1817

CITY OF WORDS

by the same author

CITY OF WORDS
CONRAD: LORD JIM
SAUL BELLOW
THE REIGN OF WONDER

CITY OF WORDS

American Fiction 1950–1970

TONY TANNER

Harper & Row, Publishers
New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London

Portions of this book have appeared previously in slightly different form. Thanks are due to the *Critical Quarterly, Novel, London Magazine, Salmagundi, Twentieth Century Studies, Partisan Review* and *TriQuarterly*.

CITY OF WORDS. Copyright © 1971 by Tony Tanner. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 10 East 53d Street, New York, N.Y. 10022.

STANDARD BOOK NUMBER: 06-014217-0

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 70-156554

试读结束：需要全本请在线购买： www.ertongbook.

Contents

PREFATORY NOTE 11

INTRODUCTION 15

1. On Lexical Playfields (Vladimir Nabokov, Jorge Luis Borges) 33
2. The Music of Invisibility (Ralph Ellison) 50
3. A Mode of Motion (Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller) 64
4. Frames Without Pictures (James Purdy) 85
5. Rub Out the Word (William Burroughs) 109
6. Everything Running Down 141
7. Caries and Cabals (Thomas Pynchon) 153
8. The Uncertain Messenger (Kurt Vonnegut, Jr) 181
9. Necessary Landscapes and Luminous Deteriorations (John Hawkes) 202
10. What is the Case? (John Barth) 230
11. Interior Spaciousness – Car, Bell Jar, Tunnel and House (Walker Percy, Sylvia Plath, Susan Sontag, William Gass) 260
12. A Compromised Environment (John Updike) 273
13. Fictionalized Recall – or 'The Settling of Scores! The Pursuit of Dreams!' (Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Frank Conroy) 295
14. A New Life (Bernard Malamud) 322
15. On the Parapet (Norman Mailer) 344
16. Edge City (Ken Kesey) 372

CONCLUSION 393

Recognitions (William Gaddis)

Fragments and Fantasies (Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan)

The Wide Wings of the Language

APPENDICES 421
NOTES 447
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 451
INDEX 457

FOR MARCIA

So, at any rate, fanciful as my plea may appear, I recover the old sense—brave even the imputation of making a mere Rome of words, talking of a Rome of my own which was no Rome of reality. That comes up as exactly the point—that no Rome of reality was concerned in our experience, that the whole thing was a rare state of the imagination ...

Henry James: *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*

试读结束：需要全本请在线购买： www.ertongbook.com

Prefatory Note

This book is a study of some of the novels written in America between 1950 and 1970. Indirectly I hope it manages to say something about the novel as a form and America as a country as well. I should stress from the outset that my primary aim is to try to *understand* the American imagination as it has expressed itself in fictional forms during this period. I think such efforts of understanding addressed to contemporary literature can be helpful, and that they are quite as much a part of the critic's task as the revivification of the literature of the past. A close study of the literature of the present can help us to arrive at a clearer perception of some of the plights and privileges of our own inescapable modernity. As John Cage says – 'Here we are now.' The last two decades have seen important changes and developments in American life and literature, and I felt that there was more than usual justification for a detailed consideration of a large number of works. On a more personal level, this book represents a long meditation on what America and its literature have meant to me since I first went there in 1958 and contracted an incurable interest in, and affection for, both. I would like this book to stand as a tribute, offered with admiration and gratitude, to the many good people, places and books I have encountered there.

Although I have tried to cover most of the more interesting novelists of the past two decades, there are inevitably some omissions. I have not, for instance, considered the work of William Styron, James Jones, James Baldwin, Jack Kerouac, Flannery O'Connor, Mary McCarthy, J. F. Powers, Thomas Berger, Terry Southern, Richard Stern, Paul Bowles or Jean Stafford to name only a few. I regret that I did not have the space to consider some of the more recent writers such as Joyce Carol Oates, Charles Newman, Robert Coover, Irvin Faust, Leonard Michaels, Rudolph Wurlitzer, Ishmael Reed, Alison Lurie and Gil Orlovitz. But the book is already long and I must leave my principle of selection to justify itself, or fail to, as the case may be. With any book of this kind there is the difficulty of deciding whether to assume that the reader has read the novel under discussion or needs to be told the story. I have tried to write each chapter in such a way that it will contain enough material to enable someone with no previous knowledge of the writer concerned to read it and understand what the novels are about. On the other hand I have tried

to avoid wearying the informed reader with plot summaries and recapitulations. Background material which I consider to be relevant and illuminating is contained in a series of appendices which should, ideally, be read in connection with the chapters which refer to them. Considerations of length have also made me decide to keep annotation to a minimum and I have not attempted to find room to include bibliographies for so many writers. Such bibliographies already can fill whole issues of valuable magazines like *Critique* and it seems unnecessary to repeat them here.[1]

In the field of criticism there are of course forerunners to the work offered here. *Radical Innocence* by Ihab Hassan[2] and *After Alienation* by Marcus Klein,[3] for instance, are two books which I respect and whose importance I want to acknowledge. I only came across Robert Scholes's *The Fabulators*[4] when this present manuscript was substantially completed, but it is clearly an important work in this field. Leslie Fiedler's *Waiting for the End*[5] is characteristically idiosyncratic and stimulating. As my own approach is different from any of those I have encountered, I have not thought it desirable to extend the text by constantly pointing out the self-evident fact that other critics have interesting ideas and comments on the same writers. Specific debts are acknowledged in the text or notes. I would single out the work of Richard Poirier on American literature as having provided a constant stimulus (in particular his book *A World Elsewhere*[6]).

I am indebted to the universities of Northwestern, Emory and Stanford for having invited me to hold seminars on contemporary American fiction. I first tried out many of my ideas in these seminars and I have profited greatly from the discussions which followed. I would like to express my gratitude to all those students who took part in these seminars, as well as more generally to the faculty members of those universities who made our visits so interesting and pleasant. I am indebted to the Provost and Fellows of King's College for allowing me to take a year off from teaching, and to Mr Patrick Parrinder who took over my duties during that period. Without this time I could not have written this book. I would like to express my sense of indebtedness to the many friends with whom I have discussed matters which are raised in this book—Henry Nash Smith, Charles Newman, Ian Watt, Thom Gunn, Don Doody are some of them. I am grateful to Dr Robert Young for some discussions (and loan of books) concerning Behaviorism; and to Mr Renford Bambrough of St John's College, Cambridge, for some helpful correspondence clarifying a point about Wittgenstein which I make in my Conclusion. I would like to express my gratitude to Ed Victor for suggesting that I write the book in the first place, and for his

subsequent valuable editorial help. I also wish to thank Annabel Whittet for her alert copy-editing, and Rina Clark for her splendidly prompt, reliable and intelligent typing.

Finally I wish to record my great indebtedness to my wife who has participated in every stage of this book. Many of the ideas in it arose out of conversations with her, and her suggestions, comments and editorial work on the text have been, quite simply, indispensable. The dedication to her is offered as a, necessarily inadequate, act of recognition.

King's College, Cambridge TONY TANNER
January 1970

Introduction

When I started thinking about writing this book I had no preconceived notions about recurrent themes by which I could group writers, or neat categories in which I could place their work. If anything, I embarked on my readings and re-readings motivated mainly by a sense of admiration for the wide range of individual talent which had emerged in American fiction during the last two decades. I have tried to preserve my respect for the individual achievement by offering detailed consideration of a number of novels, and, for the most part, allowing a chapter for each separate author. To some extent these chapters are intended to be self-contained studies of the writers concerned. At the same time, with continued intensive reading, certain recurring preoccupations, concerns, even obsessions, began to emerge from what at first appeared to be very dissimilar novels. I hope these recurring patterns of interest will be seen to distinguish themselves quite naturally in the course of this book, without any sense that a corresponding attempt has been made to detract from the individuality of each author's work.

One or two of the more prominent preoccupations may be mentioned in this introduction as a prelude to an explanation of the title of my book. I shall try to show that there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous. The problematical and ambiguous relationship of the self to patterns of all kinds – social, psychological, linguistic – is an obsession among recent American writers. It has long been recognized that there is a tenacious feeling in America that while other, older countries are ridden by conventions, rules, all sorts of arbitrary formalities which trap and mould the individual, in America one may still enjoy a genuine freedom from all cultural patterning so that life is a series of unmediated spontaneities. But the social anthropologist has now told the American individual that 'man has no direct contact with experience *per se* but ... there is an intervening set of patterns which

channel his senses and his thoughts' (see Appendix One); the Behavioral psychologist has insisted that 'the situation we are in dominates us always' (see Appendix Two); while the linguist has asserted that 'the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious' (see Appendix Three).

Such theories or assertions have certainly helped to enhance the American writer's dread of all conditioning forces to the point of paranoia which is detectable not only in the subject matter of many novels but also in their narrative devices. Narrative lines are full of hidden persuaders, hidden dimensions, plots, secret organizations, evil systems, all kinds of conspiracies against spontaneity of consciousness, even cosmic take-over. The possible nightmare of being totally controlled by unseen agencies and powers is never far away in contemporary American fiction. The unease revealed in such novels is related to a worried apprehension on the part of the author that his own consciousness may be predetermined and channelled by the language he has been born into.

Here then is the paradox for a writer. If he wants to write in any communicable form he must traffic in a language which may at every turn be limiting, directing and perhaps controlling his responses and formulations. If he feels that the given structuring of reality of the available language is imprisoning or iniquitous, he may abandon language altogether; or he may seek to use the existing language in such a way that he demonstrates to himself and other people that he does not accept nor wholly conform to the structures built into the common tongue, that he has the power to resist and perhaps disturb the particular 'rubricizing' tendency of the language he has inherited. Such an author – and I think he is an unusually common phenomenon in contemporary America – will go out of his way to show that he is using language as it has never been used before, leaving the visible marks of his idiosyncrasies on every formulation. Of course, this is not in itself a new position for the writer to find himself in. The desire or compulsion to project the shape of one's own unique consciousness against the imprisoning shapes of the external world is a crucial component of Romanticism. Saul Bellow's suspicion of 'agreed pictures', or what he also calls 'systems', is in line with epistemological dissent which goes back at least as far as Blake, who said in 'Jerusalem', 'I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's.'*

* Long before any American writer was bemoaning the fact that we inherit the 'agreed pictures' of reality handed down by a past age, Blake had defined the process in 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell':

试读结束：需要全本请在线购买： www.ertongbook.