Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing

Edited by

Daniel Hoffman

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Preface

This book undertakes a critical survey of the most significant writing in the United States between the end of World War II and the end of the 1970s. To describe, anatomize, and judge a literature so vast and so varied in a book of even six hundred pages may seem like trying to stuff a ticking full of feathers into a shoe box. The critic or historian, faced with the individual and particular qualities of works and authors, may be tempted to subordinate these to large general categories and trends; he may be further tempted to emphasize, at the expense of all others, those trends most visible at the time of his writing. Literature during these three and a half decades reflects, indeed often anticipates, the instability and turmoil of a period characterized by the breaking apart of many established institutions and the cultural assumptions upon which they rested. Yet resistance to these deconstructive or reconstructive energies has been strong, in our literature as in our culture. It is the hope of the authors that the chapters which follow will embody a realization of the nature of literature like that voiced in Lionel Trilling's essay "Reality in America" (*The Liberal Imagination,* 1950). In his criticism of V. L. Parrington, whose *Main Currents of American Thought* half a century ago emphasized exclusively the progressive and liberal tendencies in American writing, Trilling reminded us that "a culture is not a flow, not even a confluence; the form of its existence is a struggle, or at least a debate—it is nothing if not a dialectic. And in any culture there are likely to be certain artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and power lying in their contradictions."

Such a dialectic is explored, first, in a survey of intellectual commitments and attitudes during the period, then in an examination of the theories and practices of literary criticism which have accompanied and to some extent even influenced the writing of these decades. Of course, no literary period is actually contained within its historians' bracketing dates. In 1945, where we begin, we find that in middle age and mid-career such important fiction writers as Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, and Richard Wright dominate the scene, as do the poets Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and W. H. Auden. Although the major

work of most of these had already been done, all continued both to be productive and to influence their successors. Of these older writers, whether conservative or modernist, we do not attempt full treatment, but try instead to place them before our readers as they appeared at the time to theirs and to the younger authors who either emulated or rebelled against their magisterial presences.

If the beginning of our period is necessarily treated retrospectively, it can hardly be held that our period ends where our scrutiny of its writing stops. Even as we go to press, many of the authors discussed herein are publishing new books without awaiting our commentary. Although we have tried to cover major publications through 1978, we do not offer a terminal date. One aspect of the dialectic evident in this literature is the tendency of many writers to undergo great changes of style and method from one book to another. It would be rash to predict what such quick-change imaginative artists as Norman Mailer, John Updike, or W.S. Merwin may next turn their hands to, as it was unlikely that any such predictions concerning the late Robert Lowell or John Berryman could accurately have foretold their repudiations or innovations. We have endeavored to discuss most authors who have produced a significant body of work and to mention the more promising younger writers.

This *Guide* is not a synopsis of critical or scholarly commentary but a series of original essays by critics especially interested in the subjects and authors about whom they have chosen to write. The general editor of the volume is responsible for its overall design, but within that design the author of each chapter has been free to present his or her own sense of the dialectic perceived in the literature surveyed. It seems preferable that criticism of this kind—especially when it deals with writings as diverse, baffling, and innovative as is much of the literature treated in these pages—be of the sort that Edwin Muir defined (in *The Estate of Poetry*, 1962) as "a helpful intermediary between literature and the reader." One of the values of such criticism, Muir suggests, is "its capacity for admiration . . . A good critic in this style is one who apprehends by a native affinity the virtues of a work of imagination and rejoices in them." The work of such a critic will enrich the reader's experience of the writings with which it deals by revealing their intrinsic shapes while judging their fulfillment of their premises; it will not, however, substitute a critical analysis for the work itself, recasting the reading of a novel or a poem "into a problem instead of an experience." The criticism of intermediation thus resists becoming "an instrument of power" at the expense of the literature it serves.

The authors of this book hope to have clarified the often unfamil-

iar designs of contemporary writing for readers who turn to our pages for guidance after having read works which interested but baffled them, and for those who, after reading our pages, will be moved to turn to the writers we have discussed. Although we are aware of serving a possible reference function (and have provided dates of first publication for all works mentioned), we do not intend this guide as primarily a data bank for scholars. We offer it in the hope that it will enlarge the readership of contemporary writing and help to encourage informed discussion of the vital dialectic of themes, forms, and values which that writing embodies.

In organizing this book I am in debt to several friends for advice of various kinds which I have tried to follow whenever possible. Needless to say, any defects herein are attributable to me, while many of the felicities I hope will appear are the fruits of good counsels I received from Ralph Ellison, Alfred Kazin, A. Walton Litz, Richard Ludwig, Theodore Solatoroff, Robert E. Spiller, Helen Vendler, and Robert Penn Warren.

University of Pennsylvania
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Daniel Hoffman

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Intellectual Background

Alan Trachtenberg

IN a celebrated essay in 1929, T. S. Eliot wished to account for what he described as the remarkable "simplicity" and "universality" of the great medieval poet Dante: the fact that he remains "easy to read." Not that Dante is by any means a simple or superficial poet; but he is a uniquely *lucid* poet, a poet of "clear visual images," for whom all things are so patently meaningful that the very image of them renders thing and meaning together in one compass. Eliot attributes the translucence of Dante's verse to the "allegorical method." But more significant than the method alone was the major historical fact that lay behind it: the fact that allegory itself was a universal (that is, European) method rather than "a local Italian custom." In the transparency of Dante's verse one finds evidence that "he not only thought in a way in which every man of his culture in the whole of Europe then thought, but he employed a method which was common and commonly understood throughout Europe." Unlike the modern writer, who faces a predicament which Eliot had described in his famous article on Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923 as the need to give "a shape and a significance" to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy in contemporary life, Dante enjoyed a universally accepted world view, a philosophy and a theology which held all things together in one complex and harmonious system.

Whatever the merits of Eliot's placement of Dante in his culture, the image remains compelling, of a kind of literary Eden, where the writer could accept a philosophy, be guided by it, and bring it to a perfect crystallization. The image compels because it serves to

define the exactly opposite situation modern writers perceived themselves to be in. Eliot's Dante is at home in his world, as Eliot and his colleagues among the founders of modernist literature and art in the early twentieth century were not. The homelessness, the alienation, of the artist is a basic premise of modernism, of that dominating movement in art and thought which, by celebrating aesthetic and intellectual dissent, unbounded innovation and experiment, indeed often sheer difficulty and opacity, raised the artist's alienation into a first condition of his being an artist at all. Where Dante is "easy," that is, in the very access to his poetry, the modern writer must, according to Eliot, be difficult, difficult and obscure precisely to the degree that the "great variety and complexity" of contemporary life permits him no single intellectual schema.

Describing the "intellectual background," then, of any period of modern writing is a different matter from giving an account of the ideas, the world views, that inform the literature of classical or medieval or early Renaissance times. Modern works of literature—and this is no more or less true for the period under consideration, post–World War II writing in America, than for any other period since the early nineteenth century—are rarely created, and can hardly be read intelligibly, in the light of a single encompassing idea, such as the richly textured and intricate system of Aquinas. The entire relation of works of literature to "ideas" has been conceived of by modern critics as uneasy and by no means obvious. As the critic Lionel Trilling argues in his own excellent contribution to this theme, "The Meaning of a Literary Idea" (1949), a strong suspicion runs through modern culture in America that ideas, insofar as they take the form of abstract thought, represent a threat to the wholeness of life, to the interplay between mind and emotion necessary for a heathy existence and a vital art. Eliot himself expresses one version of this fear when he suggests that thinking by itself, dissociated from feeling, can "violate" a writer's creative capacity; while the cults of spontaneity and irrationalism that have appeared in art and in the general culture since 1945 represent other, more explicitly anti-intellectual versions of this suspicion. And if to a deeply seated tendency in American culture to eschew theorizing as a kind of intellectual disease, one adds the particular revulsion against limiting ideologies in the immediate postwar years, the status of an "intellectual background" to the writing of the period becomes even more doubtful.

Of course, a suspicion or rejection of ideas is itself a kind of idea, itself a feature of the "background" to which particular literary texts provide a foreground. A certain resistance to formal ideas is indeed

a trait of much of the writing of the period. But for a period in which the "academic writer" appeared as a major literary-social type, such poses as that of the nonbookish writer seem especially transparent disguises. In fact, never before in American literary history have so many writers, and so many first-rate and major writers, held formal ties with institutions of learning and knowledge: a phenomenon that indicates not only a new ground of acceptance for serious literature, a new audience among college students, but also, at an even deeper level, a new recognition of literature as itself a serious and legitimate form of knowledge—a form, that is, of idea as well as emotion; a form of *thinking* about common existence.

An intellectual history of a period must also be to some extent a social and cultural history: a history of changes in forms of work and play, of private and public life, and in regard to American society in these years, changes in social attitudes toward race, sex, wealth, and poverty—and toward the idea of America itself and its place in the world. An intellectual background has its own background in active human history, and it will be useful at the outset to sketch some of the broader patterns and persisting issues that characterized the postwar decades in the United States.

The Cold War

The years immediately following the Allied victory in 1945 were dominated by international affairs as never before in American history. The war left the United States virtually unscathed (compare its quarter of a million casualties with the nearly twenty million suffered by the Soviet Union) and in sole possession of the atomic bomb, a weapon whose unthinkable scale of destruction was twice demonstrated against Japanese cities in August 1945. Its industrial plant undamaged and much expanded, its agricultural output far exceeding domestic need, the United States emerged as the world's unchallenged superpower, and immediately undertook a program of aid to Western Europe and Japan. The Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine of 1947 marked the onset of the Cold War, a state of affairs that colored intellectual, cultural, and political life for most of the period, relenting somewhat only when efforts at détente began in the late 1960s. The Cold War was both a political phenomenon and an emotional one, a state of policy and a state of mind. It was premised on a certain picture of the world, a world divided into two hostile camps: the West, or "free world," led by the United States and protected by its formidable military power; and the East, the USSR, its "satellite" allies, the "people's democracies" of Eastern Europe, and

after 1949 the Communist government in China (though relations between the Soviet Union and China had deteriorated to the point of open animosity by the mid-1960s). According to the Western version of this picture—a version held more tenaciously and stubbornly in the United States than elsewhere—the East represented a monolithic and aggressive totalitarianism, and required "containment" in the form of armed bases at the borders of East and West, surveillance in the form of espionage, and military readiness in the form of "collective security" pacts such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). And because the enemy threatened "subversion" as much as military aggression, the policy of "containment" included the support of "anti-Communist" regimes, which were embraced as partners in the "free world" whether or not they measured up to the standards of political democracy.

The Cold War represented a degree of political and military involvement in world affairs quite new in American history, though a role as a world power had been developing since the end of the nineteenth century. Events everywhere in the world, in the most remote cities and rural districts, not only were immediately available as "news" (a worldwide instant communications system came into use in the 1960s as one direct result of outer-space technology), but also impinged on the lives of Americans with more force than ever before. Major episodes in the Cold War, some of which threatened actual conflict and contributed to the widespread anxiety about mass destruction, included the Berlin blockade of 1948, the Russian explosion of an atomic bomb in 1949 (which launched an escalating arms race; eventually several other nations tested nuclear weapons, raising the specter of a threat to life from fallout), the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. And twice the United States committed troops to actual "hot" wars, in both cases without formal declarations of war: in Korea, from 1950 to 1952; and the much more dramatic and consequential commitment, at one point of more than a half million troops and airpower surpassing that employed in World War II, in Vietnam, from about 1964 to 1973. American casualties in both wars together far exceeded World War II figures.

The Cold War, then, was an inescapable fact of life, implicated as much in the spectacular development of technologies of warfare and of communication and transportation as in the unprecedented concentration of power in government agencies, especially those concerned with military affairs and with espionage. Many Cold War assumptions and the government institutions which embodied them came under sharp scrutiny and attack during the upswelling of op-

position and resistance to the war in Vietnam in the 1960s. But throughout this period, and especially from the late 1940s to the middle 1960s, there was no doubt that a Cold War view of the world profoundly influenced the thinking of most Americans. The picture of a world divided between "us," "free" and democratic, and "them," totalitarian and "godless," seemed unshakable, as was the corollary of a need for military strength, preparedness, vigilance. The feeling of a superior virtue threatened by an insidious enemy reached a pitch of hysteria in the 1950s, a time of witch hunts, blacklists, loyalty oaths, charges of "subversion," trials for espionage and treason, and the jailing of Communists and other dissidents on charges of "conspiracy."

But even apart from the more sensational excesses in the name of the Cold War, especially the exploitation of the "internal subversion" fear by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s, the Cold War state of mind settled deeply into the intellectual life of the nation. Fundamental criticism of American society, especially from radical perspectives, virtually disappeared from public life in the 1950s, a time described by some critics as an "age of conformity." Many intellectuals and writers who had associated themselves with radical causes and a Marxist point of view in the 1930s either reversed their positions entirely in this period, and appeared now as repentant "anti-Communists," or tempered their former criticisms with a more appreciative and assenting appraisal of the "American way of life." The turnabout owed as much to the widespread loss of belief in Marxism in the face of the Stalinist terror and the general repressiveness of Soviet society (confirmed by Khrushchev himself in his report on Stalin's crimes in 1956) as to external pressures to prove one's loyalty.

A major Cold War consequence for intellectual life was the absolute certainty with which socialism and Marxism were associated with Soviet Russia and with Stalin, national liberation movements and revolutions were linked with "international communism" and "subversion," and domestic dissent from foreign policy and from the values of "big business" was considered proof of disloyalty. For about twenty years after the conclusion of the war, it was common for Americans to read in their newspapers and journals, and hear and see in the mass media, nothing but praise for the "American Way," for the "American Century," typified by an ever-rising Gross National Product, an expanding highway program, and mushrooming suburban shopping malls. It was common to hear America described as a consumer's paradise, a showcase of democratic free enterprise, in which the ubiquitous credit card had wrought a more lasting revolution against class distinctions than any "foreign" ideology could offer. "Freedom"

reigned as the rhetorical centerpiece of public discourse. And deviations from the national consensus, either in political views or personal styles, risked the chilling charge of "alien," "subversive," "unAmerican." These were the years, indeed, when the House Committee on Un-American Activities often seemed to rule public life.

What became evident as American cultural life began to emerge from this phase of moralistic and anti-intellectual acquiescence in the middle 1960s was that the presumption of a national consensus had disguised very real divisions and critical social problems. Although a stream of social criticism did appear in the 1950s, it took its themes from the assumption that American society was basically unified and pleased with its material conditions, and focused on issues such as the psychic costs of affluence, or the threat to the individual from the impersonal structures of business corporations and government, or the quality of entertainment produced by the mass media. On the whole, criticism seemed to assume a rather homogeneous, white, middle-class, suburban society—a society of more or less contented consumers who suffered, if at all, from the spiritual malaise of too much consumption. What the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal named in *An American Dilemma* (1944) as the most flagrant and challenging failure of democracy in the United States, the failure of racial equality, hardly captured the public imagination in these years, when the mass media (including the movies) rarely showed a black face except in stereotypical menial roles. The plight of blacks in the South and in the ghettoes of northern cities did not become prominent, did not enter public consciousness as a potentially tragic rift in American society, until the civil rights movement of the late 1950s, dramatized by the boycotts and marches led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the several ghetto uprisings and riots in the middle 1960s.

The presumption of consensus and homogeneity, of a universal "freedom" available to all in America, was shattered in the 1960s in campus antiwar movements, in urban movements such as the Black Panthers, in efforts to create a "poor people's movement," in the hippie and counter-culture movements of the late 1960s. Whatever the lasting effects of the agitations of the 1960s—and it would seem a decade later that they belonged more to the realm of culture than that of politics, resulting more in an enlarged range of choices in life-styles for middle-class Americans than in visible institutional improvements for racial minorities and the poor, or real changes in the relation of competing groups to the centers of power—whatever the permanent traces, it was unmistakable then that the cultural and intellectual climate of the country had changed dramatically. In part, the change

reflected unexpected developments elsewhere in the world, the two most consequential of which were probably the appearance of dissent in Eastern Europe after the death of Stalin (beginning with the violent demonstrations in East Germany, Poland, and especially Hungary in the 1950s and culminating in the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia in 1968), signaling the possibility of a breakup of the grim monolith whose image had served so powerfully to reinforce the Cold War picture of the world; and the sudden appearance of radical youth movements in countries allied with the United States, in Germany and France (reaching a fever pitch of enthusiasm and hope for radical change in Paris, 1968), and in Turkey and Japan, where student movements contributed to the toppling of regimes. Apart from rising protest movements and movements for social justice, notably the women's rights movement, a number of shocking events—the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, of Malcolm X in 1965, of Martin Luther King in 1967, and of Robert Kennedy in 1968, and the Watergate scandal, which led to the resignation of President Nixon in 1974—fed an undercurrent of doubt, anxiety, instability in the period. The collapse of relations between the USSR and China, and the policy of détente pursued by the American government with both these representatives of noncapitalist systems, further eroded the hold of the dominating Cold War assumptions of the 1950s.

The Intellectual in Postwar Society

Cold War politics often distracted Americans from recognizing that they were embarked on a new journey in their national history, that the most fundamental patterns of life were undergoing rapid and decisive transformation. This is not to say that change rolled uniformly across all levels of society; there had been a notable but increasingly suspect tendency among commentators to take the white urban and suburban middle classes as the typical Americans, the measure of what is "normal." In fact, although a drift toward homogenization of life-styles ("massification," some social scientists call it) is one weighty characteristic of the new society, aggravation of social rifts, of antagonistic cultural interests, is another. As the society as a whole moved steadily toward an urban cultural style, local and regional interests became more stubbornly intense; in one entire school of fiction—the southern school—a rural, antimodern sensibility and traditional customs provided a major literary subject-matter. If the dominant social movements constitute "modernization"—the movements toward more rationalized organization of industry and government, the appearance of "bigness" in all institutions, and with it "impersonality," and a

submission of all traditional ways of personal and family and group life to the scrutiny of scientific methods of investigation (sexual behavior is one dramatic and critical example)—then counter-modernism, resistance to the very idea of the modern, provided a not so trivial submotif. It took the forms of racism and sexism, resistance to redressing racial injustice and to granting full equality to women, and also emerged in the idea of the generation gap, with its implied pitting of "up-to-date" youngsters against stodgy, conservative oldsters. The cries against big government, big business, big labor, also carry imputations that older ways were better, healthier, more "American," and modern ways somehow offensive, threatening, dehumanizing.

The process of forging a modern society, in which rational calculations increasingly control decisions about public and private life, did not begin in the postwar era. In many ways, the period marked a resumption of the course of American development first crystallized in the 1920s, then stalled and detoured and corrected through the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the war (itself a kind of solution to the economic failures of the depression): a resumption, that is, of the breakup of genteel attitudes toward sex, a dissolution of "small-town" values, and the consolidation through electric and electronic media of a national popular culture. The 1920s was the first era of "mass culture" in America, and the concept of mass culture, as we shall see, informed virtually all of the significant thinking about American society and culture, about self, soul, and God, in the postwar period.

But who performed this thinking, and under what circumstances? The category of intellectual, of those persons devoted to a "life of the mind," to disinterested, speculative, and critical thought, itself underwent subtle alterations in this period. And we miss a large piece of the intellectual background unless we consider the intellectuals themselves in their self-perceptions and their new roles.

Two phenomena seem uppermost: first, the continuing process, begun early in the century, of the integration of intellectuals into the formal institutions of American society, especially government, universities, and the media; and second, at the same time, a growing sense of discomfort at the very process, a feeling, especially on the part of politically dissident intellectuals, that integration threatened loss of independence, a worry that social acceptance with its rewards of status and material well-being betokened an inner surrender of that edge of skepticism and discontent that gave the intellectual his raison d'être in the first place. Creativity thrived with alienation, some postwar writers insisted—or at least they held that the condition of alienation which had played a nurturing role in fostering modern art, literature,

and thought was too precious a heritage to sell for an academic chair or a government post.

The overlapping of these two phenomena—the acceptance of social acceptance and the dissent from it—appears in a 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium, "Our Country and Our Culture." Twenty-five prominent intellectuals—mainly literary critics but including several sociologists and anthropologists and a philosopher—were invited to respond to the proposition that "American intellectuals now regard America and its institutions in a new way." Until recently, the editors wrote, America was regarded as hostile to art, to culture, to independent thinking. Since the war, however, and since the sour outcome of the affair of many intellectuals with Marxism in the 1930s, "the tide has begun to turn, and many writers and intellectuals now feel closer to their country and its culture." American democracy has "an intrinsic and positive value" which "represents the only immediate alternative as long as Russian totalitarianism threatens world domination." With very few exceptions (including Irving Howe, Norman Mailer, and C. Wright Mills), the contributors agreed with the general estimate that conditions have improved for the life of the mind, and that no major social problems remain—no problems except the problem of "mass culture" itself: the worry that the "domination" of politics by the "masses" creates a "new obstacle" for the intellectual, the obstacle of a "mass culture" which converts art into commodity, excludes "everything which does not conform to popular norms," and threatens the very continuation of "high" culture.

Norman Mailer found a "shocking" assumption in the symposium, that "society is too difficult to understand," and the sociologist C. Wright Mills noted "a shrinking deference to the status quo." Moreover, Mills and Irving Howe both detached themselves from the view that political democracy is responsible by itself for the tawdriness of "mass culture"; it is "capitalist commercialism which manipulates people into standardized tastes," wrote Mills, to which Howe added that both democracy and "mass culture" have so far been "known to us only in the corrupting context of capitalism." These dissenting voices implied a role for the intellectual as a critic of the social and economic, as well as the cultural, status quo: a role that entailed an effort to grasp the society in its entirety, to seek a critical point of view, and to resist pressures to abandon any ideological perspectives. The dissenters—and Howe expanded his argument more fully and richly in his essay "This Age of Conformity" (*Partisan Review,* 1954) —clung to an ideal of intellectual opposition, a challenge to wealth,