparalleled prosperity and technological wonders to major new international commitments. With the help of new media like television, Americans turned inward, to each other, and outward to the world in ways they never had before. The essential continuity of postwar life has helped keep the writers current in a way that their Depression counterparts only occasionally are. In an effort to understand these writers, I also try to make sense of the society around them, which drew me into historical as well as literary issues. I hope I've done some justice to both. Even more than the 1960s, this is a period too often reduced to stereotypes, and its culture has been seen by some literary scholars and art historians as little more than a reflex of the Cold War, repressive, patriotic, and militantly small-minded. My aim in this book is to draw a more complicated picture, to do justice to the variety of voices that make this era richer, more contradictory, and more self-critical than we have previously imagined.

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Much of this book was first written for the new *Cambridge History of American Literature,* edited by Sacvan Bercovitch. I am grateful to Jeff Kehoe and Harvard University Press for believing that it should be expanded into a separate book and to Cambridge University Press for allowing me to use this material here. Above all I'm thankful to Sacvan Bercovitch for his patient encouragement and valuable comments on my manuscript, and to my fellow contributors, John Burt, Cyrus R. K. Patell, and Wendy Steiner, whose fine work on other facets of postwar fiction, including Southern writing, multicultural fiction, postmodernism, and post-1970s feminism, enabled me to concentrate on the earlier writers who most engaged me. I profited from the insight of numerous critics of postwar fiction, including John W. Aldridge, Robert Bone, Leo Braudy, Malcolm Cowley, Chester E. Eisinger, Josephine Hendin, Irving Howe, Tim Hunt, Stanley Edgar Hyman, Peter G. Jones, Frederick Karl, Alfred Kazin, Thomas Hill Schaub, Mark Shechner, Ted Solotaroff, and Gore Vidal, and from historical studies of postwar American life by Willliam H. Chafe, John Patrick Diggins, Godfrey Hodgson, Kenneth T. Jackson, William E. Leuchtenburg, William L. O'Neill, James T. Patterson, and Daniel Snowman. Most of these debts are recorded in the bibliography. Stanley

Burnshaw, Eugene Goodheart, Larry and Suzanne Graver, Alfred Kazin, Richard Locke, and Anne Roiphe were generous with their friendship and their keen interest in this project. I learned much from graduate students in my courses on postwar fiction, among them Peter Mascuch and Bill Mullen. Stephen Motika deserves thanks for the index. As usual, Lore Dickstein's enthusiastic support made all the difference.

New York, January 2001

LEOPARDS IN THE TEMPLE

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INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, COUNTERCULTURE, AND POSTWAR AMERICA

Some periods of history take on a legendary character, which usually means that we have substituted a few stereotypes for the complexity of what actually happened. Many still think of the 1920s as one long party, a hedonistic romp for the fun-loving young, though F. Scott Fitzgerald, who helped establish that image, later worked hard to revise it. The thirties have come down to us in black and white images of apple vendors and dust storms, all social misery and middle-class anguish, though the books and films of the era tell a more complicated story. Newsreel views of the 1960s, which rarely venture beyond protest demonstrations, campus conflicts, stoned hippies, and Beatlemania, have invaded the memories of those who were there, who now recall those film images better than what they themselves saw. The postwar period, especially the 1950s, has been simplified into everything the sixties generation rebelled against: a beaming president presiding over a stagnant government, small-town morality, racial segregation, political and sexual repression, Cold War mobilization, nuclear standoff, suburban togetherness, the domestic confinement of women, and the reign of the nuclear family.

Like most stereotypes, this picture of the 1950s has a certain truth to it. Because both sides see the postwar years through the prism of the 1960s, conservatives and liberals can agree on many details while judging them differently. The titles of their books tell the story. To radical journalists and historians the 1950s were *The Nightmare Decade* (Fred Cook) or *The Dark Ages* (Marty Jezer), the period of *The Great Fear* (David Caute), when so many were *Naming Names* (Victor Navasky). To writers less enchanted with the 1960s, the preceding years were *The Proud Decades* (John Patrick Diggins), the moment of the *American High* (William L. O'Neill), *When the Going Was Good* (Jeffrey Hart). By the 1970s, in sharp reaction to the recent turbulence, a tranquil, pastoral image of the fifties took hold in popular culture, a fun image of carefree adolescence in the days before the fall. Thus George Lucas's nostalgic film *American Graffiti* gave birth to the sitcom *Happy Days* and the hit musical *Grease,* which had little in common with the troubled images of adolescence projected during the period. More recently, serious novelists have been busy idealizing their formative years, as

Philip Roth does in *American Pastoral* and Gore Vidal does in *The Golden Age.* There is more than a trace of irony in most of these titles, but they show remarkable unanimity in portraying the period after 1945 as insular and innocent, the antithesis of the radical decade.

By the mid-1980s, however, a different viewpoint began to be heard, though it has yet to make much headway against the popular image. In a study of postwar intellectuals, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (1985), the historian Richard Pells rightly argued that the social critics of the 1950s, including William H. Whyte, David Riesman, and C. Wright Mills, by focusing on conformity, psychological manipulation, and the malaise of the middle class, had prepared the ground for the more radical criticism that followed. Pells suggested that there was a good deal of continuity between the two periods. Another historian, Lary May, edited a valuable collection of essays, *Recasting America* (1989), which explored many of the tensions and contradictions of the postwar years and drew attention to developments in the arts and intellectual life that hardly fit the somnolent image of the period. William H. Chafe has repeatedly emphasized the "paradox of change," the momentous social transformations—in the life of the middle class, for example, or in the position of blacks and women—that were taking place behind the conservative façade. On the other hand, some scholars in American Studies and art history who approach the arts as expressions of social ideology have tried to demonstrate that nearly every cultural phenomenon of those years, from genre films and literary criticism to abstract art, was somehow a reflex of the Cold War, a "hegemonic" expression of the "national security state" and the containment policy toward international Communism. What passed for culture became a way of indoctrinating Americans and aborting independent thought. Such arguments, which rarely appealed to factual evidence, have given rise to a school of Cold War scholarship that takes little account of other influential factors in postwar social life, from the baby boom and economic expansion to the education boom and shifting roles of women, blacks, and ethnic minorities. Based on a presumed ideological bent that can hardly be verified, such arguments depend on tenuous links between politics and culture that are sometimes suggestive but too often arbitrary or reductive.

My aim in this book is to give a more varied, less familiar picture of the postwar years by taking a fresh look at some striking changes in the arts, especially in fiction, and at the strong radical undercurrents that led directly to the culture wars of the 1960s. World War II had brought a powerful but artificial unity to Americans, first by ending the Depression, which had highlighted class divisions; then by giving Americans a cause to fight

for, a life-and-death struggle fraught with patriotic and personal feeling; and finally by deflecting internal conflict among social groups for the duration of the war. But the war also shook Americans loose from their local moorings, from religious roots and isolated lives in small towns, from urban ghettos and other homogeneous communities. Young men who had never strayed fifty miles from home were shipped off to distant training bases and overseas missions; others migrated to take up jobs in defense industries. City boys and country boys, the children of immigrants and the children of sharecroppers were thrown together for the first time, like an accelerated version of the melting pot or a poster for the Popular Front. At the same time, new communication links like Edward R. Murrow's live news broadcasts from besieged London were beginning to make the world a smaller place. There was no return to isolationism after the war, as there had been after the First World War. Instead, the physical destruction of much of Europe, the unconditional surrender and occupation of Japan, and the breakup of the old colonial system left the United States in a powerful economic and political position, which would soon be cemented by strategic alliances such as NATO.

A more cosmopolitan America was coming into being, a good deal more open to social differences yet resistant to political dissent and social criticism. Outsider groups such as blacks, women, and Jews, even working-class and rural Americans, having seen something of the world, were not about to return to the kitchen, the ghetto, or the menial jobs to which they had been confined. As industry turned to consumer goods, to new housing and technology, the growing economy opened the gates to a social mobility only dreamed of during the lean years of the Depression. The GI Bill of Rights, designed in part to keep returning servicemen from flooding the job market, created educational opportunities that would equip veterans for a role in the expanding economy. This enabled them to start families, just as new highways and expanding suburbs allowed them to raise those families outside the city. Their earnings, like the aid we sent to Europe under the Marshall Plan, fueled the economy by heating up demand for goods and services. This in turn stimulated a burgeoning consumer society as more and more Americans, moving up into the middle class, reaped the benefits of improved technology, better housing, shorter working hours, more leisure time, and increasingly comfortable lives. The fruits of this prosperity were not spread equally. African Americans still faced formidable barriers as to where they could live and work, but even for them the war opened many doors that could never be shut again. It was not long before the good life became the sovereign right of every American, at least in theory—and that theory would cast a long shadow.

The arrival of these outsiders in the mainstream of American society had a close parallel in the arts. Just as the needs of the economy opened professions previously closed to Jews, the needs of a newly cosmopolitan culture, born in the shadow of unspeakable wartime carnage, opened up literature and academic life to Jewish writers. Specialists in alienation, virtuosos of moral anguish, witnesses to the pains and gains of assimilation, they had a timely story to tell. Race had always been close to the heart of American life but the war against Germany, Italy, and Japan brought this issue home more than anything since the Civil War and Reconstruction. Black writers too had a tale to tell, as Richard Wright had recently shown in *Native Son* and *Black Boy.* Thus began the stream of outsider figures who would do more than anything else to define the character of postwar writing: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, a vibrant voice from the underground rehearsing his own idiosyncratic version of black history; Flannery O'Connor's eccentric Misfit, some kind of messenger of God who expresses his frustrations through serial murder, or her Displaced Person, a European refugee literally crushed by the no-nothing society he does not begin to understand; Norman Mailer's White Negro, the hipster as moral adventurer and sociopath; the new kind of American saint of Jack Kerouac and the wayward, misunderstood adolescents of J. D. Salinger; the ordinary grunts oppressed by their officers in so many war novels; the anguished old Jews and magical schlemiel figures in Bernard Malamud's stories; the loopy intellectuals who fill Saul Bellow's fiction with their long memories and sardonic cultural speculations; the refined old-world decadents of Nabokov, with their classy style and kinky or comical longings; Philip Roth's protagonists, who make grand opera of their sexual needs, exposing the stigmata they received in the gender wars. These characters, all in some way projections of their distinguished authors, are like Kafka's leopards in the temple, implosions of the irrational, children of the Freudian century, sharp-clawed primitives who would somehow be integrated into the once-decorous rites of American literature, who would *become* American literature.

Like the efflorescence of social criticism in the 1950s, the emergence of these writers points to the essential continuity of the postwar decades and reveals the roots of the counterculture of the 1960s. Along with many filmmakers, playwrights, musicians, and painters, these novelists dramatize the unease of the middle class at its moment of triumph, the air of anxiety and discontent that hangs over this period. From our dim memories of the early years of television, the dying days of the Hollywood studio system, and the popular songs of the Hit Parade, we still think of the 1950s as a time of sunny, even mindless optimism, only slightly dimmed by preparations for World War III. This is an example of selective cultural memory.

In fact, from Cole Porter and Busby Berkeley to Frank Capra, there was a good deal more optimism on show during the grim days of the Depression than in the supposedly buoyant years of economic expansion after the war. In the arts, perhaps the best known evidence of the dark side of postwar culture is film noir, the vogue of cheaply made crime movies so unlike the gangster films popular before the war. The earlier movies were really success stories; they were built around crudely charismatic men who were legendary for their amoral energy, management style, and genius for power, acquisition, and display. Though their fall was built into their rise, the death of the gangster was a glorious coda to his overreaching life rather than a moral lesson. Censors understood this early by cracking down on what they rightly saw as an idealization of the antisocial. But after the war, crime movies become a tissue of paranoia, betrayal, and fatality from which no true heroism emerges, certainly not among the forces of the law, who usually come off as faceless organization men, and hardly ever among the criminals themselves, who kill and are killed without being romanticized.

Everywhere in postwar culture we can see the marks of anxious division, even self-alienation. Some of the bleaker film genres of the 1950s, such as horror and science fiction, obviously reflected the anxieties of the Cold War and the atomic age, including the fear of menacing aliens, radioactive mutations, and nuclear annihilation. In movies like *The War of the Worlds* (1953), audiences identified with apocalyptic scenes of the destruction of New York or Los Angeles by a seemingly invulnerable force. But the dark elements that surfaced in film noir, in domestic melodramas, and in revisionist westerns are harder to explain. The John Wayne of Ford's classic prewar western, *Stagecoach* (1939), was a typical thirties character, an outlaw yet a gentleman, socially marginal like other admirable figures in the film yet unambiguously heroic. The film shows up the hypocrisy of respectable citizens like the thieving banker, while dramatizing the redemption of the those they've rejected, such as the alcoholic doctor and the good-hearted whore, whom Wayne courts and wins as if she were the finest lady. But the John Wayne of many postwar westerns from *Red River* to *The Searchers* is a more complex figure; he can be stubborn and unreasonable, obsessed with betrayal and hell-bent on revenge. This is even more true of the embittered characters played by Jimmy Stewart in gritty fifties westerns by Anthony Mann. In one of the harshest of these films, *The Naked Spur,* Stewart plays a bounty-hunter who stalks and captures a sinister killer but for mercenary reasons. He had gone off to fight the Civil War—as the so-called "greatest generation" would later fight World War II—but returned to find his woman gone and his land sold from under him. Like the Wayne of *The Searchers,* he is a morally ambiguous figure, wounded,

guarded, and hard to fathom, who must earn his bit of heroism by learning to be human again—to trust, relent, and forgive.

The Freudian wave that washed over American culture in the forties and fifties brought not only introspection but an undercurrent of hysteria into otherwise conventional genre films. These include Raoul Walsh's Oedipal gangster movie *White Heat,* in which Jimmy Cagney plays the gangster as mama's boy, who suffers from migraines and needs her to remind him to keep up a tough front; Nicholas Ray's anti-McCarthy western, *Johnny Guitar,* with Mercedes McCambridge consumed by her erotically tinged hatred of Joan Crawford; and Douglas Sirk's vertiginous melodrama, *Written on the Wind,* in which Dorothy Malone plays a wayward heiress who sleeps with every man she can find because she can't sleep with Rock Hudson, and dances herself into an erotic frenzy in her room while her father drops dead on the stairs below. Meanwhile, her playboy brother (Robert Stack) destroys himself slowly with alcohol and self-hatred. The love of a good woman (Lauren Bacall) and a faithful friend (Hudson) almost saves him, until, beset by jealousy and sexual anxiety, he "accidentally" shoots himself. If social suffering, poverty, and exploitation topped the agenda of the arts in the 1930s, neurosis, anxiety, and alienation played the same role in the forties and fifties when economic fears were largely put to rest.

On the other hand, some films noirs were driven less by paranoia than by romantic fatalism, a sense of doomed love, as in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), based on lurid novels by the hard-boiled writer James M. Cain, and in Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* (1949) and Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949), stories of fugitive couples pursued by the law. Unlike most postwar stories, film noir is often grounded in pulp material from the 1930s, which gives it a hard edge of cynicism and romantic abandon along with a look of fatality. Noir was not so much genre as a style and outlook that showed up in many kinds of Hollywood films; it was the great naysayer in the postwar banquet of American self-celebration. Playing on the lower half of double bills, most genre films did not have to meet the ideological test of featured productions; they flew below the radar of significant Hollywood filmmaking, creating their own kind of counterculture within the heart of the entertainment industry and offering an implicit critique of the Pollyannish, upbeat elements of the mainstream culture. This can be seen in photography as well. For every heartwarming cultural marker, such as Edward Steichen's celebrated 1955 *Family of Man* exhibition, there was a bleak rebuttal like Robert Frank's seminal collection of photographs, *The Americans* (1959), with its unpoetic view of the heartland as a grungy scene of everyday vacancy and blank happenstance.