

Frederick R. Karl

AMERICAN FICTIONS

1940 / 1980

A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation



1817

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FOREWORD

*The Alps neglect their Curtain
And we look farther on!*

EMILY DICKINSON,
"Our Lives are Swiss"

The American novel since the Second World War is, obviously, that fiction which came after 1945; but it is also more than a body of work in chronological sequence. In attitudes, recognitions, ideologies, disturbances, and techniques, it is a fiction that molded itself to post-atomic ideas and responses and reached out to become something new. We have an era, really sustained for the first time, of what we may broadly call "American modernism,"* the rough equivalent in fiction of abstract expressionism or action painting, of the *nouvelle vague* in cinema, of the post-Pound-Williams era in poetry, of serial and electronic music, of increasing forms of abstraction which have characterized all the arts. On the stage, where our cultural

*Postmodernism, fabulation, Gothicism, the antinovel, the post-antinovel novel, the self-reflective (or self-conscious) novel, Nabokovian discontinuities, Borgean fantasies, as we shall observe, are all derivatives of modernism, either developments, expansions, or reductions of the original impulse. Because modernism came relatively late to American fiction, critics have been eager to relabel what are impulses from a movement that never dissipated its original energies. In the prewar novel, only Faulkner and Dos Passos, among major novelists, assimilated European ideas of modernism and even there in limited quantities, and certainly without establishing any equivalent American movement.

ideals are visualized more directly, the bare, abstract, symbolic look is part of this general movement. Theater manifested the perfect expression of the era in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—in language, characters, themes, staging, even clothes. In all its diversity, the postwar novel has striven for precisely this achievement: to defamiliarize the familiar, to make the reader reinvent the world, and while moving human experience to the margins, to move the margins toward the center.

Several studies of this period have attempted to categorize its fiction. Each characterization is an effort to convey coherence to a massive body of very individualized work. It has been called a "city of words" (by Tony Tanner), a "waste land beyond" (Raymond Olderman), a literature "after alienation" (Marcus Klein), a period of "radical innocence" (Ihab Hassan), in part a "world elsewhere" (Richard Poirier), a literature of "disruption" (Jerome Klinkowitz), the inheritor of an eroticism based on "love and death" (Leslie Fiedler). Most of these diagnoses are ingenious, and some are quite useful as critical tools. They all fall short, however, of being sufficiently inclusive, and nearly all neglect both patterns and details of the larger culture.

Although *American Fictions* is primarily an inter-

pretation of key American fiction in the four decades since the 1940s, it is, also, a reading of the culture from which the novels and writers derived. By "culture," I mean not only literature or the arts, but the social, political, and economic institutions that help define a society. If we seek coherence in the fiction, we must discover a profile for the era.

I play two roles: first, locating and identifying several paradoxes that reflect a complex, even profound cultural experience; second, redefining the nature of our taste in fiction by distinguishing between novels (even very adroit ones) and literature. My two points interpenetrate. The great vitality and inventiveness of the postwar American novel derive from its confrontation with what, ultimately, will help to frustrate it. It is doubtful whether in any other period in history the serious writer has had to respond to so many unyielding, rapidly altering, and irreconcilable conflicts. Yet the American writer boldly pursues the paradoxes of the American experience, trying to reconcile the irresolvable, unwilling to be defeated by the presence of so much diversity. The resonance of a baffled Melville and an embattled Whitman can be heard.

Unlike his English contemporaries, who seem comfortable within reductive and unresolved elements, the American writer continues to chip away at uncertainties, perhaps hoping that in this somewhat stale Eden he or she against all odds to the contrary can gain a foothold. Every grappling point, however, is slippery and hostile. What is remarkable about America is that even while it appears to assimilate, indeed to devour, the new, it is resistant to nearly everything important. The serious writer bangs his head against this particular irony.

We must nevertheless emphasize that many of our experiences that seem so startlingly innovative are anchored deep in our past. Postwar discontinuity, of course, exists, but it frequently prospers within the context of continuous lines. Although Emerson and Thoreau, not to speak of Jefferson and, further back, the Puritans, may have receded from our *active* imagination, their presence *is* clear in the themes, obsessions, conflicts, and even techniques of our contemporary novelists.

My second point is directed at a cultural phenomenon of considerable importance, which is that our tastes in serious fiction are increasingly being guided by the mass media: that is, reduced to television or film. The distinctions between novels and literature have become so fuzzy that even our more responsible critics look to "big names" as our cultural luminaries

and "big books" as cultural events. The star system has so confused our cultural values that much which passes for literature is simply fiction. Novels, rather than literature, are part of the "now" and are, for that reason, more appealing and accessible to the media.* It is not that bad drives out good—although that may occur—but that mediocrity is hailed. Novels are pumped up to seem like literature, when they are simply—novels. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Lie Down in Darkness* were early examples, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* another, *Herzog* a fourth. Sometimes a writer produces several novels that are greeted extravagantly as significant literature—the work of William Styron, exemplifies that,† or John Updike—and yet retrospection suggests a different order of being.

To discover where literature does exist, we must seek beyond media favorites and those who gain publicity on nonliterary grounds. Readability and accessibility, while *never* to be discounted as essential to entertainment, cannot preempt other values. Yet many of those whom I cite as makers of literature are, admittedly, difficult in their point of view and execution. I have in mind John Hawkes, William Gaddis, John Barth, Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, William Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, with more traditional fiction by Saul Bellow,

*The negative response to John Barth's *Letters* (1979) is instructive and should be juxtaposed to the acclamation afforded John Irving's *The World According to Garp*. While very difficult to read and in many aspects a display of authorial self-indulgence, *Letters* is a significant cultural event. For it does what literature is supposed to do, which is to probe new modes of perception, however tedious the process. *Letters* must be given time to find its level.

†Jerome Klinkowitz, an academic critic, views Vonnegut as an important "post-contemporary," the senior member of a group that is remaking the novel through "radical disruption" of novelistic conventions. "Vonnegut's rise to eminence [Klinkowitz writes] coincides precisely with the shift in taste which brought a whole new reading public—and eventually critical appreciation—to the works of Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, Jerzy Kosinski, and others. Ten years and several books their elder, Vonnegut by his long exile underground was well prepared to be the senior member of the new disruptive group, and the first of its number to be seriously considered for the Nobel Prize." Academic criticism here becomes indistinguishable from media hype; this could have come from *Time*, *Newsweek*, *People* magazine, or a CBS television commentator. The opposite of such hyperbole comes from *Commentary* mercenaries who, as the result of conservative political allegiances and/or toadying to the editor, feel obliged to denigrate what are often solid literary impulses.

Ralph Ellison, Walker Percy, Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, Bernard Malamud, providing and continuing to provide literary events. Literature in the modern or postmodern period is often inaccessible or even disagreeable—as were Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's "Waste Land" in 1922—but it has a shaping vision that goes well beyond the novel of the "now." We must once more make that leap, as though it had not been made before. We must never forget that Gide found Proust unintelligible, a poor writer of French; that early readers of *Ulysses* reeled without guidelines; that "The Waste Land" remained impenetrable for years.

Most (not all) major work of this forty-year span in American fiction derives from its reliance on the modern movement, the willingness of our authors to experiment, to have sensational failures (such as Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*) as well as inaccessible triumphs (Gaddis's *JR*). We find European ideas of fiction entering as early as the 1940s, in John Hawkes (especially *The Cannibal*) and Saul Bellow (*Dangling Man*), then in the 1950s in William Gaddis and John Barth, with some intimations from Norman Mailer; followed by an avalanche of work in the modern mode—more Barth, more Gaddis, Coover, Pynchon, Gass, Barthelme, McElroy, Sukenick, Kosinski, the English novels of Nabokov. Even less experimental novelists—Roth, Bellow, Ellison, Heller, Baldwin, for example—were not immune. An early draft of *Catch-22*, for one, was an almost unintelligible version of a Joycean stream. The models were not always the same, but they included Joyce (apparent in Faulkner and Dos Passos, in an earlier generation),* Kafka, Céline, Borges, French existentialist novelists and philosophers (handled very derivatively), Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, Heidegger and phenomenology, Freud, Jung, and their epigones, plus aspects of Proust, Beckett, Gide, Woolf, Conrad, Mann, Hesse.

The era gains its coherence from the interpenetra-

*The earlier generation—Dos Passos, Faulkner, and Hemingway, of course, Wright Morris, John O'Hara, John Steinbeck, Katherine Anne Porter—was at the time of World War II alive and writing; but its most significant work either belonged to an earlier period, the twenties or thirties, or else did not respond to the vast changes that the war brought. The most ambitious book from that group in the postwar era was Faulkner's *A Fable* (1954). For this, Faulkner selected an episode in the First World War, creating a religious mythology which, while very powerful, would have little meaning in the larger culture after the later war. For all its energy and reach, the book is a holding action, not an exploration.

tion of foreign ideas and techniques with typically American ones. European sense of time had to work through with American stress on space; European dread with American escape; European historical dimensions with American presentness; European sense of decline and last-ditch philosophy with American bustle, growth, its own forms of entropy, frustration, and dejection. American pastoral had to accommodate European "counterfeit"; American openness, European disguise and invisibility. Even American underground—as in Ellison or Wright—had to adjust to European subterranean modes, whether Dostoyevskian or Kafkan.

Through a decade-by-decade arrangement, this book can locate the larger culture as it lies in the individual writer and focus on how he or she is both continuous and discontinuous with European and American themes. Discussion by decade rather than chapter readings of a particular novelist's work can help us account for such apparently divergent materials as the combat and war novels of the late forties and the fifties, a large body of fiction by black Americans, an equally large outpouring by ethnic novelists (mainly Jewish), the appearance of an ever increasing body of work by female writers, the presence, in fact, of writers as culturally different as Hawkes, Oates, Ellison, Flannery O'Connor, Barthelme, Mailer, Roth, Gaddis, Baldwin, Bellow, Burroughs, and Barth. What can they possibly have in common: a writer like Bellow, who, after *Dangling Man*, used his intelligence to resist European models, and one like Pynchon, who has subscribed to everything the Europeans can offer? At first look they would appear not even to share the same map of the United States, or else to share the America of Jasper Johns, distorted on canvas almost beyond recognition. (The decade arrangement has some few exceptions: when a particular career—such as Burroughs's—is as a whole more illuminating culturally than if parceled out; and when certain themes—for example, those pertaining to politics, growing up, minimalism, the female experience, and the nonfiction novel—cut significantly across the decade pattern.)

In this period, American fiction is no longer simply American; just as America itself is no longer purely American. The Atlantic, once divisive, has receded in favor of overseas linguistic modes, experiments with structure, a willful difficulty. As our culture has turned, so has our fiction. We cannot read postwar fiction—and this is a factor common to all of it—without reference to European novels, philosophy, cultural modes. And yet the American novel is

still American. The point is that "American" has a different sense and feel to it, a different weight, both a tentativeness and a resolution that are its own and not quite its own. In brief, postwar fiction spins out in reflected images what the culture is becoming. Rather than dying or becoming extraneous or a false guide, the novel at no time in history has illuminated more a country, a people, a direction.

We should think of the postwar novelist in America as fitting into that description Jung made of the "Trickster Figure." His subject was the coyote, both a natural and a magical creature. At one time, the coyote had become, for the American Indian, a figure capable of changing from a physical to a spiritual state, and back again—in a series of transformations that suggested a huge, mysterious center. But with the coming of the white man, the coyote lost its magical presence, and its transformation from one role to another was observed no longer as spiritual or shamanistic, but as mean cunning, something in the world of the trickster, not the magician. It became part of that definition in which the cowboy or Westerner refers to a low-spirited person as a "coyote."

Yet the coyote continues, working its changes, altering its personality, and it survives. In a sense, without being mean-spirited as individuals, our novelists must become tricksters; for they have lost their aura as magicians and spiritualists. That power has passed elsewhere, to the culture in which the novel counts little: to the world of sound and sensation;* to the world of psychology and psychoanalysis; or to the social sciences, which have preempted the flashier elements of the novelist's material. The novelist survives, of course, but like the coyote, he must work

*William Burroughs is our novelist of that "aural culture," where sounds can be used as forms of power and control. For Burroughs, the tape recorder is more potent than a nuclear bomb. Warhol's *a*, which poses as the new, is derivative Burroughs.

along the contours of different frontiers; he must approach borders differently, and he must be prepared to accept his lesser role in a white man's America. The magic has gone out, not only from his world but from the world; and it has passed elsewhere or been extinguished. What the novelist needs, now, is not only a vision but strategies for holding on; for he/she still embodies the crises, conflicts, and tensions which we associate with a culture—although precisely what the culture embodies has become part of America's fictions.

Jung speaks of a savior: "Only out of disaster can the longing for the savior arise—in other words, the recognition and unavoidable integration of the shadow create such a harrowing situation that nobody but a savior can undo the tangled web of fate." But Pynchon, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, gives us less pretentious perspectives: "Ghosts used to be either likenesses of the dead or wraiths of the living. But here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly. The status of the name you miss, love, and search for has grown ambiguous and remote, but this is even more than the bureaucracy of mass absence—some still live, some have died, but many, many have forgotten which they are. Their likenesses will not serve. Down here are only wrappings left in the light, in the dark images of the Uncertainty." To negotiate as ghosts in the shadow—not as saviors—is the function of the novelist, the one-time shaman now turned trickster. Behind those shadows, the novelist, like the coyote, survives by redefining himself and his culture.

Those who lament that the postwar American novel has not produced its Proust, Mann, or Joyce should recall that the earlier generation of American novelists—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Wolfe, Dreiser, the source now of so much nostalgia—lacked a Proust and Mann also. We must return to the last century for that, when Melville was our Joyce, Hawthorne our Proust, Emerson our Mann, Poe our Gide. For giants, except for Faulkner, look backward.

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A POLEMICAL INTRODUCTION: WHO WE ARE

We are double-edged blades, and every time we whet our virtue the return stroke straps our vice. Where is the skilful swordsman who can give clean wounds, and not rip up his work with the other edge?

THOREAU,
A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers

. . . it is unlawful to do what one will spoil by doing.

Ibid.

Many writers, during their lifetime, occupy the very center of novel-making. This is a large, rather disorganized center, and they fill it at different levels and removes from each other. Such novelists are of widely different kinds, but I am speaking of Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., William Styron, Irwin Shaw, Truman Capote, James Baldwin, among many others. Because some have been able to dramatize their lives (through public appearances and political appeals), or gain an inordinate amount of media attention (by appearances at Elaine's or literary parties), in ball games in the Hamptons, or through drinking brawls, multiple marriages, talk shows), they appear as central cultural figures. And some of them are, some of the time.

For several of these writers, however, their significance is guaranteed only by their physical presence; remove *them* and their work recedes rapidly. Mailer's last unqualified novel (a considerable achievement) was in 1967. Often, the attention paid to them is disproportionate to their body of work, although in some of their books they indicate serious intentions. Saul Bellow, for one, has for thirty-five years sailed close to the real centers of fictional achievement, but his critical sense has lagged behind his novelistic gifts, and he early on connected himself to a self-defeating

conservative aesthetic. As a consequence, he did not permit his talent to take him where it could, and moderation itself—except in *Henderson the Rain King* (1959)—appears to have hobbled his imagination. He is, in this respect, almost the obverse of Norman Mailer, who has absorbed the “new” without being able to reflect it fictionally. Yet an adulatory press still hails them as literary heroes, cultural lions.

My quarrel is not with these writers—let them seek their fame where they may—but with the neglect literarily and aesthetically of possibly more important writers and their books. Some of these, such as Barth and Pynchon, are suitably praised; but they are not considered touchstones of literary effort, either in the press or other media, or in much of the academy. Many of these writers—besides Barth and Pynchon, I have in mind William Gaddis, John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme—are physically removed from the scenes where fame accrues. And their work certainly does not lend itself to certain kinds of staff reviewing or popular reception.

We encounter a curious phenomenon, in its complexities almost uniquely applicable to postwar fiction. That is the entrance of the serious novel into the world of entertainment (more varied and competitive than ever before), with the novelist himself as

entertainer.* Sports figures have become a more vulgarized version of the same process. In an earlier generation, Ernest Hemingway was perhaps the leading practitioner of this kind of substitute for literary effort. As his work declined in significance, he increasingly offered himself: fishing, hunting, eating and drinking, divorcing, remarrying, following the bulls, romancing the media. His activities have spawned an entire generation, and in some ironic way, if we seek Hemingway's influence on postwar fiction we find it more in his public personality than in his work.

Running parallel to the above is something equally invidious, and paradoxically, this phenomenon is connected to our strengths as well as weaknesses. We are all familiar with the fact that the more extreme and outlandish the event, vision, or people, the more readily it or they are accommodated to our sense of things. One of our postwar shibboleths is that everything reflects us; we are everywhere—a spinoff of Emerson's dictum that man is the source of all. In quick order, the culture embraces and assimilates the vision, and then through imitations reduces the original, until, finally, the latter is replaced by the substitute, which comes to stand for the whole. When a literary vision is involved, such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, only the substitute enters the marketplace of ideas.

The man with the vision gives way to the man who has a vision to sell—a commentator, reviewer, columnist, media personality, that middle ground of literacy and competency. The seductiveness of the marketplace for ideas is indeed one of our glories, the result of egalitarianism in all aspects of our culture. None of this involves “selling out” to capitalism, as the left once labeled it; it is part of our ideology as Americans.

Yet the marketplace establishes its own paradoxes. For even as it expresses our uniqueness as a people and a culture, it must reduce everything it touches. An extended example: The American novel of the last two decades has been like a beehive, equaled only by the aggregate of Latin American fiction—full of invention and energy, innovative techniques, daring use

of language. Nevertheless, the impact of the novel as an art form has been slight because of its very accessibility, and chiefly because of the ease with which every aspect of experience can be expressed and published. Dilution begins with publication and ends with media reductionism. In the Soviet Union, any idea expressed in an art form or as a criticism of official policy must push its way against incredible odds—to get written, to be published (publicly or underground), to be distributed, finally to be read. An idea that rubs the culture wrong becomes a spearlike thrust.

In a tolerant society such as ours, an idea loses its power long before it has the opportunity to simmer in the marketplace. All this is greatly to be preferred, of course, to the suppression of art and the terrorizing of the artist. Yet it is in just such a flexible atmosphere and in just such a society that art dissipates its values. The artist becomes part of the society, no matter how severe his vision, how extreme his criticism. Heller's vision of America as nightmare, in *Something Happened*, goes on to become a best-seller, a bourgeois artifact. Burroughs's revolutionary stances made him a sought-after speaker. It is not only a question of money, or of the salability of a product, not only a question of hyperbolic overkill—it is the very nature of a tolerant society to absorb whatever seems dangerous and turn it into mass communication. Good art can survive, however, only if its ideas are given their run.

The very term “novelist” has become suspect in the postwar era, and many novelists prefer to call themselves “writers,” which can be packaged better. Part of this confusion of realms is a by-product of the 1960s–70s concern with the “new journalism,” where borders were, in the view of some, blurred; so that one could speak of the nonfiction novel, or novelistic journalism. “Writing,” rather than journalism or novel-making, was the acceptable phrase for those who moved along the contours. Much of this nomenclature was nonsense, for novels and nonfiction or journalism, new or otherwise, are very different things. This new form could be stressed only because of a general disdain for the novel.

The “death of the novel” controversy (d.o.n.c.) is connected to the assimilationist tendencies of the marketplace and to the role of the novel as entertainment, the novelist as entertainer. D.o.n. talk had begun as early as the 1950s, but in the 1960s, passions flared. In the earlier decade, Lionel Trilling had denied the phenomenon in an essay called “The Novel Alive or Dead” (February 1955), although he granted

*John Aldridge picked up this development in the 1950s and wrote, in the 1960s, that it may be better for a young writer not to continue writing and “far more strategic for him just to lean back and enjoy the advantages that come simply from being well known.” Celebrity, he adds, becomes self-perpetuating, dependent less on work produced than on skillful public relations.

the temptation to add his signature “to the certificate of the novel’s death.” Leslie Fiedler later spoke of “The End of the Novel,” part of the apocalypse, indeed Armageddon, he saw in American culture as a whole. In “The Ivory Tower and the Dust Bowl,” Albert Guérard, in 1953, had tried to lay a different groundwork, so that the novel could be perceived as alive, based no longer on history but on language, withdrawal, new stances to fit new circumstances. And in 1969, John Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion,” which was misread as part of the d.o.n.c., was really about revivals.

Of course, revivals and resurrections can lead to excesses. James Tuttleton cautioned that “when the idea gains currency that a whole genre is exhausted in the achievement of its first great example, writers whose genius may best find expression in traditional forms are driven toward the extremes of a futile dead-end experimentalism—simply to be ‘inventive,’ to escape the charge of ‘imitation.’” Nevertheless, the drive to bury the novel went on, with Louis Rubin’s book called *The Curious Death of the Novel: Essays in American Literature* (1967). Rubin felt that the novel is now in the stage of “rearrangement and replenishment of literary energies,” an interval. We are marking time “while a group of very talented writers—Styron, Bellow, Malamud, Barth, others—explore the already mostly discovered ground to see whether anything important has been overlooked.”

To press his point, he says that we have no Faulkners, Joyces, Hemingways, Fitzgeralds, Prousts, Manns, and the like in the postwar era. Yet by citing Joyce, Proust, and Mann, Rubin overloads his circuits, since only Faulkner can compete there, and to compare American contemporaries with them is both critically and culturally unsound. Even in Rubin’s own terms, Hemingway and Fitzgerald are not at the level of Proust, or Joyce, or Kafka.

Ronald Sukenick offered a witty reply to d.o.n. critics in his novella “The Death of the Novel” (1969). Sukenick provides his own version of what has died in the novel—not the genre but its materials—and then writes a novella as a film sequence to demonstrate the vitality of fictional forms. To clear the ground, Sukenick lists what no longer exists, like James’s dismissal of American culture in his biography of Hawthorne: “Reality doesn’t exist, time doesn’t exist, personality doesn’t exist. God was an omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot, and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there’s no guarantee of the authenticity of the received version.” Chance rules, and all reality is indi-

vidual experience—German phenomenology transferred to fiction. So, Sukenick agrees, the novel *has* died, and one must seek ways to resurrect it. While we should hail Sukenick’s defense of the novel, we should be wary of his dismissals. What has kept the novel from dying has not been an awareness of the loss of time, destiny, reality, personality, et al., but a perception that these older ideas exist in a dialectic with their denial; that the old is very much with us, but only as one element of a “reality.” What is needed is not a further dismissal of the old—Sukenick leans on Robbe-Grillet as if the latter had already transformed fiction—but modes in which the dialectic can dissolve, reform, and defamiliarize. As this occurs, the novel survives the marketplace, assimilation, and its critics.

In many instances, novelists who are considered marginal—while perhaps treated respectfully—are experimenters: inventors on their own or ingenious borrowers of European forms. There is an apparent division which fits in perfectly with American social leveling. The novelists who offer themselves in the marketplace as “writers” are traditionalists who eschew experiment or adventurousness. The writers who either reject the limelight outright, or shun it because celebrity insists on assimilation, are frequently the experimenters. It is a premise of this book that in the latter group we are more likely to find literature; in the former, novels. The latter are, admittedly, difficult, and often when their books go wrong, as Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* does, they are unreadable. Yet even when accessible, their books can present such a challenge even to the experienced reader that they become coterie writers—consider Gaddis and especially his *JR*, or some of Barthelme (*The Dead Father*, for example), or Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Even so, difficult works are not always permanently difficult. The later fiction of these writers often opens up the earlier, so that in the light of *JR*, *The Recognitions* becomes more accessible, or with *Chimera* in mind, even *Giles Goat-Boy* becomes approachable.

In point of fact, many readers (and reviewers) are still fighting battles about modernism, which had already altered our consciousness by 1930, no less 1960 or 1980. We can, for ironic purposes, return to over a century ago, when Herman Melville, beginning with *Moby-Dick*, decided to be new, and lost the readership gained from his earlier romances of the South Seas. Melville’s pronouncement that he wanted to be different, that he deemed (surface) inconsistency a

virtue to be achieved, is echoed in John Hawkes's youthful statement that his work will eliminate plot and character in their traditional roles. Such an overstatement, which Hawkes later retracted in part, is well within an established American tradition. Emerson's stress upon intuition, his proposition that every "natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact," his assertion that he has taught one doctrine, "namely, the infinitude of the private man"—all support disarrangement, inconsistency, the shadowy and the vague as against the bright and the clearly delineated. If man shares in the "divine superabundance" and if the sole integrity in life is the integrity of one's own mind, under such conditions the author immerses himself, like all men, in the universal mind; what is consequent is a synesthesia and disarrangement that we ordinarily associate with the nineteenth-century *poètes maudits*. American experimentalism has a long lineage, not only from its European sources but from its own American tradition.

Hawkes's very early novella "The Owl" begins: "Him?/Think not of him for your daughter, Signore, nor for her sister either. There will be none for him. Not him. He has taken his gallows, the noose and knot, to marry.'" There is no discernible speaker. An unknown voice comes out of what might be a recording hidden in a tree. Even the prepared reader is disconcerted. The place mentioned in the next line is Sasso Fetore ("stinking rock" or "tomb," in Italian), no known geographical location; and the "I" of the story, but not the narrator of the first words, is Il Gufo (the goof), the owl of the title. We already feel exhausted, as if some terrible weight were being laid upon us.

Words pour out, as though the writer has forgotten us or assumes we know where he is heading, where he came from. There is none of the traditional information or linkage, as in Bellow, Mailer, or Malamud. The very rationale here is missing, and Hawkes has himself seemed to vanish. Coherence, if it does exist, resides inside the form, and that comfortable reader settled in his chair must work out what the Owl means, what Sasso Fetore is, locate it (or not) in time and space, and pursue intelligibility.

Experimentation is not, of course, the only thing; but it does suggest that fiction is responding to the culture, reflecting it with vitality.* Our postwar era

*Saul Bellow disagrees not only about experimentation but about vitality. Writing in *Modern Occasions* (Winter 1971), he begins: "I'm not sure that what we have is a literary situation; it seems rather to be a sociological, a political, a psychological

has been called, variously, the age of narcissism, the "me too" age, the age of anxiety, of liberation, of depression, of melancholy, the post-atomic age. Fiction is hard-pressed to respond, in subject matter as in treatment. An unorthodox "novel" such as Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) is, because of the circularity of its form, a greater reflection of American narcissism than (say) Bellow's *Herzog* (1964), which seems more directly self-indulgent.

By way of disconnections and disruptions, the novelist—and the reader by implication—is doing no more than experiencing Emerson's dictum: "the *all in each* of human nature," the universal residing in each individual, by way of intuition. The novelist must move along the lines of that intuition, even when it leads toward disaster. Emerson repeated: "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." This may have proved pernicious, a prod to solipsism, or else the ultimate in democratic egalitarianism. The paradox here, in Emerson, nourishes the novel, and nowhere more than in the postwar era. What may be destructive in the larger culture can frequently provide the right mix of drama, paradox, and irony for fiction.

I suggested that an experimental fiction like *Pale Fire* might be more expressive of the culture's subjectivism than a more traditional work such as *Herzog*, or *Goodbye, Columbus*; although all three expertly characterize the sixties, with elements of the Roth collection preternaturally prophetic. Yet still another example, Hawkes's *Second Skin*—an intensely American work in the Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Edenic tradition—suggests even more fully how experimentation can jar us into a sense of the culture, or how the culture can be filtered through a work of fiction.

By the time of *Second Skin* (1964), Hawkes had worked through to more traditional forms than in *The Cannibal* or *The Owl*, while retaining his disturbing method of limning characters and events as if his eyes were pieces of glass refracting even as they observed. The prose has some greater flexibility, but it is stilted and oblique, not the language of discourse but a self-conscious literary mode. He begins:

I will tell you in a few words who I am: lover of the humming-bird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped; lover of bright needlepoint and the bright stitching fingers of humorless old ladies bent to the sweet and infamous designs;

situation in which there are literary elements. Literature itself has been swallowed up."

lover of parasols made from the same puffy stuff as a young girl's underdrawers; still lover of that small naval boat which somehow survived the distressing years of my life between her decks or in her pilot-house; and also lover of poor dear black Sonny, my mess boy, fellow victim and confidant, and of my wife and child. But most of all, lover of my harmless and sanguine self.

The materials so far presented center the fiction within the consciousness of an individual "I," but without any identification and without sign of development or direction. The novel is motionless; the key image is stasis. Yet our bewilderment about roles is precisely what Hawkes has attempted to evoke: self against self, our wonder against his strategies. Bewilderment raises consciousness, as does frustration. The process of defamiliarization has begun, from the first lines, and our grappling for fixed points relates as much back to us as to the desire for location.

As the section called "Naming Names" moves along, we discover little help. Hawkes turns to mythical forms, to Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Antigone, then into a mixture of Hamlet, Gertrude, and Cassandra. He has begun, apparently, with a very compressed reprise of the past, such as we find in the Shakespearean Prologue, spoken rapidly while everyone is still being seated. Words provide, not guidance, but a whiff of chaos, a sense of anarchy. Language divides us from meaning and from reality.

Once carried along, we note that Hawkes works through tensions created by adversary lines of development. Whatever he gives in one instance, he withdraws in another. His central intelligence, Skipper or the Captain, is the writer of his tale, and we are located in the familiar territory of "remembrance of things past," a fable of self unfolding to create its own text. This narrative method establishes a complicated time sequencing and, as well, turns outward space into space denied, into space as having already been experienced even as we the reader observe it shaping up. Setting his present view of himself against what occurred in the past, Skipper has developed a second skin and can deny the reality of the first. While he appears to be a picaresque of sorts (and encourages this manly aspect), there is always the "other" dimension, alien to the picaresque, of the inner self having already unfolded before the story is related.

For Hawkes, this double bind, with its inner core of negative energy, is particularly necessary, since his vision at its best withholds as much as it releases. What creates the dimension of "otherness" is the

reader's consciousness seeking order, while the writer is reluctant to reveal his pattern. He pays out information in bits, and even names—the profusion of Gertrudes, Cassandras, Pixies, Mirandas, Catalina Kates—disallow an easy narrative until the reader has sorted out their almost interchangeable roles as mother, daughter, granddaughter, one island woman, second island woman, and so on. Hawkes slants in as part of his strategy to upset traditional narrative styles, routine plot structure, customary notions of character and setting. His world is composed of half-moons, where the other side remains a mystery; darks and lights, as if in some Manichee vision, dominate landscape and background.

As a twilight writer, a kind of Munch in words—Fiedler misleadingly places him among the Gothicismists—Hawkes burrows into paradoxes and adversary possibilities by way of distortion of perspective, convoluted time, inverted sequences, antirealist devices. His fiction is an adversary force, still within the terms of the traditional novel, but extending its countering potentialities to the inner reaches of time and space. His scenes are themselves nonsequential, noncausal; often they appear to have no association with each other, for they move laterally as well as horizontally and vertically. Whether judged successful or not, his methods aim at a transformation of our fictional consciousness, an attempt to reflect, in terms of perspective, the larger culture as we would find it in the 1960s. Although some of Hawkes's materials look back to European modernism, he had adapted himself to his own time and place. Read *Second Skin* and observe the sixties unfold.

If the postwar era in America is characterized by tentativeness, lack of completion and fulfillment, a sense of shivering disappointment, frustration amid plenty, the fear that everything is temporary (ready either to collapse or to disappear), the recognition that while all matters, little counts—if this is the mood which swings up and down, then fiction is sorely tested; or else left behind by the more popular media, which can shift attitudes overnight. If the postwar American is a difficult target to focus upon, then the postwar American novelist seems to arrive and depart like Merlin. Crèvecoeur called our country "this great American asylum," but the noun has taken on quite a different connotation. Can we even define what an American novelist is in this "great American asylum"? De Tocqueville spoke of "three races" in the United States, but when we look at our fiction writers, we find closer to thirty, or more.

The postwar era has become noted for the proliferation of designations. Among black writers alone, we have black Americans, Afro-Americans, Negroes, then subdivisions for each sex; among Jews, we find Jewish-Americans, Jewish novelists, subdivisions into male and female, occasionally further subdivisions into the particular Jewish orientation—German, Eastern European, Sephardic, and eventually we can expect South American Jews, North African Jews, Israelis, and so on. Among other ethnic authors, we have Irish and Italian, but few females. Then we have Southern novelists, a subdivision that began in an earlier generation, but still is used, catching as wide a group as Walker Percy (a Catholic and, like J. F. Powers, often referred to as a “Catholic novelist”), Flannery O’Connor (also Catholic, but referred to as a “lady Southern novelist”), Eudora Welty (not noted for any religious affiliation), William Styron, a transplanted Southerner, and so on. Then among the so-called WASP writers, we have divisions that cut across numerous categories, from William Burroughs to John Cheever, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, James Purdy, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, John Hawkes, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis. This is a group of such variety—except for the preponderance of John and William as Christian names—that we have no justification for labeling it a group or category. We can expect still further subdivisions, for even now male and female homosexual writers are distinguishing themselves from heterosexual authors, so that we will have the lesbian Jewish-American novelist or the gay black-American writer.

This diversification, which is generally healthy for a democracy but is a nightmare for the classifier of materials, whether literary critic or taxonomist, is an inevitable reflection of American culture. If de Tocqueville could speak of Indian, Negro, and white, we must speak of such variousness that only language holds our fictional literature together. One of the tenets of this study is that no matter what the sex, the race, the ethnic or religious affiliation of the writer, he or she is first and foremost an American writer because of the use of American English.* The commitment to writing in American English, for the black, Jew, Italian, Irish Catholic, WASP, male or female, gay or straight, is a commitment to American values,

*For this reason, I have omitted Isaac Bashevis Singer. Jewish or black novelists—Cynthia Ozick and John Williams, for example—who pepper their English with Yiddish or black idiom are nevertheless connected by a shared language and its traditions.

no matter what the stresses, attitudes, antagonisms, degrees of separation, and hostilities of the writer. John Cheever and James Baldwin may appear widely separated (although after *Falconer* one cannot be certain of anything), but commonality of language makes them foster brothers. This is not to say that their language, or their literary usage, is the same. After commonality comes diversification.

An excellent example of cultural bifurcation comes in the work of Vladimir Nabokov, who grew up bilingual in English and Russian. Although his career divides into the Russian half and the English half, when Nabokov turned to “American” as his novelistic language, he carried over such a burden of Russian culture and language that his English works are truly “Russian-American.”† *Pale Fire* exemplifies this bifurcation: for within the confines of the English Commentary by Charles Kinbote, the preponderance of Zemblan (a mock Russian) overlays the American English and creates a cultural divide which we do not find in Jewish-American, black-American, or Italian-American novelists. Their thinking is clued in to American themes, reflected in their language; whereas Nabokov, no matter how Americanized his terminology, was thinking as a highly sophisticated European with particular reference to Russian culture. We have no equivalent of Nabokov in this respect. No serious American novelist, home bred, can carry such a weight of another culture, and, therefore, his or her language—idiom, usage, vocabulary—is critical in demonstrating cultural roots. The use of a language reflects a culture so profoundly that it orders virtually every aspect of human perception. Jerzy Kosinski by writing in English and not Polish—even when his grasp of the learned language was uncertain—placed himself in a vastly different literary culture which would affect everything he could envisage or relate.

What we say here pertains particularly to black and Jewish novelists. Writers who identify strongly with the black experience, such as Morrison, Baraka, Williams, Reed, Brown, Killens, could, if they wished, cast their novels in what they consider to be black English. Reed, in fact, has moved toward a kind of “middle language” so as to convey a different kind of experience from that of (say) Ellison or Baldwin. Such a use of English, which would be heavily dependent upon a specialized idiom, vocabulary, and tonality, would come closer to conveying the sense of a distinctive black experience than does the “alien” lan-

†Especially his final masterwork, *Ada*.

guage of standard American English, even when the latter is peppered with images and idioms from black culture.

Yet black writers have rejected this form of expression. It would, of course, seal them off from most of their readership; but more importantly, I think, in terms of their own creative development, it would deny a large part of their experience as Americans. As a result of schooling they grew up, as did many of us, in a two-language culture: one, the home language, the other the standard language of public school. Since writers are usually early and serious readers, the language they read in their formative years was a standard English, which carried with it a cultural freight they could not easily shuffle off. Further, when they read foreign literatures, the language was the standard English of translations, of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, Kafka, Sartre, and Camus. When LeRoi Jones (not yet Baraka) wrote his powerful play *Dutchman*, he drew on the universal myth of the Flying Dutchman, adapting it to the black experience; that is, wedding his reading to his own experience, as he would later do with Dante's *Inferno*.

Similarly, novelists with certain ideas about life and people and culture that we consider "Jewish" are American writers, not Jewish writers, not members of a Jewish club, affiliated to each other not as Jews but as Americans. They are not part of a Yiddish or Hebrew tradition, but of an American historical background. The distinctions among them are far greater than the similarities, and to speak of them as "Jewish-American" is to homogenize what should be particularized. Even when Yiddish seems close to the surface of their English usage, how intensely American they are in their response to the culture! Malamud's *The Assistant*, for example, is ostensibly about a "Jewish experience," flavored with Yiddish expressions, its English inverted as if a translation from Yiddish; and yet it is full of 1950s upward mobility—for the Italian Frank Alpine, being Jewish means a higher economic status. His name is his destiny. In *A New Life*, S. Levin, a New York Jew, seeks rebirth in an American Eden, and in so doing flirts with every motif in American culture since the Puritans. Despite some Yiddish tonalities, Malamud's English is solidly American, full of hip idiom, mocking the clichés, aware of nuances, using a contemporary modish language as the means of shaping character and event.

None of this denies the specifics of the Jewish and black experiences; each is clearly very different from that of the American WASP or the Italian Catholic—but different in its secondary characteristics. Pri-

mary characteristics are part of shared values. Growing up in the 1920s and 1930s was, for most of our authors in question, a problem of relating to American forms of reality, American schizophrenia in regard to race, ethnicity, sex, sense of gain and loss, the good and the bad life. The main considerations were, for the older writers, the Depression, the agonizingly slow recovery, the Second World War, the raising of hopes in its aftermath, the cold war, the political malaise and counterfeit of the fifties, the manic mood swings of the sixties, the vague drift of the seventies. And these cultural pressures were all associated with language, which itself expanded radically to meet the changes, including terms from black and Jewish literature, from music (swing, jazz, rock 'n' roll), science and technology, films and television: all common terminology.

John Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), a novel which has never received its due, is an ambitious effort to view the black experience on a world scale. Cast mainly in Amsterdam, the novel mixes the adventures of transplanted American blacks (thinly disguised Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Williams himself) with African themes and a plot to exterminate blacks altogether. Its swelling form cuts across everything that concerned blacks in the 1960s—breadth of reach, in fact, vitiates some of the impact—and yet it is intensely American in its values. Its language is not a form of black or Africanized English, but the standard American of the white literary establishment. Since blacks and whites speak the same language, and mix socially and sexually, Williams's insistence on distinctions, while real, must be based on secondary considerations.

If language creates continuity both laterally and historically, then ideologically and philosophically the postwar American novel is continuous with American themes, even when the influence of European ideas and modes of thought is insistent. Kafka's presence may seem extraordinarily pervasive, but his influence does not snap the thread of continuity in American fiction. One of the most persistent motifs is that of the regaining of paradise by means of spatial movement; that is, to stop the clock or move back in time by way of space. This awareness of the loss of Eden, or the wasting of it, and the compulsive need to regain even the sense of it lead to terrible conflicts in American thinking and particular narrative forms. Not for nothing did the son of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., call his book on self-destructiveness and American culture *Eden Express* (three of the four chapters express "traveling," "arriving," "going"); or Emma

Rothschild title her book on the fate of the automobile (emblematic of America itself) *Paradise Lost*. Kafka and Camus link up with Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville.

The full force of the modernist movement did not strike American writers until the years after the Second World War; and with the influence of Virginia Woolf, not until the 1960s and 1970s. Although modernism in its major phases had almost run its course in Europe by the early 1930s, its impact then on American fiction was minimal. Unlike the poets, only Dos Passos, Faulkner, and Hemingway among major American novelists can be related to this movement, but the more we scrutinize Hemingway's work the more we can perceive its American forebears rather than European models. The spareness, the lulls and silences, the unspoken words, are *sui generis*, patterns of Midwestern speech and outgrowths of journalistic usage, owing little to Joyce or others. As for Dos Passos, modernism had to struggle against native naturalism, and the latter won.

When European models flooded American shores beginning in the 1940s, it was mainly Kafka's presence, reinforced, somewhat incongruously, by French existentialism, the general ideas rather than precisely the fiction of Sartre, de Beauvoir, or Camus. Camus's most popular novel, *The Stranger*, offered little new to the American sensibility; marginality, bizarre patterns of behavior, and anomie had long been staples of the American imagination. European existentialism, whose various strands are not simple, was reduced and modified for American taste; but however diluted, it did have its impact on nearly every major talent here, as that of Robbe-Grillet would a decade later. Each import, we should stress once again, whether existentialist or not, became assimilated to American needs. The purely French "novel of ideas" rarely caught on.* Existential angst (that of Sartre,

Kierkegaard, later Heidegger) became hostage to American need for escape; European modes of depression, despair, enclosure became secondary to American dependence on spatiality and denial of temporal modes.

The marked antirationality of modernism, even when couched in a heavy intellectual frame of reference, was also attractive to the American novelist, giving him (her) some philosophical foundation for his pursuit of sensory experience. Nearly every major novelist in this country has indulged in marked anti-intellectuality, something that goes well beyond attacks on the academy, where so many of the writers have found support. We are speaking of authors as diverse and distinct as Barth, Bellow, Pynchon, Heller, Vonnegut, Mailer, Malamud, and Barthelme. Possibly, the very anti-intellectual aspects of modernism—its stress upon consciousness and vitality as against mentality, its reliance on "inner states," its attacks upon officialdom, experts, and administrators as automatons, its emphasis upon memory and unmeasurable data, its disruptiveness and discontinuities—account for its appeal.

It is not money or immediate reward that makes American novelists repeat themselves, but an inability to grow because of a persistent anti-intellectuality, which, in turn, I associate with the masculine tradition. Even Bellow, whose work is frequently cited for its "braininess," is least satisfactory when discussing ideas. His manner is hit and run (as is Mailer's), the offering up of tidbits, sometimes spuriously, as though learning had to convince us of something unconnected to intellect. Herzog as an intellectual is the least convincing part of him, Herzog as a parasite compelling. We should add that female writers describing the "female experience" seem little different in their marked anti-intellectuality, as if the masculine-anticulture stance were a gigantic trap for all.

We are, of course, in the middle of one of our cultural paradoxes. The anti-intellectual tradition is one of our glories, the mainstay of our great literary flowering in the mid-nineteenth century. And the masculine tradition—in Cooper, Melville, later Twain—is intricately associated with it. *Moby-Dick* is, in one of its aspects, the working out of the dialectics of this tradition, the interplay between "masculine" (Ahab) and "feminine" (Ishmael), all against a

orchestrated to suggest an "inscape," which is, in fact, the title of the first section. "Outscape" ends it. Between are alternations among the questing narrator, his efforts to write, and the Journal, three voices that ultimately blend.

*An excellent exception to this is Albert Guerard's *The Bystander* (1958), which in its controlled prose, tones, and narrative strategies uncannily foreshadows the novels of Robbe-Grillet. Guerard's frame of reference is a play of ideas, his protagonist a voyeur who chooses freedom, and options that include cheap happiness and exalted suffering. The novel functions well at both its abstract and its realistic levels. Earl Rovit's *The Player King* (1965) fits roughly into the same genre, owing more to the postwar French novel than to the American. Reminiscent of Gide in *The Counterfeiters*, Rovit offers polyphonic voices. His three levels are a first-person narrator, who provides continuity; a man who is starting out to write a novel; and a novelist who keeps a journal. The three voices are carefully

background of mind and intellect struggling with other levels of experience. Further, because of the masculine tradition, Americans write so well about war. Some recent books about the Vietnam conflict, *A Rumor of War*, *Dispatches*, and *Going After Cacciato*, indicate that the American talent for the war/-combat book has not subsided, with the latter itself strongly suggestive of *Catch-22*, *The Gallery*, and *The Naked and the Dead*.

The very mobility that is at the core of an egalitarian society militates against a strong intellectual tradition in the arts, since mobility has its own dictates and the slow development of a talent or mind cannot be encouraged. Clearly, the last forty years in America celebrated a kind of frenzy that is not conducive to stable intellectual traditions. Even the proliferation of educational opportunities under the G.I. Bill did not provide the basis for such a tradition; although many of our novelists have been splendidly trained. Stress on the academy in postwar years led, in fact, to parody of learning rather than to learning within the framework of a large body of fiction.

For the postwar writer, there is only now; the past ended in 1945. That lack of historical sense, and in many instances an active rejection of history, means that our major writers did their best work when the full force of the postwar era was upon them—in anger, rebellion, withdrawal, adversary action. Freshness, wit, and stylistic adventurousness characterized the earlier work of Bellow, Mailer, Roth, Heller, Percy, and several others, qualities often not to be found in their later work. Their perception of our society, or their adaptation of these perceptions to fictional use, did not lead them into new modes of seeing, but often into repetition.

That ahistorical, anti-intellectual masculine pressure on the individual talent (female as well as male) can only intensify in the present arena of publishing. The free-for-all policies that have taken hold of all but a small number of publishing houses cannot help but exacerbate that celebration of the Now. Only our most heroic novelists—Pynchon and McElroy, perhaps—can allow their talent to mature before they display it. More frequently, we find writers (like Joan Didion, Paul Theroux, John Gardner) entering the galaxy of “major novelists” before they have produced even one book ambitious enough to gain entrée. It is not just the marketplace, where rewards can be very high indeed, but the larger society of publishing, entertainment, competition with films, television, and nonfiction that must be accounted for. The novel, as we have observed, finds itself in a terrible

struggle to exist as a serious form of entertainment and moral instruction. There are no villains, only a process.

Much of this is familiar, but bears repeating. The changes in the nature of publishing, and, in turn, of bookstores, must influence the novel in a myriad of ways. Such changes involve the acquisition of publishers by conglomerates for whom books are commodities; an increase in the level of hyperbole from publishers, reviewers, and all those involved in the book industry; the celebration of authors in general and novelists in particular, whereby they vie with sports figures and film and television stars; the celebration of editors, agents, and publishers themselves. All such events are good for the ego, but what happens to the book?

It is not, as I have suggested, that good novels fail to be published; there are enough small houses so that nearly anything of merit will appear. Also, bad novels do not necessarily drive out good—not if we look to the long run. Gaddis's *JR* did get published and won the National Book Award, although it remains unread and undiscussed. What does occur in the present razzle-dazzle situation is that potentially fine novelists are not permitted to develop; that those who have produced a solid first work are preempted too rapidly; that the thinking that goes into a serious novel is diluted at the source; that books will appear at intervals from large talents simply to provide a holding action; and that critical theories develop to protect certain favorites which have little relationship to what they are actually producing. Such criticism has supported Styron, Updike, Vonnegut, Mailer, many others, despite terrible unevenness.

All changes in the publishing industry, as all changes in society, involve, ultimately, matters not only of economics but of taste, aesthetics, the entire structure of a literary culture and how it is shaped. Mergers between publishing houses, purchases of already large houses by conglomerates, external pressures on houses to multiply profits as apart from quality, tie-ins (a continuing process begun in the 1950s) between hardcover and paperback houses, the publishing of original, “catchy” paperbacks, or paperbacks tied in not to hardcover books but to films or television, the radical increase in books by celebrities—movie and ballet stars, athletes, media people, criminals, rock stars—all these are related to “book-making,” but marginal to literature. What they involve, unlike developments in the past, is not the increase in the book-reading population (that is, of real books) but a way of reaching those for whom a