Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction

STACEY OLSTER
State University of New York at Stony Brook

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For Abraham Jacob Olster,
who did not tell me how to spell the
words I asked about, but taught me to
look them up myself instead

History, the articulated past – all kinds, even our personal histories – is forever being rethought, refelt, rewritten, not merely as rigor or luck turns up new facts but as new patterns emerge, as new understandings develop, and as we experience new needs and new questions. There is no absolute, positive past available to us, no matter how rigorously we strive to determine it – as strive we must. Inevitably, the past, so far as we know it, is an inference, a creation, and this, without being paradoxical, can be said to be its chief value for us. In creating the image of the past, we create ourselves, and without that task of creating the past we might be said scarcely to exist. Without it, we sink to the level of a protoplasmic swarm.

– Robert Penn Warren, "The Use of the Past"

Preface

Imagine, if you will, a meeting between Gertrude Stein and Henry Ford at a cocktail party – an unlikely pairing, to be sure, but not an inconceivable one for two people born within eleven years of each other and dying a year apart. The conversation turns to America, specifically American history. Stein responds, as she did in *The Making of Americans* (1925), with authorial effusiveness: "It has always seemed to me a rare privilege, this, of being an American, a real American, one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete." Ford, concurring, reacts with assembly-line efficiency: "History is bunk."

Ford was wrong, of course. Yet no less so was Stein. Assuming a generation to consist of twenty years, and subtracting the three generations of Americans that she cited from the year that her words appeared in print, one arrives at 1865 – shortchanging America of its past by almost ninety years of independence and by over two hundred years of European settlement. The more grievous error in Stein's remarks has little to do with chronology, however. Rather, it concerns the relationship they posit between having a history and having historical consciousness, making the historical sensibility of a nation's people dependent upon their nation's age in years. Viewed with respect to other countries in the world, which is the perspective from which Stein's comments are made, America *is* a young country, one whose history as a settled land dates back only to the early seventeenth century. But because those first European settlers were who they were, American history was understood by them in relation to a vast scheme of salvation history in which chronological age was largely irrelevant. Therefore, while *America itself* may not have had much history, either then or now, *its inhabitants* have had access to a sense of grand historical process from the very beginning.

It was in the hopes of interjecting my own voice into those conversations, imagined and actual, that celebrate an antipathy to history that this study was first undertaken. Originating in part in response to my students, it reflects my own awareness that the undergraduates I now teach are a changed group from those I first encountered as a teaching assistant, that those whose historical sensibility (however limited) I could define with reference to the election or assassination of John F. Kennedy have been superseded by an undergraduate population whose average year of birth is closer to 1970. Reflecting as well the sensibility of one who, as an undergraduate herself, was regularly asked to date the last time she read a newspaper (and who, indeed, did not know of Nikita Khrushchev's death until four months after it had occurred), this study derives as much from the thought that the narrowed historical consciousness observed so frequently in students today may not necessarily be unique to current times, but – to this writer, at least – may be symptomatic of a kind of cultural insulation that the halls intended to enhance learning may inadvertently, and ironically, be inducing with respect to the world outside their confines. More than anything else, however, this study emerges from my own belief that literature – like everything else – is not written in a vacuum and, as such, results to a large degree from the impact that both inherited traditions and contemporary conditions have on individual writers.

In pursuing an integration of American literature and American history specifically, I am traveling an intellectual road that others have traversed before me. In *The Imagined Past* (1980), for instance, Alan Holder examines portrayals of American history, mainly Southern history, and American historical figures that twentieth-century writers have recast based upon their own experience of the present. Similarly, in showing how twentieth-century literature continues to redefine perceptual trends set much earlier in time, I also am following a lead that others have previously set – notably Harvey Gross, whose *Contrived Corridor* (1971) treats modernist literature with respect to Hegel's dialectical historicism and Nietzsche's myth of eternal recurrence, and, more to my purposes, Harry Henderson, whose *Versions of the Past* (1974) considers American novels with respect to progressive and holistic frameworks, the first devoted to ideas and values that evolve over time, the second to manners and mores that are formed in discrete times. Yet in focusing here on the way that one such inherited constant, namely millennialism, intersects with contemporary variables, most of all the American experience of communism, the work that I have undertaken differs from the work of these earlier critics. Obviously, other long-standing traditions might be, and have been, claimed as guiding forces in the development of American history and American literature – the frontier springs immediately to mind as a prominent example. So, too, might it be claimed that a disillusionment with communism was but one variable that affected the historical imagination of contemporary writers today. I offer neither of these influences as singular or definitive. I offer them instead as providing a vivid illustration of the impact that can be produced when the variables of the present fit so snugly into the perceptual set bequeathed by the past.

As should be evident by now, the views of American literature presented here do not distinguish novels written after 1945 from those written earlier with the on–off precision of a light switch. In this deliberate refusal, I am fully in agreement with what Gerald Graff has called "the myth of the postmodernist breakthrough." I also am aware, however, that in choosing to minimize the idea of distinct points of change I may be contributing to the slipperiness of that already slippery term called "post-modernism." Furthermore, because the only kind of disruption that I do consider here is the subjective one experienced by the writers of the novels that I examine, a feeling that I explore with reference to the facts of American sociohistorical conditions, I found it inappropriate to introduce into my discussion the more abstract arguments of recent literary theorists whose terminology would have obscured more than it would have clarified. To do so would have produced another work, not this one.

Because the production of this work spanned a long time, and because completion of it was achieved under somewhat arduous circumstances, the debts that I owe professionally are necessarily intertwined with the debts that I owe personally. Some of the names that follow appear more than once because the people who bear them contributed to the final version of this book in more than one way and deserve to be cited for a variety of services rendered.

James Gindin supervised the initial version of this study when it was first conceived as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan; directive without being dictatorial, he gave me enough freedom to make my own mistakes and enough guidance to correct them when necessary. Robert Weisbuch encouraged me, wisely and despite my own resistance, to turn that original study of contemporary literature into a piece of scholarship that was Americanist in its thrust. In adding that Americanist dimension to the work, Susan K. Harris, Ned Landsman, Ruth Miller, Nancy Tomes, and Barbara Weinstein kept me from going too far astray by checking my fledgling reading of earlier American texts against their own literary and historical expertise. Rose Zimbardo read every word of the completed manuscript – at her own request – and, in combining a critic's scrutiny with a colleague's solicitude, proved as ideal a reader as one might wish. Whatever merits this study now has reflect the advice that I received from these people; the flaws that remain are attributable to myself alone.

The actual writing of the manuscript was facilitated by a number of people who were generous enough to let me stay in their vacated apartments over successive summers; in thus providing me with more space in which to work, Rose Zimbardo, Martin Stevens, Joseph Pequigney, Steven Mays, William J. Harris, and Susan K. Harris also contributed to a greater degree of sanity than would have been available to me in my own Long Island lodgings (as did Tom Maresca and Diane Darrow by feeding me – in great abundance – during those summer stays). Preparation of the typescript was aided by two State University of New York research grants. In teaching me how to use the personal computer that one of these grants afforded me, I am especially grateful to William Dawes, particularly for his patience in dealing with someone like myself who experiences fear and trepidation at thoughts of inserting plugs into electric sockets. Sheryl Fontaine, Richard Boyd, Patricia Roos, and Nancy

Tomes all proofread the final version of the manuscript for the minuscule reward of one cooked meal. Marlon Ross, Lynn Thiesmeyer, and Michio Umegaki calmed numerous prepublication anxieties. My mother, Adeline Meister, and my sister, Deborah Olster, survived both me and the inevitable mess that followed in my wake with remarkable aplomb. Most of all, Elizabeth Maguire, Alex Geisinger, Eugene Goodheart, and the readers for Cambridge University Press supported the project from start to finish, despite expected and unexpected obstacles. To them I owe not just my thanks, but the fact of my continued employment.

As I stated at the outset, my debts to these people are as much personal as they are professional, for each one extended himself or herself well beyond the duties exacted by formal obligations. The final debt that must be cited, however, is the one that I owe those people whose care and concern, in different and often overlapping ways, kept me going through the daily ordeal of committing words to paper. This book is dedicated to the person who taught me to do things for myself, but if a second dedication were possible, it would acknowledge Barbara Kos, Nancy Tomes, and Rose Zimbardo as those people who showed me how I could accept the help of others.

Port Jefferson, New York

Key to Abbreviations

Norman Mailer

ND	*The Naked and the Dead*
BS	*Barbary Shore*
DP	*The Deer Park*
AM	*Advertisements for Myself*
PP	*The Presidential Papers*
AD	*An American Dream*
CC	*Cannibals and Christians*
WV	*Why Are We in Vietnam?*
AN	*The Armies of the Night*
MSG	*Miami and the Siege of Chicago*
FM	*Of a Fire on the Moon*
PS	*The Prisoner of Sex*
EE	*Existential Errands*
SG	*St. George and the Godfather*
Pont.	*Pontifications*

Thomas Pynchon

V.	*V.*
L	*The Crying of Lot 49*
GR	*Gravity's Rainbow*

John Barth

FO	*The Floating Opera*
ER	*The End of the Road*
SWF	*The Sot-Weed Factor*
GB	*Giles Goat-Boy*

LF	*Lost in the Funhouse*
C	*Chimera*
LET.	*LETTERS*
FB	*The Friday Book*

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Introduction

> After all, history is never literal. If it were, it would have no pattern at all, we'd all be lost.
>
> – Richard Nixon in *The Public Burning* (1977)

At one point in *The Public Burning,* Robert Coover's "Historical Romance," a man exits from a theater into the Times Square area where Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are to be executed.[1] He takes in the scene before him. "People are carrying signs that his right eye tells him read SAVE THE ROSENBERGS! and HEIL EISENHOWER!, his left BOMB CHINA NOW! and ETHEL ROSENBERG BEWITCHED MY BABY! He is no longer surprised by these ocular reversals, in fact he is very clear-headed, which is the main cause of his panic. It strikes him that he is perhaps the only sane man left on the face of the earth" (356). If he is, he has more cause to panic than he knows – the reason he sees things as he does is because he has neglected to remove his 3-D glasses upon leaving the movie. If what he sees through those lenses passes for sanity, how much more insane must the unrefracted world be.

Most authors today would find Coover's scene a paradigmatic expression of what contemporary life is like. Most also would find Coover's scene paradigmatic of what contemporary *American* life is like, the double vision of its unnamed man an apt representation of a country whose schizophrenia finally has come to the surface. It is when critics evaluate such scenes that problems arise. Some contend that an environment of disorder invalidates any order proposed in art. "If the world is absurd," claims Jerome Klinkowitz, "if what passes for reality is distressingly unreal, why spend time representing it? Physical, social, and political conditions may be a mess, and to view them from one perspective, imposing a rational order, is an aesthetic mess. . . ." Others point to these conditions to separate modernist from post-modernist thought. William Johnsen, for instance, finds that "Contemporaries reject Modernist use of metaphor, history, and myth to support a totalitarian obsession with order, by embracing the freedom of disorder." Ihab Hassan declares that "it is already possible to note that whereas Modernism created its own forms of

Authority, precisely because the center no longer held, Postmodernism has tended toward Anarchy, in deeper complicity with things falling apart."[2] Yet in their haste to legitimize post-modernism as a movement unto itself, critics are too quick to sever the ties it has with its artistic antecedents. Indeed, it seems as though it is not so much the post-modern artist who proclaims the irrelevance of the old, but the critic of post-modern art.

I would argue the contrary position. For American novelists today, a chaotic environment provokes not unrestrained reveling but sheer terror, and, much like their modernist predecessors, they combat that terror by constructing systems of order within the confines of their works. More to the point, I would argue that these novelists construct particular *kinds* of ordered systems within the confines of their works – namely, systems of historical process in which the relationship between past, present, and future may be understood with respect to an overarching temporal scheme. Individually, each of the writers with whom I am most concerned – Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and, to a lesser extent, E. L. Doctorow and Robert Coover – depicts that scheme in terms of his own distinctive metaphor. Collectively, they emerge with constructions of similar traits – *serial* models of history, shaped like open-ended spirals, in which the past is reenacted but not repeated, and nonapocalyptic novels that assert that knowledge of the past can help to determine an as yet unwritten future. Far from being "totalitarian" in their impulses, however, these novelists remain acutely aware of the arbitrary and idiosyncratic nature of the historical schemes they propose. Much like the makers of 3-D movies whose cinematic perspective was available only when viewers wore polaroid lenses within darkened theaters, novelists today affirm the validity of their historical perspectives only when readers are actively engaged within the artifice of their texts. But much like those other movie magicians of the 1950s, the makers of Cinerama, once they have secured that engagement, post-modern writers present a view of historical process that is truly panoramic in scope.

Ours is not the first time that American writers have offered panoramic visions of history. Earlier writers often directed their works to the propagation of millennial design and portrayed American history in accordance with whatever variant most suited their time – the Puritans with respect to a religious scheme that stretched from the Fall of Man to the establishment of New Heavens and Earth, the later Yankees with respect to a secularized Manifest Destiny that spread democracy from sea to shining sea. Nor is this the first time that American writers have acknowledged that the personality that informs a work of art also informs the view of history it contains. Emerson went so far as to replace the term "history" with "biography." Yet earlier writers did not expect that their own subjectivity could distort the historical schemes they presented or act as an obstacle to belief in them. Until the nineteenth century, faith in an ordered universe promoted faith in the millennial promise. Individual facts or events were subsumed within a priori systems of belief. Individual personalities were made subservient to the corroboration of objective evidence, notably that of Scripture and Newtonian science. Inheriting this Christian millennial view of the universe, but celebrating the self that perceived its workings, the Transcendentalists displayed their historical consciousness with equal certainty because "the procession of facts" that made up their history derived from "an invisible, unsounded centre" in each that Emerson had elevated to godhead.[3] Because all those separate centers united in one eternal Over-Soul, all perceptual differences among them conflated into one collective vision.

By presuming a universe in disorder, however, novelists today acknowledge that *any* historical theory that recounts its workings is a subjective ordering of experience, "a provider of significance to mere chronicity," as Frank Kermode has observed (*Sense of an Ending* 56). Moreover, because individual consciousness alone invests events with significance, they realize that any projected design is subject to the limitations and frailties of its designer. Introducing their works as the imaginative offspring of their characters, as they often do, post-modern novelists demand that readers view the theories advanced within them as reflections of individualized – and often disturbed – consciousness. For example, *The Book of Daniel* is presented as the dissertation of Doctorow's graduate student, Book Two of *The Armies of the Night* is composed by Mailer's egotist of Book One, and the whole of *Gravity's Rainbow* may derive from the mind of Pirate Prentice, Pynchon's fantasist-surrogate. Furthermore, by presenting their works as though they are in the process of being composed, these writers expand their focus from the presentation of theories of history to include the process whereby such theories are formed.

In structure, the novels most resemble those older ones of Southerners that show the searching as well as the synthesis. One recalls, for instance, Quentin Compson's piecing together the story of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* to conclude with a historical pattern that is seen as a set of rippling pools, or Jack Burden's researching the lives of Cass Mastern and Judge Irwin as he tells the tale of Willie Stark in *All the King's Men* and arrives at a "theory of historical costs" and a "theory of the moral neutrality of history" (393–4). In spirit, the novels spring from the well of Henry Adams, who investigated his own past in order to formulate a "larger synthesis" for the events he studied and proposed "A Dynamic Theory of History" as a way for man "to account to himself for himself somehow, and to invent a formula of his own for his universe, if the standard formulas failed" (*Education* 472).

"Standard formulas" for an idea of history fail for a number of reasons, but they do not always lead to the formation of alternative formulas to take their places. For one thing, the standard historical formula in America has shown an amazing resilience. Nineteenth-century novelists had grave misgivings about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century millennialism, but the most they could do was invert millennial premises in their work, as seen in Melville's juxtaposition of the Second Coming with the coming of *The Confidence-Man* and Hawthorne's reissuing of past evils at the end of "Earth's Holocaust." Even simple inversion could not be sustained for very long. Melville followed the revelation of *The Confidence-Man* with the redemption of *Billy Budd*. Haw-