

Postmodern counternarratives :  
irony and audience in the novels of Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles

by Christopher Donovan.

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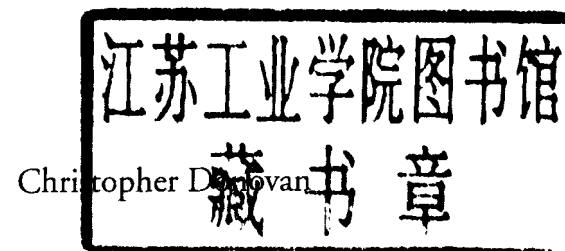
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POSTMODERN COUNTERNARRATIVES  
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## POSTMODERN COUNTERNARRATIVES

Irony and Audience in the Novels of Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, and Tim O'Brien



Routledge  
New York & London

Published in 2005 by  
Routledge  
270 Madison Avenue  
New York, NY 10016

Published in Great Britain by  
Routledge  
2 Park Square  
Milton Park, Abingdon,  
Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group.

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.

Donovan, Christopher, 1971–

Postmodern counternarratives : irony and audience in the novels of Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, and Tim O'Brien / by Christopher Donovan.

p. cm. -- (Literary criticism and cultural theory)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-97127-6 (alk. paper)

1. American fiction--20th century--History and criticism. 2. Postmodernism (Literature)--United States. 3. Experimental fiction, American--History and criticism. 4. Johnson, Charles Richard, 1948--Technique. 5. Authors and readers--United States. 6. Auster, Paul, 1947--Technique. 7. O'Brien, Tim, 1946--Technique. 8. DeLillo, Don--Technique. 9. Reader-response criticism. 10. Irony in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PS374.P64D66 2005  
813'.5409113--dc22

2005016636

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## Preface

This book, which began as a doctoral dissertation submitted in early 1999, attempts to answer the deceptively simple question asked by Paul Auster in the title of one of his essays, "Why Write?" Serious novelists, despite a climate of decentralizing theory, exhausted literary experimentation, and the prospect of a marginal role, at best, in popular consciousness, continue to enter the fray in hopes of carving out their own niche. In the process, some of our most intriguing writers have manifested similarities in their work that suggest a new strain of postmodern fiction (to rely on an overused and under-specific term) clearly distinct from the blueprint drawn up by celebrated forebears like Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis and John Barth. Of course, the real motivating question in exploring this work was, as in many studies of contemporary fiction, "why read?" and for me the novels of Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson and Tim O'Brien provide some of the most convincing answers.

The past five years have seen a steady growth in the academic industry around these novelists, especially DeLillo in the wake of *Underworld*, his most significant critical and commercial success to date. There have also been comprehensive, career-spanning studies of Johnson (by William Nash) and O'Brien (by Mark Heberle). I have been careful to indicate where such insightful works examine in depth ideas that I only touch upon in passing.

The novelists have not been idle themselves, of course, and have continued to explore new creative frontiers. O'Brien's *Tomcat in Love* and *July, July* both include Vietnam veterans in their cast of characters, but their wider range of social exploration thwarts the war novelist categorization that has long dogged their author. Johnson's *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, originally commissioned as a companion piece to the television series *Africans in America*, suggests a refined social role, a conflation of novelist and documentarian. Auster has shown himself a media jack-of-all-trades, directing another film (*Lulu on the Bridge*), writing other scripts (including, controversially, *The Center of the World*), and undertaking a number of projects with National



Public Radio, among them the collection of listener stories ultimately published as *I Thought My Father Was God*, as well as several programs pondering and memorializing the World Trade Center tragedy.

The horrific events on and following 9/11/2001 obviously represent the most decisive change in our national fabric since 1999. Returning to this work, I winced at my portrait of the social climate in the nineties, an irony cushioned by a widespread perception of national security. Certainly the ironic age I discuss herein has given way to a more tempered irony in the public sphere. Our novelists found their perspective on the terror and its aftermath in great demand, hardly surprising given their celebrated analysis of the psychology of terrorism and their habitual itemization of the ideological cargo we ship overseas in our entertainment and rhetoric. Richard Rorty, whose philosophies lend structure to this study, has been notably and passionately vocal as well. Of these responses, DeLillo's article "In the Ruins of the Future" is of the most interest here because it not only mourns and probes our national trauma but also stands as his most definitive statement on his interests and approaches as a writer. Accordingly, I have woven some discussion of this piece, a decisively postmodern document that implicitly argues against postmodern abstraction, into my final chapters as well as a new afterword addressing writings since 1999.

I must thank Professor Frederick Karl, my dissertation director at New York University, for his unflagging support for my project even when his appraisal of literary value differed sharply from mine. Thanks also to my students, who have contributed much to my understanding of the novelist's role in the modern age by asking their own deceptively simple questions.

## Acknowledgments

Excerpts from "The Transmission," "Confession," "Poetry & Politics," "A Soldier for the Crown," "Martha's Dilemma," "The Plague," "The People Speak," and "Murderous Thoughts" in *Africans in America, America's Journey Through Slavery*, copyright © 1998 by Charles Johnson, reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

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## Chapter One

Postmodernism, Liberal Ironism,  
and Contemporary Storytelling

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty observes that "poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of private obsession with public need."<sup>1</sup> In the process, he nimbly equates all fields of intellectual study and all avenues of creative pursuit, regardless of any pretensions of objective fact, isolated aesthetic craftsmanship, or national teleology, as nothing more or less than fertile sources of imaginative narratives, narratives hierarchical on the basis of imaginative potency rather than truth or accuracy. The absolutist tenets we habitually rely on—scientific principles, religious systems, versions of the past we cherish as true history—are transient constructs, shifting with the times, with the moods of the populace, with the whim of chance. Accordingly, Rorty celebrates a most romantic vision of iconoclastic genius, in which grandness of inspiration is what counts, ultimately, in our most potent philosophers, scientists, and novelists (poets all, to his eye); he is particularly drawn to those thinkers, those poets, who "try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as quasi-divinity, where we treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance."<sup>2</sup>

To many thinkers, such a relativist outlook might seem destined to result in a moral vacuum, but even as he posits these theories Rorty dedicates his own narrative to the fervent encouragement of those thinkers who "include among [their] ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease."<sup>3</sup> Although by his own philosophy liberalism's program in which "cruelty is the worst thing we do" can be nothing more than one in a spectrum of compelling and competing narratives, he is adamant that it

nevertheless is or should be an inarguable tenet of civilized life. Pain and causality, he insists, are non-linguistic truths, a statement denying virtually every sentiment of modern critical theory, including, especially, his own.

Rorty is well aware that in this he seems to be committing himself to a grievous contradiction in terms, but he remains unruffled by charges of schizophrenia. Indeed, an embrace of contradiction is at the heart of his philosophy; simultaneously elitist and populist, theoretic and pragmatic, ironic and sincere, poetic and political, he represents a middle space, an unique equipoise, built upon his Quixotic desire to prove that in a world in which contingency and irony rule, the advocating of solidarity remains feasible and viable. Dedicated to substantiating his claim through art, specifically literature, he practices dexterous evasions and subterfuges in his readings designed to uncover conscience even where only aestheticism and isolationism seem apparent. The moral onus lies, finally, on the reader, to the point that it hardly seems to matter whether the strong poet in question writes solely for himself, toward some personal theory of art, or whether he aspires to galvanize readers by addressing those contemporary social issues and structures that concern him most deeply. Thus it is that Rorty's paradigmatic authors, Nabokov and Orwell, fulfill his ideal but represent polar oppositions, Nabokov's work suggesting self-absorption and Orwell's, certainly, social-absorption, even didacticism. Rorty does not examine, however, the poet who occupies the precarious position in which many of our most vital and conscientious novelists find themselves, both extolling ironism like Nabokov and encouraging solidarity like Orwell; Rorty serves as an illuminating model for these writers, though, because he himself fills this role, because the embrace of paradox he labels *liberal ironism* is the challenge increasingly taken up by writers like Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, and Tim O'Brien.

Like Rorty, the contemporary novelist faces a new world of contingency and irony, inheriting a medium decisively wrenched from its realistic or pragmatic mooring by the exploratory literature of the sixties and seventies and the influx of much European thought on linguistics, semiotics, and ideology (both comprising the entrenchment of what is generally labeled postmodern fiction and postmodern theory, though Rorty dismisses that identifier as "rendered almost meaningless by being used to mean so many different things"<sup>4</sup>). Novelists like Pynchon, Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Gaddis, Gass, Burroughs, Vonnegut and Reed have fostered upon us the realization that the novel is the blandest of conventions, laying bare the malleability of the human mind in its easy mastery of the reader, its capacity to infiltrate our dreams and craft our attitudes. In their terms, our celebration of "realistic" writers like Updike, McGuane, Stone, Tyler, Carver, Irving, Bellow, Ford and Malamud represents

a mute acceptance of the logocentric authority against which Rorty cautions. But postmodern indulgences of form, plot, and self-consciousness threaten an irreconcilable schism in contemporary fiction between non-ambitious mainstream writing that remains largely traditional or mimetic in form and more profoundly observant work that is nevertheless self-absorbed, elitist, and erudite to distraction. Where Rorty's liberal ironist reader must establish a middle ground in his interpretations between values of genius and values of social utility, the liberal ironist *novelist* must maintain a middle ground in his writings between realism and antirealism, edification and esoterica.

For more than three decades, theorists retaining traditionalist or moralist leanings have attempted to identify writers who mediate in this fashion between "conventional" and postmodern values of the novel. Alan Wilde's *Middle Grounds*, perhaps the representative example, asserts the increasing prominence of "mid-fiction," referring to the work of Stanley Elkin, Thomas Berger, Donald Barthelme, Grace Paley and Pynchon (*The Crying Of Lot 49* only) which rejects both "the oppositional extremes of realism on the one hand and a world-denying reflexivity on the other, and that invites us instead to perceive the moral, as well as the epistemological perplexities of inhabiting and coming to terms with a world that is itself ontologically contingent and problematic."<sup>5</sup> Dissatisfied with the "moral cataractia" found in much-acclaimed minimalist fiction by Raymond Carver and Joan Didion, Wilde labors to find in his authors parabolic examples of "how to deal with the world," a successful equipoise, like Rorty's, amid the flux of perception, a willingness to "live with and in the untidiness of existence."<sup>6</sup> Wilde's plea is for humanist fiction, defined as featuring not only an eternally inquisitive mind but a valuing of the individual and an insistence on tolerance; yet in practice he often seems to be grafting moral significance onto texts which lack the wherewithal to maintain it. Thomas Berger's *Who Is Teddy Villanova?*, for example, is, like Auster's early "City Of Glass," a satire of the language and structure of the hard-boiled detective novel, gleefully rooting out convention until the effects on the reader parallel those wrought on its hero by villain Washburn: "to remove the sense of wonder is often tantamount to emasculation."<sup>7</sup>

Most of the other works Wilde describes do not move beyond a philosophical or linguistic understanding of contingency to address its frequent eruptions into political, social, and religious issues. Instead, there is a very self-absorbed whimsy in many of these works; though Wilde bases his reading of Barthelme on the "background of daily life"<sup>8</sup> found in his writing, there is little in the seminal *The Dead Father*, or the somewhat misleadingly titled collection *City Life*, akin to the wide-reaching depiction of such life in Tom

Wolfe's realist-throwback *The Bonfire Of The Vanities*, or, on the postmodern end, in the roving thematic exploration of the far more textually challenging *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Unlike Wilde's authors, Auster, DeLillo, Johnson and O'Brien clearly evolve away from the extremes of authorship represented by Pynchon and Wolfe. DeLillo and Auster are initially much nearer the postmodern end, DeLillo especially, as he is drawn to the benchmarks of postmodern writing—excess, play, and a Derridean exposure of the unreliability of language. Auster, more influenced by French poetry and existentialist writing than by postmodernists like Pynchon or Coover, gravitates toward “white spaces” (what Roland Barthes calls “writing degree zero”), in which what is unsaid is more important than what is. Even more than DeLillo, he is interested in the way language functions (or hardly functions), and, correspondingly, in the mechanics of literary expression, specifically the question of what transpires in the gray area between the writing and the final interpretation of the text by the audience. While this last interest would seem to represent a stronger awareness of the reader's role than is present in DeLillo's early approach, which expressly admits its disdain for the audience, Auster's defamiliarization of the story process in his early novels is so complete that narrative *as* narrative, as opposed to the *idea* of narrative, is enervated to the point that it can no longer “move” his readers. Yet Auster's 1999 novel *Mr. Vertigo* is, while fantastic in nature, a far more conventional narrative than his earlier and very self-reflexive *New York Trilogy* (1985–1987), just as DeLillo's 1997 masterpiece *Underworld*, though a long and challenging text, is nowhere near as dauntingly self-conscious as his earlier metanovel *Ratner's Star*.

Johnson and O'Brien, on the other hand, are public-oriented from the start. Johnson posits an ethnic voice to counter the hegemonic (white) voice of American fiction, a gesture that could be seen as mischievous, as disruption, as play, but he is determined to make comprehensible and constructive statements about racial consciousness in this country, aspiring to a “philosophic fiction” with specific lessons to be learned, specific values to be uncovered, a systematic broadening of the mind of his readers. O'Brien firmly grounds himself in the war narrative tradition, his voice an amalgam of the straightforward style of Hemingway and an adamantly moral tone increasingly rare in the modern novel. In his first book, the autobiographical *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, he declares his intention to “expose the brutality and injustice and stupidity and annoyance of wars and those who fight them . . . when I was released, I would find other wars; I would work to discover if they were just and necessary, and if I found they were not, I would have another crusade.”<sup>9</sup> O'Brien stresses that this is the immaturity of a young

soldier speaking, but nevertheless such sentiment is vastly different from any expressed in Auster's and DeLillo's early work—and the fire and conviction, if not necessarily the idealism, still persist in the older, battle-scarred O'Brien. But both writers find, according to pattern, that the novel is a more contingent entity than they had foreseen, that they cannot easily re-center what the postmodernists have de-centered, and thus in the spirit of Rortyian compromise they engage this contingency to tell their stories more effectively.

In this they are joined by DeLillo and Auster, overcoming their reluctance to address the audience, overcoming a maxim much taken to heart by contemporary novelists: only the misunderstood work survives. H.R. Jauss, using the initially controversial but unpopular *Madame Bovary* as an example, believes that the greatest works confound the assumptions of their initial audience, their lasting value resting in an “aesthetic distance” he defines as “the disparity between the given layer of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception can result in a ‘change of horizons’ through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> Jauss implicitly suggests a writer's mandate: write for the future; write the novel that will stultify the masses; take comfort in the fact that later in history such works will be cherished for their innovation. As Peter Aaron, the narrator of Auster's *Leviathan*, explains: “books are born out of ignorance, and if they go on living after they're written, it's only to the degree that they cannot be understood.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet a sense of responsibility toward contemporary readers continues to haunt these writers, as epitomized by the fact that they all, as we will see, share a very prominent motif in the storyteller's journey, in which the storyteller enacts the circle more customarily carried out by his hero: a self-banishment from the tribe; an accumulation by trial of knowledge and experience; an eventual return bearing power and insight. A typical example can be found in DeLillo's *Mao II*, in which the work of noted and reclusive writer Bill Gray reflects, in the eyes of his assistant Scott, “people's need to make mysteries and legends.” His novels “made Scott think of the great leaders who regenerate their power by dropping out of sight and staging messianic returns.”<sup>12</sup> Such a conflation of modern artist, ancient storyteller, and mythic hero is nothing new; of the tribal storyteller, Freud writes: “he goes and relates to the group his hero's deeds which he has invented. At the bottom this hero is no one but himself.”<sup>13</sup> John Gardner describes how the Romantics “took upon themselves” various mythic roles including both the “heroic mode” and “the singer of the hero's deeds.”<sup>14</sup> But the contemporary manifestation of this mythic alter ego is as doubt-wracked as he is powerful, either repulsed by images of primitive tribesman cowering in caves or menaced by images of brutish



Neanderthals huddled ominously around a fire, a poet-priest trepidaciously debating the cost of his journey, the worth of story, even as the fate of his tribe hangs in the balance.

Modern texts that repeatedly reference the primeval storyteller are referencing our primal need for narrative and our primal capacity to understand it; as such, they focus on rudiments of narrative such as plot progression and character development, building blocks of the novel that have often seemed opposed to the style and self-awareness that is also essential to its art. The novelist has always struggled with this primacy of story; it was only with great reluctance that E.M. Forster admitted that "the novel tells a story. That is its fundamental aspect without which it could not exist . . . and I wish that it were not so, that it could be something different—melody, or perception of the truth, not this low atavistic form."<sup>15</sup> John Barth suggests, though, that we have finally evolved beyond this low form. Unlike Joseph Campbell, who asserts that myth is alive wherever the reader of fiction can find in art constants relating to the human condition—"what, then, is both grave and constant, irreducible and inevitable, in this scene of conflict and death?"<sup>16</sup>—Barth insists that our ties to the world of myth have been severed and can be re-experienced only through ironic recapitulation, imitation, or satire; the culprits are an era of diffuse literary experimentation and the infringement of advanced technology on the modern consciousness. Barth "deplores" those who ignore "the whole modernist enterprise" and the influence of "Freud and Einstein and two world wars and the Russian and sexual revolutions . . . and now nuclear weaponry and television and microchip technology. . . . There's no going back to Tolstoy and Dickens and company except on nostalgia trips."<sup>17</sup> Such shallow readers, he argues, are clinging to "middle class realism."

Realism has long been the central precept of the Novel's unique variety of myth-making, according to Ian Watt, who matter-of-factly identifies a form "under an obligation to satisfy its readers with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned [and] the particulars of times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms."<sup>18</sup> But this precept, in the eyes of writers like Barth, cannot conceal the "fact" that, as Tzvetan Todorov observes, the novel is "sheer distortion. What exists first and foremost is the text itself, and nothing but the text. . . . Novels do not imitate reality, they create it."<sup>19</sup>

Such writers are unbothered by the fact that the ultimate distancing from readers is a dismissal of the world, their world, its realistic core. Even Rorty, flamboyant subjectivist that he is, feels it is necessary to remind his reader that there is an objective reality, a world "out there," even if there is no

truth "out there:" "to say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space or time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states."<sup>20</sup> Brian McHale, on the other hand, wants little to do with "common sense," rejoicing in the postmodern "plurality of universes," in which ontological exploration "is not necessary to seek some grounding for *our* universe; it might just as appropriately involve describing *other* universes, including 'possible' or even 'impossible' universes."<sup>21</sup> William Burroughs, in accordance with McHale's theories, does not conceal the world as much as eliminate it altogether. According to Ihab Hassan, the postmodernists emulate Burroughs's trailblazing, his "complex desire to dissolve the world—or at least to recognize its dissolution—and to remake it as absurd or decaying or parodic or private."<sup>22</sup>

Burroughs's approach in *Naked Lunch* is to unleash a stream-of-consciousness barrage of grotesqueries, horrors, and sexual abuses, all presumably reflective of the "copulating rhythm of the universe."<sup>23</sup> Frank Kermode, insisting that "there is still a need to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to [the world],"<sup>24</sup> finds no such "human" structure—no structure, moral or otherwise—in Burroughs's "avante garde" novel, which to his eyes is "unified only by the persistence in its satirical fantasies of outrage and obscenity."<sup>25</sup> Yet theorists like Sontag discover in it instead a pattern and a harmony, a cohesion found not in theme but in "the principles of (and balance between) variety and redundancy."<sup>26</sup> We recall Forster's ambivalent wish that melody could be the ideal of the novel instead of story; here the ideal is indeed, according to Philip Stevick, to "extend the idea of form beyond . . . linear progression . . . toward something more mosaic, concentrated, or circular."<sup>27</sup> Unlike Forster or Campbell, Sontag has argued that art has changed drastically from the "magical-religious operation" of primeval times, and is of value now only to stimulate the conscious with sensual pleasures; this needs be the writer's imperative given that the nation's tendency to excess has produced "a steady loss in sharpness of our sensory experience."<sup>28</sup>

But Rorty remains insistent about the role of narrative. He explains how the most powerful narratives bring about a new world view, a new self-image, grand examples being Galileo repositioning Earth in the universe, Darwin repositioning Man in the biological order, and (of most interest to Rorty) the founders of democracy repositioning the common man in the political and social arena.<sup>29</sup> The role of the novelist in this process is often to make sense of the transition, to reconcile the triumphant world view with the lost one, providing the comprehensible storyline required by the masses. Pinpointing another modern upheaval (if less grand) in our descent into irony, deconstruction and extreme self-consciousness, Rorty

himself rewrites the history of philosophy so that it seems our greatest thinkers, even pragmatists like John Dewey, have always been drawing us toward an accepting acknowledgment of contingency. He may be misrepresenting their work, as many claim, but he hopes that as a result we will be better able to accept the moral possibilities he finds in contingency instead of letting an all-too-likely paralysis set in. In their mature work, our novelists supply similar explanatory narratives, alternative histories, only far more utilitarian than Rorty's in that they are more accessible to a non-academic audience. While they do not shy away from postmodern obfuscation, they explore the origins of postmodern confusion, presenting narratives of the birth of the postmodern age. In other words, they supply narratives exploring the end of narrative, a gesture of the most hopeful paradox. Jameson stresses that the postmodern freedom to toy with the past is emblematic of an irremovable barrier between the contemporary artist and his or her sense of history: "the symptom of social and historical impotence, of the blocking of possibilities that leaves little option but the imaginary."<sup>30</sup> Yet realizing that the excesses of the postmodern world (and the postmodern novel) are less threatening if their genesis is explained, our authors reengage this past, offering various myth-speculations, varied scapegoats for the unleashing of these confusions: for DeLillo, the JFK assassination; for O'Brien, the Vietnam war; for Johnson, the King assassination, compounding the process begun with American slavery. Such history lessons approximate Eliade's "myth of origins," which both unifies and renews the community: "in most cases, it is not enough to *know* the origin myth, we must *recite* it." Yet historical "fact" is often mangled in the configuring of these narratives, stimulating controversy; DeLillo especially faced criticism from conservative writers like George Will, for whom tampering with the sanctity of U.S. official history is dangerous business indeed. How limited, then, is the audience for their type of narrative?

Rorty stratifies the reading public between elitist readers and non-elitist readers, a distinction coinciding with his wider-ranging one between ironists and "commonsensically nominalist and historicist"<sup>31</sup> non-ironists. Rorty purports to defend both, yet his sympathies seem to lie firmly, and on occasion alarmingly, with the ironist camp; since only intellectuals of a certain type can process irony and accept contingency, he argues, they should minimize, however possible, the saturation of irony, *their* irony, into the masses. David L. Hall is ironic himself when describing Rorty's elitist program: "there must be the presence of a hope that cruelty may in fact be overcome. It is in order to protect this, often fragile, hope that Rorty wishes to ban irony from the public sphere."<sup>32</sup>

But Rorty's utopia is not diverse enough to reflect the pulse of contemporary America. While it is true that there are many conservatives like Will, and that, as Charles Hartshorne insists, "the skepticism of academics and intellectuals is balanced by waves of popular religiosity and superstition,"<sup>33</sup> there is clearly also a deep cynicism about all facets of modern life, including religion, that extends well beyond intellectuals and academicians. Such media-friendly flights from cynicism as visitations from UFOs and angels constitute a postmortem response to an irony that has dug deep into the American psyche; one would not struggle to recapture the religious sublime if it had not been lost. Irony of Rorty's type has been widespread for a long time; in 1956, Saul Bellow's Tommy Wilhelm observed that "cynicism was bread and meat to everyone. And irony, too. Maybe it couldn't be helped."<sup>34</sup> Hendin pinpoints the entrenchment of irony into the fabric of life during the fifties, when economic bounty bloomed under the cast of atomic war, the "consolidation of power and the promise of affluence."<sup>35</sup> In the current age, neither the national self-definition supplied by the cold war nor the optimism of economic bounty remains; filmmakers mourn the lack of easy villains, a problem compounded, not simplified, by 9/11, and the overriding perception is of an unforgiving job market tainted by the cold-hearted ethic employed by continually accumulating and merging mega-corporations (tellingly, this perception was in full force even during the healthy economy of the Clinton years). As a result, irony has become cultural currency; by the mid-nineties, musicians shrilly evoked it like a mantra in popular music, and journalists endlessly mulled over its pervasiveness and its contribution to contemporary directionlessness, despondency, and insensibility. The majority of the minority of citizens who vote remain decidedly non-idealistic, disillusioned even with their own candidate (the controversy around the Bush/Gore fiasco only aggravated a pre-existing jaundice). Relativism is commonplace, as Philip Roth sums up in *Operation Shylock*: "even the gullible now have contempt for objectivity; the latest theory they've swallowed whole is that it's impossible to repeat anything faithfully other than one's own temperature."<sup>36</sup> This irony epidemic does not antiquate Rorty's program, however, as much as prioritize it, necessitating the promulgation of liberal ironism on a far grander scale than he envisioned.

These ironists, more numerous than Rorty assumes, approach art in different ways. Some carry their ironism into their reading, insisting on the self-acknowledgement of contingency, but others turn to art for precisely the opposite reason, to suspend their irony, perhaps on some level to exonerate themselves of it. These readers are fully able to experience the primal story despite their entrenched awareness of its artificiality. Peter J. Rabinowitz explains that there are

two types of roles we assume when reading, and to which the writer caters. The first is the role of the *authorial* audience, in which a self-conscious approach to the art “will generally intrude on the illusion of reality, and limit our involvement in the world of the work before us.”<sup>37</sup> The second is the role of *narrative* audience, which “takes the work before it as real.” The ironist majority is quite capable of the first role, much encouraged in postmodernism, but far more inclined to the second. This does not mean that they are disinclined to the kind of manipulation DeLillo utilizes in *Libra*; in fact, Rorty’s idea that history is just a collection of narratives is a widespread one, as cinematic choices reflect. Despite the fervent debate in the media over the historical merits of Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, most moviegoers accepted the film as a political thriller, a paranoid thriller, with a ring of truth but not factual accuracy; the potent message was to be skeptical of governmental claims, not to implicate LBJ in the conspiracy. The most presumably “adult” of nineties blockbusters, *Forrest Gump*, was inherently supportive of the status quo in most ways, yet “played” with touchstones of the last several decades both on the level of narrative and through Oscar-winning computer effects used to manipulate footage of presidents and celebrities—a technique that presents a light-hearted flipside of the scene in *JFK* in which conspirators doctor the infamous photograph of Oswald with his rifle. Immensely popular television programs like *The X-Files* (1993–2002), far more negative about the state of the Union than *Gump*, presented an alternative mythos, a darkly fabulistic and fatalistic counter-story to the surface national teleology; few viewers bought into the show’s claims of alien abduction as fact, of course, but were instead invested in the dark narrative of governmental corruption, known by devotees as “the mythology.” The narrative audience, the narrative ironist, is willing to embrace relativism so long as the story is accessibly told, credible within its circle of logic; so long as the story remains a story, undeconstructed. While Auster, DeLillo, Johnson and O’Brien supply no truth, only versions of the truth, their impulse is to approximate, if only for the space of a novel, the enabling *surety* of truth, an impulse toward the reader that goes against many prevailing notions of the modern Novel in which they themselves have often believed and against which Rorty often writes: first, that art that serves a social function is not true art; second, that the audience, the reader, is unworthy of such catering; third, that art and morality remain ever separate.

## Chapter Two

# Social Realism in the Postmodern Age

In the study of American literature, the term “realism” has come to signify more than Watts’s standards of characterization, time and place. It has come to be associated with a particular movement of writers in the so-called Gilded Age, William Dean Howells and his often more talented cohorts, a loosely cohering school who in their rejection of commercially dominant novels of sentimentalism and romance and their avowed adherence to the mundane truths of day-to-day life often served to expose social injustices sorely in need of remedy. In the postmodern view, though, these texts ultimately *supported* the status quo. Brook Thomas summarizes this argument: “[the realistic novel’s] final sense of cohesion offers implicit reassurances that contradictions can be contained within a significantly ordered structure inherent in society.”<sup>1</sup> Such reasoning fastens on an inherent sense of order, order not as much in the story, in which violence and upheaval are common, but in the form, its relative confidence in the mimetic properties of language and the stability of perspective.

As a case in point, postmodern defender Lee Lemon, although purporting to stress the readability of Barth’s work, his use of the “significant, thematic values” that “regularly win popular rather than critical support,”<sup>2</sup> criticizes Barth’s accessible first two novels on the grounds that they employ “the common tricks that seduce the common reader.” Lemon prefers instead “more difficult and more rewarding”<sup>3</sup> novels like Barth’s *LETTERS*, a vast work requiring not only undo patience but a wide-ranging familiarity with Barth’s entire oeuvre, without which the text is unrewarding and largely incomprehensible. Frederick Karl does not resort to Lemon’s questionable rhetoric; he freely admits that *LETTERS* is “very difficult to read and in many aspects a display of authorial self-indulgence,” and celebrates it for that very reason; as an antithesis of popularly acclaimed and more “traditional” work like John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, it does “what literature is supposed to do, which is probe new modes of perception, however tedious the process.”<sup>4</sup> Karl categorizes this mode

of writing as "literature," whereas more accessible works such as *Garp*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *The Fixer*, and *Lie Down in Darkness* are simply "novels." Tom LeClair, in line with Karl, favors those writers derided by Tom Wolfe as a school of "puppet masters" who are "in love with the theory that the novel [is], first and foremost, a literary game, words on a page being manipulated by an author."<sup>5</sup> He argues that it is only the mega- or meta-novel, the work most reliant on theory and most likely to stifle the audience's expectations, that can combat the ever-present inflation or obesity of contemporary life: "only extraordinarily knowledgeable and skilled works of literature—masterworks—have the kind of power that asserts the efficacy of literature and leads readers to contest and possibly reformulate the mastery systems they live within."<sup>6</sup> In other words, he asserts a social function, a social role, for this disruptive urge.

In truth, the early, seminal postmodernists often shared the same social views as their realist forebears. Realist patriarchs like Howells exposed the detritus of a young and impudent American capitalism reliant upon spastic undulations of the market that were as likely to dash men's lives to pieces as to elevate them to prosperity, and that calcified the souls of even those who most prospered by them. Postmodernists like Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis display in monumental texts like *Gravity's Rainbow* and *JR* a dreadful apprehension over the increasingly chaotic turns of modern economics, the explosion of data and multitudinous perspective brought about in part by the mass media (what Jean Baudrillard describes as "the obesity of meaning systems and information banks"<sup>7</sup>), the swelling of multinational corporations, and the encroachment of the artificial upon the human facilitated by scientific research often funded by those corporations. The recurring subject of their fiction is the apoplectic despair of any individual aware of these vast forces and futilely attempting to establish a sense of place and identity among them, a semblance of coherence, whether internal or external. It is on these grounds that Jacques Derrida has defended the *realistic* core of deconstruction in terms applicable to the postmodern novel that is its most self-conscious embodiment, insisting that his approach is not limited to theory, but is instead representative of "what is happening today in what they call society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on and so forth."<sup>8</sup>

But even if the seminal postmodernists framed the challenges of their bulky texts—their indistinguishable characters, inscrutable plots, and erudite conceptual systems—in order to represent or embody the moribund conditions of society, they chose to do so to such an exaggerated degree that their work ultimately constitutes an affront to the reader, adding insult to injury, so to speak, the storyteller mangling his story, depriving it of its replenishing effects. Writing of the *roman à thèse*, Wolfgang Iser defines the limitations

faced by all writers with Something To Say: "the problem is merely to ensure the reliable communication of the thesis, which means that the expectations and dispositions of the reading public must be linked as smoothly as possible to the contents. In other words, the strategies of the text must ensure a *good continuation* that will extend into the reader's store of experience."<sup>9</sup> When postmodern texts sunder this continuation, their social message, the potentially melioristic exposure, in LeClair's terms, of forces including "monopolistic capitalism, consensus politics, industrial growth, and an alienated consumerism of objects, entertainment, and information,"<sup>10</sup> comes to seem less important than their philosophic or linguistic methods of deflation, the deconstructionist principles uprooting, again in LeClair's terms, "the concept of transcendental or absolute truth; the primacy of origin, cause and end; the priority of substance, identity, unity, and homogeneity." Thus it is not surprising that, having deconstructed their own social program, these postmodern metatexts inspired not only imitators of their inflated yet socially conscious style but also such "playful" and largely irrelevant works as Barth's *Chimera*, Barthelme's *Snow White*, Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*, and Ronald Sukenick's "The Death of the Novel," literature about literature, the writer uninterested in his world.

Umberto Eco defines the novel that not only admits its own contingency but elevates it to its main theme as the "open text." "what matters is not the various issues in themselves but the maze-like structure of the text. . . . You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it."<sup>11</sup> In practice, then, the open text proves to be closed; Eco prefers the freedoms inherent in the more conventional reading process, the give and take between text and reader, as opposed to Roland Barthes, for example, who favors the self-aware text, the "text of bliss" (*jouissance*) that "discomforts (perhaps to the state of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions . . . [and] brings to crisis his relation to language."<sup>12</sup> Rorty observes that many philosophers who share his ideas of contingency often limit their work to contingency, much as many postmodern authors limit their work to a discussion of the futility of our compulsion to interpret. Such endeavors, he suggests, offer only the most radically unfeasible ideas of human progress: "Philosophers who specialize in antifoundationalism . . . often see themselves as revolutionaries rather than rubbish-sweepers or visionaries. Then, alas, they become avant-gardist."<sup>13</sup>

Postmodern theorists like Robert Scholes stress the ludic impulse of postmodern fiction, "a more subtle faith in the humanizing value of laughter,"<sup>14</sup> as not only a replacement but a remedy for the idea of the novel as a "reforming instrument." Of course, even if this value were to be adequate

compensation, one must question Scholes's confidence that this laughter is not at the reader's expense; in actuality, the ludic impulse epitomizes just what it would seem to, an insouciant regression into childhood, as our authors eventually conclude. Their evolving use of a Lewis Carroll motif demonstrates; Carroll is a cherished father figure of the postmodern movement, of postmodern theory, as the introduction to "Contemporary Approaches to Literature" in *The Bloomsbury Guide To English Literature* shows: "The implied mirror at first appears to reflect passively and accurately Alice's own drawing room, just as words seem to have fixed and true meanings. But the world behind the glass, like a literary text, destabilizes that certainty, for the language of *Through the Looking-Glass* constructs our world, rather than reflecting it."<sup>15</sup> Here again is Todorov's sense of the novel as construct. In the relentlessly self-conscious "City of Glass," Auster seems to find artistic imperative in the reaction of mad genius Stillman to the Humpty Dumpty declaration that "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." As Stillman explains: "In his little speech to Alice, Humpty Dumpty sketches the future of human hopes and gives the clue to our salvation: to become masters of the words we speak, to make language answer our needs. Humpty Dumpty was a prophet, a man who spoke truths the world was not ready for."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, DeLillo relies on numerous *Alice in Wonderland* correspondences in his early metanovel *Ratner's Star*; Douglas Keesey claims that they "help lighten the burden, creating the potential for comedy and a happy ending,"<sup>17</sup> but the true program of the novel is to burden and baffle the reader, as DeLillo freely admits.

Conversely, Tim O'Brien recognizes from the start that Stillman's imperative, in which there need be no sense of restraint, responsibility, or realism, is a constant threat, and attempts, though with only partial success, to defend his *Going After Cacciato* against the assertions of many critical readers who have seen it as a postmodern text blurring the distinctions between reality and fantasy: "Our imaginative capabilities determine, in large part, the shape and direction of our lives. [But] we often look at imagination as weird fantasy—a bunch of Hobbits running around, Alice in Wonderland stuff."<sup>18</sup> It is Johnson's 1998 *Dreamer*, however, that reflects the more mature understanding of these four writers, in which the audacity of Stillman's (Humpty's) declaration excuses the most alarming social and political irresponsibility. When a black militant claims that "you can't be a racist unless you have power. . . . Black folks don't have power, so they can't be racist," Johnson's narrator, Matthew Bishop, recognizes "the logic of Humpty Dumpty" at work: "and there in the Black People's Liberation Library, I felt as if I'd fallen down a rabbit hole where all the world's meanings were reversed."<sup>19</sup>

Tom Wolfe has argued stridently for a more conventional realism opposed to such potentially irresponsible avant-gardism. For a modern author, he argues, making sense of "the people" is both the greatest liberation and the most impactful flourish of the imagination. His contemporaries have fallen far from Howells's famous New York ambition: "I hope to use some of its vast, gray, shapeless life in my fiction."<sup>20</sup> In an essay clearing the way for his throwback *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Wolfe recreates the pivotal years of the sixties, the turning point when the publishing world could have maintained its vigor had novelists looked to the people for subject matter: "the publishers along Madison Avenue . . . had their noses pressed against their thermopane glass walls scanning the billion-footed city for the approach of the young novelists who, surely, would bring them the big novels of the hippie movement, the new left, the Wall Street boom, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam."<sup>21</sup> Of course, Wolfe was strategically whetting his audience's appetite for his own work, but the concordance of critical and popular attention accorded his novel may have proved his point.

Much of the realism of the realist movement was based upon the accurate imitation of society's many contrasting voices, for, as Janet McKay observes, "it is only through the representation of many voices and many perspectives that an objective reality emerges."<sup>22</sup> In addition, she continues, an interest in a wide spectrum of perspectives emphasized an egalitarian message. In *Bonfire*, Wolfe explores a cross-spectrum of New York life, the voices of urban America, rich and poor and multiracial, without surrendering his sense, or more importantly the reader's sense, of control. In contrast, heteroglossia as manifested in the postmodern novel is not, according to Brian McHale, "held in check by a unifying monological perspective,"<sup>23</sup> as it had been in earlier attempts to address the life of the people such as John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* The author's control is independent of the reader's; the multitude of voices that make up Gaddis's *JR*, for instance, are virtually indistinguishable, undifferentiated by punctuation or notation, so that the reader must always labor to determine who is speaking, let alone what their opinions might be. In addition, Gaddis unleashes a barrage of a communicative channels into the muddle—television, radio, advertising, music—that further derail one's scrutiny. Wolfe's novel, if not necessarily an aesthetically brilliant work of art, seems to capture the randomness and moral vacuum of modern life far more resonantly than *JR*; in light of the national trauma of circus-like events like the Simpson trial, it continues to touch a common chord. The egalitarian impulse of postmodernism, Pynchon's favoring of the preterit over the elect, is always undercut by a lack of investment in people, whether preterit or elect, in favor of voices severed from origin and context, spun around and against one another.



We have discussed how Sontag finds melody in this dissonance. While taking care to placate "outraged humanists," she clearly does not favor the ideal of "morally committed, human scale art."<sup>24</sup> She supports her position through such examples as Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propagandist film *The Triumph of the Will*; while we must condemn its morals, she insists, we must also cherish its genius.<sup>25</sup> An antithetical work of art would be a film like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which, while stylistically assured and masterful in most formal cinematic aspects, has achieved much of its public renown on the basis of its moral function as a testament to the Holocaust experience (Spielberg's similarly intentioned *Amistad* draws from much of the same source material as Johnson's *Middle Passage*). In such a work as *Schindler's List* it ultimately proves impossible to determine where the technician's craft ends and where the moralist's begins, both being facets of the same sensibility, that sensibility which Sontag attempts to divide according to the distinction "between the moral and the 'merely' aesthetic" that Rorty finds most vexing, as it is often used to "relegate 'literature' to a subordinate position within culture and to suggest that novels and poems are irrelevant to moral reflection."<sup>26</sup> Instead, he shares Gerald Graff's certainty that "literary thinking is inseparable from moral and social thinking."<sup>27</sup>

Rorty has himself come under attack for his negligence of underlying reality; Frank Farrel suggests that Rorty's support for creative narrative tends to belie the fact that the best approach for a writer who wishes to grant a particular social view ascendancy is "to attend to the world, and to discover something about how it works, rather than attend to strategies of sociological manipulation."<sup>28</sup> But more critics attack Rorty for the moral impositions of his utopian conjecturing; Honi Fern Haber, for example, characterizes Rorty's assertion that "only one form of political discourse, the liberal and democratic one, is valid," with "a form of terror."<sup>29</sup> The ironic writer in Rorty's mode, then, finds himself navigating between Scylla and Charybdis. It is clear, though, that Wolfe's "people" are an integral part of the mix; the modern author equates "the masses" with his literary audience.

### Chapter Three

## "Middle Class Realism" and the Acceptance of the Reader

Barth decries those readers, "the lobotomized masses," who cling to "middle class realism." His impulse is nothing new; Mircea Eliade, writing of the reader of *Finnegan's Wake* and other challenging modernist classics, recognizes that the central precept of the literary elitist, writer or reader, is revulsion for the bulk of humanity. The true appeal of difficult works, she states, is that they represent "closed worlds, hermetic universes that cannot be entered except through overcoming immense difficulties like the initiatory ordeals of the archaic or traditional societies." The ultimate aim is "to proclaim to the 'others' (i.e. the 'mass') that one belongs to a select minority," the latter opposed to "both official values and the traditional churches."<sup>1</sup> But if the impulse is nothing new, shifts in the status of both novel and novelist over recent decades have widened the divisions.

The Novel is no longer the primary form of American art, and there may be resentment as a result. J. Hillis Miller sees the end of the American intellectual in the new culture created by film and the full spectrum of recent technological innovations, the "popular visual and aural culture of radio, television, cinema, videos, CDs, CD-Roms, and The World Wide Web, which has replaced print culture as the crucible of public opinion."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the media often laments the grim prospects of the Novel, and it has a multitude of supporting evidence from which to draw, as attested by a 1997 column in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* describing the severe competition for our leisure time: "on the average, we watch more than four hours of TV a day, listen to three full hours of radio, and spend nearly fifty minutes reading;" the final category breaking down as "twenty-six minutes a day with a newspaper, ten minutes with a book, and fourteen with a magazine."<sup>3</sup> In *Dreamer*, published the following year, Johnson exemplifies how aware our novelists are of such

accounting: "by the time most of you are sixty-five years old, you will have looked at 102,000 hours of television, heard 25,000 hours of radio, seen 300,000 comic pages and 3,599 movies . . . and never devoted one hour to meditating on the truth."<sup>4</sup> Although Charles Newman observes that the industry has undergone an inflationary surge in which "in the last thirty years, more novels have been published than in any other comparable period of history,"<sup>5</sup> the demand is for easy-to-read, unassuming crowd-pleasers, the "literary" novel retaining its place only due to its expendability, as George Garret observes: "the literary book is, almost always, more economical. Doesn't call for an enormous advance. If good things develop, good and dandy. If bad things accrue, why the publishers can quickly dump it, cutting losses."<sup>6</sup> As novelist William Gass observes: "Fame is not a whore we can ring up. The public spends its money at the movies. . . . While the books die quietly, and more rapidly than their authors. Mammon has no interest in our service."<sup>7</sup>

In "City Of Glass," Auster epitomizes the Catch-22 offered by the modern literary market through his characterization of fledgling detective Daniel Quinn, a moderately successful writer of pulpy, pseudonymous detective stories. Despite his secure livelihood, Quinn's concessions to the market have cost him his artistic integrity, his writer's soul, there being no middle ground between popular and imaginative/artistic writing: "as a young man he had published several books of poetry, had written plays, critical essays, and had worked on a number of translations. But quite abruptly he had given up on all of that. A part of him had died."<sup>8</sup> Such a state is what Auster obviously feared for himself while struggling to stay financially afloat as a young writer, producing his own generic detective stories, doing, in his words, "everything in my power to prostitute myself, offering up my words for rock bottom prices, but no one would have me."<sup>9</sup> Auster equates popular fiction with prostitution; DeLillo equates it to pornography. It is a wonder, given this environment, that writers continue to write at all.

Given the years of financial struggle recounted by our four novelists, it is no surprise that the homeless derelict is a recurring character in their fiction. Nor is it unexpected that they imbue this figure with simultaneous yet contrasting significances, the extremes between which their literary purpose swings: the first is a realist criticism of economic systems institutionalized to callousness, the chaff left to stumble the streets in forlornness and despair; the second is a celebration of the deprived life as the means to a pristine state in which true art, art without an audience, can be generated. Tom Wolfe is much attuned to the predominance of the second attitude, in which an absorption in text and language has seemingly necessitated a self-punishment through starvation and isolation, a wan cherishing of despair that has not been so

much the vogue in print since the "celebration" of melancholy in Thomas Gray's era. Wolfe depicts the ideal home of the literary ascetic: "You can envision her apartment immediately. There is a mattress on top of a flush door supported by bricks. There's a window curtained in monk's cloth."<sup>10</sup> Wolfe pictures this young artist figure on a crowded subway train, disdaining the crowd, the masses, by blotting out the rush hour crush by focusing on the (inevitably challenging) book in her lap.

In his tumultuous formative years, Auster, taking part in forays that had "everything to do with James Joyce and *Ulysses*,"<sup>11</sup> walked the streets of Dublin in true Bloomian style, with "an insatiable urge to prowl." But drifting "like a ghost among strangers," he had no investment in the people around him—"after two weeks the streets were transformed into something wholly personal for me"<sup>12</sup>—very much out of sync with Joyce's own ideal of admitting, in Werner's words, "the full range of human life into the work of art."<sup>13</sup> Bloom's reflective sojourns become for our four authors an emblem of the dream of reconciliation, the thinker walking the busy streets, always apart from the robust life of the people yet always a part of it. The opposite, resentful impulse, a common pitfall for our writers, is summed up by Wolfe's subway rider, more a Stephen Dedalus than a Leopold Bloom: "I may be forced into this rat race, this squalid human stew, but I don't have to be *of* it. I reject all this."

Recent bearings in critical theory have inflamed this resentment by giving readers the upper hand; the advent of reader-response theory has inverted the relationship between author and reader. An author, according to George Poulet, provides a framework that can alter a reader's perception, but has little choice but to offer up his text, and in a sense himself, to the reader's intrusions, the reader's whim. Poulet describes this experience from the reader's perspective: "I am aware of a rational being, of a consciousness of another, no different from the one I automatically assume in every human being I encounter, except that in this case the consciousness is open to me, welcomes me, lets me look deep inside itself, and even allows me, with unheard of license, to think what it thinks and feel what it feels."<sup>14</sup> This description hardly takes into account the artistic persona still so cherished by the writer, that of the exile, the misfit, the terrorist, everything opposed to such intimacy; in *Players*, DeLillo suggests an aversion to any connection shared with the uncouth, undiscerning masses, the reading public. On separate occasions, protagonists Pammy and Lyle Wynant notice to their horror that they are being watched by a man masturbating in his car; Pammy recoils, but it is too late, she has shared his experience, in terms that recall Poulet's, only twisted, loathsome: "to see the offer was to accept, automatically. . . . He'd taught her his

way of speaking, his beliefs and customs, the name of his father and mother. Having done this, he no longer needed to put his hands upon her. They were part of each other now."<sup>15</sup>

Of course, no writer can write without any reader in mind; there must be an ideal reader, as defined by Gerald Prince: "a certain type of reader whom he bestows with certain qualities, faculties, and inclinations according to the obligations he feels should be respected."<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Culler describes the importance of the properly equipped reader, claiming, commonsensically, that "works remain opaque to those who have not assimilated the appropriate conventions." Yet while Culler stresses socially formed and ratified conventions of reading in his observation that "someone who has read a lot of literature is better equipped to understand a work than someone who has read none,"<sup>17</sup> he suggests that in the end this equipped reader will not be the lover of literature at large but one whose techniques are those "explicitly manifested in literary journals, critical discussion, and literary education." Roland Barthes, waving off humanism entirely, believes that the audience for his "literature of bliss" is made up of "aristocratic readers,"<sup>18</sup> who are not averse to re-reading, who are not bent upon uncovering some easily packageable meaning. Gass constructs an ideal reader who is "a lover of lists, a twiddler of lines," and who forgives "the author's self-indulgence"<sup>19</sup> (DeLillo may have been thinking of this or similar Gass assertions when creating Scott, Gray's obsessive disciple in *Mao II*, who insists that "there was pleasure in the lists, faint and clear"<sup>20</sup>). Lemon, still under the pretense of asserting Barth's accessibility, admits that his most likely reader is nevertheless "the eager professional, the reader who reads less for enjoyment than for the unsolved problem or an unanswered question that can be converted into a publishable paper."<sup>21</sup> Rorty for his part laments the rise of the *theory-oriented* reader who resorts to "Foucault, Eagleton, Jameson, Lyotard, and Zizek" instead of "the stacks that contain Shakespeare, Sterne, Wordsworth, Dickens, Emerson, etc."<sup>22</sup> But Rorty remains sensitive to the needs of the elitist artist; he posits Freud as another example of a perspective embodying the seemingly fragile yet utilitarian middle-ground between the author's isolationist impulses and the needs of the common, not theory-oriented, reader: "Freud stands in awe before the poet, but describes him as infantile. He is bored by the merely mortal man, but describes him as mature. He does not enthuse over either, nor does he ask us to choose between them."<sup>23</sup>

In attempting to build stability on this blurred horizon, our writers find themselves, somewhat unexpectedly, following in the wake of paradigmatic naturalist Steinbeck. In *East Of Eden*, Steinbeck, committed to asserting the individual over the group, believes that even conceiving of people as "the

masses" facilitates their exploitation by business interests, the pleasing realization that "two men can lift a bigger stone than one man" leading directly to the implementation of crass industrial policy: "a group can build automobiles quicker and better than one man." Yet at times Steinbeck's celebration of the individual seems to suggest a very contemporary elevation of the lone artist-figure over Barth's lobotomized masses: "once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group can never invent anything. The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of a man."<sup>24</sup> But his novel draws back from the precipice of self-indulgence; in the end, the pragmatists who make up the gray shape of humanity are as compelling as the isolated artist-figure, if not more so. The most admirable character, Irish immigrant Samuel Hamilton, has himself more than a trace of genius, but has turned his back on greatness to aspire to mediocrity, valuing, in Freud's terms, the mature over the infantile: "on one side you have warmth and companionship and sweet understanding, and on the other hand—cold, lonely greatness. There you make your choice. I'm glad I chose mediocrity, but how am I to say what reward might have come with the other?"<sup>25</sup>

For a novelist, the pursuit of this "mediocrity" involves a certain degree of realism, a certain degree of support for the status quo, and a certain amount of pandering to the audience. Accordingly, the works of the core writers in this study *do* come to cling, if precariously, to domestic ideals, the "official values" against which Eliade's elitist community defines itself, the "middle-class realism" that Barth decries. In particular, marriage and the family unit retain their value, cases in point including DeLillo's imperiled yet still vital Gladney clan in *White Noise*, Auster's glowing rendition of "the Auster family" in "City of Glass," O'Brien's family focus in *Northern Lights*, *The Nuclear Age*, and *The Things They Carried*, and Johnson's quite old-fashioned technique of concluding his novels with marriages, emphasizing stability in the social order (if possibly a more fluid social order than that which preceded them). This proposition runs counter to an idea of marriage in place in literature since the seventies, as described by Hendin: "the rise of the work ethic of sex correlates with the development of marriage as a literary symbol for every kind of political, psychological, and economic bankruptcy."<sup>26</sup> Our political climate has been much marked by the rhetoric of family values, of course, but clearly these authors are not passively echoing "hot button" issues but instead asserting a value despite their awareness of how that value has been manipulated by political agents whose social agendas do not coincide with their own. It is with his usual playfulness that Johnson chooses the figure of Karl Marx, of all people, to represent an approach that embraces "official values," and that casts off any trace of resentment toward the reader. In *Oxherding Tale*, Marx pays a visit to the Polkinghorne plantation,

where, conversing with Andrew Hawkins's tutor, Ezekiel, he displays a remarkable sanguinity toward the disinterest of the populace to his work. He realizes that the people for whom he writes will probably never read him, yet nevertheless resolves to write *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* for a pretty, oblivious young woman spotted on his stagecoach. Hearing this, Ezekiel, an elitist intellectual himself, is affronted, and sullenly reminds Marx that "she'll never read your goddamn book." Marx replies that loving someone is more important than being loved, leading Ezekiel to reveal the deep wound, or fear of wounding, that motivates so many of these writers: "denying *me* love, they would, strictly speaking, deny *me* life."<sup>27</sup>

But accepting the fact that one's work will not be read is not sufficient; one must tailor his work to fit the audience's desires. This is the terrible realization with which DeLillo grapples in *Players*. Pammy Wynant, having just returned from a disastrous affair in the arms of a troubled, eventually suicidal homosexual, loses herself in vapid TV, a fifties movie in which a family faces dire, and melodramatic, straits: "Pammy couldn't stop watching. The cheapness was magnetic. She experienced a near obliteration of self-awareness."<sup>28</sup> DeLillo is fully aware of the tawdry nature of such art, its lack of aesthetic value, its crass manipulation of the audience with, as he calls it, "serial grief." But though Pammy shares DeLillo's awareness and deep-rooted cynicism, she cannot resist the onslaught on her emotions, even though she knows it is "tainted by the artificiality of the movie, its plain awfulness." She observes, somewhat bitterly: "Movies did that to people, awful or not."

Yet the insipid art that inspires her revulsion, the generic movie of domestic crisis, also inspires a genuine catharsis: Pammy finally collapses into tears over her *personal* crisis, the nightmare she has put herself through, and continues to put herself through, for no better reason than boredom or anomie. She experiences guilt, grief, and a newfound sadness over the absence of her husband, who is on an equally calamitous course, for similarly shallow reasons. Empathy for the human condition, the experience of joy or sorrow, love or heartbreak, is supposedly the aim of the "popular" novelist and the lowest common denominator novel, yet her long-overdue breakdown is, as the most human note in *Players*, a moment of extreme revelation, if not enough—too little, too late—to fully humanize Pammy.

Although DeLillo shares Pammy's repugnance of the Crowd in all its raucous permutations, he also shares her respect for the potency of the art by which it has chosen to be represented, even if he suspects he can never embrace it himself, as an inheritor of that school of literary thought best defined by Henry Miller: "An artist is always alone—if he *is* an artist. No, what the artist needs is *loneliness*."<sup>29</sup> In his short story "Moving Pictures,"

Johnson suggests that the accessibility so fundamental to popular film may be one and the same in literature:

You'd seen it as a miracle, an act of God when the director, having read your novel, called, offering you the project—a historical romance—then walked you patiently through the first eight drafts, suspicious of you at first (there was real money in this, it wasn't poetry), of your dreary, novelistic pretensions, and you equally suspicious of him, his background in sitcoms, obsession with "keeping it sexy," and love of Laurel and Hardy films. For this you wrote a dissertation on Derrida? Yet you'd listened. He was right in the end.<sup>30</sup>

The novelist is pretentious, theory-ridden; the purveyor of pop wares is puerile yet skilled, shrewd, a storyteller. It is clear that the former has much to learn from the latter; it is this type of admission, this type of growing process, that allows the ironist writer to dispel the pervasive negativity of the postmodern masterwork in favor of Rorty's more positivistic questioning, in which it has become "steadily easier to substitute Deweyan questions such as What communities' purposes shall I share? and What sort of person would I prefer to be? for the Kantian questions, What Should I Do? What May I Hope? What Is Man?"<sup>31</sup>