I

INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, COUNTERCULTURE, AND POSTWAR AMERICA

Some periods of history take on a legendary character, which usually means that we have substituted a few stereotypes for the complexity of what actually happened. Many still think of the 1920s as one long party, a hedonistic romp for the fun-loving young, though F. Scott Fitzgerald, who helped establish that image, later worked hard to revise it. The thirties have come down to us in black and white images of apple vendors and dust storms, all social misery and middle-class anguish, though the books and films of the era tell a more complicated story. Newsreel views of the 1960s, which rarely venture beyond protest demonstrations, campus conflicts, stoned hippies, and Beatlemania, have invaded the memories of those who were there, who now recall those film images better than what they themselves saw. The postwar period, especially the 1950s, has been simplified into everything the sixties generation rebelled against: a beaming president presiding over a stagnant government, small-town morality, racial segregation, political and sexual repression, Cold War mobilization, nuclear standoff, suburban togetherness, the domestic confinement of women, and the reign of the nuclear family.

Like most stereotypes, this picture of the 1950s has a certain truth to it. Because both sides see the postwar years through the prism of the 1960s, conservatives and liberals can agree on many details while judging them differently. The titles of their books tell the story. To radical journalists and historians the 1950s were *The Nightmare Decade* (Fred Cook) or *The Dark Ages* (Marty Jezer), the period of *The Great Fear* (David Caute), when so many were *Naming Names* (Victor Navasky). To writers less enchanted with the 1960s, the preceding years were *The Proud Decades* (John Patrick Diggins), the moment of the *American High* (William L. O'Neill), *When the Going Was Good* (Jeffrey Hart). By the 1970s, in sharp reaction to the recent turbulence, a tranquil, pastoral image of the fifties took hold in popular culture, a fun image of carefree adolescence in the days before the fall. Thus George Lucas's nostalgic film *American Graffiti* gave birth to the sitcom *Happy Days* and the hit musical *Grease,* which had little in common with the troubled images of adolescence projected during the period. More recently, serious novelists have been busy idealizing their formative years, as

Philip Roth does in *American Pastoral* and Gore Vidal does in *The Golden Age.* There is more than a trace of irony in most of these titles, but they show remarkable unanimity in portraying the period after 1945 as insular and innocent, the antithesis of the radical decade.

By the mid-1980s, however, a different viewpoint began to be heard, though it has yet to make much headway against the popular image. In a study of postwar intellectuals, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (1985), the historian Richard Pells rightly argued that the social critics of the 1950s, including William H. Whyte, David Riesman, and C. Wright Mills, by focusing on conformity, psychological manipulation, and the malaise of the middle class, had prepared the ground for the more radical criticism that followed. Pells suggested that there was a good deal of continuity between the two periods. Another historian, Lary May, edited a valuable collection of essays, *Recasting America* (1989), which explored many of the tensions and contradictions of the postwar years and drew attention to developments in the arts and intellectual life that hardly fit the somnolent image of the period. William H. Chafe has repeatedly emphasized the "paradox of change," the momentous social transformations—in the life of the middle class, for example, or in the position of blacks and women—that were taking place behind the conservative façade. On the other hand, some scholars in American Studies and art history who approach the arts as expressions of social ideology have tried to demonstrate that nearly every cultural phenomenon of those years, from genre films and literary criticism to abstract art, was somehow a reflex of the Cold War, a "hegemonic" expression of the "national security state" and the containment policy toward international Communism. What passed for culture became a way of indoctrinating Americans and aborting independent thought. Such arguments, which rarely appealed to factual evidence, have given rise to a school of Cold War scholarship that takes little account of other influential factors in postwar social life, from the baby boom and economic expansion to the education boom and shifting roles of women, blacks, and ethnic minorities. Based on a presumed ideological bent that can hardly be verified, such arguments depend on tenuous links between politics and culture that are sometimes suggestive but too often arbitrary or reductive.

My aim in this book is to give a more varied, less familiar picture of the postwar years by taking a fresh look at some striking changes in the arts, especially in fiction, and at the strong radical undercurrents that led directly to the culture wars of the 1960s. World War II had brought a powerful but artificial unity to Americans, first by ending the Depression, which had highlighted class divisions; then by giving Americans a cause to fight

for, a life-and-death struggle fraught with patriotic and personal feeling; and finally by deflecting internal conflict among social groups for the duration of the war. But the war also shook Americans loose from their local moorings, from religious roots and isolated lives in small towns, from urban ghettos and other homogeneous communities. Young men who had never strayed fifty miles from home were shipped off to distant training bases and overseas missions; others migrated to take up jobs in defense industries. City boys and country boys, the children of immigrants and the children of sharecroppers were thrown together for the first time, like an accelerated version of the melting pot or a poster for the Popular Front. At the same time, new communication links like Edward R. Murrow's live news broadcasts from besieged London were beginning to make the world a smaller place. There was no return to isolationism after the war, as there had been after the First World War. Instead, the physical destruction of much of Europe, the unconditional surrender and occupation of Japan, and the breakup of the old colonial system left the United States in a powerful economic and political position, which would soon be cemented by strategic alliances such as NATO.

A more cosmopolitan America was coming into being, a good deal more open to social differences yet resistant to political dissent and social criticism. Outsider groups such as blacks, women, and Jews, even working-class and rural Americans, having seen something of the world, were not about to return to the kitchen, the ghetto, or the menial jobs to which they had been confined. As industry turned to consumer goods, to new housing and technology, the growing economy opened the gates to a social mobility only dreamed of during the lean years of the Depression. The GI Bill of Rights, designed in part to keep returning servicemen from flooding the job market, created educational opportunities that would equip veterans for a role in the expanding economy. This enabled them to start families, just as new highways and expanding suburbs allowed them to raise those families outside the city. Their earnings, like the aid we sent to Europe under the Marshall Plan, fueled the economy by heating up demand for goods and services. This in turn stimulated a burgeoning consumer society as more and more Americans, moving up into the middle class, reaped the benefits of improved technology, better housing, shorter working hours, more leisure time, and increasingly comfortable lives. The fruits of this prosperity were not spread equally. African Americans still faced formidable barriers as to where they could live and work, but even for them the war opened many doors that could never be shut again. It was not long before the good life became the sovereign right of every American, at least in theory—and that theory would cast a long shadow.

The arrival of these outsiders in the mainstream of American society had a close parallel in the arts. Just as the needs of the economy opened professions previously closed to Jews, the needs of a newly cosmopolitan culture, born in the shadow of unspeakable wartime carnage, opened up literature and academic life to Jewish writers. Specialists in alienation, virtuosos of moral anguish, witnesses to the pains and gains of assimilation, they had a timely story to tell. Race had always been close to the heart of American life but the war against Germany, Italy, and Japan brought this issue home more than anything since the Civil War and Reconstruction. Black writers too had a tale to tell, as Richard Wright had recently shown in *Native Son* and *Black Boy.* Thus began the stream of outsider figures who would do more than anything else to define the character of postwar writing: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, a vibrant voice from the underground rehearsing his own idiosyncratic version of black history; Flannery O'Connor's eccentric Misfit, some kind of messenger of God who expresses his frustrations through serial murder, or her Displaced Person, a European refugee literally crushed by the no-nothing society he does not begin to understand; Norman Mailer's White Negro, the hipster as moral adventurer and sociopath; the new kind of American saint of Jack Kerouac and the wayward, misunderstood adolescents of J. D. Salinger; the ordinary grunts oppressed by their officers in so many war novels; the anguished old Jews and magical schlemiel figures in Bernard Malamud's stories; the loopy intellectuals who fill Saul Bellow's fiction with their long memories and sardonic cultural speculations; the refined old-world decadents of Nabokov, with their classy style and kinky or comical longings; Philip Roth's protagonists, who make grand opera of their sexual needs, exposing the stigmata they received in the gender wars. These characters, all in some way projections of their distinguished authors, are like Kafka's leopards in the temple, implosions of the irrational, children of the Freudian century, sharp-clawed primitives who would somehow be integrated into the once-decorous rites of American literature, who would *become* American literature.

Like the efflorescence of social criticism in the 1950s, the emergence of these writers points to the essential continuity of the postwar decades and reveals the roots of the counterculture of the 1960s. Along with many filmmakers, playwrights, musicians, and painters, these novelists dramatize the unease of the middle class at its moment of triumph, the air of anxiety and discontent that hangs over this period. From our dim memories of the early years of television, the dying days of the Hollywood studio system, and the popular songs of the Hit Parade, we still think of the 1950s as a time of sunny, even mindless optimism, only slightly dimmed by preparations for World War III. This is an example of selective cultural memory.

In fact, from Cole Porter and Busby Berkeley to Frank Capra, there was a good deal more optimism on show during the grim days of the Depression than in the supposedly buoyant years of economic expansion after the war. In the arts, perhaps the best known evidence of the dark side of postwar culture is film noir, the vogue of cheaply made crime movies so unlike the gangster films popular before the war. The earlier movies were really success stories; they were built around crudely charismatic men who were legendary for their amoral energy, management style, and genius for power, acquisition, and display. Though their fall was built into their rise, the death of the gangster was a glorious coda to his overreaching life rather than a moral lesson. Censors understood this early by cracking down on what they rightly saw as an idealization of the antisocial. But after the war, crime movies become a tissue of paranoia, betrayal, and fatality from which no true heroism emerges, certainly not among the forces of the law, who usually come off as faceless organization men, and hardly ever among the criminals themselves, who kill and are killed without being romanticized.

Everywhere in postwar culture we can see the marks of anxious division, even self-alienation. Some of the bleaker film genres of the 1950s, such as horror and science fiction, obviously reflected the anxieties of the Cold War and the atomic age, including the fear of menacing aliens, radioactive mutations, and nuclear annihilation. In movies like *The War of the Worlds* (1953), audiences identified with apocalyptic scenes of the destruction of New York or Los Angeles by a seemingly invulnerable force. But the dark elements that surfaced in film noir, in domestic melodramas, and in revisionist westerns are harder to explain. The John Wayne of Ford's classic prewar western, *Stagecoach* (1939), was a typical thirties character, an outlaw yet a gentleman, socially marginal like other admirable figures in the film yet unambiguously heroic. The film shows up the hypocrisy of respectable citizens like the thieving banker, while dramatizing the redemption of the those they've rejected, such as the alcoholic doctor and the good-hearted whore, whom Wayne courts and wins as if she were the finest lady. But the John Wayne of many postwar westerns from *Red River* to *The Searchers* is a more complex figure; he can be stubborn and unreasonable, obsessed with betrayal and hell-bent on revenge. This is even more true of the embittered characters played by Jimmy Stewart in gritty fifties westerns by Anthony Mann. In one of the harshest of these films, *The Naked Spur,* Stewart plays a bounty-hunter who stalks and captures a sinister killer but for mercenary reasons. He had gone off to fight the Civil War—as the so-called "greatest generation" would later fight World War II—but returned to find his woman gone and his land sold from under him. Like the Wayne of *The Searchers,* he is a morally ambiguous figure, wounded,

guarded, and hard to fathom, who must earn his bit of heroism by learning to be human again—to trust, relent, and forgive.

The Freudian wave that washed over American culture in the forties and fifties brought not only introspection but an undercurrent of hysteria into otherwise conventional genre films. These include Raoul Walsh's Oedipal gangster movie *White Heat,* in which Jimmy Cagney plays the gangster as mama's boy, who suffers from migraines and needs her to remind him to keep up a tough front; Nicholas Ray's anti-McCarthy western, *Johnny Guitar,* with Mercedes McCambridge consumed by her erotically tinged hatred of Joan Crawford; and Douglas Sirk's vertiginous melodrama, *Written on the Wind,* in which Dorothy Malone plays a wayward heiress who sleeps with every man she can find because she can't sleep with Rock Hudson, and dances herself into an erotic frenzy in her room while her father drops dead on the stairs below. Meanwhile, her playboy brother (Robert Stack) destroys himself slowly with alcohol and self-hatred. The love of a good woman (Lauren Bacall) and a faithful friend (Hudson) almost saves him, until, beset by jealousy and sexual anxiety, he "accidentally" shoots himself. If social suffering, poverty, and exploitation topped the agenda of the arts in the 1930s, neurosis, anxiety, and alienation played the same role in the forties and fifties when economic fears were largely put to rest.

On the other hand, some films noirs were driven less by paranoia than by romantic fatalism, a sense of doomed love, as in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), based on lurid novels by the hard-boiled writer James M. Cain, and in Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* (1949) and Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949), stories of fugitive couples pursued by the law. Unlike most postwar stories, film noir is often grounded in pulp material from the 1930s, which gives it a hard edge of cynicism and romantic abandon along with a look of fatality. Noir was not so much genre as a style and outlook that showed up in many kinds of Hollywood films; it was the great naysayer in the postwar banquet of American self-celebration. Playing on the lower half of double bills, most genre films did not have to meet the ideological test of featured productions; they flew below the radar of significant Hollywood filmmaking, creating their own kind of counterculture within the heart of the entertainment industry and offering an implicit critique of the Pollyannish, upbeat elements of the mainstream culture. This can be seen in photography as well. For every heartwarming cultural marker, such as Edward Steichen's celebrated 1955 *Family of Man* exhibition, there was a bleak rebuttal like Robert Frank's seminal collection of photographs, *The Americans* (1959), with its unpoetic view of the heartland as a grungy scene of everyday vacancy and blank happenstance.

This thread of anxiety, paranoia, and inner conflict was a decisive element in many postwar works, but as a film noir shows, it was far from the whole story. There was also a wild emotional vitality, a primitivism inherited from modernism, that fed paradoxically off the economic expansion and the new social mobility. We see this expansive energy in the avant garde among bohemian painters, jazzmen, young rockers, and Beat poets but also at the heart of American popular culture. Television was the bête noire of intellectuals critical of mass culture, but they had been just as dismissive of American movies during the glory days of Hollywood before the war. TV united the American public into a single audience even more than movies or radio had done, but it also privatized leisure time by relocating it in the home and focusing on family fare. At the same time, early television spread the spirit of vaudeville to a mass audience with wild farceurs like Milton Berle, Jimmy Durante, and Jerry Lewis; satiric geniuses like Ernie Kovacs, Imogene Coca, and Sid Caesar; veteran radio comedians like Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, and Fred Allen; and even borscht-belt entertainers such as George Burns. Highbrow critics saw only fragile kitchen-sink realism in live TV drama and little more than mind-numbing repetition in early sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners,* which have been rerun ever since as classics of marital mayhem and anarchic social comedy. Their zany irreverence, like the later mockery of Joseph Heller in *Catch-22,* played well against postwar pieties. Critics missed the crucial point that repetition and variation, not novelty, were staples of the popular arts. With its vast appetite for material, early television, like all popular media, relied on ingenious formula and the gusto of physical performance rather than the sort of originality that sustained high art. If the content of early TV was constrained by family values and conventional gender roles, there was a raw, ebullient energy that complemented the buzz and dynamism of American society. As TV became pervasive, it would also reshape the political landscape more than any other force, starting with the Army-McCarthy hearings and the Kennedy-Nixon debates. Like other postwar institutions that were at once conservative and revolutionary, television too was part of the "paradox of change" during the Cold War years.

Part of the legend of the postwar era is that it was small-minded and repressive. This accords with our memories of the limited political options available during the 1950s, but this was not entirely the result of the Cold War. McCarthyism and militant anti-Communism were less a reaction to the Soviet threat abroad or disloyalty and espionage at home than a political wedge used by Republicans to fracture the New Deal coalition, in the same way that they would recapture power by demonizing liberalism in the 1980s. To be accused of being soft on Communism could be fatal to a

political cause or to one's chances of working again in fields like the movie industry. The Cold War descended on the 1950s like a damp, gray fog, blanketing and muffling the landscape with its polarizing view of an embattled America. There were some curious features to that landscape, from the duck-and-cover drills that prepared school children for the coming nuclear war to the underground shelters where they would presumably find refuge when it actually broke out. In this torpid political climate, the range of open debate was more restricted than at any time in the century, especially after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950. McCarthyism and the blacklist mentality enforced these limits, ruining the lives of many who stepped out of line or stood accused of harboring radical views twenty years earlier. Above all, it was not a good time to be black in America, to be poor, which made you almost invisible, or to be a woman, many of whom joined the great migration to the suburbs, where, as Betty Friedan argued, married women were being pressed back into roles they thought they had escaped during the Depression and the war. It was not a great time to be a liberal because you could easily be labeled a Communist, a pinko, or a fellow traveler. It was not a great time to be young and horny, since a pair of twenty-year-olds who wanted to be together had to get married (though it *was* a good time to raise the children who would soon follow).

But scholars who put too much emphasis on McCarthyism and repression, or who fail to see how much the condition of women and blacks was quietly changing, come up with a skewed picture of the period. Thus the historian Elaine Tyler May argues that there was a domestic equivalent to the containment policy pursued by the United States against the Soviet Union. This was certainly true in politics where, as I have said, patriotism and anti-Communism became ways of discrediting liberalism and breaking up the electoral majority once enjoyed by the New Deal. But May extends the notion of containment to social life as well. "Postwar Americans fortified the boundaries within which they lived," she says. "They wanted secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country . . . Containment was the key to security." But this is merely a verbal melding of two forms of security, two kinds of containment. After describing the containment of nuclear weapons and of domestic Communists, May turns to people's personal lives. "In the domestic version of containment," she writes, "the 'sphere of influence' was the home. Within its walls, potentially dangerous social forces of the new age might be tamed, where they could contribute to the secure and fulfilling life to which postwar men and women aspired . . . More than merely a metaphor for the cold war on the homefront, containment aptly describes the way in which public policy, personal behavior, and even political values were focused on the home."

But "containment" *is* a metaphor, a questionable analogy between personal and international security, the home and the world. Moreover, it suggests that the prevailing social force of the postwar years was constriction, policing, and intimidation, a sort of emotional McCarthyism. Yet for all its constraints, this was a period of unparalleled economic growth and social mobility, when the lives of many American changed more than they had in the previous two centuries. What containment really means is that revolutionary hopes for egalitarian social change, which flared up during the economic crisis of the 1930s, died down during the prosperity that followed the war. This is another way of looking at the period through the eyes of the 1960s or through the critical lens of academic disciplines that flowed from the sixties. It scarcely acknowledges what May herself calls the "potentially dangerous social forces of the new age."

Certainly there were efforts to confine women to traditional roles, but this was undercut by much of what was actually happening. Despite the fabled retreat of Rosie the Riveter to home and hearth, the number of women who worked outside the home, especially married women, doubled between 1940 and 1960, though this mainly meant in low-level, pink-collar jobs rather than in the professions. The increase was especially marked among married women and mothers with younger children. Despite the domestic stereotypes of the fifties, the economic role of women was quietly changing as more Americans joined the middle class. Two incomes helped foot the bill for the new social mobility. Similarly, the civil rights movement of the late fifties and early sixties did not come from nowhere, but developed out of continuous civil rights agitation that began with the return of black soldiers from war, continued with the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948 and the Supreme Court's unanimous decision to desegregate the schools in 1954, and was driven home by direct action, nonviolent demonstrations, and congressional legislation in the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's assassination. The cradle of the civil rights movement was the postwar years, not the 1960s, when it began to splinter. As William H. Chafe writes in *The Unfinished Journey,* "there existed remarkable continuity within the black protest movement between 1945 and 1960." This progress was unquestionably advanced by the literary work of Wright, Ellison, and James Baldwin in the same period, which, along with the writings of social scientists like Gunnar Myrdal and Kenneth Clark, introduced many Americans to the inner experience of racism and discrimination. If this was containment, it failed miserably.

Another radical turn of the forties and fifties was the explosive emergence of youth culture. This too was partly an offshoot of economic growth, which placed a great deal of disposable income and free time in the hands of the young and built up a new market that would grow ever larger in the years that followed. If the official values of postwar America were complacent or repressive, young people became part of a culture that spoke to their alienation yet bristled with spontaneity, energy, and instinctive vitality. Not incidentally, these were the very qualities cherished by the avant garde, from bop musicians and abstract painters to Method actors and Beat poets. Like the social critics of the period, they emphasized individuality and self-expression in a society that too often rewarded time-serving and conformity. At the heart of the new counterculture of the 1950s, the balance between civilization and its discontents was shifting, as theorists like Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, and Paul Goodman would soon try to show.

In fiction this took the form of picaresque novels of flight and adventure loosely based on Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* including Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March,* and Kerouac's *On the Road.* In each of these books the first-person voice, with its vernacular ebb and flow, conveys the dreams and frustrations of the youthful protagonist. All were written in nervous, syncopated, jazz-like riffs veering unpredictably between the colloquial and the literary. The mixed background of these writers—black, Jewish, French-Canadian—contributed to this creative crossing of styles, which had a huge influence on the writers of the next decade, including Philip Roth and Thomas Pynchon. "At the simplest level, it had to do with language," Pynchon later said in *Slow Learner* about the sources of his work, citing "Kerouac and the Beat writers, the diction of Saul Bellow in *The Adventures of Augie March,* [and] emerging voices like those of Herbert Gold and Philip Roth" as important breakthroughs. But if the sixties writers resonated to the linguistic freedom of their predecessors, especially their fresh, innovative rhythms, they were also invigorated by their loose-limbed forms, which reflected the quest of their protagonists. All these young heroes, like Huck Finn himself, are searching for freedom, eager to escape the conventional and oppressive social roles that others have foisted on them. Ellison's hero is initially eager to please but gradually realizes that he is being manipulated at every turn: "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan." Again and again, Holden Caulfield finds phoniness and inauthenticity in the adult world around him. As Huck and Jim fled the bonds of slavery, the tyranny of respectability, and the hypocrisy and corruption of the towns along the Mississippi, so

their successors recoiled from the 1950s regime of family and responsibility. They look to create themselves, to escape the blessings of civilization, just as Huck Finn at the end will "light out for the Territory." In a world that tailors maturity into a strait-jacket, they are determined to avoid growing up.

The first of these books, *The Catcher in the Rye,* helped kick off the youth culture that soon burst onto the screen in movies like *The Wild One, Blackboard Jungle,* and *Rebel Without a Cause* and took over popular music with subversive performances by early rockers like Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard. Under the guise of a sociological study of juvenile delinquency and youthful alienation, filmmakers explored a new emotional terrain in the smoldering, inarticulate masculinity of actors like Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Montgomery Clift. The malaise of the young, which we still trace back to the generation gap of the 1960s, really began with these damaged figures whose sensitivity and estrangement may reflect the suppressed traumas of the war years. They bring together a cool, insolent rebelliousness, an almost masochistic sense of victimization, and a new kind of high-voltage sexuality. Elvis modeled himself on the surly, misunderstood figures of Brando and Dean but found his music in the rhythm and blues of the black ghetto. He tapped into the emotional plangency and sexual directness of the blues. His pelvic gyrations, censored on national television, elated teenage girls and shocked contemporary guardians of morality. He took even more from black culture than Mailer and the Beats, cutting a path for the rockers of the 1960s. Rock brought a driving physical energy into popular music. In *Blackboard Jungle,* the opening performance of "Rock Around the Clock" by Bill Haley and the Comets, instead of conveying youthful savagery or anarchy (as the plot dictates), became the clarion-call of a new generation.

Despite the limitations of the Hollywood Code, grown-up expressions of this sexual energy could be felt in other American movies, especially film noir. Here is one extended example. Joseph H. Lewis's vertiginously romantic *Gun Crazy* takes up the Bonnie-and-Clyde legend of the outlaw couple, first developed in the 1930s in Edward Anderson's novel *Thieves Like Us* and Fritz Lang's film *You Only Live Once.* In *Gun Crazy* the romance begins with a mutual fascination with guns. Where Lang, in classic thirties style, portrays the fugitives as hunted innocents, victims of a harsh, destructive society, Lewis gives his lovers a Freudian charge of sexual intensity, making their gunplay stand in for their sex play, the animal magnetism that draws them and keeps them together. The film has a wild, kinky sexual energy, a driving, obsessive rhythm that only B-movies and pulp novels were then free to pursue.

Where many films noirs present women as inscrutable, treacherous seducers, scarcely more than a projection of male longings and fears, *Gun Crazy* gives us Laurie, a carnival performer whose restless craving for excitement makes a man (and an unwilling killer) of Bart, her shy, tormented lover. They're "like a couple of animals," says her sleazy, jealous employer, whom she has jilted. Laurie literally seduces Bart into becoming a stick-up man. We stereotype the postwar period as the heyday of domesticity, when young vets and their wives settled down to raise families. This is true enough, but here we get another view. Domesticity is represented by the dull, meager lives of Bart's sister as she struggles to raise her small children, and Bart's boyhood friends, who have become law-abiding pillars of the small town where they grew up.

Laurie turns Bart's life upside down, but he remains more boyish than hard-boiled. He feels increasingly troubled as their crime spree continues, especially after one caper turns into a killing. His fears and his moral scruples are built into his raw, gawky, neurotic masculinity. But the lovers cannot separate, hard as they try; whenever they go straight, their world turns flat and dead, since ordinary life cannot compete with the thrill of risk and crime. As the law catches up with them, they lose everything and flee back to the quiet town he came from. In the morning mist of the nearby mountains, with the air so thin she can barely breathe, trapped among peaks that remind us of the ones they tried to scale, they achieve their love-in-death in the natural world where he first learned to shoot. There he finally kills her (and dies) to keep her from harming his old friends.

It is hard to know what social significance to give a film as masterfully idiosyncratic as this one. Like other films noirs, *Gun Crazy* is shadowy, doom-laden, and fatalistic; it illustrates the dark side of the period's official optimism. But it also conveys a huge charge of excitement that anticipates the new counterculture of the 1950s. Though *Gun Crazy* never crudely equates guns and sex, it shows how a popular Freudianism, with emphasis on the irrational, the instinctual, and the unconscious, altered the spirit and content of earlier film genres. The film makes ordinary life seem flavorless while it idealizes the animal vitality that can't easily be channeled into marriage and child-rearing, work and respectability. It's a provocative work masquerading as a romantic thriller, a Wagnerian Liebestod disguised as pulp tragedy. It shows us the transgressive, barely socialized energies that would flare out in the sixties, which were linked to the dynamic forces of consumption, technological change, and global power. As the nation emerged from the deprivations of Depression and wartime, Laurie's tragic, unappeasable hunger for experience, her sense of "I want it, and I want it now," would become the guiding spirit of a new culture.

This darkly shaded exuberance and vitality is even more marked in the avant-garde arts of the period, especially jazz and painting, and in the Beat movement that followed. This was the moment Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and bebop took over the jazz world, with small groups of virtuoso performers replacing the large swing bands of the 1930s. Bebop grew out of a strike in the recording industry between 1942 and 1944, when young men began jamming with each other, developing bold individual styles that had no place in the dance music of the swing era. Here, as in painting, the radical arts in the postwar years took an introspective, experimental turn. Charlie Parker substituted dazzling speed, complex polyrhythms, elusive chord changes, and atonal riffs for the uptempo melodic flow of swing. This kind of jazz depends much more on spontaneity and improvisation. In numbers like "Leap Frog" and "Relaxing With Lee" in 1950, we hear the conversational interplay between Parker's alto sax, Gillespie's trumpet, Thelonious Monk's piano, and Max Roach's drums. Where swing had made jazz social and popular—perfect music to dance to—bebop made it challenging and elusive, difficult and provocative, as well as dangerous for some performers, whose dependence on drugs often became self-destructive.

In smoky late-night clubs in many American cities, boppers created an underground culture out of complex music in the outlaw style of classic American outsiders. The impeccable Duke Ellington and his band had made jazz part of the culture of elegance of the twenties and thirties; Parker and his friends took it back to its darker roots. "He was an obsessed outsider," Ralph Ellison said of Charlie Parker: "Bird was thrice alienated: as Negro, as addict, as exponent of a new and disturbing development in jazz." Ellison was clearly of two minds about Parker's "tortured and in many ways criminal striving for personal and moral integration," but others responded by idolizing and imitating him, and by turning him into a legend after his early death from a heroin overdose in 1955.

At the same time, between 1947 and 1950, Jackson Pollock came into his own in drip paintings of an astonishing beauty and complexity, making way for another band of outsiders who would one day dominate American art. Pollock's kinetic style, which the critic Harold Rosenberg described as Action Painting, linked him to both bebop and the Beats, who also relied on spontaneity and fluid movement over formal restraint or figurative representation. Pollock saw art as a reflection of the inner landscape, the unconscious workings of the mind, which could be drawn out by intuition and association. He seemed to paint from inside the canvas and from deep inside his own mind. His "all-over" method decentralized the canvas and made his work seem random and chaotic, yet his technique demanded

enormous discipline and control. Soon a photo spread in *Life* magazine and the films of Hans Namuth trumpeted Pollock's fame to a wider audience, which undermined his precarious stability. His death in 1956, like James Dean's and Charlie Parker's the previous year, made him the epitome of the edgy artist consumed by his own creative intensity. *Pollock,* an earnest and intense movie by Ed Harris, recently consummated this romantic myth by focusing as much on his tormented personality as on his painting.

Thus, at a conservative moment in American art, the arrival of Abstract Expressionism constituted a genuine avant garde, intransigently modern and innovative. But the radical credentials of this art were questioned in a provocative book published in 1983 by the art historian Serge Guilbaut called *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art.* He argued that the Abstract Expressionists and their critical supporters, especially Clement Greenberg and other New York intellectuals, were implicated in a process of cultural hegemony, at once dethroning Paris as capital of the art world and delegitimizing the kind of political art, including mural painting and social realism, that had been dominant in the United States before the war. As a result, he claimed, art became complicit with the global and domestic goals of the Cold War, enhancing American power abroad while defusing political criticism at home. By depoliticizing art and turning it towards abstraction, Guilbaut argued, these painters and critics had been engaged in a Cold War mission of imposing a Pax Americana on the art world.

Guilbaut's influential critique was taken up by other art critics and cultural historians, including Frances Stonor Saunders in her widely reviewed book *The Cultural Cold War,* which reveals many details about the CIA support for artists and intellectuals in the postwar years, including a number of overseas exhibitions of abstract art. Her logic suggests that if the CIA supported something, even if the recipients remained ignorant of that support, their work served the interests of American domination. For ideological critics, the political context always determines how we must understand the art. There is no clear evidence that Guilbaut or Saunders ever actually *looked* at a painting to determine whether the work itself was powerful or fraudulent, whether its impact was radical or reactionary, or whether the stylized realism, populism, and regionalism of the Post Office murals should have remained the last word in American art. As an afterthought to her chapter on how the abstract painters were promoted abroad, Saunders adds the caveat that of course "their art cannot be reduced to those conditions . . . There was something in the art itself that allowed it to triumph." What that was she doesn't venture to say. By exporting the Metropolitan Opera as well as the work of abstract artists as markers of creative

freedom, the CIA thought it could convince skeptical Europeans that the United States actually had a high culture and a serious intellectual life. If some used art as a weapon in the Cold War, others saw the Cold War as a way of prying loose money to support the arts. While rightly lamenting the secrecy and deception behind this funding, Saunders minimizes the paradox that a branch of the United States government was sponsoring exhibitions of boldly original art that the President himself considered to be meaningless scribbles and many members of Congress saw as a sinister Communist plot.

Guilbaut's book, which came in the wake of a new revisionist historiography on the origins of the Cold War, helped kick off the school of ideological criticism I touched on earlier, which tried to link not only the visual arts but the most disparate cultural developments of the postwar years to the agenda of the Cold War. In this variant of the hermeneutics of suspicion, even the most innocent looking work could be explained in terms of Cold War ideology. The intellectual expression of that ideology was seen in Arthur Schlesinger's liberal anti-Communism, Lionel Trilling's tragic realism, or Reinhold Niebuhr's neo-Augustinian theology. If Schlesinger hadn't published his 1949 book *The Vital Center,* these critics would surely have had to write it for him, if only to prove that there was no middle way, that liberalism itself was the enemy, not simply McCarthyism. Yet all three were acute social critics who often drew radical conclusions from conservative premises about human nature.

On closer examination, postwar culture looks more edgy and unsettling than we once imagined, reflecting powerful and subversive social energies roiling beneath the placid surface of the Truman and Eisenhower years. Undoubtedly there were deeply conservative elements in the arts, not only in popular fiction and music but in more serious writing. Fiction and poetry were often more conventional than they had been between the wars, and, with the exception of southerners like Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty, few major women writers emerged then. It was not until the revival of feminism in the late 1960s that a new school of witty, articulate women novelists and social critics would appear, yet another wave of outsiders who would bring a different vision into American writing. In the 1940s and 1950s, most novelists turned away from Joycean or Proustian experiments; established poets retreated from the cutting-edge modernism of Eliot and Pound and the neo-Romanticism of Crane and Stevens to embrace a modest, small-scale academic modernism, learned, densely charged, full of wit and irony, but free to titanic ambitions and audience-challenging technical innovations. The cozy civility and for-

mal dexterity of Auden became a prime influence on younger poets. In criticism as in literature, ambiguity was the watchword; caution and restraint the prevailing mood.

But there was another side to this picture, as I've tried to show here. As we explore the novels, music, art, and movies of the period, the radicalism of the 1960s, which once seemed to surge up out of nowhere, reveals its sources in the turbid cross-currents of the postwar years. Where once I had thought of the 1950s and 1960s as cultural contraries, it became clear that there were vital elements that bound together the whole period from 1945 to 1970 and beyond, a creative reaction against the official values of the period. While seemingly marginal to the business of the hour, artists can serve as canaries in the mine, an early warning system whose message can be understood only in retrospect. Writers, artists, and musicians exposed a deep discomfort at the core of American affluence and power, the same unease laid bare by critics of middle-class conformity such as Riesman and Whyte. Undreamed-of prosperity had created an unprecedented standard of living, so why wasn't it more satisfying? Thwarted politically, social criticism shifted into the cultural sphere; thwarted collectively, American radicalism migrated into the work of individual artists, who had their own vision of what a full life demanded.

For many left-wing critics, this cultural turn looked like a flight from politics, a way of dropping out. The organized left of the 1930s remained the gold standard. They paid no attention to the Hollywood underground though it was largely composed of thirties radicals soon to be blacklisted. They despised popular culture and did not see how the avant garde, so small and marginal, could be the bellwether of social change. What artists explored in the 1940s and 1950s, including drugs, sex, and new forms of self-expression, would become entitlements of the middle class in the decades that followed. Ideological critics of Cold War culture, such as Serge Guilbaut and his successors, were searching for revolutionary art and ideas that would take a conventionally political form and were therefore blind to the *cultural* revolution that actually took place, which would prove far more deep-seated and consequential, not just in shaping the sixties counterculture but in reshaping American life. This cultural radicalism, amplified and commercialized by the mass media, would become the legacy of the postwar years to the rest of the twentieth century.

As we turn back to the major writers of fiction, this continuity may help account for the enduring careers and influence of many of these writers. We should not slight the personal drive, the innate literary gift, the sheer creative stamina that contributed to the longevity of Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, John Updike, or Philip Roth, who were still doing

powerful work at the end of the century. But cultural factors also enhanced the staying power of these and other postwar writers who died early, stopped publishing, or burned themselves out, such as J. D. Salinger, Jack Kerouac, Paul Bowles, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Bernard Malamud, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. Like the jazz musicians and abstract painters, they were determined outsiders at a moment when other children of immigrants, blue-collar workers, storefront preachers, and rural sharecroppers were entering the American mainstream. They were the advance guard of the multicultural future though they wanted to succeed as American writers, not as specimens of an oppressed minority. Their work was powered by the appetite, energy, ambition, and unconventionality of strangers in a half-strange land, clamoring to be heard, seeking their place at the table but not by looking or sounding like anyone who was already there.

These writers arrived at a time of momentous change in the economy, demography, and material base of American life. Among the things taken for granted by middle-class Americans by the 1960s that scarcely existed in 1945 or 1950, the historian James T. Patterson lists supermarkets, malls, fast-food chains, air-conditioning, freezers, dishwashers, ball-point pens, long-playing records, four-lane highways, and tubeless tires. The day-to-day lives of most Americans changed dramatically in the postwar years, which saw the beginning of the world as we know it today. Peace and prosperity led to a galloping consumerism and vast technological change, along with new economic and political power in the world. As the American model became the cutting-edge of modernization throughout the world, American art and popular culture also began their long march toward world influence. The writers who began publishing after the war were the first to take account of this new life, especially its psychological effects. Theirs was a world of material comfort and its dissatisfactions, including anomie, alienation, and a nagging sense of weightlessness; of a turn inward towards the self and its problems of identity; a world dominated by the utopian ease and abundance made possible by technology, but also the anxiety set off by its huge potential for destruction; a world that knew the fragility of relationships when moral boundaries have been blurred and sex has become ubiquitous, where advertising and the arts spread images of a better life by making us unhappy with the life we had. In postwar society, material consumption soon translated into cultural consumption, into changes in morality, values, and style. In their focus on the inner life and on the changing world of the middle class, the postwar writers were the first to document this great shift.

For most postwar novelists, this brave new world was not well suited to

a traditional fictional approach, the kind of literary realism that held sway from Balzac to Dreiser, which set a large cast of lifelike characters in a closely observed social world. Instead, they grappled with it in a way that still makes sense to us today, not primarily through social realism and reportage but by way of inwardness and self-absorption, an expansion and projection of the ego. Even in Mailer's conventional first novel, we can already see a fascination with power, ego, and will, the murky recesses of the irrational. Eventually Mailer will come into his own by making himself his main character, the sensor who registers the most minute vibrations between his interior life and the larger world. In a more speculative mode, Bellow too will begin to build his fiction around versions of himself without losing his huge curiosity about how different people live their lives. In a series of half-surreal episodes, Ralph Ellison shapes the twentieth-century itinerary of black people around the quasi-autobiographical figure of his Invisible Man; Gore Vidal invents his best character in the cutting patrician persona of his essays. Roth's Zuckerman and Updike's Rabbit, like Chaplin's tramp and Keaton's resourceful Everyman hero, become the indispensable projections of the authors, their alternate lives. By stepping outside themselves, they can at once channel their obsessions and get an oblique angle on their own limitations. They can dream of lives they might have had as they record the inner history of the last half century, decade by decade. By cultivating the self, not entirely without a certain narcissism, these writers found new ways of writing the history of their times, an age of prosperity and therapy when the exigent, imperial self became the obsessive concern of many Americans.

Whatever their limits, which will be noted in the pages that follow, these writers captured the anxiety and insecurity of Americans in their newfound comforts. Amid his recollections of athletic glory, and even his later wealth, Rabbit feels like a loser, a man in decline, for he knows that something is missing. In his obsessive pursuit of WASP women, Roth's Portnoy, trying hard to be crude and vulgar, confesses that "I don't seem to stick my dick up these girls, as much as I stick it up their backgrounds—as though through fucking I will discover America." Flannery O'Connor wickedly pursues the black comedy of educated people marooned among the salt of the earth, in a backwater of humanity where ordinary folks are as cunning as they are self-satisfied. Bernard Malamud plays off cultivated Jews uneasy in their assimilation against ethnic Jews who will never fit in. These resonant themes gave the writers more energy, more purchase on experience than old-stock Americans writing novels of manners in a world that, for them, was changing only glacially. Bellow, Roth, and Mailer especially capture the sexual anxiety of men in the postwar world. The self-

absorption of their protagonists, their focus on male grievances, coincides with the emergence of women from the kitchen and the bedroom to demand much more from the world around them.

Once I thought that postwar novelists had perversely turned their backs on society to cultivate their own gardens—the private world of the self and its mysteries. This is a view still held by Tom Wolfe, whose own novels, as colorfully hyperbolic as his essays, are little more than journalistic cartoons passed off as social history. The momentous shifts in American life after the war demanded a different kind of literary imagination, a more surreal technique. The changes in American fiction reflected the transformation of society as a whole. The carnage of the war and the Holocaust turned writers into scholars of violence, specialists in extreme situations. Where Marx had once been their guide to class conflict, they turned to Freud, to existentialism, or even to theology as tutors in the shadowy recesses of the psyche. The new prosperity solved some old economic problems while drawing attention to inner conflicts.

For white male novelists of the postwar years, blacks and women sometimes became projections of the Other, at once desirable and threatening. Their attitudes toward women, always under siege, threatened to strand them in an earlier era. They had to move forward. For a writer like Norman Mailer this meant a turn from the male-centered realism of the war novel to the allegory of *Barbary Shore,* the psychological probing of *The Deer Park,* the egotism and mythmaking of "The White Negro" and *Advertisements for Myself,* the hallucinatory effects of *An American Dream,* the scabrous black humor of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and the comically grandiose self-portraiture of *The Armies of the Night* and other works combining fiction and journalism. Mailer's itinerary is extreme but not unusual; Updike, Roth, Bellow, Cheever, Pynchon, Heller, and even Ellison, in *Invisible Man* and in his long struggle to complete his second novel, show the same kind of experimental restlessness, a shift from realism to fable, allegory, and the play of language.

By the early 1970s, in the wake of the new feminism, new women writers were flourishing, bringing along rediscovered ancestors like Kate Chopin and Zora Neale Hurston. The postwar male dominance began to crumble in fiction as it did in society at large. But the novel itself was becoming less important, challenged first by journalism and the personal essay, then, during the explosions of the 1960s, by visual media that could better convey the color and cacophony of politics as theatre. Mailer's generation dreamed of writing the great American novel, but after 1970 this kind of talent was often directed toward moviemaking, starting with Martin Scorsese and his film-school contemporaries. As fiction became

less central it grew more self-conscious. The protean transformations of Mailer, his ventures into journalism, coincided with the rise of postmodernism, as fiction lost confidence in its power to encompass the world and reach an audience through the written word. As reality itself turned less credible, realism gave way to magic realism and the comic-apocalyptic extravagance of black humor. With writers like Donald Barthelme, John Barth, and Robert Coover, fiction began probing its own techniques, raising questions about its ability to represent what was real. Soon more personal novelists like Philip Roth, who had arrived on the confessional wave of the 1960s, followed them into metafiction, exploring the interface between autobiography and fiction, confessional writing and fabulation. This dialectic between memory and invention itself grows out of the more interiorized approach of the novelists of the fifties, their fascination with the self and its projections, though which they filtered the social world around them. Roth himself came full circle—moving from the Jamesian realism of his early books and the confessional black humor of his post-*Portnoy* period to the metafictional play of his Zuckerman novels and the historically inflected realism of his books of the late 1990s, such as *American Pastoral, I Married a Communist,* and *The Human Stain.*

Whatever techniques they tried and discarded, the postwar novelists gave us a portrait of society by giving us portraits of themselves, struggling to maintain their precarious balance when the rules of life and art were being rewritten. These writers could be embarrassing about race, dreadful about women, monstrously self-absorbed, oblivious to urgent social problems that had engaged Depression writers, indifferent to politics yet all too entranced with the spectacle of cultural politics, especially in the 1960s when some of them stumbled while others came into their own. What might help account for their endurance, however, is their deep loyalty to art. Like the abstract painters who turned against the populism of mural art, the postwar writers consciously rebelled against their politically committed predecessors, cultivating psychological nuance and linguistic complexity over any social mission. Compared to writers of the thirties, whose work could be too spare and topical, too journalistic, and to many post-sixties writers, who were often seduced by cultural fashion, Bellow, O'Connor, Ellison, Malamud, Cheever, Updike, Baldwin, Mailer, and Roth were faithful to their aesthetic conscience, to the gospel according to James and Joyce, Kafka and Proust, even when the results showed up their own faults of craft or character. They remained loyal to the novel even as its boundaries blurred and its hold on readers diminished. Art may not have made them immortal, but it has given their performance a long and uncommonly interesting run.

4

ON AND OFF THE ROAD: THE OUTSIDER AS YOUNG REBEL

DESPITE the emergence of writers who were moving in new directions, the late 1940s was hardly a stellar period in American fiction. Very few major novels were produced. Most of the important books, as we have already seen, either dealt with the war or reflected its aftermath, since very few events altered American life as much as this global conflict. Many novels that were much acclaimed at the time, such as *The Naked and the Dead, All the King's Men, The Young Lions, Guard of Honor,* and *Other Voices, Other Rooms,* seem flawed or dated today; in some cases their authors (Mailer, Capote) went on to make their mark in strikingly different styles. The plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller and the hard-boiled films noirs of the era seem stronger today than the fiction of the period. The work of some novelists who were just beginning to write then, including Mailer, James Jones, Saul Bellow, Flannery O'Connor, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, still feels vital and impressive today, yet their work belongs primarily to the literary scene of the next decade.

Nevertheless, the forties were the testing ground for everything that happened in American writing for the next twenty years. As the American economy moved from Depression and war production to affluence, consumerism, and worldwide geopolitical dominance, writers turned away from economic and social concerns to engage more with spiritual and personal issues. The radical politics and progressive social views that were so important between the wars lost favor, despite Harry S. Truman's unexpected victory over Thomas E. Dewey in 1948. With much of the world's economy in ruins, America entered a period of booming economic growth and relative social peace, marked by expanded job opportunities, a high birth rate, migration to the suburbs, new upward mobility and, thanks to the GI Bill of Rights, a vast expansion of higher education. To some it seemed that American society had entered a new golden age, but very few writers shared this expansive outlook. Instead, they reflected a deep sense of malaise that contrasted with the surface buoyancy and optimism.

The cultural mood, influenced by the horrors of war, grew receptive to European existentialism and crisis theology. For many intellectuals, the sense of sin and evil in Søren Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr, which found a secular equivalent in the psychology of Freud, supplanted the pragmatic social hope and faith in reform that marked the work of John Dewey, though Dewey himself lived until 1952. In fiction, the social novel of the 1930s gave way to stylized fables that brought forth the prismatic figure of the outsider, the misfit, the madman, or the primitive. As America's official values grew more conservative, this outsider character would give a radical edge, a mood of brooding alienation, to work that no longer had any clear public agenda. It would link this new fiction with the Beat poet, the abstract painter, the Method actor, the jazz musician, and the youth-oriented rocker. As economic growth leaped ahead dramatically in the two decades after the war, this outsider character emerged in fiction, poetry, movies, and music as one of the great nay-saying figures in American culture.

Not all thirties writers were naturalists or Marxists, but nearly all of them, even those who were modernists influenced by James Joyce and Marcel Proust (including John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Henry Roth) saw the texture of society, of city life, or of America as a whole as their inescapable subject. For them, the marginal characters who mattered to their fiction were *social* misfits, immigrants moving haltingly into a new culture, Wobblies laying down their idealistic challenge to American capitalism, poor white trash like the Snopeses making a new order out of their own predatory needs. The writers who followed in the forties and fifties, however, were influenced more by *Heart of Darkness, The Interpretation of Dreams,* and *Civilization and Its Discontents* than by *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital.* They were obsessed more with Oedipal struggle than with class struggle, concerned about the limits of civilization rather than the conflicts within civilization. Their premises were more Freudian than Marxist.

Auschwitz and Hiroshima had set them thinking about the nature and destiny of man, and relative affluence gave them the leisure to focus on spritual confusions in their own lives. Just as the burgeoning consumer society sanctioned a new selfishness, so the growing therapeutic culture, buoyed by affluence, invited a focus on "relationships" that would have seemed a luxury or irrelevant to earlier generations. At the same time, the beginnings of the Cold War and the development of McCarthyism, which aimed to root out the remnants of Depression radicalism, encouraged writers to turn away from politics to domestic problems and personal relations. The war itself had brought ordinary Americans together, heightening their patriotism and their intolerance of dissent. The crusading, provincial, and

suspicious atmosphere of the Cold War contributed to a new conformity and materialism. This in turn deepened the spiritual malaise of the postwar years and made some of the best writers feel even less at home in America than the radicals of the 1930s, who put a noble *idea* of America and a belief in its promise and possibility at the center of their work.

Thus, at a moment when America seemed more triumphant than at any time in its past, when we had just fought and won a "good war" and much of the world (including our leading economic and political competitors) lay in ruins, a deep streak of disaffection set in. As advertising became more pervasive, as television began to enter every home, some serious artists felt swamped by the growth of mass culture, though others welcomed it as an expression of the native energy. During this period, Robert Hughes wrote, "the real artist was the one who worked against the grain of American vulgarity, who aspired to a European complexity and subtlety and felt alienated at home." Artists also felt politically alienated. Communism and Fascism were the gods that failed, yet to many writers, American society seemed disoriented, confused; they sought a vantage point outside it. This is reflected in the brutal fantasies of pulp fiction, which exploded in the 1950s from such writers as Jim Thompson and Mickey Spillane, and in the dark patterns of film noir, where the outlook is often so bleak, the milieu so dark and corrupt that the appointed czar of the film industry threatened to forbid the export of American movies for fear of tarnishing our image abroad.

The Catcher in the Rye, which J. D. Salinger had been working on since the last days of the war, seemed a harmless and beautifully crafted book about adolescence when it first appeared in 1951. But with a baby boom developing in tandem with a spending boom, adolescence would prove to be a more potent and far-reaching subject than many realized at the time. Meanwhile, Marlon Brando arrived on the stage as one of Tennessee Williams's dangerous primitives in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* but in his first film, *The Men,* he played a paralyzed war veteran, surly and morose, who must be coerced – by his peers, by doctors, by women – into rejoining the community. Brando's acting combined sullen toughness with hints of strong emotion, a smoldering physicality with a bruised sensitivity. At once masculine and feminine, his style, like Salinger's, helped usher in a new mood of youthful rebellion.

Within a few years, in *The Wild One* (1953), Brando was playing the leader of a motorcycle gang that terrorizes a small community. By then much of America was up in arms over a new youth culture, marked by supposedly antisocial comic books, media violence, and juvenile delinquency. The older generation in small towns, cities, and newly affluent suburbs found their values rejected by their own children. With a surge of

economic growth, social and geographical mobility, and consumer spending, more Americans were moving into the middle class. As the fruits of plenty and of world power dispelled memories of deprivation that went back to the Depression, many of the young turned away from the ethic of upward mobility, finding their parents' lives stodgy, unadventurous, and materialistic. Soon the culture industry discovered a potent new market among adolescents. They made films and songs *for* the young, not simply about them, and rock 'n' roll became the official music of adolescent rebellion, much to the horror of the older generation. In films like *The Wild One* and *Blackboard Jungle,* the sociological study of delinquency turns into an anthem of generational revolt. The pride of the fifties was the nuclear family, nurturing, wholesome, and patriarchal, celebrated in such television sitcoms as *Father Knows Best.* But movies like Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) exploded such families as dysfunctional – distorted by neglect, parental discord, and repressed sexuality – with adults unable to understand the simplest needs of the young. The kids in the movie, led by a very insecure James Dean, must form a more nurturing alternative family among themselves. In the hands of "sensitive" new actors like Brando, Dean, and Montgomery Clift, maladjustment itself became a form of rebellion, even if its goal was obscure. Asked what he was rebelling against in *The Wild One,* Brando answered famously, "Whad'ya got?"

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Soon the widespread concern over juvenile delinquency, which led to congressional hearings like those on organized crime, gave way to the media's fascination with the antics of the Beats. *Time* saw them as good copy, combining moral titillation with public spectacle. But besides their promotional gifts, which were reminiscent of earlier avant-garde movements such as Dada and surrealism, the Beats conveyed to their young followers a new social spirit, communal, antinomian, and sexually liberated. Among the Beats, the values previously associated with advanced art were played out in bohemian enclaves of voluntary poverty and spirited exhibitionism. With the beginnings of the civil rights movement and later the Vietnam War, student protest activities burgeoned on a scale unseen since the Great Depression. This new radicalism in turn helped fuel the rise of the sixties counterculture, whose focus on community, poverty, drugs, and sexual experimentation acted out a criticism of American values and behavior, ranging from puritanism and competitive individualism to anti-Communism and the worship of technology.

Artistically, the Beats had strong links to two movements whose permanent achievements would prove greater than their own. One was jazz,

which was undergoing a revolution in the forties, turning from large swing bands playing dance music to the amazing virtuosity of bop artists like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk. It was their improvisational freshness, complexity, and spontaneity that the Beats would try to recreate in their prose and poetry. The other movement was abstract expressionism, the reigning avant-garde of the late forties and early fifties, whose gestural, performative manner and large spiritual ambitions also influenced the Beats. For these artists, painting was an act, an event, an experience rather than a crafted, finished object or the direct representation of a recognizable image. "What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event," said Harold Rosenberg, the critic who coined the term Action Painting. The purpose of art, as Meyer Schapiro wrote in 1957, had become "more passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling." In the work of such abstract painters as Jackson Pollock, the tangible buildup of the paint on the canvas reminds us constantly of the physical action and movement that put it there. "The work of art," said Schapiro, defining the abstract aesthetic, "is an ordered world of its own kind in which we are aware, at every point, of its becoming."

In both jazz and abstract painting, as in Beat writing, the fluidity, energy, and subjectivity of the creative process become signifying elements of the work itself. This self-consciousness points to the Americanization of modernism in the postwar years. Challenging the more conservative culture of the fifties, these kinetic arts supplanted traditional forms with a vehement expression of personal energy; they became part of a growing counterculture that appealed strongly to alienated intellectuals and to the rebellious and discontented young.

Many contemporary observers described the fifties as the Age of Anxiety. Because of the Cold War, the widespread fear of nuclear annihilation, the Korean War, and finally the war in Vietnam, American society had remained, psychologically at least, in a wartime frame of mind. To all this, a large segment of the young said no, first through the music, then eventually with drugs, political protests, campus rebellions, and freer sex. By and large they were children of affluence, moved by the guilt and boredom that comes with privilege, not the anguish born of deprivation. Even their leaders, many of them children of thirties radicals, abandoned the rhetoric of class conflict that had fired up their parents. The colorful circus of generational conflict appealed to the media far more than the quiet persistence of class conflict. From the surly Brando and the troubled James Dean to the raucous Abbie Hoffman and the clownish Jerry Rubin, the restless young exposed a widening fissure in American life that novelists and filmmakers were among the first to exploit.

Novels and films rarely found a public language to deal with social conflicts over race, war, McCarthyism, Communism, or any other issues that divided an otherwise triumphant America in the decades following World War II. By integrating the armed forces and supporting civil rights legislation, the Truman administration had briefly put race at the top of the American agenda, provoking a Southern revolt, but the brief vogue of social protest films and novels in the late forties effectively died by 1950, and the tough, shadowy style of film noir lasted only a few years longer. The public lost interest in the problems of the returning soldiers, especially when most of those veterans, taking advantage of the education offered through the GI Bill of Rights, began to thrive in the booming postwar economy. By the 1950s, as anti-Semitism diminished, thanks to a spasm of guilt over the Holocaust, race and poverty became subjects few still cared to discuss. Some social scientists and historians, often former radicals, began emphasizing consensus rather than conflict, status anxieties rather than class divisions, and portrayed America as a country that had largely solved its most pressing problems.

Novelists and filmmakers, on the other hand, were drawn to stories that reflected the darker side of American life. The fifties saw a vogue of low-budget horror and science-fiction films that reflected pervasive anxieties about the Cold War, nuclear war, and the blight of timidity that spread in this atmosphere of fear. These works expressed such themes as the fear of invasion by an alien force, fear of the invisible, delayed effects of nuclear radiation, and (in the case of Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* 1956) fear that, beneath a veneer of normality, the Cold War itself would undermine American traditions of dissent and individuality.

Again and again, such novelists as Ralph Ellison, William Gaddis, and Thomas Pynchon would deal not so much with the contour and clash of personalities, like most earlier novelists, but with the loss of personality in a world that trivialized individual differences. Some of this effacement of personality had already been a theme of war novelists such as Norman Mailer and James Jones, who saw the repressive and brutal aspects of army life as an intimation of postwar fascism. But McCarthy, the kind of figure their novels anticipated, proved to be a demagogue and a clown rather than a Fascist, and the threat came more from what William H. Whyte, Jr. called the "social ethic," the spirit of suburban and corporate conformity, than from political repression. Although Mailer would argue in 1957 that the concentration camps and the atom bomb had visited untold psychic havoc on the postwar world, the new prosperity had a deadening effect at least as widespread as any anxious concern about survival. The fifties were at once a period of complacency, of getting and

spending, and an age of anxiety, a time for doubt and self-questioning, as shown by works like David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* With such writers as Riesman, Whyte, Vance Packard, C. Wright Mills, John Kenneth Galbraith, and finally Paul Goodman and Betty Friedan, social criticism became a major growth industry in an apparently self-satisfied society. Much of the fiction of the fifties, including such popular novels as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Cameron Hawley's *Executive Suite,* belongs to this vein of critical self-examination.

❦

It is hard to think of J. D. Salinger as any kind of radical. His best-known hero, the superbright young prep-school dropout, Holden Caulfield, and Holden's even brighter and cuter sister, Phoebe, live comfortable middle-class lives on New York's Park Avenue, where Salinger himself spent his adolescent years. The son of a prosperous Jewish cheese importer and a Scottish-born mother, Salinger was born in 1919 and, after an indifferent academic career, served in the army from 1942 to 1946. Before he joined the literary community surrounding *The New Yorker* in 1948, the army was the family to which he became most strongly attached. From the breakdown he describes in his 1953 story "For Esmé – With Love and Squalor," it appears that the emotional problems he experienced during the war impelled him to look for a way to recapture the lost innocence of childhood and adolescence. His work would become one of the literary keys to a world in which adolescence was becoming an overriding concern.

Though earlier writers like Henry Roth in *Call It Sleep* (1934), Jean Stafford in *The Mountain Lion* (1947), and Truman Capote in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) had written intensely lyrical growing-up stories, Salinger was the first to tap emotionally into the new youth culture created by America's growing adolescent and college-age population after the war. The economic boom enabled Americans to keep young people out of the job market for a much longer period; meanwhile, increasing affluence turned the young into consumers with cultural values distinct from those of their elders, whose needs had been shaped by immigration, depression, and war.

The stresses of the period from 1929 to 1945 had created a cautious, culturally conservative middle-class generation whose values, at least initially, were invested in home, family, and maturity. Thanks to the GI Bill, returning soldiers received college degrees that gave them an advantage in the increasingly specialized postwar economy. But the massive influx of blacks and Hispanics into the large cities drove newly affluent whites to

garden suburbs organized around single-family homes, shopping malls, and the automobile. When many of their children took up rock music and Beat styles, with their roots in the ghettos and in black culture, they were embracing the milieu and the values their elders had left behind.

Salinger's work is the most polite, well-bred version of adolescent rebellion, yet it is founded on a sweeping dismissal of grown-up life as inauthentic, pompous, and moralistic. Holden Caulfield is the first of a long postwar line of fictional naifs who see through everything, whose lives are an epic of thwarted sensitivity, who feel stifled by the hypocrisy of adults, the stupidity of their peers, the betrayal of those they trust, and the manipulations of all figures of authority. In the course of the novel he is misunderstood, patronized, verbally abused, beaten up, even propositioned by a trusted teacher, all described in the same bright-eyed tone of shocked wonderment and premature sophistication.

Like dozens of later novels from *On the Road* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* to *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Bright Lights, Big City,* Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* is not a growing-up novel but a *not*-growing-up novel, focusing on a young man's refusal to assume the social responsibilities the world is too eager to impose on him. All these novels go back in different ways to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* one of the *ur*-texts of postwar fiction, with its emphasis on the inner life of troubled boyhood, and Huck's need to escape the corruptions of the adult world. This had a special point in the fifties, when *maturity* and *adjustment* were cultural watchwords, bolstered by a pop Freudianism. To Holden Caulfield, everyone from his teachers to the actors he sees on the stage are "phonies." Thrown out of yet another school, Pencey Prep – modeled on a well-known military academy where Salinger himself had spent two years – Holden is a genteel urban Huck Finn who dreams of taking to the road but instead, in his few days of adventure in New York, is actually in the midst of having a breakdown. The book thus brings together three of the main tropes of the fifties counterculture: the youthful misfit, the road, and mental illness as a form of social maladjustment and intuitive wisdom.

Where the growing-up novel, even in the hands of a writer as unsentimental as Jean Stafford or Nabokov, often expresses itself in nostalgia for a lost world, Salinger's stories rediscover the vernacular of childhood and youth as a language of endangered innocence. A wicked satirist with a cool eye and a perfect ear, Salinger lampoons the vulgarity and duplicity of adults while endowing his powerless young with amazing verbal virtuosity. Some of Salinger's best and worst stories, from "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period" and *Catcher in the Rye* to the five long stories about the Glass family published in *The New Yorker* between 1955 and 1965, are essentially

extended comic monologues that cleared a path for the picaresque writers of the 1960s, including Roth in *Portnoy's Complaint,* who, with some impetus from Céline, helped bring this tradition to its climax. One of Truman Capote's early mentors had called *Other Voices* the "fairy Huckleberry Finn," but *The Catcher in the Rye* was more truly in the colloquial Huck Finn tradition. Only Salinger successfully captured the exact accent and rhythm of the adolescent voice and sensibility; only in his work did the young recognize themselves as they were or as they dreamed of being.

Unlike the writing of Twain or Ring Lardner, Salinger's theme is spiritual: his young people and his sainted dead (especially Seymour Glass) are eternal innocents who cannot adjust to society or accept its compromises. "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" (1948) is the prototype for Salinger's later, more garrulous fiction. The main character besides Seymour Glass is an infinitely wise, articulate child named Sybil. He meets her on a Florida beach, and she provides him with a momentary respite from his gossipy wife Muriel ("Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948," according to Seymour), whom we see polishing her nails and chatting with her mother on a long-distance telephone call. Caught between an unrecoverable innocence and a vulgar vitality, Seymour commits suicide – the founding moment of the Glass dynasty. Holden Caulfield and the shell-shocked soldier in "For Esmé – With Love and Squalor" are spiritual descendents of the martyred Seymour, while Holden's bright sister Phoebe and the young Esmé belong to the oracular mode of the bright young Sybil.

As we see in the later Glass stories and occasionally in Beat writing, such fictions can easily turn precious and narcissistic, reposing on a sentimental vision of the elect, but with little sense of the society that frustrates their needs. Salinger's later work needs more Muriel and less Sybil, more of the world's variety and less obsession with saintliness. In Holden Caulfield's sojourn in New York, though, Salinger still has his ear tuned to wider frequencies: roommates, parents, prostitutes, college boys, taxi drivers, elevator operators, spoiled mentors, all the people who fail Holden on his way down. The key to Holden is that at sixteen he is still virginal, presexual, like the falling children he dreams of rescuing as "the catcher in the rye." He has a grown-up mind trapped uneasily in an adolescent's awkward body. Holden's problem with sex is a more concentrated version of his problem with the adult world: that it seems unspiritual, crude, a violation of the perfect sympathy he feels only with children:

> If you want to know the truth, I'm a virgin. I really am. I've had quite a few opportunities to lose my virginity and all, but I've never got around to it yet. Something always happens. For instance, if you're at a girl's house, her parents always come home at the wrong time – or you're afraid they will. Or if you're in

the back seat of somebody's car, there's always somebody's date in the front seat – some girl, I mean – that always wants to know what's going on *all over* the whole goddam car. I mean some girl in front keeps turning around to see what the hell's going on. I came quite close to doing it a couple of times, though. . . . The thing is, most of the time when you're coming pretty close to doing it with a girl – a girl that isn't a prostitute or anything, I mean – she keeps telling you to stop. The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don't. I can't help it. You never know whether they really *want* you to stop, or whether they're just scared as hell. . . . Anyway, I keep stopping. The trouble is I get to feeling sorry for them. . . . They tell me to stop, so I stop.

This sexual embarrassment is the material of stand-up comedy, but it is more than a riff: it remains wonderfully in character. Holden's adventures in New York are really a series of Jewish jokes, at once sad, funny, and self-accusing. Like Philip Roth, Salinger is an inspired mimic. When Portnoy complains that he feels caught in the middle of a Jewish joke, he's following in Holden's footsteps. Though little of Salinger's work belongs explicitly with the Jewish American novel, there is a touch of the schlemiel about Holden's fumbling adolescent self-consciousness, about the way he is prone to disaster, doomed to disappointment at every turn. Holden's haplessness arises from a mixture of anxiety and good-heartedness; his failures attest to his nobility and single him out for a special destiny.

As Twain did with Huck Finn, Salinger concentrates on the flow of Holden's voice, the starts and hesitations that echo his behavior. Voice – volatile, immediate, and seductive – was the secret weapon of fifties writers against the postwar resurgence of gentility and good form. Where more formal writers depend on a stable sense of identity, the picaresque narrator, like the jazz performer or Action Painter, seems to be making himself up as he goes along. Holden is not only a great storyteller but also a compulsive fibber and fantasist, living more easily in the identities he assumes than in the ones imposed on him. He lies out of an excess of imagination, and as a way of avoiding unpleasant confrontations. He is verbal and judgmental but never grasping or deliberately cruel. He understands sex only as violation – as a way of using someone and spoiling what is perfect about them. For Salinger, this makes him not just confused and unhappy but morally superior to the world around him. Holden foreshadows a counterculture that will be less about sex than about innocence; its ideal would be a kind of sainthood and spiritual election in a fallen world.

The youthful rebels and misfits who followed in the fifties and sixties were generally less funny than Holden and far less attentive to the nuances of a world they found oppressive. Their cultural or moral revisionism takes the place of the social revolts of previous decades; it aims to escape the demands of society rather than to change society. Their unorganized

protests occur not in a Depression world of crisis, suffering, and upheaval but in a triumphant world of postwar affluence and economic growth, a world they find soulless rather than exploitative. They are truly rebels without a cause. The terms of their radicalism are existential, not political; they seek inner satisfaction and identity, not social justice. Thus James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison reject the work of their mentor, Richard Wright, as "protest novels" or as works that fail to do justice to either the richness of African American life or the hollowness of the larger society.

If the protest novel, in Baldwin's sense, was political, propagandistic, and its moving force was a burning rage at injustice, the new kind of novel of the 1950s was not only personal, it was lyrical. Lyrical novels were not so much critical of society as indifferent to it, in flight from it, subjecting it to a dismissive mockery. These novels were often colloquial, written in the first person (like *Huckleberry Finn*), loosely structured, seemingly spontaneous. Their heroes, always in flight, lay claim to the Emersonian freedom to create and remake themselves that many Americans consider their birthright. The alternative to the lyrical novel in the 1950s is the ironic novel, tightly patterned, intricately written, in which such freedom proves to be a delusion, because society will never permit it and life itself makes it unattainable. Here the protagonist, much less identified with the author, becomes an object lesson in frustration or failure.

Versions of the lyrical novel include the road novel, the adolescent novel, the adventure novel, the first-person picaresque. The sensitive protagonist is always trying to escape from social regimentation, from the nuclear family, especially from the domesticating power of women, and trying to find his own path within an overorganized society. The ironic novel, on the other hand, often took the form of the Jamesian social fable or the Kafkaesque metaphysical parable. It centered on plots that created a sense of entrapment or futility, on characters caught in webs of circumstance not of their own making, or in contradictions set deep within their own personalities. Fatalistic works like Bellow's *Seize The Day* or Malamud's *The Assistant* show us a world not at all shaped to a person's needs or likely to bend to his will.

The ironic novel belongs to the conservative, quiescent strain of American thought after the war: the darkly shaded Freudianism of such critics as Lionel Trilling, the sense of sin of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr, the anti-utopianism of historians like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Richard Hofstadter, the critique of liberalism and progressivism of the work of these and other writers and thinkers, including Schlesinger in *The Vital Center* (1949), Niebuhr in *The Irony of American History* (1951), and Hofstadter in *The Age of Reform* (1954). As Morton White showed in *Social*

Thought in America (1949), the darkly shaded mood of existentialism had displaced the spirit of progressivism; the influence of Dewey had given way to the ghost of Kierkegaard. In Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), a sense of modernist complexity and tragic realism undermines the old faith in reform. Nearly all these intellectuals remained liberals, but their social faith had a tragic, anti-utopian cast.

This recoil against liberal optimism was influenced by both the failures of Communism in the 1930s and the barbarities of Fascism in the 1940s. It was a neoliberalism that had little confidence in human nature and the benign power of the human will; it looked back not to Emerson but to the founding fathers, with their suspicion of democracy and irrationality and their insistence on checks and balances to keep human nature at bay. Its literary roots were more European than American, for its outlook was grounded not in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman but in the social determinations of the realistic novel and the ironies of literary modernism.

The ironic novel, the kind of novel in which people are defined by who they ineluctably are, not by what they want or need, became the specialty of Jewish writers such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, of Southerners like Flannery O'Connor, and blacks like James Baldwin, writers who came from groups that had known defeat and oppression and had experienced the direct impact of history on their collective and personal lives. The idea of man's unbounded freedom had little resonance for them except as a misguided form of hubris. It didn't belong to their own experience. The goal of their characters was survival, decency, the chance to get along: the recognition of their humanity, not the giddy intensities of self-invention. People in their novels who do try to reinvent themselves, like Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* (1956), are invariably thwarted, humiliated, even destroyed, though not without moments of tragic self-understanding. Lyrical novelists, on the other hand, brought American fiction closer to native traditions of transcendentalism and pragmatism. Emerson's work was their scripture, Whitman and Twain their literary inspiration. The oral richness of American humor spoke to them more strongly than the ironic reverberations of Kafka or Freud or the social structures in Balzac and George Eliot. Their novels, so often autobiographical, were personal effusions more than social canvases, though they were scarcely free of ironic details, and often conveyed a sharp sense of the social limits they fiercely resisted. These were utopian novels, dreamers' novels, even when (as in *The Catcher in the Rye*) their well-meaning characters came to grief. They appealed most to young people, and in the fifties and sixties they became an important vehicle for an emerging counterculture as well as a momentous turn in American fiction.

The novel that had the greatest impact after *The Catcher in the Rye* was Jack Kerouac's *On the Road,* completed the same year *Catcher* appeared (1951) but not published until six years later. In the interim, Kerouac wrote nearly a dozen books in what became his autobiographical saga, the Duluoz legend, but none would be as readable as *On the Road,* nor would any of his other novels match its mythic status as a founding text of the Beat movement. Born in 1922 in the mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts, where his French Canadian father worked as a printer, Kerouac did not even speak English until he was five or six, and his later celebrations of the American heartland were the work of a keen observer rather than a confident insider. For Kerouac, Lowell and his mother's home represent a Catholic tradition of family values, while the great empty spaces of the West, which he discovers for the first time in *On the Road,* offer undreamed-of possibilities of freedom that leave him feeling ecstatic but deeply ambivalent.

Kerouac's more traditional first novel, *The Town and the City* (1950), was written in the expansive autobiographical mode of Thomas Wolfe. A high school football star, Kerouac had left Lowell in 1939 for a year of prep school in New York before taking up an athletic scholarship at Columbia. After a disastrous hitch as a merchant marine in the U.S. Navy, he returned to New York, where his real life in the city began. In his first novel, the hometown and the large nuclear family based on Lowell were set off against the exciting bohemia of the city, peopled by characters based on Allen Ginsberg, then still a Columbia freshman, and William Burroughs, the Harvard-educated black sheep of a wealthy St. Louis family – Kerouac met both of them in 1944. Their world, on the fringes of the university, attracted the young writer, essentially an autodidact, to whom art was as darkly appealing as sin. This alternative family offered the hope of self-transformation through a new kind of community: close-knit but transgressive, morally adventurous, marginally criminal, and wonderfully creative.

The Town and the City is a benign version of the "revolt from the village" novels of the 1920s, typified by Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920), in which the writer's autobiographical surrogate tries to flee the stultifying intimacy of the small town to seek fulfilment in a wider world, usually the big city. The genre was ill suited to Jack Kerouac, who, just beneath his bohemianism, had a deeply conservative cast of mind, as his later life would repeatedly show. It was only by escaping *from* the city that he found the subject that truly ignited his literary imagination.

On the Road is based on a series of cross-country trips that Kerouac himself had made, mostly with Neal Cassady, between 1947 and 1950, at the very moment other Americans were rediscovering the mobility they had

lost during years of Depression and wartime. There would soon be an explosion of cars on the road, sped along by the sleek new highways of Eisenhower's Interstate Highway System, the major federal achievement of the 1950s. Best-selling books like Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) would show that Americans were becoming a rootless people, thanks to migrations from rural areas to cities, from cities to new towns and suburbs, and from stable manufacturing jobs to corporate white-collar positions that repeatedly transferred them to different parts of the country. Though *On the Road* seemingly turned its back on the world of marriage, families, and jobs, it was very much in tune with the new mobility that peace and prosperity afforded to many Americans in the 1950s. The jobless, penniless drifters of the Depression were turning into the white-collar transients of the postwar world; Cassady and Kerouac, one rootless, the other restless, were pushing their way past a door that was already swinging open.

The genius of *On the Road* was to attach the new restlessness to the classic American mythology of the road, and to use it to express a subversive set of values – exuberance, energy, spirituality, intensity, improvisation – that would challenge the suburban and corporate conservatism of the 1950s. The road represents the expansive, footloose spirit of America after the war yet also the need to escape from the constraints of the new domesticity and work ethic. Dean Moriarty, Kerouac's hero, based on Cassady – his name combines James Dean with Sherlock Holmes's chief villain – is everything from a charismatic con man and cocksman to a "HOLY GOOF" with the tremendous energy of "a new kind of American saint." As a self-made man, he is much better at holding down a job and supporting a family than the pampered Kerouac, raised on mother love. But this saint lives for kicks and preaches a gospel of irresponsibility that makes everyone around him miserable, especially the long-suffering women. In the eyes of Sal Paradise, the fearful but enamored narrator (based on Kerouac), the kinetic Dean, fleet runner, legendary driver, virtuoso lover, is everything he himself is not: comfortable in his own skin, free of moral hang-ups and family ties. Where Sal, like Tom Sawyer, never breaks the umbilical cord connecting him to his aunt, Dean is a modern Huck Finn who was "actually born on the road" and grew up with his wino father on skid row in Denver, an abused child and orphan who learned early on to fend for himself.

In *On the Road,* the likable but impossible Dean is the daemon who presides over the Road; he is the tutelary spirit of the West, even of the pioneers Kerouac also had in mind as he repeatedly tried to tell the story of his "life on the road." He runs and drives like a figure out of Greek myth or black magic. The American tradition of the Road is built into the scale of the continent itself, the endless migration made possible by the frontier

and the great open spaces of the West, a migration that extends the "westering" movement that first brought the colonists to the New World. In biblical and Christian imagery, this westward movement is always renovating and apocalyptic, offering the promise of a fresh beginning, a new life, as John Steinbeck understood when he took his family of Okies on a biblical trek across the desert to a green and promising land. In *On the Road,* as in early Westerns like *The Virginian* and its many film offshoots, the East represents a stale, unhealthy, ossified civilization, an indoor civilization out of touch with nature, while the West is a brave new world, full of explosive energies and dangerous possibilities.

Road novels and movies were especially important in the 1930s when so many Americans were uprooted by the Depression. From *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932) and *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933) to *U.S.A., The Grapes of Wrath,* and *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), the hobo and the drifter became icons of the era, staples in fiction, photography, and Depression journalism as well as film. Even earlier, Whitman had eulogized the open road as the emblem of a truly American freedom and Mark Twain had turned the Mississippi into an escape route that rescues Nigger Jim from slavery and Huck Finn from the brutality of his drunken father and the tyranny of small-town respectability. As the novel ends, Huck decides famously "to light out for the Territory" when the adults threaten to "sivilize" him. Jack London had collected the memories of his tramping life in the 1890s into another apotheosis, rich with hobo slang, *The Road* (1907). "I became a tramp – well, because of the life that was in me, of the wanderlust in my blood that would not let me rest," wrote London, whose adventurous ways had already made him a legend. "I went on 'The Road' because I couldn't keep away from it; because I hadn't the price of the railroad fare in my jeans." Immensely literary and self-conscious about his work, Kerouac responded strongly to plebeians like London and to vernacular writers who experimented with the American idiom, including Twain, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, Ring Lardner, Nelson Algren, and William Saroyan – the same writers who most impressed the young Salinger. Most of these were writers whose work emerged out of the great oral tradition of American humor, storytelling, and mimickry.

In Kerouac's work, going on the road is less a matter of economic need, as it had been during the Depression, more a myth of rebirth, as in literary and religious parables. Almost from the beginning, the narrator feels eerily estranged from himself: "My whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future." This is not so much a destination as a dream of pure movement, directionless, propulsive, unreflective. To the

more conventional Sal, Dean's "frantic" travels eventually come to seem "maniacal" and "completely meaningless," but at certain times they make him ecstatic; their manic intensity projects him into a realm of pure spirit. Kerouac himself was afraid of driving, terrified of flying, uncomfortable with women, afraid of falling under the tracks of trains – all the spheres in which Dean, with his amazing physical dexterity and con man's irresistible charm, performed with such ease and confidence.

At about the same time Kerouac was mythologizing Cassady, the publicity apparatus of American culture, especially *Life* magazine, was mythologizing another rugged son of the West, Jackson Pollock. He was hard drinking, taciturn, intensely physical, and often worked on a grandiose American scale. He had studied with Thomas Hart Benton but then gone his own way, though the swirl and flow and size of Benton's compositions influenced his work. Though he rejected the stylized realism of the thirties muralists, he said he wanted to create "large, movable pictures that will function between the easel and mural." Keeping the canvas on the floor so that he could get *into* it, throwing paint at the canvas and letting it drip, sometimes adding tactile, angular bits of gravel and pebbles, he created a thickly layered grid, a complex impasto of paint that was almost a road map of the energy and intensity he had put into it. (Like Kerouac he was attracted by the improvisational energy of jazz.) For Pollock, the canvas itself was his way of being "on the road," of taking off on an explosive free-form adventure of his own. Until one drunken night on New York's Long Island in 1956, he wrapped his car around a tree, killing himself and one of the women with him. Like James Dean in his silver Porsche the previous year, he was yet another casualty of the road.

At about the same time, another great visual artist, the Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank, also took to the road to create a document of American life. When his pictures were collected in *The Americans* (1959), with an introduction by Jack Kerouac, they not only captured the look of postwar America but reshaped the legacy of Depression photography. Where Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange had portrayed an America suffering extreme privations with exquisite dignity and determination, Frank showed the world a casual, backwater America, tending its small-town rituals, caught up in the undramatic business of everyday life.[2] Unlike their Depression counterparts, Frank's "Americans" had multiple histories, not just one big brush with History. In line with their subjects, his pictures

[2] Frank, working with Alfred Leslie, memorialized the downtown world of the Beats and the New York painters with the same random attention in a largely improvised film, *Pull My Daisy* (1959), that was pulled together by Kerouac's inspired narration.

had a drab throwaway look that broke sharply with the artful composure of previous American photography. They seemed to have a deceptively amateur quality, as if the image just happened to come together, like some of Kerouac's prose of which Paul Goodman complained that "nothing is told, nothing is presented, everything is just 'written about.'"

But unlike Frank's sad, eerie images of an American wasteland, Kerouac's novel has a figure at the center to energize his portrait of America. At first Sal relishes the simple pleasure of being with Dean, the sense of putting all entanglements behind him, of leaving even himself behind. He feeds on Dean's explosive energy, his sheer physicality. Dean is the spirit of the West, life in the raw; he is the orphan boy without a superego, ready at any moment to pull up stakes and jettison his life. Friends, jobs, wives, children mean something to him only so long as he feels impelled to stay with them. A kind of centaur, perfectly fused to his four wheels, Dean believes in movement simply as a way of going with the flow, cutting any knot that binds him and complicates his life.

> "Whooee!" yelled Dean. "Here we go!" And he hunched over the wheel and gunned her; he was back in his element, everybody could see that. We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move.* And we moved!

As time goes on, however, Sal, with his Catholic feeling of guilt, his middle-class sense of family, recoils from Dean's habit of simply picking up and moving on. Like Dean's wives and girlfriends, Sal flinches from the irresponsibility that attracted him in the first place. In one memorable scene, many of the women in Dean's life, wives of his old buddies, have their say: we see the Pied Piper from the point of view of those who were left behind, who nail him for living solely for "kicks." To Sal, as to these jealous upholders of civilization and domesticity, Dean's energy has become more like madness than exuberance; it evokes Sal's deep-seated anxieties as much as his sense of wonder. For him, Dean's sainthood and irresponsibility are all mixed up. Dean is like the unfathomable Gatsby seen through the grudgingly respectful eyes of Nick Carraway; he's the obsessed Ahab conjured up in lightning flashes by his chronicler, Ishmael.

Curled up in the back of the car, expecting an imminent smash-up, Sal tries to sleep. Soon, in Dean's hands, his mortal fear gives way to resignation:

> As a seaman I used to think of the waves rushing beneath the shell of the ship and the bottomless deeps thereunder – now I could feel the road some twenty inches beneath me, unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds across the groaning continent with that mad Ahab at the wheel. When I closed my eyes, all I could see was the road unwinding into me. When I opened them I saw flashing

shadows of trees vibrating on the floor of the car. There was no escaping it. I resigned myself to all. And still Dean drove.

As Dean's character thickens into moral ambiguity, Kerouac's prose becomes less wide eyed and innocent, more Melvillean. This "road unwinding into me" is also the Buddhist or Tao road of cosmic submission, the tranformation of fear into individual purpose. "What's your road, man?" he imagines Dean saying to him, "– holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road." The enigma of Dean, the message of Dean, even Dean's style – these are what the book is all about. Soon after he completed *On the Road,* Kerouac would write another book, *Visions of Cody* (1973), his most free-flowing and experimental work, simply to fathom his friend's character.

The run-on spontaneity of Cassady's talk and letters influenced Kerouac's writing much like the improvisational flow of jazz riffs, which Kerouac worked hard to imitate in language. Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody," as Allen Ginsberg called it in the dedication of *Howl and Other Poems,* was yet another version of the "road," the flow, the book's organizing metaphor. So was the physical manuscript of the final version, which Kerouac produced on a single long roll of paper in three weeks of nonstop composition in April 1951. As he wrote to Cassady a few weeks later: "I've telled all the road now. Went fast because road is fast . . . wrote whole thing on strip of paper 120 foot long (tracing paper that belonged to Cannastra.) – just rolled it through typewriter and in fact no paragraphs . . . rolled it out on floor and it looks like a road" (*Selected Letters,* 22 May 1951). Truman Capote quipped that Kerouac's style was not writing but typing. Yet Kerouac's typing, with its uncensored, unshaped remembering, was one of the few spheres in which he could match the speed and intensity of Cassady's driving, running, screwing, and verbal riffing. His style, shaped by this nonstop flow of memory, reflects the aimless spontaneity of their cross-country travels.

Kerouac's three-week marathon was his literary breakthrough. *On the Road* is somehow a great book without being a good novel. Too much in the book happens mainly because it happened, with little dramatic buildup or consequence; too many minor characters are there just because they really were there at the time. Even the style often falls into cliché; the much-edited syntax, the punctuation "improved" by the publisher, too often goes lame. There is a gushing adolescent enthusiasm that does not entirely belong to Kerouac's narrator, Sal: "I licked my lips for the luscious blond." "The nights in Denver are cool, and I slept like a log." On apple pie and ice cream: "I knew it was nutritious and it was delicious, of course." But neither the clichés nor the publisher's insistence on conventional punctuation really damages the *lilt* of Kerouac's prose or the propulsive energy and feeling behind it. Shapeless at its worst, incandescently evocative at its best, Kerouac's prose became a landmark in the poetics of improvisation that gave the counterculture its distinct character. At its frequent best, this style, influenced by eruptive writers like Céline, would free up countless others, beginning with his friends Ginsberg and Burroughs, and then Norman Mailer, all of whom were still working in a far more conventional vein in 1951. If we compare Burroughs's straightforward *Junkie* to *Naked Lunch* or Ginsberg's formal early poems to *Howl,* Kerouac's influence on them becomes immediately clear. Kerouac taught writers from Ginsberg to Bob Dylan to go with the flow, to avoid censoring outlandish images, to tap their fantasies as they shaped their memories, and to ride the shape of their own breath, as the surrealists preached, the Buddhist masters taught, and jazzmen instinctively practiced. The flow of this style, the cascade of details that Kerouac recalled astonishingly well – Ginsberg called him "The Great Rememberer" – meshes with Dean's kinetic personality to give the novel its unusual kind of strength.

Ultimately, *On the Road* was more important as a myth, as a cultural marker, than as a novel. As Holden Caulfield became the first literary protagonist of the new youth culture, Dean Moriarty would become the patron saint of the counterculture, to be followed closely by the Ginsberg of *Howl,* the Mailer of "The White Negro" (1957), the Paul Goodman of *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), and, among literary characters, the ultracool Randall McMurphy in Ken Kesey's fable *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and many others throughout the 1960s. (Before his death in Mexico in 1968, Cassady himself would drive the bus for Kesey's perpetually stoned group of Merry Pranksters, as tediously recorded in Tom Wolfe's sixties chronicle, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* [1968].) Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963) zanily crosses the offbeat drifter world of Kerouac with the precise plotting of Conrad and Graham Greene. In later years, Ginsberg would mythologize Kerouac as a Beat legend, as Kerouac had mythologized Cassady, and as Norman Mailer, the promising but reserved young novelist, would revamp himself into a hip adventurer, an existential legend, in "The White Negro," "The Time of Her Time," and *Advertisements for Myself* (1959).

Because of Kerouac's sense of himself as an outsider, *On the Road* is ultimately a sad book rather than merely an exuberant one. Where Mailer mythologized blacks as figures of impulse and violence, Kerouac, in the most notorious passage in the novel, projected his loneliness onto the black ghetto of Denver, imagining it as a scene of warmth and belonging from which he feels excluded. Sal is disappointed with Dean, cut off from everyone else, locked in his own shyness and inhibitions. Feeling abandoned, he

dreams of exchanging worlds with "the happy, truehearted, ecstatic Negroes of America." They represent the vitality, spontaneity, and human connection he himself had despaired of achieving except in fugitive moments, as in the brief affair with a Mexican girl described so touchingly in *On the Road.* For Kerouac himself, this sense of being stranded and cut off was prophetic, for the success of the book made his world a living hell.

Kerouac was deeply ambivalent about the fame he had sought and found, which made him feel even more isolated. Nearly all his important work was written before *On the Road* was published. His chronicles ranged from early love affairs retold in strikingly different styles in *Tristessa, Maggie Cassidy,* and *The Subterraneans,* which brought out some of his tenderest writing, to accounts of the Beats themselves, his substitute family, in books like *The Dharma Bums,* written quickly to capitalize on the success of *On the Road,* and in *Desolation Angels* (1965), his last good book.

In his final years – he died of alcoholism in 1969 – he became almost as reclusive as Salinger. The two writers also shared a deepening interest in Buddhism, and both obsessively devoted their later energies to shaping a family saga. Like the fictional Holden Caulfield, who idealizes his dead brother Allie as a dreamy legend, Kerouac wrote worshipfully of an older brother, Gerard, whose death in childhood left him feeling half amputated, a mere survivor. *Visions of Gerard* (1963) was the peculiar shrine he erected to this departed saint. Kerouac played off another childhood legend in *Dr. Sax* and described a nervous breakdown brought on by fame, drink, and drugs in *Big Sur.* Publishers showed little interest in his carefully composed Buddhist scrapbook, *Some of the Dharma,* an ambitious collage of poems and meditations that did not appear in full until 1997. The last book he published in his lifetime, *Vanity of Duluoz* (1968), was a more directly autobiographical version of *The Town and the City.* As Salinger's last published story, "Hapworth 16, 1924" (1965), was written in the precocious voice of a seven-year-old Seymour Glass, Kerouac's posthumously published *Pic* (1971), an early experiment in first-person storytelling, was narrated in dialect by a black boy of ten.

It would be foolish to extend the parallel between Kerouac and Salinger too far. Even with the solipsistic excesses of his Glass stories, Salinger remained a fastidious writer in the *New Yorker* mode, crafting each sentence as if it were his last. Kerouac was in every way a looser, more spontaneous stylist, a good travel writer with an evocative sense of place, experimenting with different techniques from book to book, running the gamut from solid naturalism to undifferentiated stream of consciousness depending on the subject and his state of mind. One of Kerouac's most improbable admirers was a younger *New Yorker* writer, John Updike, mandarin stylist, heir to Nabokov in lexical playfulness and metaphoric dazzle, yet also a conscientious realist, dutiful husband and father, and protégé of John Cheever as chronicler of the suburban middle class. In a 1971 interview excerpted in *Picked-Up Pieces* (1975), Updike singled out Salinger, Kerouac, and the virtually unknown Harold Brodkey, his Harvard contemporary, for having broken the mold of the well-made story they had inherited in the 1950s.

According to Updike, "It's in Salinger that I first heard, as a college student in the early Fifties, the tone that spoke to my condition," something he had not heard in the short stories of such hard-boiled or "wised-up" writers as Hemingway, John O'Hara, or Dorothy Parker. "Salinger's stories were not wised up. They were very open to tender invasions. Also they possessed a refreshing formlessness which, of course, he came to push to an extreme, as real artists tend to do."

He goes on to praise Brodkey's work for going "deeper into certain kinds of emotional interplay than the things written by older writers" and Kerouac because "there is something benign, sentimentally benign, in his work." When the interviewer expresses astonishment at any link between Updike, the polished craftsman, and the fluent Kerouac of the printer's roll, Updike insists that "Kerouac was right in emphasizing a certain flow, a certain ease. Wasn't he saying, after all, what the surrealists said? That if you do it very fast without thinking, something will get in that wouldn't ordinarily."

Updike's comments are virtually a manifesto for the lyrical novel by someone not usually associated with the first-person picaresque or with any kind of countercultural self-assertion. They suggest that Kerouac's and Salinger's importance even to the most buttoned-up writers was not simply a matter of form or style but a whole approach to experience. The arrival of the sensitive male in American fiction followed quickly on his appearance in film and drama. The formal breakthrough of the writer also represents the physical freedom many young people were seeking in a transitional era of severe but rapidly eroding moral constraints. American society still stigmatized sex and stressed the value of home, family, and work, but this was a rear-guard position within a growing culture of consumption and abundance. "Maturity" was the albatross of the postwar generation; Salinger and the Beats helped their readers see beyond it, to find the sensitive child, the thwarted adolescent in themselves. This in turn connected them to the newly emerging values of personal fulfilment, individuality, and unlimited consumption.

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In remarks in *Esquire* in 1945, Salinger himself had criticized the hypermasculine war novels for showing "too much of the strength, maturity and craftsmanship critics are looking for, and too little of the glorious imperfections which teeter and fall off the best minds. The men who have been in this war deserve some sort of *trembling melody* rendered without embarrassment or regret. I'll watch for that book." Here, Salinger speaks rather self-consciously for those for whom the war was a trauma rather than a triumph, a desperate challenge or a breakdown rather than an adventure. His aim is to write the emotional history of the war generation, to give us characters who, in Updike's revealing phrase, are "very open to tender invasions."

Salinger, Kerouac, and Updike thus represent in their different ways the inward turn of the postwar novel, its feminization, so to speak. They look beyond masculine worlds imagined by Hemingway, the social map minutely drawn by John O'Hara. They look beyond sophistication toward the lost innocence of childhood, the paradise approximated by sex or drugs, the freedom associated with the road yet also the tenderness of family life. Families are their subject yet families also bring out their most ambivalent feelings. Families represent at once the remembered scene of childhood, the site of tender relationships, and the maturity trap they are anxious to escape. Sometimes they reject home and marriage only to experiment with new families, as with Kerouac and his Beat friends or Updike's Rabbit in *Rabbit Redux,* whose house becomes a kind of sixties communal pad, an irregular family, after his wife has left him.

Transgressive writing had flowered briefly with such homosexual authors as Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, and Paul Bowles in the late forties, but in the fifties and sixties a dream of freedom, a sexual and moral utopianism, beckoned to nearly every important American writer. Saul Bellow's chilling novella *Seize the Day,* a masterpiece of ironic fiction, dramatizes the failure of one man's bid for freedom, but it is preceded and followed in Bellow's work by two wildly lyrical novels, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Henderson the Rain King* (1959), essentially road novels exploring the limits of both well-made fiction and social convention. Ralph Ellison's great *Invisible Man* (1952) is the most surreal of autobiographical novels. Its form takes on the classic picaresque pattern of Voltaire's *Candide* or Nathanael West's *A Cool Million,* in which the eternally hopeful hero, like a rubbery cartoon character, repeatedly takes it on the chin from a crude and brutal world. *Invisible Man* carries us through Ellison's Oklahoma childhood, his encounter with the South and the ideas of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute, his arrival in Harlem in the late 1930s, and his disillusioning attachment to the Communist party.

For the anonymous protagonist, as for many other black migrants, this road takes him nowhere, toward a Dostoyevskian underground room where he nurses his final cynicism. The strategy of his patrons is simply to manipulate him, to wear him out with the appearance of movement and progress: "Keep this nigger boy running."

Even compared to Bellow and Ellison, Updike is the most improbable of road novelists, the one most anchored to suburban life and a conventional literary career. At a time when so many young couples married so they could have sex and conceived children largely because they were married, Updike and his first wife were raising four children while still in their twenties. His literary mentor, John Cheever, seemed every inch the country squire, the well-mannered *New Yorker* stylist with the moral weight of his New England Puritanism behind him. But early on, Cheever began writing, in a deceptively light tone, about seriously dysfunctional families – emasculating mothers, failed fathers, murderous fraternal rivalries – and from *Falconer* (1977) to his posthumously published *Journals* (1991), he raised the curtain on a secret life of dark bisexual hedonism and marital misery on an epic scale. Another errant son of New England with a troubled family history, Robert Lowell, made the breakthrough much earlier and more daringly in the autobiographical prose and verse fragments of *Life Studies* (1959), contrasting his famous family name and genteel but impoverished background with his tortured mental history.

Compared to Cheever and Lowell, Updike's family origins were strictly lower middle class. His father, memorably portrayed in *The Centaur* (1963), was a high school math teacher and his mother, the central figure in *Of the Farm* (1965), was a frustrated writer who actually began publishing fiction late in life. Born in 1932 and raised in rural Pennsylvania, Updike attended Harvard on a scholarship and spent a year in Oxford as an art student before joining the staff of *The New Yorker,* where he became a lifelong contributor. His alter ego in fiction, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, is his notion of what he might have become had he never left southeastern Pennsylvania. The two main settings of Updike's fiction are the Pennsylvania towns where he grew up (the suburb of Reading he calls Olinger or Mt. Judge) and Massachusetts shore towns like Ipswich (called Tarbox in his novels) where he brought up his growing family after 1957.

Updike's work blends social chronicle with invention and autobiography, but like most lyrical novelists, his writing has a deeply personal core. Besides *The Centaur* and *Of the Farm,* two of his most effective and heartfelt works, he wrote remarkable sequences of stories about his boyhood and youth (collected in his *Olinger Stories,* 1964); his travels and his life as a writer (transmuted into *Bech: A Book,* 1970); and his first marriage, separa-

tion, and divorce (brought together memorably in *Too Far to Go,* 1978), collections that read like loosely sutured autobiographical novels. His first great commercial success, *Couples* (1968), was an epic of suburban adultery lightly salted with spiritual longing. But the core of his work can be found in the life history of Rabbit Angstrom, a sensual man trapped in marriage, family, responsibility yet always hungering for something beyond, a perfection he once experienced as a high school athlete.

Free of the showy stylistic filigree of Updike's early work and the lumbering, pedantic manner of some of his late books (such as *Roger's Version,* 1984, and *Memories of the Ford Administration,* 1992) and written in the vivid immediacy of the present tense, the Rabbit novels become Updike's personal history of America over four decades. His scenes from a marriage are keyed to the mood of the country at large: rebellious but frustrated in the late fifties, apocalyptic in the late sixties, smugly materialistic in the late seventies, disintegrating by the late eighties. Since Rabbit is not an intellectual, not a writer but a sentient animal who lives most in his body, the novels are full of vividly observed details, a flat poetry of the ordinary that gave rise to the Kmart school of fiction (by such lower-middle-class writers as Bobbie Ann Mason) in the seventies and eighties. But the Rabbit novels, especially *Rabbit, Run,* are also the history of a spiritual quest that does not always mesh well with Rabbit's unreflective nature. Though Rabbit eventually becomes prosperous, making love to his wife in a bed of Krugerrands in *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), the novels unfold a long history of decline, foreshadowed from the first page of *Rabbit, Run.*

The Rabbit tetralogy begins and climaxes with the same scene: a bit of sandlot basketball in which the sometime star athlete tries to turn the clock back, to show the kids (and himself) that he still has the moves. In *Rabbit, Run,* eight years out of school, already past his prime at 26, Rabbit impresses the kids, who have no idea who he is; in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), ailing, fat, out of shape, he reaches for the rim one last time but suffers a massive heart attack that has been coming on for two decades. Yet the subject of the books, especially of *Rabbit, Run,* is not Rabbit's fall so much as his inchoate quest, his effort to shape his life to the fleeting glimpses of glory he once had – occasionally still has – as an athlete and lover. Though Rabbit's instinctive middle-American conservatism seems a world away from the Beats, we can see here how Updike, a serious Christian, was influenced by Kerouac in crafting a fable about the frustrating constraints of family life, the deadening spiritual limits of adulthood, maturity, and civilization itself.

Along with Richard Yates's neglected *Revolutionary Road* (1961), *Rabbit, Run* is the classic novel of middle-class disappointment in the late Eisenhower years, when the social confidence of the fifties was breaking up, when John F. Kennedy was building his presidential campaign on a sense of national malaise, on the contrast between Republican stagnation and his own well-projected vigor. Although his opponent, Vice-President Richard Nixon, accused him of "downgrading America," he offered a new beginning, with a historic sense of passing the torch to a new generation. Though his private life did not become public till long after his death, he and his young wife even then conveyed a sense of sexual as well as political potency that contrasted with the avuncular Eisenhower and the devious, sinister Nixon. Updike, like Mailer before him, like Philip Roth, his exact contemporary, also projected a sense of male energy at bay, caught in a world swamped by mediocrity and routine.

Rabbit, Run is built on images of blockage, frustration, baffled vitality. *On the Road* had begun with the end of Sal's marriage, the start of his life on the road. Updike's novel begins with Rabbit married two years, with a son at home, a child on the way, a crummy job, and a wife who drinks too much, who watches children's programs on television, and no longer attracts or responds to him much in bed. "Just yesterday, it seems to him, she stopped being pretty." Her pregnancy "infuriates him with its look of stubborn lumpiness." In one recurring metaphor, Rabbit feels meshed in a "net" that keeps tightening around him, "a net he is somewhere caught in," not the hoop of his glory on the court but a web of routine and responsibility. He "senses he is in a trap." Surrounding the town there are still "hundreds of acres of forest Mt. Judge boys can never wholly explore," a dark wood just outside the line of civilization, the mountains where Rabbit continues to run as the novel ends.

Work and marriage have made Rabbit claustrophobic; his instinctive solution as an ex-athlete is to run, sometimes on his own two legs, often on wheels: "Harry sits wordless staring through the windshield, rigid in body, rigid in spirit. The curving highway seems a wide straight road that has opened up in front of him. There is nothing he wants to do but go down it." Not long after the novel begins he takes to the road for the first time, impulsively, after a quarrel with his wife Janice, getting all the way to West Virginia before turning back. Soon he is living with a part-time whore, Ruth, who also becomes pregnant, but he comes back home when he learns that his wife is in labor, leaving Ruth as abruptly and unthinkingly as he had left his wife. When he runs out again on Janice, she accidentally drowns their baby, in one of the most painstakingly horrific scenes in recent fiction. After another reconciliation, and after the baby's

funeral, he rejects the guilt others seem to be heaping on to him and takes off again, running for his life.

Summarized in this way the novel seems flimsy and repetitious. As a middling sensual male with a positive gift for messing up his life, Rabbit hardly seems worth the writer's loving attention. His two women are more real than their counterparts in *On the Road* but they remain essentially male projections: Janice the resistant female, the intractable wife who has lost her sexual appeal; Ruth the compliant female, the tough but tender broad who has been around, who knows the score. Sex is no hang-up for her, though she has grown cynical about the way men use her to get it. When Rabbit demands and receives oral sex – a signal moment in the sexual history of the American novel – she feels humiliated only because he is bent on humiliating her, bringing her to her knees, where she must prove herself by servicing him. (A briefer, less explicit scene of oral sex in Mailer's *The Deer Park* [1955] had caused the original publisher to drop the book.) The next morning, Rabbit's wife gives birth and he guiltily leaves Ruth behind, having in a sense gotten all he wanted from her.

As Rabbit rattles his chains, the two women remain passive objects of his need and anger. His real antagonist in the novel is another man, the Reverend Eccles, who becomes his persistent goad and confidant, working tirelessly, despite his own troubled marriage, to bring Rabbit and Janice together again. Superficially sympathetic but meddlesome, Eccles is a version of the therapeutic figure who had been reappearing in plays and films since the late forties, especially in social-problem dramas like *The Best Years of Our Lives, Home of the Brave, The Men,* and *Rebel Without a Cause.* He is Updike's mordant comment on this new authority figure of postwar culture, the doctor, minister, psychiatrist, or social worker who began offering post-theological solutions to the sense of alienation – the seismic shifts in social relationships – that had shaken American life since the war. Eccles is a vehicle for Updike's larger ambition: to make *Rabbit, Run* more than a documentary take on the miseries of married life, to turn it into a novel of ideas. Eccles stands for a therapeutic liberalism that blatantly intrudes into other people's lives; his religious skepticism deifies social and personal bonds over any higher powers. To Updike, Eccles represents the vaunted religious revival of the fifties, humanistic instead of dogmatic, this-worldly rather than otherworldly, altogether enlightened and reasonable but spiritually null. Eccles's technique for saving souls is manipulative, not authoritarian. His own soul is in a questionable state; perhaps it has been replaced by his social conscience, which Updike sees as a subtle will to power. By befriending Rabbit and bringing him back to Janice, disastrously, he bears some responsibility for the death of their child.

To Rabbit, it is his flight, his "sin," even his need for sex that must surely be to blame for his daughter's death. In relation to *On the Road,* Rabbit is at once the guilty, conflicted Sal and the amoral Dean, for Updike has taken the cry for liberation at the heart of the lyrical novel and enmeshed it in the fateful and ironic consequences of the fiction of relationships, the fiction of entrapment. "There is a case to be made for running away from your wife," Updike told an interviewer in 1969. "In the late Fifties beatniks were preaching transcontinental travelling as the answer to man's disquiet. And I was trying to say: 'Yes, there is certainly that, but then there are all these other people who seem to get hurt.' That qualification is meant to frame a moral dilemma." (In 1995, in an introduction to a one-volume edition of all four Rabbit novels, he framed the point even more moralistically. *Rabbit, Run,* he says, "was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road: the people left behind get hurt." But he acknowledges that "arriving at so prim a moral was surely not my only intention: the book ends on an ecstatic, open note that was meant to stay open. . . . The title can be read as advice.") In *On the Road* the same moral issue, framed by women but also by Sal, only highlights Dean's terrifying spontaneity, his amoral charisma. It affirms Dean's mythic status but offers little counterweight to the lure of the road. "Funny," thinks Rabbit near the end of the novel, "how what makes you move is so simple and the field you must move in is so crowded."

If Rabbit is ambivalent like Sal, he is also a quester like Dean, a confused, propulsive id who lives in his body yet seeks something beyond, a transcendence that other people scarily discount. Here, the earthbound Eccles is his antagonist. When they play golf together *(golf!)* Rabbit, growing too articulate, feels the pull of a world behind the visible: "there's something that wants me to find it." When he lands a shot, when the ball "with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling," he says triumphantly: "That's *it!*" Eccles is skeptical, however. To him, "all vagrants think they're on a quest." "That was all settled centuries ago, in the heresies of the early Church," he tells Rabbit. "It's the strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt." Rabbit's half-articulated goal, which Eccles mocks, is what Kerouac in *Visions of Cody* calls "the Go – the summation pinnacle possible in human relationships." "I'm a mystic," Rabbit says jokingly of himself. "I give people faith." Still, his simple story resists taking on this cumbersome freight.

It is typical of the younger Updike to give a slightly allegorical cast to an essentially realistic novel, to seek God in the suburbs, to allow his characters (not wholly convincingly) to debate theological issues on the golf

course, and to put someone like Rabbit at the center of such a conversation. Eccles speaks for maturity, adjustment, the sober, hard-nosed realism cherished by social thinkers of the 1950s, but Updike makes Rabbit his unlikely spokesman for a keen spiritual and sexual hunger. To Eccles, Rabbit should come to grips with life's limits, should accept the "muddle" of diminishment as other couples do. Rabbit demurs: "After you're first-rate at something, no matter what," he tells Eccles, "it kind of takes the kick out of being second-rate. And that little thing Janice and I had going, boy, it was really second-rate." Though no postwar novelist writes more lyrically about married love than Updike, *Rabbit, Run* is grounded in the male sense of enclosure, the loss of sexual freedom and variety – a sense of being weighed down by family, no matter how much loved, and having one's wings clipped. "If you're telling me I'm not mature," Rabbit tells Eccles, "that's one thing I don't cry over since as far as I can make out it's the same thing as being dead."

But by giving us a Rabbit who does not simply want to be free but has a longing for something beyond, Updike attaches the novel to the utopian discourse that emerged in the late fifties, which marked a path for the counterculture of the next decade. In its own way, *Rabbit, Run* is a Christian version of not only the violent sainthood of the Beats but also the spiritual-sexual mythology of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955); Norman Mailer's "The White Negro"; Norman O. Brown's apocalyptic *Life Against Death* (1959), with its appeal to Christian mystics like Boehme and its radical reading of Freud; and Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd,* which famously interpreted both the hell-raising of delinquent youth and the bad-boy behavior of the Beats as a cry of existential anguish, an inchoate quest for meaning. Updike connects sex to theology, physical grace to spiritual grace. *Rabbit, Run* is at once a fifties recoil from maturity, a male outcry against being domesticated, a Freudian rebuff at the instinctual sacrifices that make civilization possible, and a Christian dream of unfallen perfection. This is a terrible weight for any novel to bear, but Updike's book, with its wonderful surface realism, its plenitude of sharply observed details, carries it off from scene to scene, as if the physical world itself had great sacramental purpose.

Rabbit, Run relocates the road novel in middle America, at the heart of American marriage, far away from the voluble sophistication of Salinger's precocious young or the bohemianism of Kerouac's self-consciously marginal rebels. Unlike some of Updike's more pretentious or experimental novels, the Rabbit books are grounded in the ordinary, the concrete, whatever their spiritual or historical themes. Rabbit gets away, but Updike never lets him get off easily and he allows him moments of complex awareness beyond what the character can bear. Even before his daughter dies, Rabbit is surprised when someone "seems oblivious of the gap of guilt between Harry and humanity." He experiences the recognition of limits that Eccles has been projecting at him. "He feels the truth: the thing that had left his life had left irrevocably; no search would recover it. No flight would reach it. . . . The fullness ends when we give Nature her ransom, when we make children for her. Then she is through with us." This is Updike's thinking, not Rabbit's.

In *Rabbit Redux,* the situation of the previous novel is reversed. His wife Janice leaves him – *she* is having the affair – and we see the world at least initially from her point of view. Instead of chafing at his static surroundings, Rabbit, grown increasingly conservative, has turned pensive and downhearted as the world explodes around him. The scene is the summer of 1969, the summer of the first moon landing, Ted Kennedy's fall at Chappaquiddick, and riots in the streets of American cities. In a culture saturated with casual sex, desire has leaked out of Rabbit like the air from a balloon, or his rapidly fading memories of early success. He has grown passive, become a working stiff whose job in a print shop will soon be lost to automation. After Janice takes off, he lives at home with his teenage son, then takes in an 18-year-old runaway girl and a young black fugitive who has been to Vietnam and now dreams of becoming the black Jesus. But Rabbit's amorphous politics recoil at everything the newcomers represent: the new youth culture, the antiwar movement, and the hopped-up rhetoric of black nationalism. Though this is Updike's most topically attuned novel, trying too deliberately to take in the whole sixties scene, Rabbit seems more than ever the ordinary man: he is no longer dreaming of special ecstasies, and his stubborn, almost shell-shocked recalcitrance prefigures the sullen American backlash against the counterculture, which lies just over the horizon.

Like Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* twenty-five years later, *Rabbit Redux* relies on stereotypes to evoke the era, especially the figure of the violent, wayward, aimless child, the angry adolescent; yet it was a prophetic book, less about the sixties than about their impact on middle America. Once, Updike had found a metaphor for his own sense of restlessness in Kerouac's evocation of the road; now Rabbit's own mother, almost paralyzed by Parkinson's disease (a "movement disorder," as doctors call it), urges him to leave, to run away, but there is nowhere he wants to go; he already feels old, wasted. The road seems closed to him. Now that the moral world that once confined him has broken up, he misses its stability. The sexual freedom he coveted is everywhere, not simply among the young but in the suburbs, as Updike had already demonstrated in *Couples* (1968). Surrounded by the cacophonous bacchanal of

the late sixties, Updike, still in his thirties like Rabbit, writes a precocious novel about middle-aged depression. As America grows absurdly younger, Rabbit ages prematurely.

The even more spent and tired protagonist of *Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* is a much coarser figure, reunited with his newly independent and self-sufficient wife, battling viciously with his son, even sleeping with his daughter-in-law. Like the narrators of other late novels such as *Roger's Version,* Rabbit becomes the rancorous, disappointed shadow of his increasingly distinguished author, the vehicle of Updike's pet peeves as he had once been the earthy dreamer of his visionary hopes. Retired to Florida, Rabbit observes the mores of aging Jews with distaste but feels reassured by having a Jewish surgeon tinkering with his defective heart. At the same time Updike is perfectly aware of Rabbit's limitations, and he laces *Rabbit Is Rich* with strategic references to Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt.* The novels themselves grow longer, becoming more like reportage, an accumulation of realistic details about a changing America, with little of the allegorical cast, the young writer's wild ambition, that gave another dimension to *Rabbit, Run.* Accepting an award for *Rabbit at Rest,* Updike paid tribute to the tradition of realism descending from William Dean Howells, who had not previously been his household god.

Rabbit's inexorable decline speaks to a sense of loss at the heart of Updike's imagination, an empathy with failure at odds with his own carefully managed, beautifully evolving career, which seemed to go from strength to strength in every department of writing: novels, innumerable stories, light verse, brilliant book reviewing, art criticism, memoir, the whole terrain of the man of letters. The key lies undoubtedly in Updike's sense of the past, of life unfolding in time and inexorably running down, as indeed it must. Despite Updike's fluent ability to conceptualize a book and will it into being, the core of feeling in his work is lyrical and autobiographical, as it finally is in the works of Cheever and Nabokov as well. Nothing in Updike's work can quite match the emotional intensity of such stories as "Flight" and "The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble, and Fanning Island," both in *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) or the closely related novella *Of the Farm* (1965) and its 1990 sequel, "A Sandstone Farmhouse," collected in *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994). They pay a mixed tribute to his difficult mother, who believed in his future even when he was a boy, who told him thrillingly that he was "going to fly," and they evoke the final years of his maternal grandparents, whose lives open up a vista of historical time he feels he must preserve, and finally his mother's own death. At the same time that he deals with the paradoxes of growing up and growing old, Updike, like Salinger and Kerouac before him, feels an immense tenderness toward

every aspect of his own experience – every tangle of relationship, every nuance of perception, every observed or imagined fact.

In *Of the Farm,* the protagonist, on a visit to his mother's farm, feels emotionally estranged from his new wife when he begins to see her through his mother's judging eyes, the eyes that first helped him see and feel. "You've taken a vulgar woman to be your wife," his mother tells him, almost mesmerizing him with her force of will – but the younger woman, like the city to which he must return, belongs to the life he has chosen, the grown-up world he loves and needs. His mother must let go, as he must let go of her and of the farm, of the whole dreamy boyhood preserved so perfectly in memories that the farm itself brings flooding back. His mother has a spell of illness that foreshadows her death and the sale of the farm. "I saw her, now, as an old woman. Always before she had appeared to me as a heavier version of the swift young mother outsprinting my father from the barn. . . . In sleep my mother had slipped from my recognition and blame and had entered, unconsciously, a far territory, the arctic of the old." As Charles Thomas Samuels remarks of the Updike paradox: "Definition requires that we keep faith with our past; freedom demands that we move beyond it."

Memory takes on an even more sublime cast in "The Blessed Man of Boston. . . ," a tryptich about all the stories he could write, the people he could recreate, the memories he could turn into words if he had world enough and time. Written in an almost magical style that brings to mind the play of memory in Wordsworth's *Prelude,* the story shows us an Updike in almost an ecstasy of involuntary recollection. Finding a silver thimble, his grandmother's wedding present, he falls down a Proustian well. With this "stemless chalice of silver" between his fingers, "the valves of time parted, and after an interval of years my grandmother was upon me again." He must "tell how once there had been a woman who now was no more, how she had been born and lived in a world that had ceased to exist, though its mementos were all about us." In the story's most ecstatic moment, he recalls lifting the sick, brittle old woman, in the full pride of his young strength, and whirling her dangerously around the room: "Had I stumbled, or dropped her, I might have broken her back, but my joy always proved a secure cradle. . . . I was carrying her who had carried me, I was giving my past a dance, I had lifted the anxious caretaker of my childhood from the floor, I was bringing her with my boldness to the edge of danger, from which she had always sought to guard me." The young man is about to step out on a date, the vibrations are intensely sexual, but the erotic anticipation of his immediate future spills out onto the vivid relics of his past, a world he hugs to his heart even as he is leaving it behind. The narrator's exhilaration comes from making the past live, from lifting aged forebears into one

last dance, momentarily reversing the flow of time. Updike's sense of decline, like Wordsworth's, is grounded in the luminous plenitude but also the concreteness of the remembered past. Of "A Sandstone Farmhouse," which deals with his mother's death, Updike himself commented that "by keeping the focus on the house – its stones, its smells, its renovations – I hoped to convey the dizzying depth of life its walls have contained. . . . The story is about *things* – how they mutely witness our flitting lives, and remain when the lives are over, still mute, still witnessing."

❦

Though the later Updike would often grow cerebral, recruiting stuffy pedants, or the pedant in himself, to narrate some of his novels, his deepest affinity as a writer was not only with the gorgeous prose, the profligate imagination, of predecessors like Vladimir Nabokov, but with the sense of lost radiance that gives their narratives such a poetic charge. In the brief preface to *The Stories of John Cheever* (1978), the collection that finally gained him unassailable stature as a modern classic, Cheever remembers a "long-lost world when the city of New York was still filled with a river light, when you heard the Benny Goodman quartets from a radio in the corner stationery store, and when almost everybody wore a hat." Cheever tells us how he chanted aloud some passages in which the best stories spin off into sublimity – bursts of poetic gusto he finds as thrilling to recall as they were to indite. Cheever's higher flights, which disconcerted his editors at *The New Yorker,* were as essential to his work as were his powers of social observation. In their flow of images, occasionally in their pull toward fantasy, Cheever's stories veer from a level realism toward glimpses of paradise that break through a fog of misery or depression.

Though he is oddly known as a cheerful chronicler of suburbia, and as Updike's precursor as a keen social historian, Cheever, born in 1912, writes about the suburbs as a state of mind, almost an imaginary place, a pastoral utopia that seems as cut off from history and memory as from suffering and tragedy. Yet behind the spacious houses, well-trimmed lawns, inviting swimming pools, and perfectly groomed children, behind the façade of a community built on wealth and exclusion, behind the impeccable manners and decorum, Cheever's stories give us glimpses of alcoholism, lust, family combat, and melancholia. One character thinks wistfully, "How sad everything is!" but the line could come from almost any of the stories, with their inextricable sense of "the pain and sweetness of life."

In view of his light tone and his long connection to *The New Yorker,* which broke down as his work grew darker and less simply realistic, it is remarkable how much unhappiness we find even in Cheever's early work,

how much bitterness, disappointment, and latent violence, whether he is writing about the Massachusetts in which he grew up, the New York he lived in during the late thirties and forties, or the Westchester County, New York, towns where he raised his children. This is the kind of bad news that comes in over "the enormous radio," unhinging a woman who is armored in her innocence and gentility yet, like the writer himself, obsessed with other people's secrets. Though some stories seem infused with a willful bleakness, others glow with longing, shimmer with Edenic recollections of summers past and boyhood dreams. Like Updike's Rabbit, Cheever's characters are divided souls, schooled in duty, discretion, and self-restraint, fueled by lust and passionate longing, wracked by unappeasable melancholy. Despite these conflicts, their lives are redeemed by moments of transcendence in love, in nature, in language, or in some lovely pocket of the past, miraculously unspoiled, at least in memory. Cheever's 1978 preface points to three privileged moments, composed aloud in a frenzy of inspiration, in which his own language turns poetic and incantatory: the conclusion of the fratricidal "Goodbye, My Brother," in which two women, the narrator's wife and sister, rise naked out of the sea; the opening of "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," which begins almost with a chant; and the close of "The Country Husband," a tale of deep marital and social discord, which signs off exuberantly in the magical language of romance: "It is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains."

Cheever's often unconvincing endings were his way of escaping unhappiness and redeeming misery and self-division into art. The endings are foreshadowed by Cheever's deceptively bright tone, which fits in rather too well with the decorous cheeriness and the limited social spectrum of the old *New Yorker.* Acordingly, the stories were persistently undervalued; their core of darkness was scarcely taken in (though Alfred Kazin shrewdly observed that "his marvelous brightness is an effort to cheer himself up"). Such superb collections as *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* (1953) were tarred by reviewers who disliked the self-satisfied tone of the magazine, with its focus on upper-middle-class manners. Cheever collaborated with this misunderstanding by sanitizing his family history in *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), though every theme of his work – including his grim sense of Puritan origins, his fierce rivalry with his brother, his parents' painful marriage, his father's feeling of being rendered superfluous, and even his own fear of turning homosexual – is tucked into the narrative with unobtrusive charm. (He was especially proud of including a four-letter word that alarmed his genteel publisher.) Scattered into storylike episodes, the book is a warm tribute to his failed father; it combines nos-

talgia for a lost Eden with the sense of a world gone terribly awry. The book was a great success for the wrong reasons: a wistful poetry of recollection somehow allays any temptation to despair.

The stresses that seem so attenuated in the novel are powerfully compressed and controlled in the three stories singled out in Cheever's preface. "Goodbye, My Brother," the perfect overture to the collected stories, contrasts the gloomy, puritanical brother, harsh in his judgments, morosely indifferent to his family and his past, with the life-affirming narrator who, looking out at the sea, finds beauty and rebirth where his sibling sees only death and decay. The narrator, Cheever himself in his most exalted vein, extends his tolerance to everyone except his brother, without realizing how much he resembles him in his own self-righteousness. Like many Cheever stories, it turns on an act of transgression when the narrator, exasperated by his brother's saturnine gloom, murderously strikes him from behind, in a sense expelling him from the family and subduing his own dark alter ego. For this moment at least, a violent gesture restores the family to the summer and the sea and a sense of paradise regained. The story, with its Cain-and-Abel theme, its tincture of fantasy and the breach of the social code, becomes a way of facing down the writer's own despair and recapturing an unspoiled sense of nature.

The other two stories, both among Cheever's best, are about another form of trouble in paradise: the quiet misery of suburban marriage. Losing his job, disappointed in his family, which seems impervious to his problems, the husband in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" takes to stealing from his neighbors. "The Country Husband" is not much more realistic in dealing with family discord. It begins with a cinematic sequence about an air crash, in which Francis, the husband, is nearly killed; but when he gets home he finds the family too preoccupied to pay any attention to what has happened to him. Feeling that he is taken for granted, that his needs do not really matter, Francis manages to be rude to the town's social arbiter, to blacken the family's standing with its conforming neighbors, and to fall in love absurdly with the baby-sitter. In both stories, the husband feels his wife, children, friends, and neighbors do not understand him, as Cheever himself repeatedly complained in his journals. In both stories, he commits a transgression that represents his very tentative bid for freedom, his attempt to regain the state of joy he once knew and still dreams about. In both, the husband and wife quarrel and almost separate but are quickly reconciled. In another story, "The Cure," the couple actually does separate, but the husband then sinks into a misery so complete that he grasps desperately at restoring his marriage. This seems to have been much the story of Cheever's own marriage, with his bisexuality left out.

In Cheever's world, freedom, including sexual freedom, is an abstract good and a pressing need but not quite as strong as the need for family bonds and social acceptance, however narrow and hollow they may sometimes seem. "The Country Husband" is full of touches that point to a larger moral and historical world, images of challenge and adventure including memories of the war, symbolized by a French maid whose head was shaved for consorting with Germans, but also suggesting romantic passion, symbolized but also mocked by the husband's infatuation with the baby-sitter. (Her father is brutal and alcoholic – she cries on Francis's shoulder when he drives her home.) The allusions to the war are unusual for Cheever, despite his years of military service, and utterly unthinkable in the sheltered world of Shady Hill. "The war seemed now so distant and the world where the cost of partisanship had been death or torture so long ago. . . . The people in the Farquarsons' living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war – that there was no danger or trouble in the world." The Farquarsons' living room stands not only for Shady Hill but for postwar America, where the sense of Edenic happiness seems built on the denial of social misery and historical tragedy.

In "The Country Husband," Francis rediscovers the joys of being deliberately rude and chafes at "the strenuousness of containing his physicalness within the patterns he had chosen." Its title alludes to Wycherley's 1674 erotic farce, *The Country Wife,* in which a man feigns impotence in order to seduce unwary women. The country husband, on the other hand, really is impotent, trapped in a world of straitlaced conventions and sublimated needs. Francis rediscovers passion but is unable to act on it any more than he can talk to people about what happened after the war, since "the atmosphere of Shady Hill made the memory unseemly and impolite." They are, however, the customs *he* had chosen, as Cheever himself, on the evidence of his journals, had done as well, and in the end these rebels invariably choose to return home, even when (as in "The Swimmers") that home is now empty and deserted.

This is where Cheever, who seems to celebrate home and family, oddly fits in with the postwar direction of the road novel as well as the closely related fiction of youth and transgression shaped by the Freudian tension between civilization and its discontents. Behind the façade of manners in Cheever's world is a dream of freedom along with a steady accumulation of misery. Later recollections of Cheever, including Updike's numerous tributes, highlight his youthful energy and buoyancy, for which he never found sufficient outlet; his despondency, which made him suicidal and alcoholic; and his family feeling, which forced him to curb and contain himself.

Cheever's journals frequently explore the anarchic sexual itch, especially the homosexual feelings, that remained masked but essential in his fiction, but also the strong needs that restrained him from exposing them, even to his closest friends, or acting on them. "But then there are the spiritual facts," he writes in his journal in 1962: "my high esteem for the world, the knowledge that it is not in me to lead a double life, my love of perseverance, a passionate wish to honor the vows I've made to my wife and children. But my itchy member is unconcerned with all of this, and I am afraid that I may succumb to its itchiness." Typically, the attraction is to another man, and as time passed, Cheever succumbed more openly and frequently, all the while maintaining his tempestuous marriage, marred by his narcissistic demands for unconditional love and approval from his long-suffering wife. And the more he succumbed, the more his work changed. His stories grew more surreal and, in a more permissive cultural climate, his novels (especially *Falconer*) began exploring more dangerous terrain: homosexuality, incarceration, fratricide.

Cheever belongs with Updike not simply because he influenced him, they admired each other, and both explored the troubled suburban marriages of white Protestant males. If they seemed equally at home in lyrical and mandarin prose, in the sensuous and the Apollonian, it was because both of them were riven by the conflict between sex and marriage, between the pull toward freedom and call of home, between instinctual need and family life. Between them, they domesticated the themes of the road novel. Like the larger popular culture of the 1950s, Cheever's work is divided between a celebration of the nuclear family, however dysfunctional, and an attraction to the figure of the outlaw, the deviant, however self-destructive. "There does seem to be, in my head some country," wrote Cheever in his journals, "some infantile country of irresponsible sexual indulgence that has nothing to do with the facts of life as I know them."

Ironically, "the facts of life" refers here not to the birds and bees but the concrete facts of social and family life, the settled domestic world that keeps the road runner at home, that keeps this fiction writer wedded to the quotidian, not the apocalyptic. Once, Cheever even puts this in the form of a small parable, inspired perhaps by Kafka's retelling of Greek and Hebrew myths:

> He could separate from his red-faced and drunken wife, he could conceivably make a life without his beloved children, he could get along without the companionship of his friends, but he could not bring himself to leave his lawns and gardens, he could not part from the porch screens and storm windows that he had repaired and painted, he could not divorce himself from the serpentine brick walk he had laid between the side door and the rose beds. So for him the chains of Prometheus were forged from turf and house paint, copper screening, putty and brick, but they shackled him as sternly as iron.

All the tensions in Cheever's work come to a head in this self-conscious fragment. He sees himself with fallen grandeur as Prometheus the light bringer, the rebel, but also as the victim bound in chains of domesticity, the willingly shackled adventurer who never left home. Instead, Cheever became the bard of suburbia, the explorer of the joys and trials of middle-class marriage. His transgressive impulses he largely reserved for his tortured private life; in fiction, he became the superlative celebrant of the joys of the quotidian. An unlikely admirer, Vladimir Nabokov, was charmed by the wealth of circumstantial detail in his stories, and pointed out that "The Country Husband" was "really a miniature novel beautifully traced." Cheever in turn admired Nabokov but saw that his own style was as different as his origins: "The house I was raised in had its charms, but my father hung his underwear from a nail he had driven into the back of the bathroom door, and while I know something about the Riviera I am not a Russian aristocrat polished in Paris. My prose style will always be to a degree matter-of-fact."

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Nabokov, of course, was forced to leave home. He was born in Russia in 1899; his father was a distinguished liberal and reformer who was imprisoned by the czar, chased and scorned by the Bolsheviks, and finally assassinated by Fascist thugs in Berlin in 1922. For Cheever and Updike, nostalgia for lost boyhood was an aspect of temperament, a way in which they remained "open to tender invasions." For Nabokov, this remembered radiance was produced by physical exile and the dislocations of modern history. For all his privileged upbringing, which he celebrates with great sensuous immediacy, far from being "a Russian aristocrat polished in Paris," he led a penniless, hand-to-mouth existence in Berlin in the twenties and thirties, supporting himself by writing for émigré journals and for publishers with a minuscule readership.

One of the most moving of the autobiographical essays that appeared mainly in *The New Yorker* between 1948 and 1950 – collected in *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) and, in revised form, in *Speak, Memory* (1966) – is his account of how, as a Cambridge student, he went about reconstructing the Russian culture, language, and literature he had taken for granted in his cosmopolitan home: "The story of my college years in England is really the story of my trying to become a Russian writer. I had the feeling that Cambridge and all its famed features – venerable elms, blazoned windows, loquacious tower clocks – were of no consequence in themselves but existed merely to frame and support my rich nostalgia." When fully

assembled and revised in 1966, the book became an album of fifteen portraits, only very loosely chronological, richly portraying the figures and settings of his youth: his mother, his father, his colorful tutors, his Russian education, his English education, and an early love interest.

The loving detail of these reminiscences, the almost hallucinatory intensity with which he conjures them up, impels us to question Nabokov's customary rejection of realism, his insistence that his art is essentially a magician's game, a set of artful tricks. Both his early work in Russian and English and such late, self-indulgent works as *Ada, or Ardor* (1969) are marred by a hothouse atmosphere of strained allegory, an oppressive literariness. Nabokov himself insists on the unreality of the "real" world around him – always very concretely described! – as compared to the superior reality of memory, fantasy, and mental invention. "'Reality,'" he says in the afterword to *Lolita,* is "one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes." "I open Nabokov," Cheever wrote in his journals, "and am charmed by this spectrum of ambiguities, this marvellous atmosphere of untruth." For Nabokov, the matter-of-fact world so beloved by Cheever, or imposed on him by his spare origins, carried no charge of emotion except as material for satire or invitations to murder, while the remembered world was suffused with nostalgia and charged with psychic energy. In his 1951 album and the novels and stories that followed, however, Nabokov, perhaps drawn by the mainstream audience of *The New Yorker,* made a pact with common life, inspired by his new American setting as he had been by his Russian past. Though he was the least sentimental of émigrés, he achieved his greatest power, in *Lolita,* by fusing memory and desire, nostalgia and impossible longing. His autobiography is a key to his published work, inaugurating his most passionate and accessible decade as a writer. It was followed by *Lolita* (1955), *Pnin* (1957), the short stories in *Nabokov's Dozen* (1958), and the diabolically clever *Pale Fire* (1962).

Like many lyrical writers, including Salinger and Updike, whom he always singled out as the current American authors he most admired, Nabokov's work is heightened with an intense feeling that makes his style luminous and incandescent yet utterly precise. But he was also an ironist whose work is a hall of mirrors, a multitude of deceptive masks, tricky and problematic, with stylized characters full of Dickensian vitality, ranging from the harmlessly eccentric to the maniacally obsessive. His past in *Speak, Memory* is the sun-dappled garden of the country estates around Petersburg. His descriptions are full of remembered pleasure but also shot through with darker anticipations: his father's murder, his mother's widowhood and poverty, and his separation from his siblings, his social position, his beloved language, and his country.

Art is Nabokov's method for recreating a perfect, unchanging past. One of his metaphors for art – and the subject of the most charming and revealing chapter of *Speak, Memory* – is his passion for butterflies, which he began collecting and identifying at the age of seven and continued to pursue and classify for the next seven decades; this was a love affair (like Humbert Humbert's) that was also a fierce obsession. The mounted butterfly, like the book itself, is nature under glass, a timeless, flawless reality armored against contingency and disintegration. Nabokov writes of the butterfly's protective coloration as a cunning device, gratuitously "carried to a point of mimetic subtlety far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception." Nabokov's self-image, often belied by the work itself, is that of the writer as a conjuror, not a passive recorder, using mimetic effects that are a form of enchantment rather than realistic representation.

Along with Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* (1951), Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1956), and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* – a collection of poems that includes his prose memoir "77 Revere Street" – *Speak, Memory* is one of the essential autobiographies of the 1950s, not only an album of recollections but a work like Wordsworth's *Prelude* that interrogates the nature of time and the sinuous process of remembering. One of Nabokov's favorite ideas was that time was really a form of space – what Wordsworth called a "spot of time" – part of the lush terrain of our mental life, to be revisited at will. "The act of vividly recalling a patch of the past is something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zest all my life," he said. Nabokov recalled how his parents did it before him, repeatedly memorializing vital moments of experience almost as a hedge against future losses. Of his mother, he wrote:

> As if feeling that in a few years the tangible part of her world would perish, she cultivated an extraordinary consciousness of the various time marks distributed throughout our country place. She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past. Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate – and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses.

Just as Wordsworth constantly insisted that the fullness of memory had more than compensated him for the loss of his sensuous childhood, Nabokov endows the past with an unsentimental poignance that anticipates deprivations to come. Instead of chronology, he gives us (as his title suggests) a dialogue with memory, a series of visits to corners of the past as conserved in his own mind, rescuing characters who had already been

transformed in his fiction, shuffling different periods like a pack of scattered cards, reconstituting "things that fate one day bundled up pell-mell and tossed into the sea, completely severing me from my boyhood."

But this loss, he insists, is a source of imaginative strength, far superior to a banal, uneventful continuity, to whit, an American experience innocent of the tempests of history ("a smooth, safe, small-town continuity of time, with its primitive absence of perspective"). As his lost Russian past would remain a source of intense emotion, the vulgar American present would become the object of frenzied, cruel, but curiously loving and minutely attentive satire.

Nabokov had nothing but scorn for the czarist émigrés who mourned the loss of wealth or privileges. He himself had come into an estate and become wealthy barely a year before the revolution, but this, he insists, meant nothing to him. *His* losses and gains, like Humbert Humbert's, are Proustian, not material. *Speak, Memory, Lolita,* and *Pnin,* all written between 1948 and 1955, form a trilogy on the inner life of the émigré, in which *Lolita* is the delirious comic inferno, *Pnin* the mild and wistful purgatorio, and *Speak, Memory* the paradise of the past recaptured, pinned and mounted under glass. We might say that what the past represents for the nostalgic biographer as he contemplates his blissful childhood, Lolita, the downy nymphet, incarnates for Humbert Humbert, who is Nabokov's most ingenious mask.

Lolita is *Speak, Memory* as a hall of mirrors, an uneasy tissue of obsession and deception that connects remarkably to the cultural themes of America in the 1950s. Where Nabokov the autobiographer seems to have surmounted his losses, imaginatively reconstituting his past within him, Humbert's loss of his first young love (named after Poe's "Annabel Lee") has left him tormented by predatory sexual needs, fixated on the transient moment when childhood is turning into adulthood. Where Nabokov could turn his harmless mania for butterflies into a mixture of aesthetic passion, adventure, and scientific pedantry, Humbert is enslaved to the fantasies he projects on this one specimen of America's coarse but energetic new youth culture.

No one, however morally censorious, can fail to be moved by the baroque language of Humbert's passionate attachment to his nymphet, around whom he weaves a solipsistic plot as rich as any writer's imaginative flights. As in other lyrical novels (though far less colloquially), Nabokov uses all the tricks of voice to give Humbert an overwhelming presence – to make us complicit with his feelings and needs, even as he himself describes them with wicked relish. But Humbert's is also a tale of self-loathing, the fable of beauty and the beast from the beast's point of

view, as written in the archly euphemistic language of both romantic love (with Lolita as the bewitching demon child) and Victorian pornography (with Lolita as the coyly seductive victim of a besotted sexual predator).

Again and again, Humbert describes himself as a pervert, a maniac, the depraved victim of his own revolting lust, an enchanted hunter manipulating (and being manipulated by) his prey. On the very first page, he even attributed his gloriously arch European prose to his kinkiness and criminality: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style." By the end, after he loses her, he recants almost convincingly, killing a farcical rival even more sordid than he is, feeling redeemed only by the fact that he loved her: "It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight." "I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais!*"

As Lolita is the product of the youth culture that gave us Holden Caulfield and James Dean, her strange admirer is the neurotic, maladjusted, but feelingful male who runs like a thread through postwar culture: the returning war veterans unable to adjust to a peacetime world; the disaffected young misfits, represented by Brando and Dean, who can find nowhere to channel their surly individuality and sexual energy; the outright madmen of Mailer's "The White Negro" and Yates's *Revolutionary Road,* whose psychopathic gaze pierces the timid rationalizations of the "normal" world. As Humbert's sexual compulsion and lack of moral inhibition distantly connect him to the priapic Dean Moriarty, so *Lolita* is a send-up of the lyrical novel that, in a sense, parodied *On the Road* even before it appeared.

Both were transgressive works that in different ways challenged moral as well as fictional norms; both were rejected repeatedly by publishers, appearing in America only years after they were written. But where *On the Road* is an Emersonian celebration of anarchic personal freedom, turning its hero into a countercultural myth, *Lolita* masquerades as a case study in deviance and abnormal psychology, satirizing the roadside America that Kerouac effusively celebrates. For Kerouac, the road is a metaphor of movement, of breakthrough; through Humbert's European eyes, it stands for aimless flight, a feigned sense of "going places," an illusory progress through a phantasmagoric landscape of cultural kitsch and inward fixation. Nabokov's book is a tissue of ironies, a modernist hall of mirrors; Kerouac's is as innocent of irony as it is of any sense of evil. The young who would adopt *On the Road* as one of their canonical books were also the young who were mercilessly lampooned as teenage cretins and stealthy masturbators in Nabokov's novel.

Kerouac's America is a cartoon seen through the eyes of a worshipful, sad, and sheltered observer; Nabokov's America is a cartoon of natural

wonders, impoverished humanity, and purblind compulsion. "We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep."

From *The Catcher in the Rye* to *Portnoy's Complaint,* a favorite device of the lyrical novel is the psychiatric monologue, the confession of the unhappy outsider who, after a life of conflicts and confusions, finally lands on the couch. With its clever, well-defended hero and his made-up dreams, *Lolita* mocks the therapeutic language of 1950s analysis and criminology. It begins with a Swiftian mask, a burlesque preface by "John Ray, Jr., Ph. D." whose "scientific" and moralistic language and laughable air of authority are exploded by the passionate metaphorical language of the work itself, and by Humbert's brilliant mockery of those who try to explain him. A tongue-in-cheek work from start to finish, *Lolita,* unlike many of Nabokov's other novels, breaks through to real feeling in its portrayal of the schemes and sufferings that flow from Humbert's fixation – which a later generation might describe clinically as a form of incest and child abuse, as Lolita herself (and the obtuse Dr. Ray) already do.

Nabokov always believed that fiction was neither moral, social, nor psychological but a sensuous exercise in style that (as he says in his 1958 afterword to *Lolita*) leads to a state of "aesthetic bliss." His curmudgeonly essays and interviews deride social novelists like Balzac and Stendhal and ridicule Freudians as Viennese quacks who substitute cheap formulas for experience. John Ray is one such scientific charlatan, like the mad and meddlesome editor, Kinbote, in *Pale Fire;* yet Humbert, as his assumed name indicates, is something of a humbug himself, though both speak at moments for the elusive author. Despite their modernist tricks and games, however, Nabokov's stories, memoirs, and novels from the late forties to the midfifties are also his closest encounter with realism, his most open and direct works. (Compare them to his previous novel, *Bend Sinister* [1947], a clotted *1984*-ish allegory of totalitarianism.) In *Lolita,* faced with erotic obsession on the one hand and American vulgarity on the other, the writer transcends himself, escaping the airless world of some of his other novels to achieve a burning intensity in dealing with both love and the American landscape.

Lolita is a road novel but also an antinovel, a metafictional tissue of literary allusions (besides Poe, to literally dozens of writers) and parodic names (characters like Humbert Humbert, Harold Haze, and Miss Opposite; places like Lake Climax, Insomnia Lodge, or "the township of Soda, pop. 1001") that belong to savage farce and undercut our reference to the "real" world. Nabokov's bent for caricature reminds us of satiric writers as different as Dickens, Sinclair Lewis, and Nathanael West, as well as his friend Mary McCarthy and his student Thomas Pynchon. His mixture of cruelty, disgust, and Flaubertian sense of outrage focuses rather than blurs his attention to detail. The author's peculiar blend of empathy and disdain for Humbert, his love-hate relationship with America, enable the book to escape his control and to become a uniquely fresh comment on American life.

From the very beginning, Humbert's monologue follows directly from the nostalgia and timelessness so central to *Speak, Memory.* A nymphet, as Humbert defines her, is a creature in whom time is suspended, "an enchanted island" between the ages of nine and fourteen "surrounded by a vast, misty sea." "Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden," he says. "Let them play around me forever. Never grow up." In this respect, nymphets resemble mounted butterflies, or chess problems, or crossword puzzles – Nabokov created the first ones in Russian – or for that matter the past itself, perfect and unchanging. But Lolita, like any particular nymphet, does not quite fit this prototype, for not only will she soon turn into an ordinary woman, a bovine adult, losing her perilous magic, but her very nature is mixed, open to the immediate and the contingent. "What drives me insane," says Humbert, "is the twofold nature of this nymphet – of every nymphet, perhaps: this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity." Lolita is not only immature but, unlike her mother, with her French affectations, she is the complete product of American popular culture, the teenage consumer for whom the ads were written, the movies were filmed, the candy bars confected, the roadside attractions promoted. In enslaving himself to Lolita and escorting her forcibly across the country, Humbert, like other fifties runaways, is both escaping and discovering America.

Though Humbert is a haughty, fastidious émigré exuding a Frankfurt-style disdain for American popular culture, *Lolita* is no more a version of Henry James's international theme, as some early readers saw it, than of *On the Road.* Humbert's nefarious designs upon "the child," which include the dream of killing her mother and various schemes of how to drug and deflower her, point deceptively to a contrast between European decadence and American innocence. Instead, Lolita, already deflowered by a precocious 13-year-old at camp, playfully initiates *him,* in one of the novel's most tender and troubling scenes. "In my old-fashioned, old-world way, I, Jean-Jacques Humbert, had taken for granted, when I first met her, that she was as unravished as the stereotypical notion of the 'normal child,'" he

writes in his posthumous brief. Instead she instructs him in a "game she and Charlie had played." With Humbert rather than Lolita as the protagonist, the novel gives us a satiric reverse angle view of the coming-of-age materials of Vidal, Capote, Jean Stafford, and Salinger.

As Humbert sums up his mock sexual initiation, "Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive in this beautiful hardly formed young girl whom modern co-education, juvenile mores, the campfire racket and so forth had utterly and hopelessly depraved. She saw the stark act merely as part of a youngster's furtive world, unknown to adults." Here, Humbert the European moralist allows himself to be shocked before giving way to Humbert the lover, who allows himself to be consumed by "the perilous magic of nymphets."

Both sexually and as a consumer, Lolita reflects the directions of the postwar youth culture, which Nabokov observed as an outsider who idealized his own very different childhood. When he was young, he tells us in *Speak, Memory,* even mutual masturbation was unthinkable and "the slums of sex were unknown to us," for all sex was airy romantic fantasy. As a young émigré writer in Berlin, Nabokov, like another displaced writer, Samuel Beckett, belonged to the first generation that fully assimilated the impact of Joycean word games, Proustian recollections, and Kafkaesque themes of entrapment and paranoia, all of which figure in the shaping of his novels. Beckett's self-exile was voluntary, but he, too, achieved a breakthrough by shifting to another tongue, freeing himself from the literary associations and daunting precursors of his native language. But where Beckett's fiction and drama move relentlessly toward a pared-down, timeless space, Nabokov's American novels develop into a comic dialogue between European modernism and a New World culture of consumerism, progressive education, youthful autonomy, fussy academic careerism, and small-town provincialism.

Nowhere is Nabokov's gift for ridicule (or penchant for disgust) more sharply etched than in his account of Humbert's cross-country travels with Lolita. Nathanael West in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Day of the Locust* had uncovered a pathos, almost poignant, at the heart of America's cultural wasteland, but Humbert writes about America's roadside and motel culture like the proverbial visitor from Mars, astonished at the strange enormity of it all. Roadside America becomes the incongrous backdrop for his overheated passion and the raw material for his overcharged style. Like West he is a master of the grotesque, yet his account is also punctuated by Kerouac-like paeans to the "smooth amiable roads" that radiated "across the crazy quilt of forty-eight states" and to "the lyrical, epic, tragic but never Arcadian American wilds." He finds them "beautiful, heart-rendingly beautiful," with their "quality of wide-eyed, unsung, innocent surrender" that lacquered Swiss villages and the overpraised Alps no longer possess.

Despite such moments of celebration, *Lolita,* far from being a lyrical novel, turns in upon itself like Ellison's *Invisible Man,* to disappoint all its characters' hopes – indeed, in this case, to kill off the characters themselves. In the form of a criminal's confession, a pervert's guilty plea to judge and jury, the novel is actually a network of correspondences that reveal the all-powerful control of that playful artificer, the one Humbert calls "McFate," which in turn connects destiny with the manipulations of the author, whose own hands are never too far from the puppet strings. As Humbert's aimless travels with Lolita give way to his stalking of Clare Quilty, who has lured Lolita away from him, and as Humbert tracks down and farcically murders him, *Lolita* is transformed into a mock detective story full of hunters and hunted, crime and punishment. Were it not for Peter Sellers's nimble performance as the almost unkillable Quilty in Stanley Kubrick's 1963 film version, this darker second half of the novel would be far less remembered than it is today. Yet it brings home what we should feel from the start – that Humbert is both an unreliable narrator and a moral monster; there is the devil to pay for both the pleasures he stole from his 12-year-old mistress and for the laughs we enjoyed in the great comedy of seduction and betrayal.

Along with *Invisible Man, Lolita* foreshadows both the dark, scabrous comedy of the novels of the sixties and the paranoid vision that makes them so intricate, so rich with menace. If black humor is comedy about the forbidden, comedy that negotiates moral boundaries and shatters taboos, *Lolita* epitomizes it. The work of Pynchon, Heller, Vonnegut, and Philip Roth can hardly be imagined without *Lolita*'s boldness, the uneasy mixture of comedy and horror in its perpetually unstable tone. Humbert's possessiveness and jealousy with Lolita make him her jailer as well as her adoring lover, but like so many later fictional characters – in Heller's *Something Happened* (1974), for example, another autobiography of a heel, or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) – he is also the slave of his own obscure compulsions, enjoying at best an illusory freedom.

In *Lolita* the road novel takes on an uproarious but troubling agenda and implodes. The youth culture of the fifties is at once idealized (in Humbert's infatuation with Lolita) and satirized (in the cultivated European's view of America). The lyrical novel of Emersonian self-assertion turns into the ironic novel of Kafkaesque entrapment and self-loathing confession, a transgressive work that remains genuinely shocking yet, in its playfulness, still somehow liberating. First read as a piece of sexual scandal, a glimpse of the author's own darkest impulses, the book has been

transformed by academic readers into an elegant set of tricks and allusions, a postmodernist exercise in self-reflexive writing. What was lost was the novel's encounter with its own age, with an exploding popular culture, a rampant consumerism, and a rambunctious younger generation that represented both a new market and the rapidly changing sexual values of a prosperous, permissive liberal culture.

Lolita's mixture of seductive innocence and brash vulgarity was typical of the ambiguous outlook of the new culture, which would soon turn into the counterculture. American culture in the fifties was staid and repressive at the center, in its treatment of women, for example, or its range of political debate, but there was also a liberal idealism that survived from the New Deal and the war. This culture was also highly self-critical – pop sociology and psychology were virtual cottage industries – and alive with change at the margins. Not only were long-forbidden works soon to be published (*Lolita, Naked Lunch, Lady Chatterley's Lover, Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn*) but much of the popular culture – from the seamy small-town setting of *Peyton Place* to the family melodramas of Douglas Sirk, such as *Written on the Wind* and *Imitation of Life* – took on a lurid, feverishly troubled cast. Where many today look back nostalgically at the fifties as a golden age, the filmmakers, writers, and social critics of the period saw trouble in paradise: anomie, conflict and tense uncertainty amid suburban prosperity. While some writers had used the road novel to declare their turn from the American mainstream, others invented a kind of anti–road novel to explore these tensions and uncertainties, to show how hard they might be to resolve. Two dark, ironic works, John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958) and Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), offer a counterstatement to the kind of self-liberation celebrated by Kerouac, mythologized (soon afterward) by Ken Kesey, explored ambivalently by Updike and Cheever, and transformed into deviant or criminal passion by Mailer and Nabokov.

❦

Of all the practitioners of the first-person novel in the 1950s, few have a more distinctive or more astringent voice than John Barth. Born in Cambridge, Maryland, in 1930, Barth often returned to the Maryland shore as his intricately textured local world, his native ground, as O'Hara and Updike created a social microcosm out of the small towns and cities of Pennsylvania. But Barth's interest in society was much more limited than theirs. He was the most cerebral of novelists, building his plots less out of milieu than from an interrogation of the nature of fiction. If Nabokov turned the road novel into the anti–road novel, making the road a timeless

locale of forbidden passion, Barth turned it into the antinovel, an experiment in the problem of fictional representation.

Barth's fastidious manner sometimes resembles Nabokov's, especially in his habit of dealing with sex in a tone of educated circumlocution. While remaining impeccably "literary," both writers echo the elevated diction of classic pornography, skillfully deploying an arch manner that titillates the reader yet eludes the censor, including the moral censor in the individual reader. But where the scheming Humbert Humbert is helplessly dominated by his obsessions, Barth's manipulative, coldly calculating heroes are more theoretical in their motives and hence more repugnant specimens of humanity. Once upon a time, Barth's protagonists played the game of emotional entanglement, the old drama of needs and relationships; later they learned to look beyond it, to use other people for their own purposes.

In Nabokov there is a plangent emotional core behind the satiric disgust and cultured rage. Barth uses the first-person narrator for the least lyrical aims imaginable, just as he plays with the confessional mode with scarcely any tincture of Freudianism. His heroes are either the typical innocents of picaresque fiction, such as Ebenezer Cooke in *The Sot-Weed Factor,* or hardened cynics who have turned their default of feeling into a bottomless nihilism. They can manipulate and even torment people, but essentially they are indifferent to them. *The End of the Road* is Barth's best novel because it beautifully explores the personal cost of such a failure of feeling. The novel wreaks vengeance on Barth's heartless hero as he wreaks havoc on everyone around him. It gives us a brilliant anatomy of this recurrent character type, whose philosophical indifference and detached, almost inhuman intellectuality preside over Barth's whole body of work.

Barth's early books come in pairs, but whether they are seemingly realistic novels like *The Floating Opera* (1956; revised 1967) and *The End of the Road* (1958), or mock-historical novels like *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960; revised 1967) and *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), or sequences of metafictional texts like *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) and *Chimera* (1972), or even an epistolary novel synthesizing (or burlesquing) all the preceding works (*Letters,* 1979), their real subject is the nature of narrative. Barth is fascinated by earlier, more naïve forms of storytelling, such as the Greek myths, the *Arabian Nights,* or the picaresque novels of the eighteenth century, which take us "back to the original springs of narrative." He idealizes the storytelling past the way Nabokov cherishes the lost world of his own past. But his nostalgia for the mesmerizing qualities of these old stories, their power to induce belief, does not prevent him from deconstructing them into postmodern narratives, laying bare their stereotypical qualities. What draws him most is not the stories themselves but the framing devices that

loosely link such collections as *The Thousand and One Nights, The Canterbury Tales,* and *The Decameron,* or the direct address to the reader that punctuates the picaresque novels, always reminding us that fiction is a constructed artifact. Todd Andrews, his narrator in *The Floating Opera,* tells us from the outset that he is no novelist. He jumps backward and forward in chronology, and his cold, witty tone, his analytical precision, so typical of Barth's protagonists, can read more like legal brief or an investigative report than a personal history.

"Storytelling isn't my cup of tea," he says, not simply because he cannot resist digression but because his mind-set, along with his clinical view of character and personality, is austerely factual and skeptical. He is reporting to us, almost twenty years after the fact, about a day in 1937 when he changed his mind, when he decided not to kill himself. But he also thinks human behavior should always be logically defensible and organized around rational choice. "I tend, I'm afraid, to attribute to abstract ideas a life-or-death significance," he says. Yet life and death have repeatedly found ways of nullifying his conscious choices. He confesses that he has experienced a strong emotion only five times in his life – the specific number is typical of him – and each time he responded by completely altering his approach to the world, adopting a new "mask" and essentially becoming a different person. In each case, whether he behaves for years as a rake, an ascetic, or an utter cynic, he lives his life as a conscious project, first adopting a pose out of some unexpected burst of feeling, then rationalizing it in abstract terms like a man who pretends to know exactly why he does whatever he does.

These roles, even the role of the cynic, finally collapse for him, so he decides quite reasonably to commit suicide. But when he realizes that even suicide is a meaningless choice, that Hamlet's question has no answer, he decides (in good Dorothy Parker fashion) that he might as well live. From then on, he spends his time pursuing an elaborate *Inquiry* into his father's suicide, with little confidence that anyone can truly explain anything. Like the novel itself, this inquiry becomes a metaphor for the limits of knowledge. It thus comes to resemble David Hume's *Inquiry* in its skeptical account of causality. After years of reading and thinking, he decides that "there is no will-o'-the-wisp so elusive as the cause of any human act. . . . [A]s Hume pointed out, causation is never more than an inference."

Such an intellectualized view of behavior and motivation seems like very unpromising material for a novel; actually, it is a perfect recipe for the kind of antinovel or postmodern novel that Barth already anticipated in the 1950s, with its sense of a decentered self and its view of the world as a "mirror-maze" (as Barth would later call it in *Lost in the Funhouse*) in which everything is a representation. Like the picaresque writers of the eighteenth

century, Barth gives us novels whose busy, involuted plots undermine their apparent realism, novels without any clear cause and effect: all action with little character development or psychological "depth." Barth's characters do not grow or change like those in Shakespeare's plays or in nineteenth-century novels. Instead, they simply alter their existential project, moving on to the next stage. Todd Andrews and Jacob Horner, Barth's first two heroes, are early examples of decentered selves, completely constructed personalities always defined by the masks they assume. Barth's early novels turn Sartrean existentialism into a form of intellectual play. It was Sartre who had pointed to the option of suicide as the ultimate source of man's freedom, Sartre who had insisted that existence precedes essence and people are defined by what they do, not by who they "are."

Barth turns this notion of an arbitrarily constructed, radically contingent self into a comedy of nihilism and a subversive exploration of the form of fiction. For a fabricated personality like Todd Andrews, life itself is an occasionally gorgeous but discontinuous spectacle that engages him only intermittently and ironically. His metaphor for this is the "floating opera," the showboat that moves up and down the river providing the audience on shore with no more than discontinuous glimpses of what is being performed on board. Born with the century in 1900, Todd gives us just such glimpses of his own life: his service in the trenches of World War I, his chronic heart and prostate conditions, his modest legal career, his father's suicide in 1930, his ascetic home life in a geriatric residence hotel, his long affair with the wife of a client and friend, and his efforts in court to salvage a large inheritance for his friend from the man's eccentric father. Except for his experience in the trenches, which first convinced him of the sheer animal meaninglessness of life, Todd describes every one of these experiences, especially his affair and his suicide plans, with cynical detachment, as if life itself were a game in which the actual moves mattered very little. His defective heart is a metaphor for his defective humanity, but also for the brute contingency of life itself. (He often reminds us he might die before finishing the chapter.)

Barth turns the melodramatic material of ordinary novels – paternal abandonment, wartime violence, courtroom strategy, an adulterous love triangle – into a *virtual* plot that highlights its own fictional nature. The more story we get – as in overstuffed later books such as *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy* – the more constructed it seems, giving substance to Todd's theory of behavior as a sequence of masks. Salinger and Kerouac were drawn to the antinomian qualities of picaresque fiction, its metaphors for escape, personal freedom, and irresponsibility, its shaggy-dog version of one man's progress. The casually constructed road novel,

especially when written in the first person, establishes the claims of individual voice against the pressures of literary form as well as social convention. This sound of innocent outrage, with its wounded sincerity, is what eventually made *The Catcher in the Rye* and *On the Road* such canonical texts of sixties youth culture.

The lyrical novel turns sincerity into an instrument of social protest, but sincerity is the last thing we would expect in a Barth hero. Barth is drawn instead to the antiquarian aspects of the picaresque, its rogue hero, its sheer accumulation of detail, which takes him back to a period before romantic individualism grew dominant, and enables him to link the premodern to the postmodern. If the lyrical novel achieves authenticity by way of the personal voice, Barth parodies the first-person novel by telling his story in a voice so dry, so antiseptic in its illusionless clarity that it makes personality, psychology, and motivation seem like outworn remnants of nineteenth-century narrative.

But Barth's novels also capsize themselves and turn harshly against their protagonists. Despite his insistence that all behavior is a social mask, without a "real" self behind it, Todd Andrews finds himself periodically upstaged by his own emotions, from the wave of fear he feels in the trenches to the surge of self-disgust that finally propels him toward suicide. This is where *The End of the Road* – the "companion-piece" to *The Floating Opera* (both were written in 1955) – completes the earlier novel and gives it a tragic dimension. *The End of the Road* is an inversion of the road novel, a reversal of its kinetic energy and movement; its hero, Jacob Horner, like his proverbial counterpart, is stuck in a corner, afflicted with complete immobility. The story is framed by his treatment at something called the Remobilization Farm, a curious send-up of the whole therapeutic and progressive culture of the fifties, which put its faith in personal improvement through socialization. At this farm, with its Progress and Advice Room, Horner is treated by a brilliant quack – one of the innumerable mad doctors of fifties fiction, like Dr. Benway in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* – whose methods flow from the theory of masks of the preceding novel.

To this doctor, life is simply performance, motion rather than emotion, the challenge of playing a part as though you believed in it. What he calls Mythotherapy is a form of dramaturgy: stereotyped role playing that at least serves to get you moving. Like so many well-rewarded vendors of positive thinking in the 1950s, the doctor urges his patients to take charge of their own story. As Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* solved all personal problems simply by moving on, leaving friends, jobs, and lovers behind, Jake Horner, paralyzed by sheer immobility, is urged to become the protagonist of his own drama, to get a life, as if he were writing a novel or casting a play.

But the life that Jake Horner simulates has a devastating effect on other people, largely because he invests so little feeling or humanity in the roles he plays. *The End of the Road* gives a deeper cast to the most frivolous and satiric of all fifties genres, the academic novel. Like Todd Andrews, Horner has an affair with a friend's wife, but this leads not to the enlightened civilities of *The Floating Opera,* where all the parties pride themselves on being tolerant and open-minded, but to her miserable death on an abortionist's table. Andrews was frank about seeking sex "without falsifying it with any romance." "The truth is," he explains, "that while I knew very well what copulation is and feels like, I'd never understood personally what love is and feels like." Todd's detachment could be interpreted as fear or despair on the few occasions when he has ever experienced a genuine emotion, but the games he plays do not have much impact on anyone's lives. Jake's manipulations, on the other hand, destroy other people's lives and cripple his own.

Jake begins his course of mayhem by callously wounding an older woman he picks up at the beach, making his contempt for her all too clear and virtually forcing her to beg for sex, which he performs with barely contained ill will, even disgust. "It was embarrasing," he says, "because she abandoned herself completely to an elaborate mood that implied her own humiliation – and because my own mood was not complementary to hers." Besides, "I was always uneasy with women who took their sexual transports too seriously." In this kind of novel, as in the road novel, the woman generally becomes the victim, whether of male lust or male indifference, of male wanderlust or male conventionality.

Jake's destructive behavior with this woman prefigures his clinical detachment during his affair with his colleague's wife. Much as he tries to avoid any messy emotional entanglement, however, this is an attitude he cannot sustain. Finally stirred to action by his pregnant mistress's suicidal anguish, Jake frantically arranges for her to have an abortion. Following her gruesome death, he collapses into a terminal apathy that puts an abrupt end to his experiment in remobilization. Like Todd Andrews in *The Floating Opera,* he has been unable to play a single "role" consistently, giving way instead to "irrational flashes of conscience and cruelty, of compassion and cynicism." Like Andrews, too, he is undermined by bursts of spontaneous humanity that his theory denies. But such moments of compunction only worsen the damage he has already done through cynicism and indifference. If the road novel uses movement as a metaphor for freedom, *The End of the Road* shows how movement alone, without a moral or emotional compass, leads to a dead end, to paralysis, to Jake Horner's dark corner. By the end he is a full-time

patient, like Holden Caulfield, with nothing to do but tell his story. As he takes leave of that story, his final word to the cab driver, "Terminal," nicely catches the ambiguity of his fate. He can go to the station to catch the train, even rejoin his mad doctor, but he has nowhere to go. His case is terminal.

The paradoxes of identity and movement also provided the material for Barth's experimental short fiction in the 1960s. The stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* are all comic turns on going nowhere, on being caught between an unmediated "reality" that is no longer available, at least to this writer, and various forms of role playing or fictional representation that will be quickly paralyzed by self-consciousness. The title story, "Lost in the Funhouse," is one of several that never quite gets told; it is interwoven with a pedantic handbook on fictional technique. Ambrose and his family are off on an excursion to "the funhouse," the hall of mirrors of all representation. But the narrator's infernal dithering, his fondness for cliché, and his acute awareness of narrative choice constantly retard the narration, preventing any suspension of disbelief and reducing the story to mere words. This was a game Laurence Sterne played long ago in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy,* backtracking and digressing to make us wonder whether his hero would ever manage to get born.

Barth's often cogent comments on fictional technique point up the fact that he was one of our first writers to study in a creative writing program – there were only two in the United States when he enrolled at Johns Hopkins University in 1947 – and one of the first to make his living as a full-time professor of creative writing, initially at Pennsylvania State University, where he taught English from 1953 to 1965, then in Buffalo, New York, until 1973, when he finally went back to Johns Hopkins. His excess of concern about fictional form, his nostalgia for a period when storytelling was a simpler matter, bespeak a certain professorial relation to the study of fiction. "Plot and theme: notions vitiated by this hour of the world but as yet not successfully succeeded" ("Title"). But the influence of Beckett has overlaid the example of Sterne: "The final question is, Can nothing be made meaningful. . . . And I think. What now. Everything's been said already, over and over; I'm as sick of this as you are; there's nothing to say. Say nothing." (Think of Beckett's "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.") In *Lost in the Funhouse* and *Chimera* Barth's genial narrators soon grow as heartily sick of this self-consciousness as we do. He even tells us that his wife and adolescent daughters "preferred life to literature and read fiction when at all for entertainment. Their kind of story (his too, really) would begin if not once upon a time at least with arresting circumstance, bold character, trenchant action."

In these short texts, the problems posed by fictional technique lead to the same paralysis that beset the heroes of his first two "realistic" novels; there, too, self-consciousness and emotional distance had entrapped his characters and kept them from really living their lives. Barth's nostalgia for storytelling is a nostalgia for more spontaneous living, and his obsession with fictional technique becomes a metaphor for an arrested emotional life, for a shyness or coldness that inhibits his characters from making real contact with other people. "I was cursed," Jake Horner said, "with an imagination too fertile to be of any use in predicting my fellow human beings: no matter how intimate my knowledge of them, I was always able to imagine and justify contradictory reactions from them to almost anything." Horner's problem in writing the script of his life becomes Barth's problem in writing a story while feeling swamped by an excess of possibility. At one point in *The Floating Opera* Barth's hero, methodical as ever, perfectly in character, actually advances the plot by drawing up a two-page list of all the ways the action might develop.

Barth's protagonist is a figure who recurs in postwar fiction: the intellectual whose springs of feeling have dried up, whose whole existence is a simulation of living, a series of abstract choices. In this social masquerade, reminiscent of Melville's *Confidence-Man* or Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (one of the secretly influential texts of postwar fiction), Barth's writing becomes "Another story about a writer writing a story! Another regressus in infinitum!" – which seems to weary him as much as the reader. Barth is a forerunner of postmodernism, not simply in his formal experiments but in portraying an inevitable loss of affect within a culture in which all the stories have already been told, the plot gambits tried, the forms exhausted from repeated use. His longer books are as removed from spontaneous storytelling as his characters are cut off from spontaneous interaction. They become no more than "novels imitating the form of the Novel, by a writer who impersonates the role of the Author." Barth thus anticipates the French theorists for whom the so-called author became simply a formal construct, the "author function," a convenience of literary discussion.

❦

There could hardly be a writer more different from Barth than Richard Yates. At a time when the realist aesthetic was waning, or simply migrating from literature into film and television, Yates emerged as one of the last of the scrupulous social realists. As other members of the World War II generation – Mailer, Styron, Heller, even James Jones – shifted toward history, apocalyptic fantasy, myth, and black humor, Yates emerged as the faithful chronicler of the lives of his contemporaries. His characters were men who

fought in the war but were not war heroes, who married too young, had children too young, and were swallowed up by the suburbs and the large corporations. Born in 1926, Yates was a prep-school boy who saw infantry service in World War II; he was the archetype of the aspiring writer who spent the postwar years in journalism or on Madison Avenue dreaming of writing the great American novel. Remarkably, he came close to doing it. His finely crafted stories, eventually collected in *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962), drew critical admiration all through the fifties, but with *Revolutionary Road* in 1961, Yates wrote the definitive history of a part of his generation.

The popular version of Yates's story had already been told by William H. Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956) and in novels like Sloan Wilson's best-selling *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). *Revolutionary Road* rewrites Sloan Wilson's novel as tragedy, as it also gives us a perfect mirror image of *On the Road.* In Yates's novel the title is wholly ironic: the road that beckons becomes the road not taken. The book tells the story of the would-be rebel, the imagined free spirit, who never leaves home, never quits his job – the man who, more typically than Sal Paradise, seeks his pastoral utopia not in the American West but in the suburban towns of Connecticut. Like *The End of the Road,* it ends catastrophically with a botched abortion – this one is self-inflicted – and it leaves the novel's male protagonist, Frank Wheeler, as little more than a ghost of himself.

The young suburban couple we meet at the beginning of the novel, Frank and April Wheeler, despite the buoyant lilt of their names, are already people with diminished expectations. After rebelling against his virile, defeated father, Frank had eventually joined the same IBM-like corporation. He had lived most intensely as a soldier, as an undergraduate intellectual at Columbia University, and as a Greenwich Village bohemian after the war. There his affair with April had first begun. Now he feels the smoldering discontent of many prematurely sober young professionals of the 1950s. April, once a drama student, now a mother of two – Revolutionary Road is their suburban address – remains the keeper of what is left of Frank's artistic hopes, which soon crystallize in a quixotic plan to sell the house, leave the job, and move the family to France, where he can fulfill his youthful dream of becoming an artist. (Her own talents, of course, have long since been subsumed in his, almost as an extension of her motherhood.)

As this possibility arises, Frank, for one brief moment, is exhilarated, but unconsciously he is appalled. He has no real desire to live out his old fantasy, or to take up the freedom to be poor and creative (rather than comfortable and stultified). Soon April is pregnant again and he manipulates her into carrying the child while he himself carries on a little affair in the

city. "Paris" is Frank's road, his dream of escape, but this is a road novel in reverse, with the hero secretly unwilling to go anywhere, except to the next rung of the corporate ladder. For Frank, bohemianism is the pipe dream still cherished by his wife, since it made him the man who first attracted her; she is the keeper of his earlier self, with which he has secretly lost faith. Unable to be frank with anyone, not even himself, Frank mouths glib clichés attacking conformity, adjustment, security, and togetherness, those familiar staples of fifties social criticism. Meanwhile, he maneuvers his wife into a suburban domesticity that shields him from his own sense of diminished horizons.

In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,* Sloan Wilson finesses these conflicts and lets his hero, Tom Rath, have it both ways. He is a war hero with few regrets about the blood he spilled; indeed, the war and the romance that came with it provided the only real excitement of his life. He discovers that he has an understanding wife who encourages him to support the child he had by his Italian mistress. Soon it turns out that he even has a sympathetic corporate mentor who treats him as a surrogate son and allows him to turn down the rat-race job he himself had once pressed on him. Tom is also helped by a benign Jewish judge who enables him to inherit his grandmother's property and turn it into suburban housing. In short, the novel takes up the problem of the organization man and resolves it through wish fulfillment. "I don't think I'm the kind of guy who should try to be a big executive," he tells his boss, who has damaged his own life by choosing the same options. "I'll say it frankly: I don't think I have the willingness to make the sacrifices." Tom can have it all: can take responsibility for his wartime past, support his mistress but also rekindle his marriage. By just saying no, he can keep his job yet preserve his integrity and his family life – all by an act of personal choice. With a timely theme yet also a happy ending, the novel – and the film version starring Gregory Peck – became immensely popular.

Connecticut real estate also figures significantly in *Revolutionary Road,* beginning with the title, but it offers no easy solution to Frank Wheeler's problems. Like Tom Rath, he is nostalgic for the desperate excitement, fear, and romance of the war years, which his wife imagines they can recapture as twenties-style expatriates in Paris. During the war, he tells her, "I just felt this terrific sense of life. I felt full of blood." Now he wants to recapture that feeling, to break out of the cellophane bag that envelops his life. This could have been anyone's story in the 1950s: suburbia, family life, the corporate ladder, the loss of brave possibility once glimpsed in the war. It is too archetypal, too fraught with generational significance. But Yates adds a daring touch that transforms the novel. Through their real

estate agent, Helen Givings, the town busybody, the Wheelers are exposed to a schizophrenic young man, her son, who eventually strips away their lies and self-deceptions and triggers the disaster that befalls them.

If *Revolutionary Road* impresses us with its verisimilitude and social realism, John Givings seems like a mutant, a strange interloper from a novel by Céline, Burroughs, or Kerouac. He is brilliantly mad: grievously damaged but lucid, dysfunctional but clairvoyant. A one-time mathematician whose face and memory have been scarred by too many electroshock treatments, he is the tragic demon the suburbs are designed to repress, the bad news no one welcomes in this pastoral utopia. His chirrupy mother, a master of denial, is adept at papering over cracks, looking at the bright side of everything; his stolid, impassive father deals with her by turning off his hearing aid. Mrs. Givings, who sells the Wheelers their house and then sells it again after April's death, is the very spirit of the suburbs in her obtuse and meddlesome cheerfulness, like a character from one of John Cheever's more sardonic stories:

> The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. Even at night, as if on purpose, the development had no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful.

After the Wheelers have departed, she is indignant that they failed to keep the house up, and prefers the "*really* congenial people" who have taken their place.

But while they were there, she sensed their difference – their tolerance and vulnerability – and so guessed that she could take the risk of initiating them into her private tragedy: the institutionalized son whose condition, we soon understand, reflects strains in the "normal" family that produced him. The young man first adopts Frank and April as surrogate parents, identifies with their planned escape to Europe, but turns on them brutally when they back out. As he sees it, April's new pregnancy, which binds them to Connecticut, can only spawn an unloved, unhappy child like himself. He alone in the novel sees through Frank's cowardice and manipulation, but he makes Frank's wife see through him as well. "You got cold feet, or what?" he says to Frank. "I wouldn't be surprised if you knocked her up on purpose, just so you could spend the rest of your life hiding behind that maternity dress." To April he says, "you must give him a pretty bad time, if making babies is the only way he can prove he's got a pair of balls."

Givings's role as madman and truth teller is so audacious that it ought to shatter the economy of the novel. Instead it shows us how much even realist fiction has changed since the start of the decade. The mad seer is really a figure from the Laingian counterculture of the sixties – who

belongs to novels like Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) – not someone from the sober and sensible 1950s. Yet Salinger, Nabokov, Barth, and even Cheever had focused on characters who break down out of emotional turmoil, and Kerouac had portrayed Neal Cassady as an inspired madman, a kind of saint or "Holy Goof" who, like the egregious Randall McMurphy in Kesey's book, helps liberate his more timid friends. So Yates prophetically imports Givings into the Wheelers' life as a return of the repressed, a perverse product of suburban optimism, and a distorting mirror that reflects back the compromises and denials that enabled the Wheelers to construct their little world.

Givings has had shock treatments to short-circuit his emotional conflicts, but the therapy also obliterated his mathematical gift. "It's awful for anybody to forget something they want to remember," April tells him. But her husband, by his dishonesty, has also muffled his feelings and talents, emptying himself out all on his own. From the beginning she had collaborated "by telling easy, agreeable lies of her own, until each was saying what the other most wanted to hear." The truth was that at bottom, behind the self-deceptions, he was simply ordinary, not the stifled artist he imagined. Her self-induced abortion is a gesture of harsh honesty that she turns on herself.

In the end Yates's message was not very different from Salinger's or Kerouac's. The world of Revolutionary Road, like Cheever's Shady Hill, stands for the life Holden Caulfield mocks for its phoniness, the world the Beats left behind, the premature home-and-family trap Updike's Rabbit tries hard to escape. Frank and April Wheeler are another version of the bright, well-meaning young liberal couple whose good intentions get rough treatment in so many postwar fictions, from Trilling's *Middle of the Journey* to Barth's novels, from Cheever's stories to the cycle of marriage stories Updike collected in *Too Far to Go.* But with John Givings, *Revolutionary Road* crosses the WASP novel of manners and personal relationships with the Beat novel of spiritual accusation and salvation, to frame perhaps the most comprehensive indictment of the whole decade. For Yates, the corporate jobs and garden suburbs that crystallize the American dream are also the bland settings in which America has lost its memory and misplaced its adventurous, risk-taking soul.

To many historians, the fifties were an era of prosperity and tranquility – an island of stability in a century of violent change – but the novelists, filmmakers, and social critics of the period saw it differently. They looked at youthful rebellion and dysfunctional marriage as evidence of deep social malaise. With the spread of xenophobia and McCarthyism, the pervasive anxieties connected with the Cold War and atomic weapons, such fears

were very close to the surface. Critics also saw a timid conformity, even a spiritual poverty, at the heart of America's prosperous economy and spectacular growth, with its emphasis on home and family and its conservative view of women's roles. When Frank Wheeler tries to convince his wife that she is emotionally disturbed, even unnatural, for not wanting to bear his next child, he is substituting a kitsch Freudian language of mental health for the patriarchal authority he resented in his father; the effect is the same. At the end he is merely an empty shell, like Barth's and Nabokov's hero-villains.

From Salinger and Ellison to Yates, the best writers of the fifties identified with the outsider, not with a dominant culture they found hollow and oppressive. They saw rebellion, neurosis, and madness as forms of lucidity, and portrayed adjustment and sanity as symptoms of deadly compromise. In her great story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor could even identify with the Misfit, an escaped and demented criminal, as a violent bearer of unpleasant truths to foolish people. Where O'Connor traffics comically in mass murder, other writers use failed abortion, tormented youth, or the death of children (as in *Rabbit, Run* or Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*) as an indication of social failure and loss of humanity.

Never did so triumphant a period produce such a mass of angry criticism, which accelerated toward the end of the decade with Beat writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg; mordant novelists such as Nabokov, Barth, and Yates; and the trenchant social commentary in C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958), Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), and Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), which was itself a critical synthesis of the new youth culture. Even in the political realm, the winds of change were finally stirring. The end of the Korean War and the death of Stalin in 1953 led to the first of a series of thaws and détentes with the Soviet Union that softened the atmosphere of intolerance at home. With such works as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), liberals struck back at McCarthyism, and McCarthy himself was censured and effectively destroyed by his fellow senators in 1954. He died in an alcoholic haze in 1957, an embarrassment even to his diehard supporters.

Soon cracks began appearing in the blacklist, but also in the moral blacklist that barred any frank treatment of sexuality in books and films. Nabokov, D. H. Lawrence, Burroughs, and Henry Miller became hot new authors, though their books had been written, suppressed, and published elsewhere years earlier. The Supreme Court's unanimous 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* took the nation on its first halting steps toward desegregation and racial equality, and in the late 1950s, the

young civil rights movement under Martin Luther King, Jr., turned to direct action with bus boycotts and lunch-counter sit-ins in Southern towns and cities.

In the 1958 midterm elections, an eager class of young liberals was elected to Congress, where the Democrats controlled both houses by almost two-to-one margins. By 1960, John F. Kennedy could mobilize the widespread discontent of the late fifties into a political campaign that stressed youth, energy, change, and, in its final moments, social justice for black Americans. A child of privilege, the son of a political fixer, and raised in an increasingly right-wing Catholic family, the young candidate ironically inherited the mantle of expectations created by Brando and Mailer, James Dean and Jack Kerouac – in short, by all the angry, wounded, mysterious, and sexually charged young men of the 1950s. Soon, by the narrowest of margins, the political outsider was president and a new era would begin, burnished by a stirring rhetoric of social responsibility, a turbulent decade of confrontation and social change for which the critical culture of the fifties had helped pave the way.

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LEOPARDS IN THE TEMPLE

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