

**Backlash Realism:
The American Novel during the Long 1980s**

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Abstract

Backlash Realism studies the limits of the novel: what can and cannot be represented in a novel, given the historico-structural architecture of the genre? How elastic is the genre? Where is its horizon? This dissertation focuses these questions by examining a specific literary-historical moment: the American novel during the waning years of postmodernism, a period I designate as “the long 1980s.” This period follows what Mark McGurl has characterized as “the Program Era” and precedes the fiction of the new millennium. Consequently, this dissertation offers a prehistory of the present. Relying on conceptions of fictionality taken from Catherine Gallagher and Dorrit Cohn, and drawing on literary-sociological methods employed by scholars like McGurl, this dissertation traces a crisis of representation that faced American writers who sought to produce important novels during the 1980s, after decades of modernist and postmodernist experimentation had seemingly exhausted the possibility of innovation. In response to this crisis, many novelists discovered renewed interest in both realism as a mode of representation and the durability of “fictionality” when juxtaposed with fact. This dissertation first offers a historical-theoretical frame for this crisis and then examines several novelists – Gore Vidal, Don DeLillo, E.L. Doctorow, Tom Wolfe, Jonathan Franzen, and Nicholson Baker – whose quasirealist or neorealist projects can be characterized as “backlash” against postmodernism. This backlash coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and a broader cultural backlash against the political and social projects of the 1960s and ‘70s: in the United States, the so-called “Reagan Revolution.” The

metaphors or tropes that novelists like Vidal, Wolfe, and Franzen employed to debate and discuss the state of the novel after postmodernism borrowed language from contemporary anxieties over nationalism and national decline, urban decay, white flight, financialization, a return to the language of the market economy, and the AIDS epidemic. These novelists also reinvested heavily in a remarkably literal conception of *realism*, one that engaged heavily with factuality, privileged the universalized liberal subject, and eschewed paranoid hermeneutics. The resulting aesthetic proved influential for the fiction of the new millennium and produced useful tensions through which to understand and analyze the limits of novelistic representation.

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Introduction

This project examines realism in the American novel. It traces a crisis of representation and a series of debates about the nature of literary representation that occurred at the end of the twentieth century. More specifically, it examines the status and durability of fictionality in U.S. literature in the wake of postmodernism, a period we might designate as the long 1980s: approximately 1974 through 1996. These dates have geo-political and literary historical significance. They range from middle of the 1973-1975 recession and the resignation of President Richard Nixon, events which mark the end of the post-war era of U.S. hegemony, to the middle of the “New Economy” boom of 1994-2000 and the reelection of President Bill Clinton, which represented the consolidation of neoliberalism across the mainstream political spectrum in the U.S. and beyond. These dates also range from the controversy over the literary value of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), a controversy which resulted in no Pulitzer Prize for Fiction being awarded in 1974, to the publication of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), on which questions about postmodernism’s persistence into the new millennium would center. For many, from Fredric Jameson to Tom Wolfe to William Bennett, the long 1980s represented a period of postmodern hegemony. That “postmodernism” in its many valences was in steep decline during this period is beside the point; at the time, postmodernism was perceived as a cultural, aesthetic, and literary dominant. This perception sparked a backlash that will serve as the nexus of the myriad texts and authors examined in this dissertation.

This dissertation will pay special attention to the concepts of “fact” and “fiction,” or factuality/fictionality/nonfictionality, which, the following chapters will demonstrate, are absolutely central to the literary history of the 1980s and to our understanding of literary representation during this period and the period that follows. As Catherine Gallagher and others have demonstrated, the novel has, since its inception, been a site of intense negotiations over the status of fact within a fictional form, albeit one that compels readers to suspend disbelief and participate in a kind of imagined factuality. These negotiations have been theorized under many terms: “potentiality,” “counterfactuality,” et al. This dissertation examines the status of fact and fiction, as they occur in the novel form in particular, after a period of exhaustive experimentation with fictional parameters: that is, after postmodernism. Central to this period was a renewed interest in the parameters and possibilities of realism as a literary mode – each writer I examine staked some claim on the idea of a fact-based realism.

1. Special Issues: Reflections on Fiction, Publication, and Readership

We might benefit from looking beyond this dissertation’s historical purview for a moment, in order to examine certain assumptions about literary realism in the period after the long 1980s. Three examples from middlebrow¹ magazine publishing are particularly illuminating: one occurred in *Time* magazine

¹ I use the term “middlebrow” in the sense described by Gordon Hutner in *What America Read: Class, Taste, and the Novel, 1920 – 1960*. The category of middlebrow realism – or “middle-class realism,” to use the term Hutner prefers – is discussed at length in Hutner’s study, which describes *The Atlantic* as one of the major “venue[s] for the dissemination of middle-class cultural values,” in which accessibly-written literary realism typically trumped the avant-garde, experimental fiction, and popular genres such as horror (208).

in 1998, the others in *The Atlantic* in 2005 and 2011. These moments will illuminate themes that will recur throughout this dissertation.

Beginning in the spring of 1998, *Time* published its five special *Time 100* issues, a series that named the hundred “most important people of the century.” *Time* intended the series to function as a countdown to both the year 2000 and *Time*’s own *Person of the Century* issue. In June 1998, *Time* published its second *Time 100* issue, titled *Artists and Entertainers*. The editors gave the twenty artists featured in the issue simple, abrupt titles: Pablo Picasso was “the Painter,” Marlon Brando “the Actor,” Le Corbusier “the Architect.” Except for a few odd, populist choices (e.g. the cartoon character Bart Simpson), the list represented the mid-century, middlebrow sensibilities that had forged *Time* magazine’s position in U.S. culture. Even the late-century representatives – Steven Spielberg, Oprah Winfrey – were populists who had reinvented their careers to conform to middlebrow standards (e.g., 1998’s first selection in Oprah’s massively influential Book Club was Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*). Mid-century sensibilities had also codified and canonized High Modernism, so a list that included Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, Louis Armstrong, Coco Chanel, and T.S. Eliot (“the Poet”) felt coherent and unified in the pages of *Time*. Little surprise, then, that the editors chose James Joyce to fill the slot of “the Writer.” Paul Gray, the *Time* writer assigned to honor Joyce, began in the following way:

James Joyce once told a friend, “One of the things I could never get accustomed to in my youth was the difference I found between life and literature.” All serious young readers notice this

difference. Joyce dedicated his career to erasing it and in the process revolutionized 20th century fiction.

Gray went on to describe *Ulysses*, the challenging High Modernist masterpiece that attempted to capture the experiences that the young Joyce encountered in life but not in literature with what Gray called “surface realism”. This “surface realism” apparently entailed techniques that most readers (and certainly most readers of *Time*) would find off-putting, to say the least: *Ulysses* remains a synecdoche for difficulty in modern literature. But, Gray argued, because they were deployed in the service of *realism* (and because *Ulysses* has an underlying, theme-rich hidden plot – the *Odyssey* structure), these techniques were necessary. They were utilitarian, not gratuitous, and therefore defensible to *Time*’s readership.

To a typical English major, the phrase “realism” is somewhat jarring when applied to Joyce. Although no one doubts the centrality of verisimilitude to Joyce’s project, *realism* as a descriptor surely belongs to the period and the methods that directly preceded Joyce, against which Joyce and his peers responded: a period (High Realism) and a set of methods that, in the accounts of critics ranging in time from Virginia Woolf to Erich Auerbach to Linda Hutcheon, had essentially failed to fulfill its self-prescribed mission of representing life in literature. But *realism* as a period category was likely meaningless to most of Gray’s audience, for whom the term was doubtlessly synonymous with *realistic*. And the long history of the novel’s troubled relationship to realism, Gray told his readers, had made *Ulysses* necessary. Every difficult sentence, every moment of

density, worked in the service of careful representation. *Ulysses* was the realist novel *par excellence*. Gray emphasized Joyce's fidelity to representation, not his avant-gardism. Joyce was revolutionary, but his was fundamentally a conservative revolution. He was, in essence, a good realist.

Time's special issue had synthesized middle-class ideas about literary history and the value of modernist literature. Over the next thirteen years, *The Atlantic* would struggle to synthesize middle-class ideas about the value and function of contemporary literature. In its May 2011 issue, *The Atlantic* published two short stories: one by critically-acclaimed National Book Award finalist Mary Morris and another by the most successful fiction writer in the world, Stephen King. Morris' story was (to risk an oxymoron) classically experimental, an interactive narrative organized as clues to a crossword puzzle, which was framed by the text of the story and could be played by the reader. King's story was another in the author's increasingly frequent forays into literary realism: a group of characters (including a family and two poets) converse before colliding in a fatal car accident.

The Atlantic published these two stories in their annual "Culture Report," a special issue on the arts. In so doing, they deliberately juxtaposed two formally and generically dissimilar works of fiction: a work of experimental fiction by a prize-winner and a work of dark realism by a horror writer. The most striking aspect of the juxtaposition, however, was not the fact that these extremely dissimilar stories were published in a magazine that had been, throughout most of the twentieth century, a significant purveyor of middlebrow realism, not

experimentalism or genre fiction. Instead, the most striking aspect of the juxtaposition was that, despite the dissimilarity the stories, their presence in *The Atlantic* was framed as a kind of united front, a defense of the role of fiction in a magazine that had, by 2011, become a purveyor of nonfiction exclusively. Morris and King's stories were the first works of fiction to appear in six years. Since 2005, *The Atlantic*'s editors had suspended the nearly 150-year practice of publishing fiction in their regular issues, opting instead to publish a single annual "Fiction Issue" that was circulated exclusively on newsstands.

Back in 2005, the editors described their decision to exclude fiction as a matter of economic scarcity. The long-observable wane of fiction in the magazine "reflect[ed] a larger challenge – one that we have long needed to confront. The challenge is 'real estate' – space in the magazine – at a time when in-depth narrative reporting from around the country and the world has become more important than ever" ("77 North Washington"). It was true that, by 2005, the role of short fiction in *The Atlantic* had tapered off significantly, from its mid-twentieth-century height of at least one story per issue to a handful of stories per year. The final piece of fiction to appear in *The Atlantic* in 2005 was "Bullheads" by Michael Lohre, a realist short story about mortality and fishing that appeared in that year's April issue. The April 2005 cover story was "Host," a feature on the rightwing talk radio industry by a novelist, David Foster Wallace.² The final two

² "Host" is notable as perhaps the most byzantine instance of Wallace's trademark experimental footnoting. Footnotes appeared in pastel text boxes, which corresponded to highlighted passages in the body text. Footnotes frequently have their own footnotes; it is unclear whether the essay's concluding sentence is contained in the body text or a footnote.

pages of the issue, meanwhile, featured an obituary of Rose Mary Woods, personal secretary to Richard Nixon, by a rightwing talk radio host, Mark Steyn. Page eleven featured a long obituary of Peter Davison, long-time poetry editor for *The Atlantic*. (A selection: “He detested the retreat of so much modern poetry into the conjuring of fleeting or trivial experience”) (Murphy). In the column announcing the suspension of fiction, the editors offered their readers the economic explanation (“not enough space!”) and also an historical justification:

The Atlantic has never been exactly the same from generation to generation: its sensibility and outlook have been remarkably consistent, but the magazine's components have varied according to the needs of the time. During much of the late nineteenth century *The Atlantic* was primarily a “literary” magazine, dominated by fiction and criticism. At other times we have been an important home for writing by social reformers, academic specialists, and public figures and public intellectuals. Such voices will always have a place. Long-form narrative reporting made its appearance in these pages during the Civil War and has been part of the editorial mixture ever since. Today there is an urgent need, and a corresponding hunger, for this kind of writing. Everyone knows that the surface features of the news are being reported faster all the time, in smaller and smaller bits. But explaining the deeper features of the world requires a different and more expansive kind of reporting—one that has increasingly become

The Atlantic's signature. That reporting consumes a lot of space.

(“77 North Washington”)

The editors of *The Atlantic* were, in short, describing a kind of post-fiction world, one in which the demands of non-fiction were so extensive that they must be met at the expense of fiction. Beginning in 2005, a special, newsstand-only “Fiction Issue” of *The Atlantic* would be published each August, featuring short stories, poems, and nonfiction essays on literature.

Six years later, Morris and King submitted their short stories as their contributions not because *The Atlantic* had reversed its policy, but because it was publishing the “Culture Report” issue, which featured reflections on the theme of “First Drafts.” Celebrated professional artists and creators from a variety of fields were invited to contribute, including visual artist Chuck Close, filmmaker Tim Burton, songwriter Paul Simon, and celebrity chef Grant Achatz. Each reflected on his process of conceiving and executing first drafts. These reflections were advertised by *Atlantic* editors under the ostentatious headline, “How Genius Works.” Novelist T.C. Boyle submitted a typed page from an early draft of his most well-known novel, *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), alongside his reflection. Boyle wrote *The Tortilla Curtain* in the early 1990s on a typewriter, not long before he switched to writing fiction on a personal computer. In his piece for *The Atlantic*, he noted that the typed page, which he calls an “artifact” and which is heavily marked and annotated with Boyle’s handwriting, “is representative of the process that has been replaced by the great and ongoing miracle of technology. The sort of corrections you see [on this page] are now made moment to moment

in the process of composition – and, of course, evidence of those corrections now vanishes with a keystroke, lost in the synaptical fire of the brain/computer matrix.” Boyle proceeded to note the impact of Word processing software on his process, which, he wrote, is significantly changed: “In the old days...this process [redrafting an entire scene] would have occupied the better part of a month.... Now I’m able to accomplish the same thing in three or four days.” In this sentence, Boyle reflects directly on a technologically-induced change in his own writing process. But the earlier sentence describes this change in the passive voice (his typed, hand-edited page “is representative of the process that has been replaced by” computer software), which expands the scope and significance of the change. His piece operates under assumptions (his, the editors’, the reader’s) that the majority of fiction writers use computers and that this fact has somehow changed the process of fiction writing, from conception to draft to perhaps its final form and reception. And although writing software offers greater efficiency, this efficiency naturally has its price. Boyle is unsurprisingly nostalgic for “the old days”:

Still, there was a pleasant rhythm to those hard-typing times, during which I would neatly stack up 10 to 12 finished pages daily, the whole business accumulating in a very satisfying way before I headed off to stroll through the woods or quaff a drink or two at the local bar. It was restful. Contemplative. Deeply satisfying. And let me tell you...back then, I had the strongest fingers in the world.

These nostalgic remembrances are rendered semi-ironically. Those good old days – the finger-empowering “hard-typing times” – are, after all, only the early 1990s. This exaggerated distance is an increasingly common maneuver among writers and artists who periodize the until-recently recent past. One sees this maneuver most often in books, films, and art that self-consciously amplify the already pervasive sense that technology and its effects are changing at exponential, incalculable, and potentially detrimental rates.³ This maneuver is common because it is effective, and it achieves its effect by evoking comedy, nostalgia, and fear simultaneously. First, it exploits the humor of grotesqueries (dial-up modems, enormous cell phones, type-written pages in Courier font) that, through a combination of close historical proximity and sheer physical/technological difference, make the recent past seem much further away than it actually is. Second, it invokes the feeling that something significant has changed in the recent past (people are interacting differently, the world is connected differently, and, therefore, writers are writing differently), and that this change has produced a hitherto unrecognized and potentially irrecoverable loss.

Two months later, the *Atlantic* editors published readers’ letters and e-mails about the “Culture Issue” with a special announcement: fiction would reappear magazine’s regular pages. The editors reported that “*Atlantic* readers happily welcomed the return of regularly scheduled fiction to our pages.” To

³ A representative example from the period is the early scenes in David Fincher’s *The Social Network* (2010), which visually foregrounds computer models, modem speeds, servers, and Web designs from the early 2000s. This foregrounding simultaneously authenticates the setting (Harvard University in 2003) and highlights the distance between the present (2010) and recent past.

justify this claim, they published two letters praising the reappearance of fiction and one archival letter from 2005 that bemoaned the original suspension. Then, under the heading “On the Other Hand, You Can’t Please Everybody,” they published a letter by a reader named Tim Markow, Oakville, Ontario: “Imagine my surprise to find fiction within the May [special] issue. What a waste of space. I read one-third, then into the blue box. Fiction *does not* belong here.” Markow was not the lone voice of dissent. The issue’s longest letter complained that the “Culture Report” did not focus enough on scientific issues, and three of the issues’ non-cultural stories (long pieces on American education, Sarah Palin, and the Arab Spring) generated the most e-mails, online comments, and media coverage, respectively.

Despite the readmission of fiction into the *Atlantic*, the 2011 “Fiction Issue” still appeared on newsstands in August. The issue featured nine short stories, seven poems, and two essays. The first essay, by fiction writer Bret Anthony Johnston, was titled “Don’t Write What You Know,” and described Johnston’s conflicted feelings – both as a writer and instructor – about the well-known dictum of MFA-program realism: “write what you know.” The dictum, argued Johnston, was too iron-clad and confining for the typical MFA student. The second essay was entitled “Do I Repeat Myself?” and written by the novelist John Barth, a paragon of U.S. postmodernism. Like Johnston, Barth worried that emphasis on originality and innovation confined too many contemporary fiction writers. Barth’s essay, the final piece in the “Fiction Issue,” concluded: “Originality, after all, includes not only saying something for the first time, but re-

saying (in a worthy new way) the already said: rearranging an old tune in a different key. ... Has that been said before? No matter: on with the story!”

The cases of both *Time* and *The Atlantic* highlight a number of positions and sensibilities, some assumed by writers of fiction and others by their audiences, that are rooted in the late-twentieth century developments in realism that this dissertation excavates. These positions and sensibilities include hostility toward the triviality of modernist and postmodernist literature (the Davison obituary); literary realism as the normative mode of fiction (Lohre’s “Bullheads”); literary experimentalism as an acceptable mode of journalism (Wallace’s “Host”); interest in periodizing the near past (or distant present) and the sense that something fundamental had recently changed about the production of literature (Boyle’s reflection on typing); ambivalence toward both the Modernist imperative to “make it new” and the MFA-program directive to “write what you know” (Barth and Johnston’s pieces); engagement, and sometimes flirtation, with rightwing political rhetoric (Steyn and Wallace); and the assumption that the public for literary fiction is dwindling, combined with uncertainty about whether to resist or accept this apparent trend (all of the above). Consider the publishing boom in nonfiction over the twenty years preceding *The Atlantic*’s 2011 “Cultural Issue.”⁴ Consider the man who wrote a letter against fiction in *The Atlantic*. Consider the editorial shrug (“can’t please everybody”) that felt as ambivalent as *The Atlantic*’s editorial board’s ultimate policy toward including fiction. And

⁴ See Douglas Hesse’s “The Recent Rise of Literary Nonfiction” (1991); Robert L Root Jr.’s “Naming Nonfiction” (2003); Philip Hensher’s “I think, therefore I am published” (2004); Simon Singh’s “The Rise of Narrative Non-fiction” (2005); and Sam Leith’s “The crisis in non-fiction publishing” (2015).

finally consider that the inclusion of Markow's angry letter functions dually, as humorous aside and as tacit acknowledgement, even appeasement, of an audience for whom reading is pleasurable but reading fiction is not. These are readers who would rather have seen another piece of popular sociology than a short work of realist fiction in *The Atlantic*, readers who seemed not merely to prefer nonfiction but to actively dislike something about fiction. These readers had apparently effected editorial oscillations in once venerable purveyors of U.S. fiction and propped up an enfeebled publishing industry by way of nonfiction sales. They remind us that the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is more significant than its lack of theorization by literary scholars suggests.⁵

Of course, letters to the editor aside, the relationship between these readers and the authors/editors of fiction tends to be impersonal, conducted either through sales (which, as a source of feedback, is often inscrutable, because sales are so heavily mediated by complex channels of capital and distribution), through limited exchanges at readings and like events, or else through the imagination, whatever the writer or editor *thinks* his potential audience wants. The actual practices and preferences of readers who like nonfiction but not fiction may be unknown to the author and editor of fiction, but, since at least the 1980s, fiction writers have imagined these readers' practices and preferences and this, consequently, altered the way fiction writers in the U.S. viewed fiction.

2. Backlash Realism: The Insurgency against Late Postmodernism

⁵ This lack of theorization is a recurrent theme in Dorrit Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction*. Recent narratological attention to the category of fictionality has only further removed discussion of categorical "fiction" from genres of fiction itself, a development that will be discussed at greater length in the Coda.

The anxieties listed above – over the possibility of innovation, and fear of repetition, after modernism; over the possible degeneration of literature during postmodernism; over the role of personal experience in fiction; over the incursion of rightwing political rhetoric into broader cultural discourse; over increased attention to the marketplace as an arbiter of literary value; over the relationship between nonfiction and fiction; and over the survival of fiction itself in a period of industry consolidation, publishing house mergers, proliferating bigbox chainstores, and apparent public apathy – preoccupied novelists in the 1980s. These anxieties, although separate from one another, produced an atmosphere of paranoia that congealed into an apparent whole within literary culture, and debates about the role of postmodernism is where this paranoia was most strenuously exorcised. At the beginning of the 1980s, nearly everyone assumed postmodernism was still happening, and this assumption informed how non-postmodern (and counter-postmodern) literary movements were demarcated and defined. By the end of the 1980s, this assumption proved to be a grave misconception: postmodernism, however one defined it, had waned. This dissertation charts the history of an insurgency within postmodernism's presumed hegemony. This insurgency included writers who constructed their literary projects against the grain of the 1980s' cultural dominant. These writers took realism – in various forms and according to various definitions – as their mantel, and conceived of a new socio-literary dominant premised on their interpretations of realism. In short, this dissertation examines the anti-postmodern backlash that occurred amid (what turned out to be) the postmodern period's death throes. This

backlash would inform the discourse surrounding postmodernism's legacy and the periodization of American literature – and American culture – in the decades that followed the long 1980s. Traces of this backlash's core assumptions can be detected in the special issues discussed above.

Taking the High Postmodern fiction of the 1950s and '60s (culminating with the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973) as its prologue, this dissertation examines postmodernism's experiments with the ontology of fact, particularly in the many iterations of postmodern historical fiction (what Hutcheon called "historical metafiction"), where the controversy of factuality was particularly acute. We then examine writers whose careers peaked, or continued to develop, in the period after the postmodern heyday of the 1950s and '60s, whose work – both fictional and nonfictional – constituted the debates over the role of factuality, historicity, realism and verisimilitude in the American novel. These writers include Gore Vidal, Don DeLillo, E.L. Doctorow, Robert Coover, Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, Tom Wolfe, Jonathan Franzen, and Nicholson Baker. Several of these writers reacted against postmodern techniques and epistemologies, a reaction that corresponded to wider social backlash against the perceived social and economic excesses of the 1960s and 1970s. They did so partly with the literary market in mind – writers like Vidal, Wolfe, and Franzen seek to uncover "the next big thing" that will replace postmodern fiction – but their market maneuvers had ideological consequences and came to constitute a nationalized vision of the American novel.

Amid the novelists, projects, and debates I examine in the long 1980s, I also analyze the rhetoric of postmodernity and the crisis of historicity in the academy during this period: namely the proliferation of Foucauldian analysis in the U.S., the rise of postmodern historiography, the emergence of New Historicism, the cultural turn in post-structuralism, and the canon wars of the 1980s. These new fields of knowledge and controversies added wrinkles to the literary marketplace that were not ignored by the novelists at the center of my project, who alternately resisted and engaged with contemporary academic developments in their quest to construct a new and radical literary realism.

To approach this period in literary history, one must have a working definition of “postmodernism.” In his 2005 study *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*, Jeremy Green introduced sociologist Craig Calhoun’s fourfold definition of the ways critics use the term “postmodernism.” Green described the first definition of postmodernism as applying to “a stylistic trend in art, architecture, and literature, typified by allusiveness, play, loose or arbitrary structures, fragmentation, willful superficiality, and the collision or commingling of high and low registers” (2). Second, the term “postmodernism” is used conterminously with “post-structuralism,” particularly in the Anglophone academy after continental philosophy gained prominence in the 1970s. Third, the term is used loosely to refer to anti-foundationalist currents in Western philosophy, beginning with Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger and extending through Richard Rorty and his challenge to the analytical tradition in Anglo-American philosophy. Finally, Green identified a “cluster of meanings

[that stem] from the use of the word postmodernism in social theory. ... Such approaches emphasize the fundamental role played by new communications media in the formation of society and argue that modern social theory, tied to the thought of Max Weber and Karl Marx, must now be seen as obsolete” (3).

Identifying Fredric Jameson as a chief proponent of this fourth definition, Green wrote: “this kind of postindustrial theory is frequently the subtext of other claims made in the name of postmodernism: the ‘post’ declares a conceptual and historical break from modernity and from Marxism.” We cannot compartmentalize these four different uses of postmodernism as easily as Green or Calhoun do. These four definitions of postmodernism bled one into another as they were experienced and understood at the time. With this caveat, however, Green/Calhoun’s definitions are useful, and I will rely on them to help navigate the category of “postmodernism” in this dissertation.

One of the most noted attributes of aesthetic postmodernism is that, despite the apparent intrinsic periodicity of its name, its forms, modes, and practices are surprisingly transhistorical, so that one can easily locate “the postmodern” in, say, *Don Quixote* or *Tristram Shandy*. The opposite might be said of realism: despite the obvious transhistorical practice of mimesis in nearly all aesthetic traditions, the term “realism” is frequently winnowed into a very specific historical period. Although books and critical essays on literary realism after 1920 are innumerable, many scholars confine serious attempts to define “realism” to mere periodization: literary realism is what happened to the novel during the second half of the nineteenth century, more or less, in Europe, Britain,

and the United States. It is the set of practices employed by George Eliot and Charles Dickens in England; Leo Tolstoy in Russia; William Dean Howells and Stephen Crane in the United States; Gustave Flaubert and, perhaps above all, Honoré de Balzac in France. Phillip J. Barrish's *Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism* (2011) dealt exclusively with the period from Nathaniel Hawthorne and the decline of American Romanticism in the 1840s to the period of Zitkala-Ša and the rise of American modernism in the 1920s. Even the conclusion, entitled "Realisms after realism," touched only on the traditional demarcation between realism and modernism, and noted the persistence of realist techniques up through the apogee of American Modernism. Barrish warned against the traditional literary historical narrative that separates realism from modernism – "any boundary-line between 'realism' and 'modernism' must remain blurry at best" – but did not attempt to represent realism's persistence beyond the 1940s (198).

Gordon Hutner, in his study of middle-class realism after 1920, has sought to temper the "enthusiasm for studying the novel's formal changes – up to and out of realism," a phrase that nicely captures the traditional literary history of Anglophone literature: the rise of the novel into, and then out of, realism (329). In Hutner's account, realism's persistence occurred in perpetual resistance to the canon: "[B]ecause they occupy the very center of the literary landscape, these middle-class realistic novels....constituted the merely ordinary, that is, the fiction against which academic tastemakers later needed to contradistinguish the best" (1). Wendy Steiner has described the persistence of realism after modernism as a

kind of dual tradition, underneath and distinct from postmodernism (“Postmodern Fictions”). According to both Hutner and Steiner, realism existed in the period between 1920 and 1990 as a separate tradition that, among other functions, provided a haven to women and minority and ethnic writers who did not participate in the (mostly white, male) innovations of High Postmodernism. Steiner was particularly sharp on this point: during the 1960s and ‘70s, large, difficult novels were privileged by literary historians and critics while domestic and social realisms were routinely kept off the syllabus. It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s, argued Steiner, that realism began to gain a kind of respectability – in large part due to its engagement with the innovations of late postmodernism (e.g., the work of Toni Morrison, which blended folk history, lived experience, and perception with traditional realism in ways that approach, but do not quite constitute, postmodernism).

Still, Hutner and Steiner’s interventions remain firmly ensconced in literary history; they provide alternative histories and alternative canons. Attempts to theorize realism in more theoretical, non-periodizing terms tend to rely, as Fredric Jameson noted in *Antinomies of Realism* (2015), on realism’s opposition with other terms, which, Jameson went on to note, are almost always historical. Jameson enumerated realism’s many structural antagonisms, ranging from “realism vs. epic” and “realism vs. romance” to “realism vs. melodrama, realism vs. idealism, realism vs. naturalism, (bourgeois or critical) realism vs. socialist realism, and of course, most frequently rehearsed of all, realism vs. modernism” (2). Even György Lukács’s classic studies of European realism dealt with its

subject in oppositional relation to its latter developments: naturalism, symbolism, and modernism, which Lukács, in Jameson's words, "deplored" for their "degeneration of realist practice" (1). In his own work, Jameson grasped realism in chronological terms, with its formation in "storytelling and the tale" – what he elsewhere calls "the narrative impulse" – at one end and "the literary representation of affect" at the other (10, 15). "A new concept of realism," he continued, "is then made available when we grasp both these terminal points firmly at one and the same time." New, perhaps, and certainly broadened; but still firmly periodized, with something like modernism ("the literary representation of affect") conspicuously bookending realism's *telos*. For Jameson, a crisis between these terms is built into the structure of realism, and this crisis somehow undercuts any project of definition. He wrote:

What we can at least conclude...is that we have here finally located the definitive formulation for the discursive opposition we have been trying to name. Now it can be articulated not as *récit* versus *roman*, nor even as telling versus showing; but rather destiny versus the eternal past. And what is crucial is not to load our dies and take sides for the one or the other as all our theorists seemed to do, but rather to grasp the proposition that realism lies at their intersection. Realism is a consequence of the tension between these two terms; to resolve the opposition either way would destroy it.... And this is also why it is justified to find oneself always talking about the emergence or the breakdown of realism

and never about the thing itself, since we always find ourselves discussing a potential emergence of a potential breakdown. (26)

This describes realism as a kind of negative space around which other modes, genres, and literary practices substantiate themselves. This always lends realism a façade of neutrality, a façade which the insurgent realists examined in this dissertation will make much of.

Barrish and Steiner warned against making too clean a distinction between the innovations of modernism/postmodernism and practices of realism. This dissertation frequently distinguishes between “realist” and “experimental”/“postmodern” fictions, but does so provisionally, because so many important novelists and popular critics of the period did so. Realist and experimental practices, though not mutually exclusive (any more than “social” and “psychological” realisms are mutually exclusive), are forcibly segregated by Wolfe and other novelist-critics. This segregation is not reflected among the majority of experimental and realist novelists of this period, but is acutely reflected among the insurgent realists. Despite often having theoretical objections to positivism, postmodern writers have usually claimed “realism” as a central component of their project. Likewise, as Steiner reminded us, by the 1970s and ‘80s, realist novelists – particularly but not exclusively women authors and minority and ethnic writers – were incorporating anti-realistic elements and experimentation into their novels, to great effect. What demarcates the novelists in this study is their adamant refusal to do so.

A racial dimension exists in this demarcation: the insurgent realists this dissertation examines are mostly white and male. Each, in his own way, constructs his literary project as a response to – or backlash against – the perceived dual threats of postmodern literary hegemony on the one hand and minority or identitarian fiction on the other. I will examine how these authors subtly conflate the modes and practices of traditional literary realism (as each of them defines it) with a kind of ontological neutrality, a space that is uncomplicated by post-positivist, anti-essentialist critique or by ethnic specificity. For them, this space is essentially blank; ultimately, this space is white.

What threat does postmodernism pose to the white male realists I examine? One oft-repeated complaint is that postmodern literature threatens to destroy the novel, either by permanently alienating audiences from literary reading or by smothering the whole process of literary representation itself with decadent experimentation. These concerns coincide with cultural and political anxieties shared by American conservatives during this period. “Anxieties over the future of the book are, by definition, *culturally* conservative,” wrote Green, “but are not necessarily of a *politically* conservative character, any more than enthusiasm about the latest technology automatically signals political radicalism. Yet the arguments of the elegists do occasionally converge with neoconservative positions in the ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s and 1990s” (6). The political affiliations of the novelists aside, the debates I have excavated startlingly echo the conservative political rhetoric of the long 1980s. The metaphors or tropes that novelists like Vidal, Wolfe, and Franzen employed to debate and discuss the state

of the novel after postmodernism borrowed language from contemporary anxieties and centerpieces of the culture wars: nationalism and national decline, urban decay, white flight, financialization, a return to the language of the market economy, and the AIDS epidemic.

3. The Decline and Fall of Postmodernism

What was happening by the late 1980s to produce the strange milieu of styles and assumptions that underlie what we might call, in *The Atlantic* in 2011, contemporary fiction? One factor was certainly something like the end of postmodernism in each of the valences that Green described above. In the critical year of 1989, Linda Hutcheon conceded: “Let’s just say it: it’s over” (*Politics* 166). “[T]he postmodern moment has passed,” she wrote, even if many of its core assumptions, ideas, and contributions persisted (*Politics* 181). In 2007, Neil Brooks and Josh Toth wrote:

In the mid to late-eighties, in fact, a number of events seemed to herald the end of postmodernism as the reigning epistemological dominant: the journal *Granta* published an issue dedicated to American “dirty realism”; neorealist writers like Raymond Carver rose in status; Tom Wolfe published his “Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel”; Paul de Man’s youthful association with National Socialism was uncovered; Donald Barthelme (along with [Samuel] Beckett) died; Derrida seemed to suddenly shift his attention to distinctly ethico-political issues; religious thinkers, like Emmanuel Levinas, began to garner significant critical attention;

and the Berlin Wall fell, suggesting the final triumph of capitalism.⁶ (*Mourning* 2)

To this list one might add John Barth's 1990 essay "The Novel in the Next Century," which "despairs of the future of literature, and of the book in general" (Green 55). The essay was Barth's third in a series, following his postmodern treatise "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) and its revision, "The Literature of Replenishment" (1980). In "The Novel in the Next Century," Barth seemed to align himself, wrote Jeremy Green, with "works such as E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987) and Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987)," two bowshots in the culture wars. Barth is even more pessimistic than Hirsch or Bloom about the future of American literary culture. Literary reading would become, Barth predicted, a "more or less elite taste, akin to chess or equestrian dressage" (qtd. in Green 55).⁷

⁶ Brooks and Toth continued: "Given that postmodernism is typically defined by its opposition to all latent utopian impulses, the fall of the last viable political alternative (i.e. the utopian promise of communism) seemingly speaks to the victory and hegemony of a distinctly postmodern, or late-capitalist, ideology. ... In *the wake of socialism*, postmodernism's increasingly dogmatic rejection of all utopian discourses began to seem totalitarian, if not dangerously utopian" (2).

⁷ Earlier in the decade, in 1982, Barth had spoken at a symposium the French *Nouveau roman* co-sponsored by New York University and the French embassy; Barth remarked on the assembly's anxiety about whether the United States would not experience its own *Nouveau roman*: "I do not detect...anything resembling a noteworthy new general direction in the U.S. novel. ... I believe the new flowering of the American realist story...to be the most noteworthy recent development in American fiction" (*Friday Book* 256 – 257). (Cautiously, he added, "But so rapidly does the literary weather change, I feel impelled to date this observation 3 p.m., October 2, 1982, and fix the latitude and longitude as well.") This exactitude self-consciously recalled Virginia Woolf's remark about the exact date of the beginning of modernism, but also reflected the growing aesthetic of exactitude – most visible in minimalism and the hyperrealisms of late postmodernism – that pervaded the period in which Barth spoke. In 1980, Robert Cheever's collected stories won the National Book Award in 1980 – an event as symbolic of the era's literary mood as *Gravity's Rainbow* National Book Award six years earlier.

The following year saw the First Stuttgart Seminar in Cultural Studies, which included Barth, and was titled “The End of Postmodernism: New Directions.” For some, the new direction American literature would take was obvious: late in 1991, the same year as the Stuttgart Seminar, *The Best American Short Stories 1992* appeared. Its editor, Robert Stone, described American writers turning away from preoccupations with language games and concerns about the viability of literary representation toward seemingly clearer, less mediated forms of narrative. In the volume’s introduction, he wrote:

In their variety, these stories reflect what is probably the most significant development in late-twentieth-century American fiction, the renewal and revitalization of the realist mode, which has been taken up by a new generation of writers. This represents less a ‘triumph’ of realism than the obviation of old arguments about the relationship between life and language. As of 1992, American writers seem ready to accept traditional forms without self-consciousness in dealing with the complexity of the world around them. (qtd. in Rebein 18)

Such declarations about a “renewal” of realism were common in the early 1990s: there was, according to critic Robert McLaughlin, “a desire to reconnect language to the social sphere” and move beyond “the dead end of postmodernism” (qtd. in

Literary institutions were looking for something new, and realism – particularly the realisms associated with the short story – seemed to fit the bill.

Dubey 364). For postmodernism, the writing was on the wall, and the walls were coming down.

Another event during this period: John Guillory's seminal critical study of canons, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1992), helped introduced the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to American literary studies. This, and his chapter on the Paul de Man scandal, marked a repudiation of post-structuralism – which was so often conflated with postmodernism, such that the two terms were sometimes used interchangeably – while eliding the “cultural turn” that supplanted High Theory throughout the academy during this period. Instead, Guillory offered a new way forward for literary studies, one that would become extremely influential in the late 1990s and 2000s.⁸ The new literary sociology and its attendant subfields provided a dramatic alternative to the methods and theories that had defined English departments for nearly a quarter century.

By the end of the 1990s, the whole history of postmodernism was being rewritten. As noted above, Wendy Steiner, whose influential section in the seventh volume of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1999) offered a sophisticated reading of the literary history of post-1945 American fiction, argued that High Postmodernism's methods had proliferated in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s alongside works of domestic realism and novels by racial and ethnic minorities. These latter novelists, as we saw in the previous section, received less critical attention than did the High Postmodernists (most of whom were white,

⁸ This was particularly true in Victorian studies.

straight, and male). Literary historians, argued Steiner, were too quick to divide these two types of novels – PoMo fiction and (domestic/minority) realism – into separate categories. They had in essence erected a wall that, by the time the wall fell in Berlin, had begun to feel unstable and perforated (Steiner’s contribution to the *Cambridge History* significantly ends in 1990). Steiner, wrote Amy Hungerford in 2008,

quite elegantly represents the position in which the next generation of scholars of this literature found themselves as they defended their dissertations in the closing years of the twentieth century. She showed how a reading of experimentalist novels can be—and, indeed, must be—integrated with a discussion of realist writing. She thus set herself the task of undoing the reigning bifurcation of contemporary fiction into the “postmodern” avant-garde and the writing of women and people of color that was so often dismissed, in the academy, as naively realist or concerned more with social issues than with the development of literary aesthetics. (“On the Period” 411).

Hungerford continued by describing in detail not only Steiner’s contribution to literary history’s understanding of its own practices in the period from 1960 through 1990, but also Steiner’s contribution to a post-1990 literary history that was better suited to account for the end of the twentieth century. The following long passage by Hungerford neatly described Steiner’s contribution to the

reconfiguration of literary history, a reconfiguration that would influence studies and syllabi in the early decades of the twenty-first century:

...Steiner was informed by the culture wars of the 1990s, but not shackled by them. Her account of what would then have been labeled as contemporary fiction crystallized an emerging critical consensus that the categories produced both by the literary press and by the academic disputes over the canon produced, at best, a misleading opposition between these two kinds of writing. At worst, that opposition suggested a hierarchy of value in which the writing of mainly white male authors such as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gaddis, and Don DeLillo was deemed “literary” whereas the work of writers such as Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Alice Walker, and Joan Didion was thought to be mainly concerned with the sociological aspects of fiction. This bifurcation of value, a legacy of New Criticism’s investment in modernist difficulty, was one of the primary ways that modernist understandings of the literary stretched beyond the moment of high modernist aesthetic production. The way Steiner mixes up the categories—by pointing out, for example, the literary self-consciousness on display in Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1993), the significance of Oedipa Maas as a housewife in Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* (1966), or the way Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) came to seem like a realist novel

in the age of Vietnam—has become, since the late 1990s, the standard practice among critics working in the field (“On the Period” 411).

In other words, the category of postmodernism – insofar as it persisted beyond its 1989/90/91/92 expiration date – was retroactively rendered far more elastic, far more continuous with realism, the category which postmodernism had always been considered anathema to, than previous literary historians had recognized. And indeed, the generation of experimental/postmodern writers who were coming of age in the late 1990s – figures like David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, et al – were viewed as far more engaged with realism, and far more provisional in their adoption of postmodernism’s epistemological assumptions, than their predecessors had been. David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) was framed as a kind of *détente* between postmodernism’s formal innovations and realism’s representational capacities. By the 2000s and 2010s, critics deployed new terms and ideas – “post-postmodernism,” “hysterical realism,” “cosmodernism,” “New Sincerity,” “renewalism,” “the return of the omniscient narrator,” “the therapeutic turn” – to describe the formally ambitious fiction of the new millennium.

These critics were interested in what follows postmodernism; I am interested in what occurred alongside it. This dissertation examines the various kinds of backlash that postmodernism inspired after two decades as the apparently dominant form of U.S. fiction. Even during its period of decline in the 1980s, postmodernism seemed to constitute a cultural hegemony, and a confederacy of

culturally conservative novelists wrote in direct opposition to what they perceived as rampant and decadent decline in U.S. literature.

Chapter One sets the scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when many writers and critics assumed that postmodern literature had exerted near total influence over literary representation for at least two decades. While this assumption is debatable (non-experimental realisms remained the dominant force in Anglophone literary culture throughout the mid-twentieth century), it generated a productive anxiety about the status and viability of the postmodern project. This anxiety produced a crisis of representation, which was expressed in numerous genres, from recognizably postmodern fiction itself to psychological realism, historical realism, and neorealism. The central concern for writers in all these genres was “getting it right,” or representing reality with fidelity. This crisis drew from currents in the academy: new theories about historiography and historical realism, the rise of New Historicism, and postmodern literary criticism *per se*, all of which challenged the possibility of easy or straightforward representation. Chapter One contextualizes the rise of neorealism against the backdrop of these developments in the fields of English and history, using figures such as Hayden White, Stanley Fish, and (especially) Linda Hutcheon as benchmarks for the theoretical shifts that informed both narratives about the crisis and collapse of postmodern literature and the various backlash realisms that consolidated against the postmodern literary project.

The first chapter is necessarily broad in its focus. Chapter Two narrows this focus by taking up the case of Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*, a novel which generated

a minor controversy about the role of historical fiction vis-à-vis the historical record. I argue that Vidal's historical fiction attempts to expand the status of fictionality to absorb the historical record, deliberately pitting fiction against a separate structure of meaning – factuality – all while maintaining that fiction is expansive enough to encompass it. Vidal audaciously claims that his fact is fiction, and vice versa. This chapter engages with the work of Catherine Gallagher and Dorrit Cohn on the nature and distinction of fictionality.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of fictionality, and of the novel genre which developed alongside it in the eighteenth century, is its relationship to middle-class subjectivity. Chapter Three addresses how the traditional liberal subject – which is historically central to the novel's structural integrity – was developed and challenged by novels amid the representational crises of the 1980s. This chapter examines several historical novels of the era, including works of explicit realism and works of self-conscious postmodern experimentation, and focuses on the figure of the U.S. president as he appears in novels by Vidal, Philip K. Dick, Ishmael Reed, Robert Coover, Kathy Acker and Don DeLillo. The figure of the president presents a unique challenge to any author who attempts to develop a subjectivity-driven novel. This chapter examines postmodern strategies alongside realist strategies for dealing with this challenge.

In the 1980s in the United States, liberal subjectivity was characterized by paranoia, and the relationship between reading and paranoia was a fruitful site of inquiry for post-structuralist literary critics in that decade. Chapter Four examines developments in paranoia as it relates to the construction and reception of fiction,

particularly realist fiction in the 1980s. To situate this issue historically, I examine two responses to the AIDS epidemic, which represents one of the major events of the long 1980s and presented a unique crisis of representation in itself. I return to Vidal, whose relationship to paranoia as a mode of reading and writing is particularly vexed, and also engage with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," which, apart from its long afterlife as an influential critical essay, constitutes a monumental representation of paranoia in the 1980s and of the AIDS crisis. Both Vidal and Sedgwick pose unique responses to the AIDS epidemic, both of which entail (albeit highly qualified) rejection of paranoia. This chapter attempts to demarcate and taxonomize the various paranoias that run through their work. Ultimately, this chapter charts the great difficulty of constructing a productive alternative to paranoia amid the dominant discourses of the long 1980s. These discourses, which invite paranoid reading or cynical naïveté, include: decentralization, cultural fragmentation, and anti-institutionalism.

While the paranoid subject is central to any interpretation of literature during the long 1980s, so is the figure of the realist writer as counterrevolutionary against the limits on epistemology that paranoid reading produces. Chapter Five analyzes two manifestos of literary realism that appeared in 1989 and 1996: Tom Wolfe's "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" and Jonathan Franzen's "Perchance to Dream." The chapter analyzes dominant metaphors that run through both manifestos, including: machinery and mechanization; engineering; financialization; journalism; urbanization and urban planning; white flight;

ghettoization; and immigration. This chapter also situates their projects in the broader “culture wars” in which U.S. cities and universities were embroiled in the 1980s and 1990s. Both Wolfe and Franzen, in different ways, seek to construct a neutral literary realism – a fictional project marked by a kind of invisibility of style and form – that suppresses the identitarian and ideological preoccupations which, in their view, threaten literature.

While my dissertation is primarily interested in writers who were invested in the discourse of reactionary backlash that marked the 1980s, I found it necessary to address developments in experimentalism during that decade that stood apart from any obvious or overt investment in the conflict between neorealism and postmodernism. My final chapter serves as an extended conclusion to the dissertation itself, departing from some of its main characters and preoccupations while refracting its themes through a new lens. It takes up the literary experiments of Nicholson Baker, and contends that Baker consolidated sensibilities from the neorealists of the 1980s into his influential brand of experimental fiction, particularly the sensitivity to fact, actuality, and literalism. These modes of literary representation were present in postmodernism prior to Baker, but Baker’s careful attention to them – and his refusal, despite his general playfulness, to treat the process of literary representation as a game – reflect the influence of socio-cultural attitudes that were also influencing neo and other realists at the end of the twentieth century. In short, Baker’s literary output carefully – at times obsessively – partitions fact, actuality, and empirically verified reality from fiction, perception, and remembrance.

Ultimately, this dissertation studies the limits of the novel and of fictionality: what can and cannot be represented in a novel, given the historico-structural architecture of the genre and the functions of fictionality. How elastic is the genre? Where is its horizon? Consequently, I conclude with a brief coda examining developments in narratology concerning the status and function of fictionality *per se*.

Of this dissertation's six chapters, four deal directly with Gore Vidal. His prominence in this project is not accidental. Vidal has been underrepresented in literary criticism of the 1980s. Today, he is viewed primarily as a figure of what John Barth called the High Sixties, an American Oscar Wilde and cultural counterpart to William F. Buckley in the fierce (and heavily televised) debates of that period. But beginning in 1973 with the publication of his novel *Burr*, Vidal began a literary project that, as this dissertation will show, would speak directly to the perception, shared by so many neorealists, that a resurgence of hard realism was necessary after decades in the wilderness of postmodernism. Unlike many neorealists, Vidal believed this resurgence ought to occur not in "New Journalism," creative nonfiction, or the short story but in the novel. He had long decried the influence of European postmodernisms on American literature, and seems a natural elder statesman to place alongside younger advocates of novelistic realism, such as Tom Wolfe or Jonathan Franzen. Further, his literary project would represent one of the boldest – and strangest – experiments in literary realism, one that challenged preconceptions about the novel's relationship to its own fictional structure in the name of historical realism. I have found that

one cannot write about the backlash against postmodernism, cultural politics in the period between 1974 and 1996, and the novel without confronting Gore Vidal.

During his confirmation hearings in March 2017, President Donald Trump's nominee for the Supreme Court Neil Gorsuch quoted David Foster Wallace in response to senatorial questioning. This prompted a flurry of articles questioning whether the ultra-conservative Gorsuch's relationship to Wallace was a natural one, whether Gorsuch's taste in literature made any sense – how could such a conservative figure enjoy the author of *Infinite Jest*? Alex Shepherd, writing in *The New Republic*, reminded readers that the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia had professed his admiration for Wallace's writing, and that Wallace could count many fans among the staff of the conservative *National Review*. Shepherd wrote:

Gorsuch will be our first lit bro Supreme Court justice. Wallace is the lingua franca of a certain subset of overeducated, usually wealthy, extremely self-serious (mostly) men. Wallace's bandana and occasional playfulness disguised this, but history has slowly revealed what has always been true, which is that David Foster Wallace was exactly the kind of person who would be into David Foster Wallace, just smarter. Gorsuch and the sneakily conservative Wallace are peas in a pod. Wallace has quietly become a favorite of many archconservatives over the last decade.

This dissertation tells the story that precedes *Infinite Jest*, the apex of Wallace's career that arguably marked the literary-historical ceasefire between realist and

postmodernist modes (both of which Wallace embodied in dramatic fashion). My aim is, in part, to make Gorsuch's taste in literature seem less incongruous, to establish how the "lit bros" got their footing and found their voice in a protracted backlash against decades of literary experimentalism that was associated primarily with the counterculture and the Left. This backlash revealed more than a comedy of manners among elite American writers or a squabble over political sensibilities – it highlighted consequential questions about the nature of novelistic representation and the limits of the novel as a genre of fiction.

Chapter I

“Getting it Right”:

Postmodernism, Neorealism, and the Dilemma of Representation

“I am thus led to the proposition that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative”

- E.L. Doctorow, 1977 (qtd. in Berger 106)

“And the trouble with much historical fiction is that it’s so concerned with getting the ‘facts’ straight – as given in the documents of history – that the artistic truth gets lost”

- John Barth, *The Friday Book* (190).

In the year of the nation’s bicentennial, Gore Vidal published *1876*, the second in his series of novels about the political history of the United States. His protagonist was Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler, a New York Dutch journalist with occasional ambitions toward literary fiction who observed the U.S. literary scene in 1876 after many decades abroad: “Our literature is a battlefield now.... It is a war to the very knife between the realists, as they like to call themselves, and the writers of good taste....” (1876 79). “Good taste” was code for European sensibilities, which Vidal typically denigrated when they appeared in twentieth-century American life, despite his personal immersion in European culture. Vidal’s Schuyler is a similarly complicated mix of proclivities and aversions. He once aspired to emulate Washington Irving, became an unapologetic Francophile late in life, but still longed for a native strain of American letters that (when he described it) adhered to nineteenth-century continental forms: Balzac and Flaubert

with an American voice. In the novel, he disparages Mark Twain for his folksiness. He also disparages those novelists who belong to the realist lineage that will culminate, the reader knows, with Henry James and Edith Wharton. Dedicated readers of Vidal know that this moment – the moment when the Jamesian realist novel emerged – represented, in Vidal’s opinion, the apex of American literature, after which the U.S. novel suffered from steady modernist and (more rapidly) postmodernist malaise. In short, Schulyer is Vidal’s fool, getting the literary scene in 1876 all wrong; and yet he speaks for Vidal in 1976 remarkably well.

By the late 1970s, one could easily reconstruct Schuyler’s rollicking literary scene. Insurgent New Journalists, including Tom Wolfe, staked a claim on the practices of fiction. Strains of what would later be called “neorealism,” which arguably included Vidal’s historical fiction, began to emerge: Russell Banks, Richard Ford, Raymond Carver, and others who would be labeled, in the next decade, “dirty realists,” started their careers. Meanwhile, countless popular critics (including Vidal) championed seemingly any literary aesthetic that defined itself in contradistinction to the *nouveau roman* of the 1960s, or the sprawling experimental novels of the 1970s – in other words, the fashionable “writers of good taste.” In the United States, these included William Gaddis, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Robert Coover, William Gass, and others to whom we apply the vexed but ultimately unavoidable term “postmodern.” The new realisms of the 1970s and High Postmodernism did not represent separate genres or even separate styles but rather separate strategies within the system of

literary representation. Debates beyond the world of fiction, particularly trends in the practice of the humanities as a whole, shaped the development of the strategies used by neorealist and postmodernist authors. The critical question that occupied many writers and critics of the period was not *what* fiction should represent nor *how* fiction should represent, but *whether* representation itself was possible. This chapter proposes that the challenge of literary representation – and the possibility of representation itself – demarcated the significant divide between neorealist and postmodernist strategies, not because the practitioners of these strategies fundamentally disagreed about the answer to the question of representation (i.e., can faithful literary verisimilitude occur?), but precisely because they agreed so forcefully.

If presented with the question of whether representation is possible, writers as disparate as Reed, Pynchon, Vidal, and Wolfe would answer with a highly qualified “yes” (an answer that resonated in their work if not always in interviews and other public statements). The key difference between them was the emphasis: whereas Pynchon, in a novel like *Gravity’s Rainbow*, confronted the problem of representing war by essentially saying, “It can’t be represented, but it can,” Vidal, confronted with the saga of nineteenth-century American politics, said, “It can be represented, but not really.” The black comedy and playful negations of American postmodern fiction belied a fundamental optimism at its heart. In the face of representation – the problem of “getting it right,” as Philip

Roth would describe it – the American postmodernist continually asserted, “No, but yes.” The neorealists, meanwhile, asserted, “Yes, but no.”⁹

This chapter provides the historical and conceptual scaffolding for the rest of the dissertation. It situates the development of neorealism along this central fault – “Yes, but no” – which can be traced across the late 1970s and 1980s, when ideas about postmodernism set the agenda in the theory and practice of fiction, literary criticism, and historiography. This chapter examines the persistent belief in postmodernism’s hegemony and the underlying anxiety about modernist innovation that underscores this belief; and it examines the crisis of representation as it is developed in theories of psychological realism, historiography and historical realism, and postmodernism *per se*. The problem of representing the mind, whether through psychological realism or postmodernist streams of consciousness, and the problem of representing history, whether through historical realism or historiographic metafiction, are linked. The mind and history delineate the outer limits of representation, that which is least susceptible to objectification; the theorization of the mind and history by critics during the 1970s and ‘80s shaped the unique trajectories toward which postmodernism and neorealism would, asymptotically and in direct contradistinction to one another, approach these limits.

1. The Dilemma of Representation

⁹ Either response might be equally represented by the cryptic opening of John Barth’s 1984 preface to his 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion”: “YES, WELL.” The preface, written during a period when Barth’s views on literary postmodernism were undergoing significant revision, proceeds to tell the story of a young method actor at Penn State also named John Barth who, cast to play a rapist and much too immersed in his craft, actually rapes a young woman. A crisis of representation.

As Gordon Hutner has convincingly demonstrated, the majority of literary production and consumption throughout the late twentieth century was realist: award-winning and bestselling novels were more likely to represent some variety of realism than to represent anything recognizably experimental or postmodern. Even observers as hostile as Tom Wolfe admitted that postmodern decadence had, by 1989, subsided and given way to other experiments, such as literary minimalism (“Stalking”). As Andrew Hoberek has corroborated, literary scholars tend to treat the transition from the 1960s and ‘70s to the 1980s as a transition between literary postmodernism and minimalism (“Modernism as Genre”). During this time, the short story emerged as the central form in minimalism and its successors. Meanwhile, the realist dictum “show don’t tell,” which dates back to Henry James and Percy Lubbock’s early theories of fiction, remained one of the founding tenets of the U.S. writing workshop, whose proliferation provided institutional energy to the emergence and prominence of the short story (see Mark McGurl, *The Program Era*). These factors all contributed to the perception of the novel’s decline, and of the traditional realist novel’s decline in particular in the wake of postmodernism.¹⁰ But among critics, academics, and scholars who linked literature to spheres beyond the aesthetic (history, sociology, psychology, economics), postmodernism remained a fruitful and persistent subject of inquiry. Arguably the most famous essay on the subject, Fredric Jameson’s

¹⁰ This perception generated solidarity – and no small amount of resentment – among those novelists who viewed realism as their *métier*, viewed modernist/postmodernist experimentalism with suspicion or disdain, and chose to operate primarily outside the university workshop. This solidarity created common purpose among the novelists I examine in this dissertation.

“Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” was published in *New Left Review* in 1984. The essay was anthologized in a volume of the same name in the late year of 1992. Linda Hutcheon, one of the most influential expositors of the postmodern in the academy, published most of her influential work in the 1980s and early 1990s. Within the academy, postmodernism (especially insofar as it was conterminous with post-structuralism and other forms of post-positivism) held a theoretical and critical dominance during this period, even if its literary expressions were waning.

In 1876, Vidal offered an oblique history of the perceived threat posed by postmodernism. His protagonist, Schuyler, denigrated the aesthetic lineage that Vidal most revered: realism, the fashionable upstart that threatened the American literary tradition. My second chapter will examine Vidal’s ardent defense of realism and the possibility of representational clarity; what matters here is his account of American literary history in 1876, a struggle between American neoromanticists and realists. This sense that the American literary project had gone seriously awry, and that two sides fought “a war to the very knife” over its legacy, was echoed throughout Vidal’s essays in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. 1876, as we will see in chapter two, marks Vidal’s earliest attempt to amend this legacy, at least in fiction. In nonfiction, Vidal had railed for years against postmodernism. His 1967 essay, “French Letters: Theories of the New Novel,” bemoaned the influence of French literary theory and forms on U.S. fiction (*United States* 92 – 93). Despite a flowering of various literary forms during this period, the sense of a postmodern hegemony persisted well beyond postmodern literature’s apparent

peak (arguably *Gravity's Rainbow*'s National Book Award in 1974, the same year it so vexed the Pulitzer Prize board that no award for fiction was given¹¹). When Vidal's denunciations of postmodern fiction began to slow in the late 1980s, others rose to the occasion: Wolfe and Jonathan Franzen penned influential manifestos decrying the influence of postmodern writing, as we will see in chapter five.

Philip Roth lodged his own complaint in fiction, in 1980's *The Anatomy Lesson*: Roth's surrogate, Nathan Zuckerman, is ailing in a hospital when he peevishly dismisses a group of student editors who wish to interview him "about the future of his kind of fiction in the post-modernist era of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon" (280).¹² The editors, representing Zuckerman's alma mater, have sent a list of questions: "1. Why do you continue to write? 2. What purpose does your work serve? 3. Do you feel yourself part of a rearguard action, in the service of a decline tradition? Has your sense of vocation altered significantly because of the events of the last decade?" (280 – 281). The "events" refer to the ascendancy of hyper-experimental literature, which came (many assumed) at the expense of realist fiction, the sort Roth increasingly practiced in the 1980s and '90s.

¹¹ One could identify High Postmodernism with the period John Barth calls "the High Sixties," approximately 1965 – 1973 (*Final Fridays* 28).

¹² Roth is frequently identified as a postmodernist, especially early in his career; although his fiction fits easily within the realist tradition, he certainly borrows tropes – self-reflexivity, fabulation, etc. – from postmodernism. He represents the broad extent to which the terms need not exclude one another, even if they are almost always treated as oppositional.

The division between postmodernist and anti-postmodernist (including neorealist) fiction compelled authors of U.S. fiction to assume stances toward a set of structural binaries within their respective system of representation, to privilege and prioritize certain strategies within their own representational projects. The following table represents neorealist and postmodern priorities as they pertain to the orientation, structure, ethos, mode, and object of representation, as well as to the status of the literary text.

	<i>Neorealist</i>	<i>Postmodern</i>
<i>Orientation</i>	Psychological	Social
<i>Temporality</i>	Synchronic	Diachronic
<i>Ethos</i>	Rationalist / Essayistic	Empiricist / Encyclopedic
<i>Mode</i>	Characterization	Plot
<i>Object</i>	Fact	Event
<i>Status of the Text</i>	Ideational	Material

This is not to imply that neorealist texts never privilege, say, plot over characterization or that postmodern texts never assume a polemical voice. Every postmodern novel contains psychological dimensions, just as every neorealist novel is in some respect social (and many aspire toward a dominantly social orientation). This table simply represents the general priorities within each system. In the 1980s, as we will see, these priorities were intensified by developments in narratology, historicist literary theory, and historiography within historical and literary studies in the late 1970s and 1980s. At every turn, what

distinguished neorealism from the postmodernist modes against which it reacts was neorealism's commitment to getting literary representation "right" despite the knowledge that it would ultimately fail. This was opposed to literary postmodernism's much more optimistic tendency to deliberately misconstrue, exaggerate, mythologize, and falsify with the expectation that, eventually, a literary and historical truth can be uncovered.

When Vidal, Wolfe, and Roth bemoaned Barth's influence in the 1980s, Barth himself possessed a keener sense of literary history's direction and of postmodernism's waning. In his 1984 preface to "The Literature of Exhaustion," he wrote that in the 1960s, "*experimental* was not yet an adjective of dismissal. ...I confess to missing, in apprentice seminars in the later 1970s and the 1980s, that lively Make-It New spirit of the Buffalo Sixties. A roomful of young traditionalists can be as depressing as a roomful of young Republicans" (*Friday Book* 64).¹³ But even the avowedly postmodernist Barth could not resist expressing ambivalence about the strategies that his fiction embodied. In the original essay, published in 1967, Barth used the multifaceted concept of *exhaustion* to demarcate, periodize, and endorse the postmodernist project. But he fretted over the possibility that experimental fiction would ultimately create more representational limits than possibilities. "I sympathize with a remark attributed to

¹³ "To be sure," noted critic Robert Rebein, "there is something of a Sputnik-era, arms-race lunacy about both Roth's and Barth's statements," referring to Roth's complaint that American reality leaves the fiction writer nothing original to write about and to Barth's laments in "The Literature of Exhaustion." "In retrospect," Rebein continued, "they say a lot more about the cultural and political climate of the American 1960s than they do about either the nature of 'American reality' or the 'usability' of inherited forms" (2).

Saul Bellow,” he wrote, “that to be technically up-to-date is the least important attribute of a writer....” (66). “[I choose] to rebel along traditional lines....” (65). *Exhaustion*, the problem to which postmodernism lends itself in Barth’s essay, occurs when a form’s technical attributes overwhelm its other attributes. “A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary: Joyce and Kafka, for instance, in their time, and in ours, Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges” (66). Barth’s essay proceeds to list Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, Borges, and Vladimir Nabokov as a literary lineage, who apprentice writers might study in order to achieve technical virtuosity without succumbing to exhaustion. Barth’s list is notably uninteresting insofar as it adheres to the conventional literary history of modernist (Joyce, Kafka) to postmodernist (or at least late modernist) writers (Borges, Nabokov) via Beckett, the post/modernist hinge *par excellence*. But Barth’s appeal to the hinge of modernism and postmodernism reveals something more than conventional taste. His later reference to Pound’s “Make It New” dictum reveals a preoccupation with the legacy of modernism. For Barth, postmodernism must be continuous with the modernist project. For neorealists, who likewise revere the modernist masters, postmodernism must always represent a critical betrayal of modernism. But realism’s relationship with modernism is structurally vexed. Realism is always defined defensively, in contrast to another mode. As Frederic Jameson notes, the

mode against which realism is most frequently negatively is modernism – the experimental and innovative tendency in modernist literature.¹⁴

Representational strategies remain at the heart of this controversy. As Barth rightly noted, few writers better express the representational ethos of the modernist/postmodernist “event” or moment than does Samuel Beckett. In *L’Innommable*, published in 1953, Beckett’s long, run-on French sentences conflate first- and second-person into a single addresser/addressee who meditates on the problems of identity, identification, representation, and naming and who, after more than 130 pages, concludes:

...il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais donc
continuer, il faut dire des mots, tant qu’il y en a, il faut les dire,
jusqu’à ce qu’ils me trouvent, jusqu’à ce qu’ils me disent, étrange
peine, étrange faute, il faut continuer, c’est peut-être déjà fait, ils
m’ont peut-être déjà dit, ils m’ont peut-être porté jusqu’au seuil de
mon histoire, devant la porte qui s’ouvre sur mon histoire, ça
m’étonnerait, si elle s’ouvre, ça va être moi, ça va être le silence, là
où je suis, je ne sais pas, je ne le saurai jamais, dans le silence on
ne sait pas, il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais
continuer.¹⁵

¹⁴ This is not to argue that realism is never innovative or never claims to be innovative; quite the contrary, realism self-consciously innovates from its inception forward. But formal innovation *qua* innovation marks the outer limits of realist literature. I discuss this in greater length in my later chapters.

¹⁵ Five years later, Beckett translated the text into English, modifying it slightly: “...you must go on, I can’t go on, you must go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my

One easily forgets that this passage, so often cited as an instance of the postwar absurd and Beckett's absurdist humanism ("je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer"), describes the challenge of representation: the impossibility of representing a figure and of being represented in language. Knowledge is contingent on language ("je ne le saurai jamais, dans le silence on ne sait pas"), but language is unfixed and unreliable, full of gaps and unnamabilities (*l'innommable* of the title refers to the narrator and the objects of his sentences, including himself).¹⁶ Without adequate knowledge, he cannot continue – but he must and he will, hence the absurd core of modernist/postmodernist representation.

Philip Roth, who in *The Anatomy Lesson* portrayed a realist author taunted by the onslaught of postmodernism, would later deliberately echo Beckett's lines, this time as an expression of the challenge of realist representation. *American Pastoral* (1997) is a historical novel of the post-Vietnam United States, which is embodied by a family torn apart by a daughter who commits an act of anti-government terror and must retreat into anonymity. The title alludes to a poetic genre that precedes the romance, and therefore precedes the *roman* and the development of the realistic novel. The pastoral is also a recurrent theme in romantic painting. Roth alludes to a visual genre (pastoral landscapes), invoking

story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

¹⁶ Notably, unnamability is a quality Frederic Jameson associated with modernism, not with realism. "Namelessness," wrote Jameson, is a problem and product of *Stimmung* (or the affective locus of literary representation), which in tension with *récit* (the narrative locus) forms the twin categories of ambiguities that, argued Jameson, realism attempts to clarify through literary representation (*Antinomies* 166).

the visual field which is so central to traditional Jamesian realism; and he plays upon the term's associations with idyll and agriculture, writing instead a novel of dense urban and suburban clusters.¹⁷ The title of the first novel of Roth's historical realist trilogy (*I Married a Communist* and *The Human Stain* followed) juxtaposes *American* with *Pastoral*, the national with the idyllic agrarian. Here again, Jameson is useful, and his analysis elucidates the force of Roth's irony. In *Antimonies of Realism*, Jameson argued that realism is characterized by the displacement of "idyllic visions of an older rural and village life" with "the development of industrial capitalism" and the ancillary development of European nationalisms (158). A pastoral vision cannot contain an authentically national vision, particularly not a realist national vision. (Recall Willa Cather's Nebraskan prairies, which are "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made") (11). And the impossibility of an American pastoral runs through Roth's novel, whose major themes include the utter inevitability of "getting things wrong." In his autobiography, suggestively titled *The Facts*, Roth described the ideal writer: "*He teaches, he judges, he corrects – rightness is all*" (161). But rightness cannot be achieved: this is the theme that inspires Roth's subtle homage to Beckett in *American Pastoral*. The narrator, Nathan Zuckerberg, has been asked to write a biography of an old friend. Reflecting on the enormity of the task, he thinks:

You get [people] wrong before you meet them, while you're
anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with

¹⁷ A *pastorale* is also a genre of allegorical drama associated with Basque. The morality and stock characters of Roth's novel play upon these deep roots.

them; and then you go home to tell somebody else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. Since the same generally goes for them with you, the whole thing is really a dazzling illusion. ... The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It's getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That's how we know we're alive: we're wrong. (35)

The passage describes an existential condition similar to the one Beckett described, wherein failure is a precondition. His repetitive language echoes Beckett's, replacing Beckett's alternating "je" and "il" with "we." Beckett's "qu'ils me dissent" parallels Zuckerberg's quandary, in which he must tell the story of another man, but he cannot get it right, but he must do it knowing it will be wrong. He refuses to quit representation despite his predetermined failure. He can't go on, he'll go on. This is the realist's dilemma.

2. Narratology and Psychological Realism

Postmodern schools of literature and theory were most attentive to the lacunae which they insisted lay at the heart of most exercises in meaning. In the 1970s and '80s, historiographers attended most closely to the contrived structures of historicity; literary critics attended to the gaps between linguistic signs and their antecedents; historical novelists such as E.L. Doctorow and Robert Coover reveled in the futility of straight historical representation. The less stability a system of meaning possessed, the more interest it seemed to generate. If

neorealism attempted to extinguish gaps and instances of unrepresentability, it would come in conflict with much contemporary theory, historiography, and fiction, which reified, analyzed, and at times celebrated these gaps. At the same time, the most radical practitioners of literary theory denigrated realism as epistemologically reactionary and pernicious.¹⁸ The key problems that all these critics attempted to address were the inherent unrepresentability, unnamability, and inaccessibility of meaning, especially as it occurred (via language) in the mind and in history. Both the mind and history had been traditional objects of realism. Frederic Jameson has argued that history is the locus of narrative, or what he calls *récit*. The mind is the locus of affect, or what Jameson calls *Stimmung*. In Jameson's account, realism attempts to resolve (and is produced by its attempt to resolve) tensions within *récit* and *Stimmung*. But in the 1970s, any attempt at resolution would be met with fierce resistance. Representations of history were increasingly ceded, as we will see, to postmodern fiction, while contemporary realism was relegated to the confused category of psychological fiction.

During this period, critical discourse about realism in American literature increasingly deployed the term "realism" to describe two genres: as an historical term to describe the Victorian novel and as a term to unify middlebrow contemporary fiction. The most prestigious and recognizable practitioners of

¹⁸ Critic Ruth Ronen aligned literary postmodernism with a "rejection of metaphysical realism," "the recognition that the notion of truth should be relative to other versions and languages brought about also progress for a theory of fiction" (qtd. in Flis 51). Mary Holland described "the antihumanist position on language and literature," "extremes such as Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal and related notions of the incommunicability, irrelevance, or worst, nonexistence of meaning and real things..." (4).

realism in American literature during this time – Bellow, Roth, Updike – approached social manners through a Jamesian realist mode, lending themselves to focalized “point of view” analyses and Lubbockian demonstrations of showing, not telling. Despite these author’s social themes, their techniques lent themselves to psychological analyses. And while popular critics prized consciousness and characterization, literary theorists were increasingly put off by interpretations that were too easily unifiable within a psychic framework. Although William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) caused a minor controversy for subordinating socio-historical forces – the sort of forces that might be central to a postmodern representation – to his title character’s Id, the novel’s psychological realism won it an enormous audience. Literary representations of consciousness became a brand of authenticity, and psychological approaches to literature (most famously the craze for Freudian readings both in and outside the academy) extended well beyond contemporary realism. Among readers, psychobiography became a popular genre following Fawn M. Brodie’s *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974) and all the sordid revelations of Watergate. In the classroom, English professors taught the High Modernists as formal innovators largely within the psychological (as opposed to social or naturalist) tradition: “stream of consciousness,” a term that Jameson has argued is actually best suited to describe representations of the mind in Victorian realism, was coined to describe modernist representation (*Antinomies* 85).

Yet the question of the *psychology* of psychological fiction was muddled, and the goal of representing the mind was confused, because the literary

representations of the mind adhered to no unified theory of the mind (at least not insofar as, say, socialist realism adhered to a uniform theory of society: namely, the Marxian one). Is the mind phenomenological? Is the Freudian model really the most relevant? In 1978, narratologist Dorrit Cohn pressed the matter by literalizing psychological realism's apparent claim to represent the mind. She argued that the mind was the chief object of literary fiction and insisted on a cognitive framework, with its limits and standard practices, within which prose writers may represent mental phenomena. Her study *Transparent Minds* tested the limits of "unreal transparencies": moments in literature when access to realist representation is blocked by the problem of inaccessibility to the mind (3). She examined writers, mostly novelists, who would refuse any postmodernist offramp away from the challenge of cognitive representation. In the first three pages of *Transparent Minds*, Cohn quoted passages from Laurence Sterne, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Stendhal, E.M. Forster, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and Truman Capote. One might assign species of realism to each of these writers (eighteenth-century English realism; magical realism; historical realism; psychological realism; high modernist realism; and neorealism), although each of these writers frequently defied such categories. More than their peers, however, each of these writers forewent experimental sleight of hand and insisted, if not on direct and unfettered access, at least on something approaching untroubled ability to write the interior life of a character, real or imagined. Neither Hoffmann, nor Proust, nor Mann (and certainly not Forster or Capote) lingered too long around the mimetic gap at the center of consciousness. Their business was representation, not

representation's representation. And yet such writers seem to insist on taking the mind as their object. As Cohn observed: "The more surprising, then, that the novelists most concerned with the exact representation of life are also those who place at the live centers of their works this invented entity whose verisimilitude is impossible to verify" (6). What fascinates Cohn is the tenacity of these writers who choose the mind as their object.

So the problem of representing consciousness is central to the challenges that face self-proclaimed literary realists. I use the verb *face* deliberately: when the object of representation is the functions and forms of cognition, then the object, the subject, and the author figuratively face each other. This figure is problematic, because an author cannot describe an object that amounts to his own mode of representing the object. A gap, much larger than the gaps in language and representation described by Jacques Derrida and other poststructuralists, will always exist. This gap also presents more practical problems than do the deeply embedded linguistic lacunae that Derrida perceives. All writers will inevitably confront Derrida's limits of language, which, put differently, means that these limits present a practical challenge to no one: there is nothing to be done. But the apparent impossibility of representing cognition is a challenge only for those writers, mostly novelists, who wish to represent cognition. This is particularly troublesome for writers who commit to neorealism, a project that assumes – to a degree, at least – the totalizability of literary representation. Despite the supposedly natural affinity between realism and psychology – which gives us the

category “psychological realism” – the mind actually poses one of the biggest challenges to the realist.

In her study, Cohn demonstrated that Victorian realism was historically not very psychological. Examining numerous examples of Victorian prose, Cohn determined that the period’s style was “markedly external,” rarely venturing into direct representations of any character’s psyche (*Transparent* 58). She further weighed against the conception of modernist stream-of-consciousness (which, as noted earlier, Jameson affiliated with Victorian realism) as an instance of “prespeech” or “preverbal” representation (86). “However many sensations, perceptions, or images we may imagine as coexisting in a mind at one moment in time,” wrote Cohn, “words can be thought only one at a time, no matter how syntactically they are interrelated” (87). Stylistic devices such as free-indirect discourse offer a “peculiarly convincing illusion of reality: a sense that [the reader] is ‘mind-reading,’ which may amply compensate him for the linearity of the mental events he follows” (87). “As a rule,” she argued

interior monologues are therefore quite as closely bound to the norms of psychological realism as fictional dialogues: just as dialogues create the illusion that they render what characters ‘really say’ to each other, monologues create the illusion that they render what a character ‘really thinks’ to himself. (76)

For Cohn, this exonerates the Victorian novel and other realist fictions from the charge that its narrators, omniscient and capable of totalizing representation, serve a disciplinary or police function (an argument she put most forcefully in her

response to D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*). For Cohn, the psychological realist novel is never successful enough in its representative aims to serve such pernicious functions. This theory of omniscient narration, which so many critics had used to attack realist fiction, held that by structuring an omniscient narrative, realist fictions were totalizing and potentially totalitarian structures. By the mid-1980s, the most extreme iterations of this theory would essentially argue that the traditional realist novel resembled nothing so much as the East German *Stasi*, a formulation Cohn rejected as “nothing short of absurd”:

novelists in fact persistently tend to *restrict* the information they provide. They restrict it most systematically when they apply the technique Genette calls “(internal) focalization”: when the fictional world is presented by way of the perception of one of the characters that inhabit it (for example, Stephen Dedalus or Joseph K.). Since this technique involves the fiction-specific privilege of mind reading, the narrator who restricts information in this fashion in fact reveals matters that would never be available to a real-world observer or narrator (which explains the even more absurd tag of “limited omniscience” sometimes affixed to this narrative mode). (“Optics and Power” 11)

For Cohn and others, ideologically-driven theories of the novel – what we might call the suspicious turn in literary theory – failed to account for the novel's basic structure. Consider a postwar realist novel such as Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), a *Bildungsroman* that represents the development of a

protagonist through his relationship to a cast of secondary characters and a set of specific locales – Chicago, Puebla, New York. William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), one of the earliest and most exemplary American postmodern novels, is far more totalizing in its aspirations than is *Augie March*. Gaddis's novel weaves church history and art history through the development of dozens of characters distributed across time and space in a deliberately obscurantist plot that exists, it seems, in order to portray in near-encyclopedic totality the phenomenology of representation. The result is an experience that is, for the reader, excessively restrictive, if not painful. This encyclopedic tendency will be repeated again and again throughout the history of the postmodern novel, culminating in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), which deploys advanced trigonometry, post-colonial history, and philological obscurities to attempt a definitive portrayal of the human experience in wartime. These are the kind of novelistic systems that lend themselves to the hermeneutics of suspicion. But even here, Cohn would argue, the underlying narrative structure cannot withstand such analysis.

The 1970s and '80s witnessed the heyday of Cohn's narratology, which sought to overturn a century's worth of practical criticism (which had privileged story and character over any unified theory of narrative discourse) and sought to cleanse the residue of New Criticism (which had subordinated narrative discourse to content and structure). Narratologists also frequently sought to extinguish the increasingly radical ethics of literary criticism from the field of novel theory: hence, Cohn's attacks on Miller and the Foucauldian strain of literary criticism.

Narratology thrived in the field of Victorian studies and made valuable contributions to the study of realism. So too did Marxist criticism and those scholars who followed the traditions of György Lukacs and the recently rediscovered Mikhail Bakhtin. But elsewhere in English departments, theories were developing that would critically frame how novelists understood the other traditional object of realist representation, history.

3. New Historiographies

“History is perhaps the conservative discipline par excellence....” –
Hayden White (*Tropics* 28)

The new Foucauldian emphasis on *discourse* in the humanities made possible a reconception of historiography. This reconception, especially in its most extreme iterations (though sometimes in more moderate studies), entailed a conflation of the objects of historical analysis with the modes of historical narrative. This conflation, as we will see, had a significant impact on the conception of postmodern novel (which Linda Hutcheon, one of postmodernism’s primary theorists, would dub “historiographic metafiction”) and of the historical realist novel. Gerard Genette, a structuralist whose writings rarely veer toward epistemological radicalism, offered a representative example of the new thinking when he observed:

Whether fiction or history, narrative is a discourse; with language, one can produce only discourse; even a statement as “objective” as “Water boils at 100° degrees C” [*L’eau bout à 100 degrés*],

everyone can and must hear in the use [in French] of the
 “notorious” article a very direct appeal to his knowledge of the
 watery element. Narrative without a narrator, the utterance without
 an uttering, seem to me a pure illusion and, as such,
 “unfalsifiable.” (qtd. in Hale 81)

Elsewhere Genette qualifies his statements about history, arguing that only fiction is truly self-referential: *Histoire de France* offers “recourse to all sorts of documents external to that work and concerned with the history of France,” whereas Proust ultimately offers recourse to “the narrating act from which it arises” (qtd. in Hale 84). But others would draw different conclusions. Stephen Greenblatt, pioneer of New Historicism, provocatively declared in the opening line of his 1988 study of Shakespeare, “I began with a desire to speak with the dead” (1). “Literature professors are salaried, middle-class shamans” for whom direct communication with the past was the primary, “if unvoiced, motive.” The past is unrecoverable, but Greenblatt argued that it leaves “traces,” instances of collective authorship in texts that can only be understood and interpreted historically.

The figure most closely associated with the radically discursive interpretation of historiography is Hayden White. He described history as “the conservative discipline par excellence,” in part because it clung so tightly to a decades-old epistemological framework and in part because, by its very nature, it is always attempting to defend and conserve a unique, fragile, and potentially untenable foothold between the social sciences and the humanities. White’s

solution to history's perpetually tenuous footing in the academy was to throw off practices that rooted the discipline in the nineteenth century and resist attempts by the social sciences to colonize history departments. To achieve this end, beginning in the early 1970s, White proscribed a radical refocus on historicity as such: "...the conventional distinctions between 'history' and 'historicism,'" he wrote, "are virtually worthless" (*Tropics* 101). He also advocated a turn toward humanistic modes of inquiry, particularly the discursive Foucauldian analyses that, as historian Geoff Eley recalled, "were slowly beginning to circulate, as were...cautious borrowings from literary criticism" (he goes on to cite the "slow subterfuge" of White's 1973 opus, *Metahistory*). By the 1980s, White was wholly devoted to writing historiographic manifestos: "...we should no longer naively expect that statements about a given epoch or complex of events in the past 'correspond' to some preexistent body of 'raw facts' For we should recognize that *what constitutes the facts themselves* is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future" (*Tropics* 47, emphasis in original).

The humanities became an increasingly attractive source of style and method for White, who urged historians to develop practices that resembled literary theory. "Our knowledge of the past may increase incrementally," he wrote elsewhere, "but our understanding of it does not" (*Tropics* 89) "...there can be no such thing as a nonrelativistic representation of historical reality...." (117) The discourses of fiction and history are "substantially the same" (121). "We are no longer compelled...to believe – as historians in the post-Romantic period had to

believe – that fiction is the antithesis of fact...or that we can relate facts to one another without the aid of some enabling and generically fictional matrix” (126). “Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data toward the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them...” (1). At one point, he swapped figure and allegory more quickly (and with less precision) than could Paul de Man: “A narrative account is always a figurative account, an allegory” (*Content* 48). He referred to “events” which appear in “chaotic form”: “What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story?” (*Content* 4) This “wish” echoes psychoanalysis (elsewhere he referred to it as a “need or impulse”) (10). It offers “a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse.” A Real is repressed in a conspiratorial turn: “The evasion of the implications of the fictive nature of historical narrative is in part a consequence of the utility of the concept ‘history’ for the definition of other types of discourse” (89). “Narrativizing discourse,” “fictive nature,” “figurative accounts”: English departments, so often accused of (mis)appropriating terms and theories from other fields, under White actually exported frameworks for the study of history.

White’s reception among literary critics was heavily mediated by the work of Linda Hutcheon, whose career straddled the line between history, literary theory, art criticism, and the history of ideas. Her definition of postmodernism, and postmodern fiction, was supremely influential in the 1980s. For Hutcheon, the problem of defining postmodernism lies in the imprecision of the term: when

applied to literature, the term “historiographic metafiction” described and unified the elements of novelists like Ishmael Reed, Salman Rushdie, and Robert Coover, whose experimental novels, according to Hutcheon, engaged with the mechanics of historiography (à la White) and amounted to a production of useful historical knowledge. In her advocacy of this category, Hutcheon warned against “the danger of separating fiction and history as narrative genres” (*Poetics* 111). She wrote:

The twentieth-century discipline of history has traditionally been structured by positivist and empiricist assumptions that have worked to separate it from anything that smacks of the “merely literary.” In its unusual setting up of the “real” as unproblematic presence to be reproduced or reconstructed, history is begging for deconstruction to question the function of the writing of history itself. (*Poetics* 95)

She continued by approvingly quoting White: “History, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation.... It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline, to preside over the dissolution of history’s claim of autonomy among the disciplines” (qtd. in Hutcheon *Poetics* 95). This project that Hutcheon proscribed for historians had deep consequences for novelists. At stake in the distinction between the novelists whom Linda Hutcheon aligned with historiographic metafiction, the advocates of Jamesian realist theories among the

neorealists, and contemporary novelists who did not fit neatly into either camp was the ideal form and function of the novel, its ability to represent and its responsibility to representation, and its ability to represent history and its responsibility to history. This struggle occurred amid what Hutcheon called “a crisis in historicity,” which White and other postmodern historiographers had introduced (*Poetics* 89).¹⁹ Because narrative fiction and narrative history shared a common construction, the consequences of fictional production were as significant as the production of historical knowledge; indeed, they could amount to the same thing.

Throughout the 1980s, Hutcheon described the emergence of historiographic metafiction as a turn to the central role of history in fiction (part of the “return to plot” that will be discussed at the conclusion of this chapter), a turn

¹⁹ Hutcheon quotes Hebert Lindenberger, whose summary of the state of historiography in the 1980s is succinct: “The new history we are beginning to see these days has little in common with the old – and for an interesting historical reason: its practitioners were nurtured in the theoretical climate of the 1970s, a time during which the individual literary work came to lose its organic unity; when literature as an organized body of knowledge abandoned the boundaries that had hitherto enclosed it, to an extent even abandoned its claims to knowledge; and when history began to seem discontinuous, sometimes in fact no more than just another fiction. It is no wonder that the scholarship we now pursue cannot take the form or speak the language of the older literary history” (qtd. in Hutcheon *Poetics* 91). Hutcheon wrote: “In both fiction and history writing today, our confidence in empiricist and positivist epistemologies has been shaken – shaken, but perhaps not yet destroyed. And this is what accounts for the skepticism rather than any real denunciation; it also accounts for the defining paradoxes of postmodern discourses” (*Poetics* 106). Elsewhere: “The new literary history is not an attempt to preserve or transmit a canon or tradition of thought; it bears a problematic and questioning relation to both history and literary criticism. ... In the postmodern writing of history...there is a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation. What fades away with this kind of contesting is any sure ground upon which to base representation and narration, in either historiography or fiction” (*Poetics* 91 – 92).

that was stimulated by the crisis of historicity in the humanities (*Poetics* ix, xii).²⁰ Postmodern fiction and theory represented a critical “refocusing on historicity,” a project that “expose[d] – very self-reflexively – the myth- or illusion-making tendencies of historiography” (*Poetics* 16).²¹ Describing the consequences of this new focus, Hutcheon wrote:

The postmodern...effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in doing so, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. This is another of the paradoxes that characterize all postmodern discourses today. And the implication is that there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of ‘genuine historicity’ (as Fredric Jameson desires), no matter what the nostalgia (Marxist or traditional) for such an entity. (89)

Although an historicist can easily concede the lack of a “single, essentialized, transcendent concept of ‘genuine historicity’” without opening up historiography to the imagination of fiction writers, Hutcheon viewed such an opening as both

²⁰ On the return to history, Hutcheon wrote: “Part of this problematizing return to history is no doubt a response to the hermetic ahistoric formalism and aestheticism that characterized much of the art and theory of the so-called modernist period. If the past were invoked, it was to deploy its ‘presentness’ or to enable its transcendence in the search for amore secure and universal value system (be it myth, religion, or psychology). ... However, modernism’s ‘nightmare of history’ is precisely what postmodernism has chosen to face straight on. Artist, audience, critic – none is allowed to stand outside history, or even to wish to do so” (*Poetics* 88).

²¹ “[O]ne of the few common denominators among the detractors of postmodernism,” Hutcheon wrote, “is the surprising, but general, agreement that the postmodern is ahistorical. It is a familiar line of attack, launched by Marxists and traditionalists alike, against...contemporary fiction” (*Poetics* 87).

inevitable and desirable. Historiographic metafiction had fulfilled fiction's calling as a historicizing mode of knowledge. Referring to specific works, she wrote:

[Postmodern fiction] refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. ... Novels like *The Public Burning* and *Legs* assert that the past did indeed exist prior to its 'entextualization' into either fiction or history. They also show us that both genres unavoidably construct as they textualize that past. The 'real' referent of their language once existed; but it is only accessible to us today in textualized form: documents, eye-witness accounts, archives. The past is 'archaeologized,' but its reservoir of available materials is always acknowledged as a textualized one. (*Poetics* 93)

Such fiction "always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them"; it is "both metafictionally self-reflexive and yet speak[s] to us powerfully about real political and historical realities" (5). Rather than occupying an ahistorical vacuum, Hutcheon argued that postmodern fiction asserts "the presence of the past," "not a nostalgic return" but "a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society, a recalling of a critically shared vocabulary...it is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic 'return'" (4). In short, history is made present in postmodern fiction; it is not excavated or reimagined (much less

remembered) but in fact resurrected by the representational possibilities opened by postmodern fiction.

Greenblatt, White, Hutcheon, and other significant interlocutors between history and fiction in the 1980s shared this notion of “the presence of the past.” Their belief in the recoverability of the past varied, as did their theoretical commitments, but they all emphasized the power of fiction to do historical work. Critics and historiographers were erasing the limit imposed by traditional historicism on the representation of history. This erasure was liberating for certain novelists, such as Doctorow and Coover. But as we will see in the upcoming chapters, other novelists – particularly those engaged with realism – felt compelled to renegotiate these representational limits in compelling ways.

4. Radical Realism and Postmodernism’s Middle Way

“Our literature is a battlefield now,” wrote Gore Vidal in 1976. He was neither the first nor the last neorealist to use such martial language to describe the literary scene of the 1970s and ‘80s. Somewhat counterintuitively, it was the neorealists who consistently rely on metaphors of battle, innovation, and industrialization to describe what, according to their own project, amounts to a return to traditional forms. Their expository genre is the essay, the polemic, and the manifesto (see chapter five). Meanwhile, Hutcheon adamantly posited postmodernism as a middle way. If the neorealist persisted in his attempt to represent reality, even at the risk of violence to his subject and with the knowledge that failure was a foregone conclusion, the postmodernist abdicated – this is the impression Hutcheon gave throughout her writings on the subject. The

realist's dilemma was not solved or even challenged, but sidestepped by historiographic metafiction. In direct response to Jameson, whose essay "Postmodernism" does not sympathize with realism but does attack postmodern culture, Hutcheon prepared her readers for her own ethos: "You will not find here any claims of radical revolutionary change or any apocalyptic wailing about the decline of the west under late capitalism.... I have tried to...study a current cultural phenomenon as it exists." (*Poetics* ix). "I want to avoid...those polemical generalizations" (3). On historiographic metafiction's strategies, she wrote, "it subverts, but only through irony, not through rejection" (xii).

She differentiated her expositions of postmodernism from Lyotard's by rejecting the "manifesto-like tone" of his famous essays (*Poetics* 55). Lyotard wrote, "Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (82); Hutcheon's altered Lyotard's text, writing, "Let us inscribe and then challenge totality; let us (re)present the un(re)presentable; let us activate differences and admit that we thus create the honor of the name and the name itself" (*Poetics* 55). Hutcheon is unassailable in her insistence that postmodernism represented a middle way, beyond conflict and outside any dialectic. Literary studies, she wrote, was "caught...between the urge to essentialize literature and its language into a unique, vast, closed textual preserve and the contrasting urge to make literature 'relevant' by locating it in larger discursive contexts. Postmodern art and theory both incarnate this very crisis, not by choosing sides, but by living out the contradiction of giving in to both urges" (*Poetics* x). She continued:

There is no dialectic in the postmodern: the self-reflexive remains distinct from its traditionally accepted contrary – the historico-political context in which it is embedded. ... This challenge foregrounds the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art, but also in broader discursive terms: it foregrounds, for instance, how we make historical ‘facts’ out of brute ‘events’ of the past, or, more generally, how our various sign systems grant meaning to our experience. (x)²²

In postmodern fiction, “the formalist and the historical live side by side, but there is no dialectic. The unresolved tensions of postmodern aesthetic practice remain paradoxes, or perhaps more accurately, contradictions” (100). A contradiction, notably, holds less promise for resolution than does a paradox, which represents at least a kind of counterintuitive synthesis. Hutcheon’s descriptions of postmodernism were even more startling when set alongside her claims about its knowledge-making potential:

...postmodern culture...cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within. ... History, the individual self, the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts – these are some notions which, at various moments, have appeared as ‘natural’ or unproblematically

²² We shall return to the distinction between “fact” and “event” in a moment, because it is central to the realists’ engagement with what Jameson called the postmodern cultural dominant.

common-sensical. And these are what get interrogated. Despite the apocalyptic rhetoric that often accompanies it, the postmodern makes neither a radical Utopian change nor a lamentable decline to hyperreal simulacra. There is not a break – or not yet, at any rate.

(xiii)

Her “not yet” would seem ominous if it were not so heavily qualified by promises that postmodernism offered no radical change or ruinous decline. Admittedly her claims grew bolder with regard to the postmodern novel, which, she asserted, “puts into question that entire series of interconnected concepts that have come to be associated with what we conveniently label as liberal humanism: autonomy, transcendence, certainty, authority, unity, totalization, system, universalization, center, continuity, teleology, closure, hierarchy, homogeneity, uniqueness, origin” (56). In this account, the postmodern novel is a veritable Swiss-army knife capable of dismantling the centuries-long project of liberal humanism. But as always, she was ready to qualify the novel’s power: “As I have tried to argue, however, to put these concepts into question is not to deny them – only to interrogate their relation to experience, without [a] kind of foreclosing assurance....” Her claims had enormous consequence for representation and the nature of historical knowledge, but Hutcheon was always quick to neuter her claims with her own prose style.

Given the boldness of postmodern historiography’s project, one could forgive Hutcheon for adopting such a modest tone. But the tone underlies so much of her argument that it amounts to an ethos. Early in *The Poetics of*

Postmodernism, a compilation of her 1980s scholarship, Hutcheon framed the stakes of postmodern historiography clearly and carefully: “The conventions of the two genres [the novel and history] are played off against each other; there is no simple, unproblematic merging” (9). But she proceeded to complicate this apparently complex and problematic merging of genres associated with historiographic metafiction with so much hedging – so many both/ands, so much paradox and contradiction – that its complexity possesses no real force.

5. Facts versus Events

At a significant moment in her argument, Hutcheon made a distinction between events and facts:

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past.... In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make these past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts.’ This is not a ‘dishonest refuge from truth’ but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs (*Poetics* 89, emphasis in original).

She later clarified that “a ‘fact’ is discourse-defined; an ‘event’ is not” (119). “Facts are not given but are constructed by the kinds of questions we ask of events” (123). Quoting Paul Ricoeur, she argued that the process of writing history “is actually ‘*constitutive* of the historical mode of understanding.’ It is historiography’s explanatory and narrative emplotments of past *events* that

construct what we consider historical *facts*. This is the context in which the postmodern historical sense situations itself....” (*Poetics* 92) The problem with the event’s raw, non-discursive purity is that its constitution renders it inaccessible and unrepresentable apart from discursive facts. Against this point, neorealists argued heatedly: Vidal posited that facts are non-discursive (as we will see in chapters two and three), while others (Wolfe, Franzen, et al.) will find the inaccessibility of events decidedly untroubling, and certainly not allow for the conflation of fact and fiction, which Hutcheon found in postmodern literature. “Historiographic metafiction,” she wrote, “refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction” (93). Neorealism will do the same thing, but in order to preserve the viability of facts as an object of representation.

Hutcheon attempted to align historiographic metafiction with one of the wellsprings of neorealism, the New Journalism of the 1960s and ‘70s: “The 1960s saw a move ‘out of the frame’ into the world of contemporary history (as seen in everything from peace marches to the New Journalism) and materiality (in art, we had George Segal’s plaster casts of ‘reality’).” “It was not accidental,” she continued later, “that this form of the New Journalism, as it was called, was an American phenomenon. The Vietnam War created a real distrust of official ‘facts’ as presented by the military and the media, and in addition, the ideology of the 1960s had licenced [sic] a revolt against homogenized forms of experience” (115). Expanding her analysis to New Journalism’s formal offspring, the so-called

“non-fiction novels” of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer (among others), she wrote:

The non-fictional novel of the 1960s and 1970s did not just record the contemporary hysteria of history.... It did not just try to embrace ‘the fictional element inevitable in any reporting’ and then try to imagine its ‘way toward the truth.’ What it did was seriously question who determined and created that truth, and it was this particular aspect of it that perhaps enabled historiographic metafiction’s more paradoxical questioning. ...[B]oth stress the overt, totalizing power of the imagination of the writer to create unities; yet...both refuse to neutralize contingency by reducing it to a unified meaning. (*Poetics* 116)

She stressed the point most succinctly when she claimed that such postmodern and neorealist (i.e., New Journalist, non-fictional) forms “politicize[s] the historical and the factual] through their metafictional rethinking of the epistemological and ontological relations between history and fiction” (121). These claims, whatever their epistemological appeal, do not accurately describe the project of New Journalism and the non-fiction novel. From Wolfe to Norman Mailer to Joan Didion, the practitioners of these genres repeatedly insisted that they borrowed modes and formal practices from fiction and applied them, across a well-defined chasm, to non-fiction. The impression and effect of New Journalism and non-fiction was that they produced new avenues toward what Hutcheon would call the “event,” but what their practitioners might simply describe as facts

– facts inflected by the modes of fiction perhaps, but not wholly chained to Foucauldian discursivity. The contract between the readers and writers of New Journalism and so-called non-fiction novels (e.g., Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*) is premised on the tenuous balance between fiction and non-fiction, *not* on their conflation or collapse.

Her optimism about the postmodern novel’s ability to engage and represent history stretched millennia of historical practice almost to the breaking point: “To Aristotle,” she wrote, “the historian could speak only of what has happened, of the particulars of the past; the poet, on the other hand, spoke of what could or might happen and so could deal with universals. Freed of the linear succession of history writing, the poet’s plot could have different unities. . . . The postmodern novel has done the same, and the reverse” (*Poetics* 106). This is one of the moments where she most clearly posited the view that a postmodern novelist can act as a historian. In Hutcheon’s (as in White’s) reasoning, because poets and historians use the same tools (language, narrative, discourse), they can follow the same blueprints.

The question of “truth” in relationship to fact and event may not appear very fruitful (truth is such a notoriously slippery concept), but it was frequently raised during the height of these debates. Marxist critics frequently objected to postmodern critics’ willingness to dismember what might otherwise serve as a revolutionary concept of History. Responding to Terry Eagleton’s concern that a postmodern paradigm “replace[s] truth,” Hutcheon wrote that postmodernism actually “question[s] *whose* notion of truth gains power and authority over others

and then examine[s] the process of how it does so” (*Poetics* 18). Dodging Eagleton’s central concern (the status of truth *per se*), Hutcheon accepted truth’s relativity as a premise, despite numerous disclaimers that her paradigm did not represent a concession to pure relativism, or she minimized the question altogether as an unrelated concern to the preeminent question of power. Postmodernism is, in this account, concerned chiefly with “notions of truth” and whose prevails (her italicized “*whose*” deflates the evasively possessive “notion of” that sidesteps Eagleton’s primary concern). Eventually she argued for a paradigm of “truths in the plural, truths that are socially, ideologically, and historically conditioned” (18).

Hutcheon correctly noted that “fictionality” did not become a truly meaningful category in literary production in English literature until the introduction of libel laws in the eighteenth century. “Defoe’s works made claims to veracity and actually convinced some readers that they were factual, but most readers today (and many then) had the pleasure of a double awareness of both fictiveness and a basis in the ‘real’ – as do readers of contemporary historiographic metafiction” (*Poetics* 107). But as Catherine Gallagher and others have demonstrated, the eighteenth-century reader’s “double awareness” did nothing to confuse the distinct barrier between fact and fiction; Hutcheon used the term “real” where Gallagher might use the much softer term “believability.” Indeed, it was, according to Gallagher, the distinctive status of fictionality qua fictionality that provided the genesis of the English-language novel. The history of readership that Gallagher and others provide undercuts Hutcheon’s basic

reading of literary history and its apparent progression toward the postmodern novel.

Hutcheon optimistically held that the postmodern novel promised “to re-write and to re-present the past in fiction and history[...], to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (*Poetics* 110). This assumes accessibility to history that the true historicist would deny. The traditionalist and Marxist historians with whom Hutcheon quibbled, far from claiming to provide naïve or unfettered access to the past, had already closed the door on such a possibility.

Afterword: The Return to Plot

“As the [postmodern] plot progresses, we come to notice that *it’s as good as it’s going to get*; and so for the first time in the history of literature we respond with a version of: ‘It’s terrific. But I wish it were over.’” – Charles Newman (qtd. in Rebein 2)

Hutcheon described the emergence of the postmodern novel as part of a general “return to *plot*” in literature (emphasis mine). I will argue (here and in upcoming chapters) that neorealism countered with a renewed emphasis on *characterization*. *Plot* differs from but shares an important relationship to *narrativity* and *discourse*. All three minimize the autonomy of the subject.²³ Plot situates a subject. “Postmodern works,” wrote Hutcheon,

²³ Historiographic metafiction, wrote Hutcheon, “challenge[s] the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness by both installing coherent subjectivity and subverting it. The tenets of our dominant ideology....are what is being contested by postmodernism: from the formation of authorial originality and authority to the separation of the aesthetic from the political. Postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very

contest art's right to inscribe timeless universal values, and they do so by thematizing and even formally enacting the context-dependent nature of all values. They also challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity. Through narrative, they offer fictive corporality instead of abstractions, but at the same time, they do tend to fragment or at least to render unstable the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character. (*Poetics* 90)

Hutcheon proceeded to cite Foucault and his “description of the challenges offered by a Nietzschean ‘genealogy.’” Postmodern fiction, she wrote,

shares the Foucauldian urge to unmask the continuities that are taken for granted in the western narrative tradition, and it does so by first using and then abusing those very continuities. Edward Said has argued that underlying Foucault's notion of the discontinuous is a “supposition that rational knowledge is possible, regardless of how complex – and even unattractive – the conditions of its production and acquisition.” The result is a very postmodern paradox, for in Foucault's theory of discontinuous systematization, “the discourse of modern knowledge always hungers for what it cannot fully grasp or totally represent.” Be it historical, theoretical, or literary, discourse is always discontinuous yet held together by

possibility of their production of meaning” (*Poetics* xii – xiii). The title of her essay “Subject In/Of/To History and His Story” conflated the narrative construct of traditionalist history with white male hegemony and the white male subject position.

rules, albeit not transcendent rules. All continuity is recognized as “pretended.” The particular, the local, and the specific replace the general, the universal. (*Poetics* 98 – 99)

In other words, Foucault – in many ways the exemplar of the radical historicization that occurred in humanities departments in the 1980s – and Foucauldian discourse foreclose the “general,...universal” spaces upon which knowledge claims about history had traditionally been made (and, arguably, from which neorealist novelists would hope to write). This, for Hutcheon, had consequences for both history and fiction. “To elevate ‘private experience to public consciousness’ in postmodern historiographic metafiction is not really to expand the subjective; it is to render inextricable the public and historical and the private and biographical” (94). In short, access to subjective experience is not the point of postmodern literature. Its design is to allow for plotting between the private-biographical sphere and the public-historical sphere.

Elsewhere, Hutcheon wrote directly about the relationship between history, fiction, narrative, content, and form:

In most of the critical work on postmodernism, it is narrative – be it in literature, history, or theory – that has usually been the major focus of attention. Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past. (*Poetics* 5)

The neorealists I consider in this dissertation each, in their own way, resist plot in favor of characterization. In so doing, they resist postmodernism and what Hutcheon calls “the return to plot.” Characterization offers an non-historical space with which these authors feel free to play with and assert objectivity. The dichotomy between *plot* and *character* is related to the dichotomy between *event* and *fact*. Events are plotted; facts are characterized. Time and again, neorealists will prefer the latter to the former.

Of course, characters can also be characterized, and Hutcheon’s postmodern project tends to elide character development as it emphasizes the central role of plot and history. Psychological space disappears. Meanwhile, there is no apolitical or transhistorical space in Hutcheon’s account of the postmodern novel and of historical representation more generally. This absence of space (or, more accurately, critics’ special attention to this absence of space) exacerbates an epistemological claustrophobia among the writers of realism in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s that explains much of the formal and ideological preoccupations of the realist novels that emerged in these years. At the heart of this is a kind of realist paradox: when limits are no longer imposed on historical or psychological representation, the more restrictive writers of realism become.

Chapter II

Fact and Fictionality:

The Case of Gore Vidal's *Lincoln*

“I myself think, however, that the weakening of the fictional also tends to undermine its opposite number, the category of the factual.” – Fredric Jameson,

Antimonies of Realism (190)

“Facts are stupid things.” – Ronald Reagan (qtd. in Noah)

This chapter considers the durability of fiction *qua* fiction. It examines how Gore Vidal's historical novel *Lincoln* negotiated the terrain between fictionality and factuality, and how Vidal's claims about the novel stretched the status of fiction almost to its limit – but only, I contend, to reinforce that limit. As Dorrit Cohn forcibly argued, ambiguities between genres such as “fiction” or “autobiography” serve to establish their distinction from one another: “the drawing of [a] theoretical borderline [does not rule] out the existence of borderline cases. Quite the contrary is true: one of the principal aims of drawing such simple distinctions between fiction and autobiography is to highlight generically complex cases...” (*Distinction* 60). Writers who attempt such “complex cases” either do so to confuse and collapse generic distinctions, as part of an experimental or innovative project, or do so in the service of fiction's integrity, a conservative project. Vidal's *Lincoln* falls into the conservative category, but not without difficulty.

This chapter also examines Vidal's role in the development of contemporary realism. If traditional realism comprises “believable stories that did

not solicit belief” (to quote Catherine Gallagher), Vidal’s historical realism interacts with factuality in such a way that his novels actually attempt to solicit belief, all while maintaining their status as fiction. Vidal imposed limits on his content, style, and narrative form that actively preserve historical data within his text, *not* as a prompt for fictional representation but as a vector for historical knowledge. All the while, Vidal insisted on the fictionality of his text. This chapter examines six aspects of Vidal’s historical realism as they appear in his 1984 novel *Lincoln*: his rigorous commitment to factuality in a fictional setting; his use of counterfactual projection; his focus on images of historical process and historical incompleteness; his reliance on material rather than psychological descriptions; his use of free-indirect discourse; and his use of intentionally neutral, prosaic style. After examining the novel, this chapter considers the novel’s reception by mainstream critics (which was mixed), conservative critics (positive), and historians (negative), which set into relief the novel’s peculiar effects.

“Believable stories that do not solicit belief.” Gallagher’s description of fictionality offers the reader of fiction a contract, encouraging the reader to apply what Cohn called “contractual criteria” that separate readerly approaches to fiction from readerly approaches to non-fiction (78). These criteria prevent, for instance, a reader from identifying a narrator too closely with a text’s author. They allow the writer broad experimentation with, and the reader broad interpretation of, content and modes of narrative while simultaneously maintaining a narrative’s status as fiction. In other words, they maintain the

durability of fiction as fiction (Cohn gives the example of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which tempts the reader to conflate the narrator and Proust without explicitly inviting the reader to do so). This chapter argues that Vidal's historical fiction attempts to expand the status of fictionality to absorb the historical record, deliberately pitting fiction against a separate structure of meaning – factuality – all while maintaining that fiction is expansive enough to encompass it.

To understand the audaciousness of Vidal's project, we should consider the easily ignored structural role of fictionality in the genre of the novel. Although factuality and fictionality are not necessarily opposites, they have been structurally excluded from each other since the inception of the novel, as Gallagher has demonstrated. Even in the innumerable instances in which fictionality possesses, describes, incorporates, mimics, or exploits factuality, fiction is fiction by virtue of not being fact. In her essay "On Fictionality," Gallagher observed that fictionality's structural centrality to the genre of the novel is too little discussed by literary scholars, that it "incessantly slips behind other features or disappears into terms like *narrative* and *signification*" (336). Gallagher argued that the English-language novel's particular brand of fictionality was a literary innovation of the mid-eighteenth century, but that this brand remains structurally implicit to practices of novel-reading and novel-writing into the twenty-first century. This fictionality has always been troubled. "If a genre can be thought of as having an attitude," wrote Gallagher, "the novel has seemed ambivalent toward its fictionality – at once inventing it as an ontological ground

and placing severe constraints upon it” (337). In Gallagher’s account, the novel’s unique fictionality emerged from concerns about libel in eighteenth-century print culture. This account slightly diminishes the emphasis that other accounts, including Ian Watt’s, have placed on literary realism. Through a distant reading of representative and canonical eighteenth century fiction, Gallagher demonstrated that “early novels stressed their departure from plausible narratives with referential assumptions, not from improbable fantasies...[they] propagated not just *realist* fiction but *realist fiction*” (345). Early English novelists crafted a fictionality that self-consciously suspended itself, that departed from previous narrative fictions by offering “believable stories that did not solicit belief” (340). This fictionality, argues Gallagher, is the genre’s lasting structural innovation. It is the device by which the novel is recognized as a coherent generic category even today.

Nevertheless, many readers of realist fiction – and of historical realism specifically – expect a certain quantity of accurate, factual detail in their novels. Joyce Carol Oates, a distinguished practitioner of postwar literary realism, briefly described such readers in her laudatory June 1984 *New York Times* review of *Lincoln*. In the review, Oates reflected on the strangeness of Vidal’s historical fictions, which seemed continually to subvert their own fictionality. *Lincoln*’s subtitle – *a Novel* – is, wrote Oates, “somewhat misleading” (“Union”). She continued:

[*Lincoln* is] certain to be a controversial work among literary critics, if not among historians (surely the history cannot be

faulted, as it comes with the imprimatur of one of our most eminent Lincoln scholars, David Herbert Donald of Harvard), or among readers with a temperamental distrust of fiction's usual strategies (they will love *Lincoln*).

Contrary to Oates' prediction, *Lincoln* was the subject of several blisteringly critical essays by academic historians, which this chapter will examine in detail. Oates was correct, however, that *Lincoln* would find a wide audience among non-professional readers.²⁴ These readers must have been struck by the degree to which its author apparently approved of their "temperamental distrust of fiction's usual strategies." *Lincoln* is unmistakably a novel: it is written in detailed but not aureate prose, and its narration is a conspicuously deliberate mode of omniscient narration mixed, on occasion, with free-indirect discourse. But it addresses itself (implicitly throughout and then explicitly in Vidal's "Afterword") to a reader who cares deeply about facts and who desires historical fiction to make a good-faith effort at factual accuracy. This desire Vidal was audaciously willing to oblige. When historians pointed out lapses in *Lincoln*'s factuality, Vidal published detailed responses; when his critics countered, Vidal published again. At no point in nearly one hundred pages Vidal would publish defending *Lincoln* did he cite the doctrine of poetic license. He did not defend his fiction by appealing to its status as fiction. Instead, he insisted that wherever the factuality of his literary

²⁴ The novel spent thirty-three weeks on the *New York Times* Best Seller list and was Vidal's greatest financial success. Four years after its initial publication, it was adapted into a television miniseries entitled *Gore Vidal's Lincoln*.

representation was challenged, either he or the challenger must have the facts wrong.

Vidal's peculiar attitude toward fiction was apparent to his readers by the time Oates reviewed *Lincoln*. She wrote:

So zestfully does Mr. Vidal contradict himself in his practice as a writer, one is not surprised to read, as long ago as 1967, that he has all but given up on prose fiction ("three centuries is quite long enough for any literary form") while being told that he is at work on a "chronicle" of novels dealing with American history.

But where Oates perceived a contradiction, Vidal was working through a vexing problem at the heart of fictionality: can a novel abandon fictionality and maintain its status as a novel? Can prose fiction solicit belief and maintain its status as fiction? There was, in Vidal's writings, a certain antipathy – expressed ironically, to be sure, but with the quotient of sincerity that irony always implies – toward the practice of fiction itself. Oates seemed to detect that antipathy in his public statements, and one senses that Vidal wished to bypass the conflict between his ambivalence toward prose fiction and his career as a historical novelist.

Lincoln was the most critically and commercially successful of Vidal's seven historical novels,²⁵ which were in turn central to Vidal's broader politico-literary project. This project was essentially corrective: not only of the facts and themes of U.S. political history (which, Vidal complained, were hopelessly ill-taught or outright misrepresented) but also of developments in U.S. literary

²⁵ The novels are *Washington, D.C.* (1967), *Burr* (1973), *1876* (1976), *Lincoln* (1984), *Empire* (1987), *Hollywood* (1990), and *The Golden Age* (2000).

history. Beginning with his 1956 essay “A Note on the Novel,” Vidal was frequently found defending novel-writing from two enemies, one foreign (public apathy toward literature) and one domestic (trends in fiction-writing). Regarding public apathy toward literature, Vidal sympathized with the apathy: the public, he wrote in 1967, preferred “books of ‘fact’” to the “portentous theorizings” and “self-conscious avant-gardism” of contemporary novels (*United States* 89, 110). Regarding those, Vidal’s public statements were consistently charged with antipathy toward two developments in U.S. fiction after the 1960s: first, rampant experimentalism, especially in fiction that bears the influence of French post-structuralism and the *nouveau roman*, and second, realism, specifically that realism that required an author to possess intimate or personal knowledge of its content and eschewed grandiose or historical (and therefore unfamiliar) material.²⁶ In short, Vidal challenged two of the most well-known dicta of twentieth-century literature: “Make It New” and “Write What You Know,” which between them encompass avant-garde experimentalism and realism. This challenge produced, in *Lincoln*, a productive strangeness that exceeded Vidal’s personal idiosyncrasies and that contributed to the broader neorealist challenge to postmodernism.

1. *Lincoln: A Novel*

Lincoln is set entirely in Washington D.C. and describes the period between Lincoln’s arrival in the capitol in February 1861 and his assassination in

²⁶ E.g., the dominance of minimalism in MFA programs in the early 1980s. Also: the term “dirty realism” was coined in *Granta* in 1983, the year before *Lincoln*, to describe the sort of closed, domestic fiction Vidal disliked.

April 1865. Lincoln appears in or is the subject of every scene in the novel. The plot centers on Lincoln's handling of the Civil War and the young, fractured Republican Party. A sizable percentage of the lines spoken by Lincoln are taken from the historical record, typically with cosmetic alterations by Vidal. A formal component of the novel that no reader can miss (and no review failed to mention) is its selective use of omniscient narration: Vidal wrote from the perspective of characters, and never wrote from Lincoln's own perspective. Vidal presented his Lincoln to the reader exclusively through the president's spoken words, through his observable actions, and through the thoughts and impressions of six characters (on whom more below). Consequently, Lincoln himself – his mind, or his own possibility for free indirect discourse – is a kind of lacuna at the center of the text, around which the novel's narration is carefully organized.

The novel's drama and humor derive primarily from Vidal's portrayal of early Republican power struggles, which receive more attention than even the war. Lincoln is initially viewed by nearly every Republican in congress and his cabinet as naïve and indecisive. By the novel's end, he is viewed as a ruthlessly effective politician with dictatorial tendencies. Vidal played both these perceptions of Lincoln (the ambivalent, rural ignoramus and the cynical, despotic politician) against his reader's aggrandized view of Lincoln as national deity and emancipator. But Vidal's version of Lincoln is hardly heterodox, and, despite his reputation by the 1980s as one of the nation's foremost radicals, Vidal makes almost no serious attempt to revise or radicalize Lincoln.²⁷ The novel ends on a

²⁷ On Vidal's reputation: Vidal was an avatar of the left in the public imagination throughout much of his middle career. Marcie Frank's *How to Be an Intellectual in the*

fairly grand but conventional note: Lincoln is memorialized by his personal secretary (and the closest the novel comes to central narrator), John Hay, as a martyr to party and nation, both of which he unified and propelled toward greater power (*Lincoln* 656 – 657).

In his afterword, Vidal anticipated what he perceived to be his reader's first major concern: "How much of *Lincoln* is generally thought to be true? How much made up? This is an urgent question for any reader; and deserves as straight an answer as the writer can give" (*Lincoln* 659). This relatively simple statement reveals compelling assumptions about the responsibility of a novelist to his reader and his subject. Instead of invoking the doctrine of poetic license and the author's

Age of TV: The Lessons of Gore Vidal is one of the few scholarly treatments of Vidal's prolific career as a public intellectual. In that book, Frank offers an astute reading of Martin Scorsese's 1982 *King of Comedy*, in which Vidal is named as a guest on a nightly talk show. Frank cites the film as evidence that Vidal was not merely a ubiquitous media personality in 1982 but a bona fide cultural figure: he "indexes 'normal' TV" for Scorsese's viewers" (55). Elsewhere, Frank suggests that, since 1968, Vidal-on-TV functioned as a metonym for U.S. leftism. Vidal's reputation colored critical reaction to the novel, especially among politically conservative critics.

On Lincoln scholarship and radicalism: historian Sean Wilentz, writing in 2009, reflected on the different extremes in Lincoln scholarship over the past half-century. He divides these extremes between the post-1960s "defamatory image of Lincoln as a conventional white racist, whose chief cause was self-aggrandizement," the more popular "awestruck hagiographies," and the literary analyses of Lincoln's speeches that "aestheticize" the sixteenth president ("now he belongs to the English department") ("Who Lincoln Was"). All of these interpretations, argued Wilentz, are in fact different sides of a common currency: the tendency to view Lincoln as a "philosopher-statesman and a literary genius," to suppress the essentially political nature of Lincoln's words and actions, to ignore "that Abraham Lincoln was, first and foremost, a politician."

On Vidal's interpretation of Lincoln: I do not mean to imply that *Lincoln* is free from Vidal's interpretation or pet ideological topics. Given Vidal's personal views of the Civil War (which can be fairly characterized as, if not quite pro-Confederate, at least sympathetic to Confederate gripes) and his consistent critique of executive power, an astute reader detects dark irony in many individual scenes. Throughout the novel, characters suggest that Lincoln's federal consolidation of military and taxation power will lay the groundwork for the kind of militarized, imperialistic economy that is, in the twentieth century, both the object of Vidal's wrath and the unifying knot of his otherwise contradictory political positions. Such moments of irony are, however, exceptional, and the bulk of Vidal's *Lincoln* is favorable to the sixteenth president.

right to embellish, Vidal proceeded to enumerate the fictional characters and events in the novel. He described the exact scenes in which he altered geography or chronology to enhance the plot. In his account, such alterations typically involve minor details in minor scenes: a drugstore is moved a few blocks north from its actual location in 1860s Washington. General McClellan appears at a Boxing Day party when he was historically sick in bed. Vidal wrote: “I have not done this sort of thing often. I have not done it at all with the presidents.”

For certain readers, this claim of accuracy seemed to invite scrutiny, and several eminent Lincoln scholars published critiques of *Lincoln*’s historicity. Over the seven years following the novel’s publication, two historians – Richard N. Current and C. Vann Woodward – sparred publicly with Vidal over the factuality of details (most minor, but a few significant) in his novel. The heatedness of the debate was partially rooted in Vidal’s egomaniacal personality, which took any criticism personally, but it was also rooted in novel’s undeniable attachment to fact and detail. The appearance of such facts and details within a novel was not unusual, but their function was. It is not that *Lincoln* provided an encyclopedic cache of trivia, such as one might find in the sprawling, experimental novels that John Barth labeled alternately “the literature of exhaustion” (1967) and “the literature of replenishment” (1980).²⁸ By 1984, ambitious readers of literary fiction were accustomed to such novels, which did not invite strong historical scrutiny in part because of the excessiveness of their representational strategies.²⁹

²⁸ See the historical novels written by authors such as William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, and Barth himself.

²⁹ Open any page to the encyclopedic novel *par excellence*, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and one will find an excess of facts and data, long indices of information incorporated

Lincoln, despite its size and attention to detail, evades this style totally. The facts and details sometimes threaten, but always fail, to overwhelm any given page. Its primary aesthetic is not excess but exactitude. Consider the opening lines:

Elihu B. Washburne opened his gold watch. The spidery hands showed five minutes to six.

“Wait here,” he said to the driver, who said, “How do I know you’re coming back, sir?”

At the best of times Congressman Washburne’s temper was a most unstable affair, and his sudden outbursts of rage – he could roar like a preacher anticipating hell – were much admired in his adopted state of Illinois, where constituents proudly claimed that he was the only militant teetotaler who behaved exactly like a normal person at five minutes to six, say, in the early morning of an icy winter day – of the twenty-third of February, 1861, to be exact.

“Why, you black – !” As the cry in Washburne’s throat began to go to its terrible maximum, caution, the politician’s ever-present angel, cut short the statesman’s breath. A puff of unresonated cold steam filled the space between the congressman and the Negro drive on his high seat. Heart beating rapidly with unslaked fury, Washburne gave the driver some coins. “You are to stay here until I return, you hear me?” (3)

into its representative strategies, sometimes denoted in a typographically self-conscious mimetic shorthand: math equations, formulae, dates, graphs, quotations, statistics, etc.

The opening is typical of Vidal's style throughout the novel: scenes are composed in clear prose, generally alternating between passages of dialogue and paragraphs of omniscient narration. Metaphors and similes are frequently employed, and extended metaphors are occasionally pursued for a page or so. They rarely, however, distract from the narrative, call attention to the novel's style or form, or even – subtitle aside – the novel's status as a novel. In short, *Lincoln* can reasonably be characterized as a practice in conventional middlebrow realism, and like so many conventionally realist novels, it practices a kind of stylistic self-erasure.³⁰ Put differently, Vidal attempted to make his style relatively free of ambiguity or difficulty. The first two, short sentences in the above passage describe simple actions. The gold watch has spidery hands; Vidal frequently described persons and objects in animalistic terms (William Seward has a parrot's beak, General Sherman has a raptor's eyes – in a later novel, William Jennings Bryant has a catfish's smile). This tendency occasionally threatens to develop into a recognizably postmodern blazon, but never does. Washburne's perspective is interrupted by a short line of dialogue, which in turn is followed by a paragraph-long sentence that meanders between Washburne's back-story, the date (February 23, "to be exact"), and the politics of alcohol and personality in Illinois. This interlude is quickly interrupted by the outside world. Such interruptions recur; free indirect discourse is subordinated to action time and again. Throughout the

³⁰As Fredric Jameson has noted, realism insists on its own stylistic invisibility. It imposes a self-conserving totality, what Jameson has dubbed the "ontological commitment to the status quo as such" – a formal and, sometimes, ideological conservatism – that characterizes realism (*Antinomies* 280 – 281, 145). Jameson argues that this conservatism is not necessarily political, though he adds that "the personal conservatism of most of the great realist novelists can be demonstrated biographically" (145).

novel, actions and events, the stuff of history, interrupt and trump the wanderings of an individual consciousness.

Lincoln is also littered with small facts. Vidal was fond of establishing the origins of well-known phrases or sayings in his fiction. In one scene, Secretary of State William Seward reflects on the size of his office compared to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase's notably larger office: "Plainly," thinks Seward, "the difference between the two offices symbolized the importance of the 'almighty dollar,' as Washington Irving called it" (273). Vidal embedded the etymology of the euphemism "hooker" and the history of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" into his narrative.³¹ Lincoln's secretaries refer to him as "the Tycoon," and we are informed that they first encountered the word "Tycoon" during "the previous year's visit to Washington by the first ambassadors from that awesome Japanese official known as the Tycoon" (29). The allusion to U.S.-Japanese relations in the 1860s is representative of a broader strategy in *Lincoln*: Vidal used U.S. foreign policy to simultaneously defamiliarize and authenticate his representation of a period that, to most U.S. readers, is exclusively associated

³¹ Literary history enters the novel only sparingly. Vidal knows the dominance of verse in the nineteenth-century U.S., and there are no references to any novels in *Lincoln* (not even *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Hay, a poet (both historically and in the novel), is obsessed with Poe. Lincoln, also a poet, is said to frequently recite William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis." Julia Ward Howe appears briefly at a party. Henry Adams makes a brief and entertaining appearance. Walt Whitman has an unconvincing scene with Chase, after the prudish Treasury Secretary reluctantly grants the homosexual poet a job interview in order to procure the poet's letter of recommendation, which bears the signature of Ralph Waldo Emerson. (Vidal makes Chase's obsession for signatures – material evidence of historical personages – a defining quirk.) These moments aside, *Lincoln*'s history is thoroughly political, and seems to elide any suggestion of its generic predecessors.

with domestic conflict.³² Although the novel is entirely set in or around the District of Columbia, the events in *Lincoln* are staged against a global backdrop. Along with small facts, foreign policy – and the continuity between U.S. and global politics – is used to simultaneously authenticate *Lincoln*'s historicity and defamiliarize Lincoln and his time for audiences in 1984. Austrian Foreign Minister Klemens von Metternich and German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck are both invoked as contemporary world leaders comparable to Lincoln.³³ The tense U.S. relationship with Canada is a minor theme; Montreal is cited as a hotbed of Confederate activity (595). Vidal alludes to U.S.-Russian relations several times, pregnant allusions in 1984. Vidal portrayed not only the well-known, near-disastrous *Trent* affair between the U.S. and Great Britain, but also coverage of the Civil War in the British press. Characters frequently quote from the *London Times*' critical coverage of the Lincoln administration, one quoting the newspaper's (hopeful) prediction that Lincoln would earn "the distinctive affix which he will share with many, for the most part foolish and incompetent, kings and emperors...that of being Lincoln – the Last" (415).³⁴

The prediction that Lincoln would be the "last" U.S. president highlights another, more intriguing, component of Vidal's historical realism. *Lincoln*'s sense

³² The allusion to Japan recalls Vidalian paranoia about that nation, partly rooted in his extreme economic nativism, which he frequently trumpeted as a response to Japanese growth during the 1980s. It functions much as allusions to Vietnam and Richard Nixon do in *Gravity's Rainbow*: a reminder to the reader of the present.

³³ The Bismarck comparison is likely derived from Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore*.

³⁴ Senator Charles Sumner – portrayed by Vidal as a sanctimonious Anglophiliac – echoes the *Times*' verdict, and establishes another point of continuity between global and U.S. politics, when he says, "Of all the rulers of recent times that I can recall Lincoln is most like Louis XVI. The storm is all about him, but he does nothing" (543).

of accuracy and exactitude is accomplished partly by its extensive and effective use of what I call counterfactual projections. Throughout the novel, characters speculate about the outcome of the war or the 1864 election, casting projections that the reader knows will prove false. These moments generate negotiation between Vidal, the text, and the reader: there is a gap between any given narrator's knowledge and the reader's knowledge, through which Vidal admitted alternate history into *Lincoln*. As with his facts, Vidal claimed that the counterfactual projections he recorded in *Lincoln* were taken from primary sources: letters, diaries, and speeches. For instance: Washburne predicts that "if the South does maintain its independence, the entire northwest will go with them, and they will together form a great nation," apparently common anxiety at the time (421). Lincoln looks ahead to his retirement: "I want to see California and the Pacific Ocean" (643). Seward decides early that Lincoln "will not be reelected," and by summer 1864, most characters – including Lincoln himself – agree (557). Seward proves to be the novel's greatest vector of alternate history, and Vidal described the secretary's elaborate, counterfactual fantasies in great detail. Seward is introduced early as the *de facto* leader of the Republican Party. In the early months of his presidency, Lincoln is viewed by many Republicans as a figurehead leader with Seward operating as prime minister. Consequently, Seward spends much of the novel imagining a Seward presidency, and attempts to steer the Lincoln administration toward his own grandiose vision: abandoning the war against the Confederacy (which he dismisses as a "half-dozen or so rebellious mosquito-states") and, instead, engaging France in a war for Mexico (156). In

Seward's vision, once the U.S. has expanded into Central and, eventually, South America, the southern states (exhausted by the inevitable collapse of the plantation economy) would rejoin the union. A conquest of Canada would naturally follow, and a Pan-American empire, ruled from Washington, would be established. Seward's grand counterfactual projection, combined with his critical underestimation of Lincoln's skill and ambition, lends credibility to Vidal's representation. The what-might-have-been authorizes the what-was, especially as Seward gradually (fact-by-fact, as if brick-by-brick) realizes Lincoln's political acumen and watches the familiar history of the Civil War unfold.

Vidal described counterfactual projections of the future explicitly, forcefully, and in detail. Conversely, he tended to understate premonitions of actual history. Accurate predictions of future events occurred, but are muted, barely elaborated upon. A reader who blinks could miss the first reference to Robert E. Lee, whom Lincoln fears will abandon the Union army to defend Virginia (a reader who does not blink already knows the outcome). Likewise, John Wilkes Booth arrives in the narrative abruptly and without fanfare. After the 1864 election guarantees Lincoln a second term, Seward observes that Vice President Andrew Johnson's "virulent hatred of the slave-owners had made Lincoln uneasy," a premonition of Johnson's disastrous post-war regime, but the subject is quickly dropped (531). As with the counterfactuals, these minor prophecies construct a gap between the reader's knowledge and the narrative's focalization, through which Vidal and the reader can exchange a knowing glance. The counterfactuals set the historical premonition into relief; Vidal attempted to

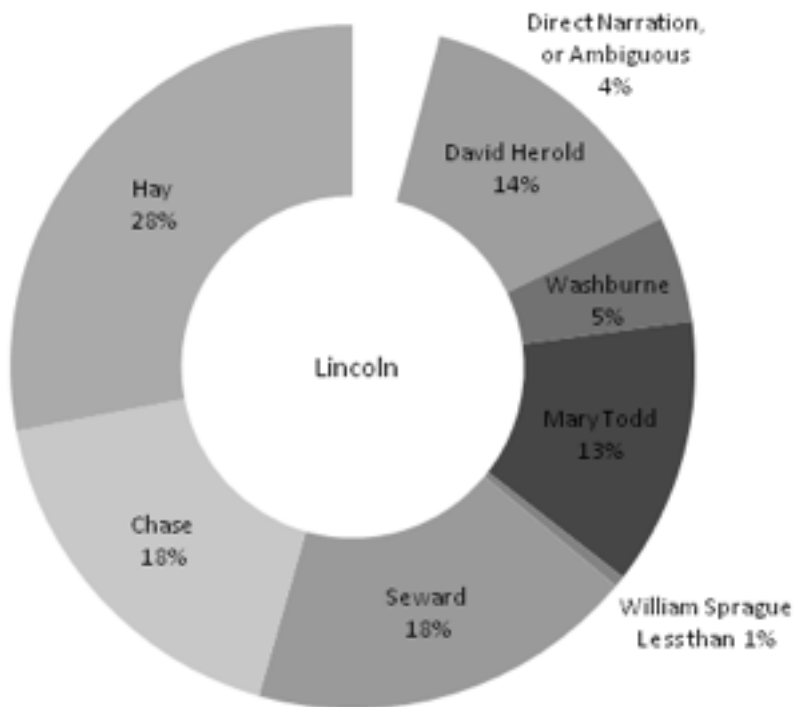
keep the door of historical possibility open (as it would have been, in 1861) without allowing the reader to become distracted – or annoyed – by their own knowledge of incomplete events.

Incompleteness – the sense of history-in-process – constitutes a major theme of the novel. *Lincoln* is full of references to incomplete edifices: some literal, others institutional, all familiar to twentieth-century readers. The Capitol dome, famously, was incomplete during the Civil War, and appears as such throughout the novel. The half-constructed obelisk of the Washington monument appears in the background in many scenes. Notably for readers in the year of Ronald Reagan's landslide reelection, the Republican Party itself is incomplete. In one scene, Lincoln expertly diffuses a hostile encounter with Republican senators, prompting Seward to reflect: "They [the senators] might call themselves Republicans, but the word was too vague to describe a former Democrat turned Jacobin abolitionist like Hickman or a former Whig moderate like himself – or the President, for that matter" (313). (By the 1984 election, it was the Democrats who were perceived to be hopelessly fractious and the Republicans who were perceived to be effectively homogenized.) In another scene, an appointment-seeker confronts Lincoln in the street and introduces himself as a "life-long Republican from Dutchess County" (154). "Our party's only seven years old," responds the president, to which the man replies, "Exactly sir, lifelong." Even the United States itself is both in disunion and incomplete. On the night of the 1864 election, Hay lists all the states alphabetically in order to record the returns. He

forgets Nevada, which had been a state for only eight days on election night, and is forced to append it out of order (584).

The novel's descriptions of architectural and national incompleteness mirror the novel's emphasis on materiality. By materiality, I refer not to the materiality of the text itself – a theoretical consideration about which Vidal was totally apathetic – but to the material qualities of the characters Vidal described in the novel. In particular, Vidal seemed to take pleasure in describing Lincoln's physical ticks, which, like counterfactuality and incompleteness, help to emphasize the materiality and the contingency of the events, characters, words, and deeds represented in the novel. More specifically, Vidal used Lincoln's physicality to flesh out those aspects of Lincoln's appearance that have become so iconic: his height, his visage, his awkwardness. When the president first appears in the novel, he is not recognized by the narrator, Washburne, because Lincoln is incognito – newly arrived in Washington by way of Baltimore, where assassination threats famously forced the president-elect to travel in disguise and grow a beard. Thus, Vidal first described Lincoln to the reader by way of misrecognition: “[A] tall thin man, wearing a soft slouch hat pulled over his eyes like a burglar, and a short overcoat whose collar was turned up, so that nothing was visible between the cap and collar but a prominent nose and high cheekbones covered with yellow skin, taut as a drum” (4). Vidal eschewed the details that would tip the reader off (the beard, the stovepipe hat) but included enough of the well-known frame and face (height, weight, prominent nose and cheekbones) that the reader essentially reconstructs Lincoln without conjuring the iconography.

Focalization in *Lincoln*



Lincoln is fleshed out (“yellow skin, taut”) but not altered. The reader, like Washburne, encounters him and *then* recognizes him: a surprise, but not a totally

demystifying surprise, and the recognition is rooted in the image’s essential familiarity. Throughout the novel, Vidal’s physical descriptions of Lincoln defamiliarize, but they do not estrange: Lincoln “slumped in his chair; and grabbed his knees in such a way that his chin could now rest comfortably upon them” (151). His hair “resembled a stack of black hay after a wind.” When he suggests suspending habeas corpus, his “lazy-limbed figure...twisted in his chair like an ebony German pretzel” (153). The novel’s physical emphasis extends to both the gastronomic and the intestinal: characters reflect on prairie politicians, Lincoln among them, who develop a taste for fried oysters while in Washington. Lincoln is frequently described eating apples (often more than one at a time, in lieu of a meal). And Vidal, through Washburne, described Lincoln experiencing “constipation so severe that he seldom moved his bowels more than once a week.”

Toward the end, Lincoln gets progressively thinner, his hair unkempt and his skin “a doughnut-brown” (577). The assassination and death scenes are well-rendered and affecting, but also lean, precise, and plainly descriptive: “At that moment, from a distance of five feet, Booth fired a single shot into the back of the President’s head. Without a sound, Lincoln leaned back in the chair; and his head slumped to the left until it was stopped by the wooden partition” (648). “The bullet had gone into the back of Lincoln’s head above the left ear and then downward and to the right, stopping just below the right eye.” Later, across the street,

Lincoln lay on his back, breathing heavily, as a doctor tried with cotton to staunch the ooze of blood from the shattered skull.

Lincoln’s right eye was swollen shut; and the skin of the right cheek was turning black. Hay noted that the long bare arms on the coverlet were surprisingly muscular. Lately, he had tended to think of the Ancient as mere skin and bone. (648 – 649)

Lincoln’s skin has gone from taut and yellow to doughnut-brown and, finally, black. Vidal marks the time – shortly after seven o’ clock – that Lincoln dies; not quite the same exactitude with which the novel opens (“five minutes to six...to be exact”), but close enough.

In an apparent inversion of his emphasis on Lincoln’s physicality, Vidal elided Lincoln’s inner life and never wrote from Lincoln’s perspective. This aspect of the novel – its focalization – is perhaps its most notable element. The vast majority of the novel’s 650 pages are written from the perspective of six

specific characters: Hay, Seward, Chase, Washburne, Mary Todd, and David Herold, a young Washingtonian who watches Lincoln from a distance and engages in espionage for the Confederate army.³⁵ (Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of free indirect discourse in *Lincoln*. The gap represents moments when Vidal writes directly in the third-person or when the identity of the narrator is ambiguous.) Each of the six narrators offers an interpretation of Lincoln that is unmistakably their own, but Vidal went to great lengths to describe the process of interpretation, to separate the words, actions, and presence of the president from the motives each narrator ascribed to him. The president's consciousness constitutes lacuna at the center of the novel, an empty space wherein Vidal dared not tread. But it is not a postmodern lacuna, an absolute zero around which narratives are organized. It is an unknowable but substantial space, shrouded by the thoughts and speculations of others. Significantly, it is not that Vidal cannot narrate from Lincoln's perspective, but rather that he chose not to.

Despite the boundary Vidal created around Lincoln's consciousness, the narration is extremely generous with the reader. The novel's omniscient narration allows the reader to know more than Lincoln – and more, indeed, than the majority of the characters – about almost every incident in every scene. The reader becomes privy to innumerable plots before Lincoln and those around him. Despite this position of near-omniscience, the narration expends an enormous amount of prose (direct and free indirect) speculating about Lincoln's thoughts.

³⁵ Additionally, there are a handful of pages narrated in direct (though not omniscient) third person, and three pages are written from the perspective of Chase's son-in-law, William Sprague. With those few exceptions, the whole of the novel is written from one of the six primary perspectives.

This careful avoidance of Lincoln's consciousness only amplifies any moment when the narration seems *almost* about to penetrate Lincoln's thoughts, when the reader detects a thin or permeable spot in the membrane that partitions Lincoln's mind from the narration's purview. At times, Lincoln is said to be "unaware" of a person or event, but invariably this knowledge comes by way of observation. In one scene, written from Seward's perspective, Lincoln "seemed to think" that Ulysses Grant harbored political ambitions, and the "seemed" (Seward's) only barely blocks the reader from free indirect access to Lincoln's opinion (as if to maintain deniability, Vidal has Seward reflect, only a paragraph later, "How typical of Lincoln...to leave unrevealed his own deepest estimate of Grant") (523).³⁶

In his 2013 study *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator*, critic Paul Dawson described a resurgence in what he called "the literary historian" mode of narration, which departed from Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction by "display[ing] a faith in the literary imagination to supplement the historical record, rather than undermine the narrative 'truth' of history" (88). In other words, realist fiction writers in the early twenty-first century – Dawson cited Gail Jones, Michael Faber, Edward P. Jones, and David Lodge – were increasingly returning to "the traditional metaphor of the novelist as historian, established by the prototypical omniscient narrator of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*..." (88). They

³⁶ Notably, Lincoln's is not the only unrepresented consciousness in the novel. For instance: Vidal's narration never ventriloquizes Edwin M. Stanton's private thoughts. The reader observes the Secretary of War exclusively from the perspective of others. This is also the case with the whole of the military, from Winfield Scott, George McClellan, and Ulysses Grant to the masses of Union soldiers.

did not feel the need to embellish or alter the historical record, but could merely serve as a supplement via realism's representational strategies. *Lincoln* represents a much earlier and more radical instance of the approach Dawson described. Vidal himself called his narration-style "Jamesian" (*At Home* 281). Henry James is a recurring figure in Vidal's essays of the 1980s, and Vidal utilized his six characters as "windows" (to borrow a Jamesian term) looking onto Lincoln. But in *Lincoln*, Vidal seemed more interested in the frames than the glass; more interested in the filter than the content. The organizing principle for the entire novel is precisely what is hidden and unknowable: the content of Lincoln's mind. Vidal intentionally kept Lincoln's window shut, insisting on the essential inaccessibility of history while simultaneously insisting on the possibility of factual representation in the present.

Lincoln's author-imposed exile from the novel's focalization has repercussions for the text's fictional representation. Discussing the point at which fiction becomes recognizable *qua* fiction, Cohn observed that "fiction is recognizable as fiction only if and when it actualizes its focalizing potential," which is implicit in the "'I-originary of a third person' ...the zero point (or center of orientation) in space and time determined by the here-and-now of the speaking subject" who is dislocated "from speaking self to silent other" in third person prose (24 – 25). Lincoln is, in this sense, not actualized as a fictional subject in the novel, only as a fictional object of the "silent others" (Chase, Hay, etc.) who observe and think about him. Vidal's motives for denying Lincoln a fictional subjectivity become clear when we consider Cohn's argument that focalization is

the structural genesis of fictionality. Vidal denied Lincoln free indirect discourse – denied him his “focalizing potential” – to hold out the tantalizing possibility that the president might be non-fictionalized within the fiction of the novel.

For Cohn, the moment of a character’s death provided a critical distinction between fiction and nonfiction. She wrote:

No instant of life (if one can call it that) highlights more dramatically than death and dying the difference in kind between biography and fiction, between the biographer’s constraint and the novelist’s freedom. For here fiction is able to represent an experience that cannot be conveyed by “natural” discourse in *any* manner or form. This may well be why novelists – great realists no less than great antirealists – perennially give us the mimesis of a dying consciousness. (22)

In this quote, Cohn reveals the incredible vista that is available to novelists – “the mimesis of a dying consciousness” – but unavailable to biographers. This point amplifies the effect of the death scene in *Lincoln*, where the dying consciousness is not only unrepresented but scrupulously avoided. Instead, Vidal drew out and emphasized those details of Lincoln’s physical condition – even those details, like the exact position of the bullet, which would have been unavailable to onlookers (because the bullet was located, ironically, in Lincoln’s head).

A final note about *Lincoln* before turning to the novel’s reception among critics: Vidal’s prose-style is not self-consciously periodized. Unlike other prominent historical novelists working in 1980s (ranging from Cormac McCarthy

to Toni Morrison), Vidal did not mimic the idiosyntaxes of nineteenth-century speech, prose, or print culture. *Lincoln*'s narrative cadence and lexicon are, generally, late-twentieth century; Vidal's style follows no nineteenth-century prose conventions. Archaic terms or phrases, when they occur in *Lincoln*, are typically used in dialogue and then defined in the narration. Although the novel contains facts, phrases, expressions, and etymologies that are obviously meant to authenticate its historicity, these elements are carefully presented as information that must be explained to the reader. Dialogue is never written in regional or ethnic dialect. Contrast this with Cormac McCarthy. When, in the opening scene of *Blood Meridian* (1985), the archaic word "shellalegh" appears, it purposefully distracts and historically alienates the reader, an effect which, in turn, authenticates the novel's historicity (9). *Blood Meridian* is precisely the sort of historical fiction that, by the mid-1980s, had come to rely on a periodized vocabulary and syntax (e.g., "the mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off"). This vocabulary and syntax produced the illusion of direct representation. Dialogue that is written to phonetically or syntactically conform to dialect has a similar effect. Even McCarthy's full title – *Blood Meridian or, The Evening Redness in the West* – imitates the subtitle conventions of nineteenth-century fiction. Each chapter begins with a paragraph-length overview of its own contents, in the style of many nineteenth-century novels. Throughout *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy intentionally mimicked the prose of Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, among others (Hungerford "Cormac"). These practices embed their representational

capacity within the materiality of their signifiers, constructing an illusion (for the reader) of a direct encounter with the past.³⁷ Naturally, the reader of *Blood Meridian* does not actually fall for the illusion that McCarthy's novel is a product (or even a fully accurate representation) of nineteenth-century literary culture. The reader knows, and derives pleasure from the fact, that McCarthy's style is pure affect: a simulacrum of a style. But this is exactly what Vidal did not do in *Lincoln*. He neither imitated nor simulated – he described.

In McCarthy, language does not represent via description: it represents via being. Its shape (as in the paragraph-length summaries) and vocality (the syntax and vocabulary) are directly mimetic prior to the content. Nothing in *Lincoln*'s shape, form, or vocality represents apart from the signified content. There is no representation in the novel without meaning. Vidal, who so arduously cultivated and defended his fiction's historicity, does not historicize his language. He self-consciously constructed a text with strict limits on its own representational possibilities.

2. *Lincoln* and its critics

Of *Lincoln*'s initial reviews, the most positive, like Joyce Carol Oates's, focused on Vidal's characterization. Harold Bloom, writing for *The New York Review of Books*, said: "no biographer, and until now no novelist, has had the precision of imagination to show us a plausible and human Lincoln, of us and yet beyond us. Vidal, with this book, does just that." There were few outright negative reviews, and the least positive reviews tended to criticize Vidal's prosaic

³⁷ Walter Benn Michaels argued along these lines in *The Shape of the Signifier*.

style. These reviews illustrate critical assumptions about normative style and the function of fiction in the mid-1980s. The Australian novelist Thomas Keneally, writing a review for *The New Republic* (titled “Bore Vidal”), praised Vidal’s “exact and careful characterization” but complained about the uncharacteristic “stodginess” of the novel’s prose, remarking: “[*Lincoln*] is a strangely dated piece of work, lacking in the fancy, idiosyncrasy, and flashes of lightning for which we depend on fiction writers, not least on Gore Vidal” (32). Commenting on the novel’s historicity, Keneally continued:

It is true that this exactitude is maintained for over six hundred pages and for that reason deserves praise. Vidal has failed, however, to filter historic events through the peculiar sieve of a literary imagination. There is a sense of inhibition in the novel, as if Vidal has chosen his particular way of telling the tale because his reverence for Lincoln has forced it on him. (32)

For this reason, Keneally wrote, the novel never really “takes flight and offers no more enlightenment than a good practical biography.”³⁸ *Lincoln* feels “dated” by comparison because it ducks the practices that, by 1984, marked both the function and value of fiction. “Fancy” and “idiosyncrasy” – irony, embellishment, particularity, contingency – are dominant components within the stylistic innovations of U.S. postmodern fiction. “Flight” and “flashes of lightning” are the kind of aesthetic pyrotechnics that we associate with postmodern fiction, and these pyrotechnics are designed to offer “enlightenment,” that is, knowledge

³⁸ It was no surprise when Keneally revealed that he prefers Vidal’s satirical novels and his postmodern pastiche, *Duluth* (1983).

elided by positivist modes of inquiry, which naively misrecognize their own linguistic or historical contingency. A novel that proudly accepted positivist modes of inquiry would seem, by 1984, not only to have missed a valuable didactic opportunity, but to have missed the point of fiction altogether. As D.A.N. Jones noted in the *London Review of Books*, Vidal's style was insufficiently "extravagant" and "provocative," adjectives one expected to attach to the author of *Burr* and *Myra Breckenridge*. In *Lincoln*, observed Jones, Vidal seemed "curbed by his subject-matter":

[Vidal] seems to want the political and religious passions to be reined back, the natural feelings of belligerence and even fanaticism to be calmed by cool reason and down-to-earth witticisms: he notices Lincoln's almost physical need for laughter. In his self-restraint, Gore Vidal does not even make a great scene of the killing.

Vidal was "curbed" by his subject, but the curbing was at least partly self-imposed: he "reins back," his prose shows evidence of "self-restraint." Keneally: "There is a sense of inhibition in the novel." These are implicit references to two aspects of *Lincoln*: the structural decision to elide the president's consciousness and the stylistic decision to not imitate nineteenth-century prose.

Because Vidal carefully (reviewers would say respectfully) avoided representing Lincoln's consciousness and neutralized (rather than periodized) the prose, the novel's tone and effect could actually be characterized as conservative. This, as much as anything, is the thrust of Jones' criticism: *Lincoln* is an

extremely austere work of historical fiction. Stylistic conservatism does not automatically entail political conservatism, and neither Vidal (though a reactionary in many areas³⁹) nor *Lincoln* can be easily aligned with U.S. political conservatism in the 1980s. Nevertheless, some of the novel's most interesting reviews came from the conservative press. By the late 1970s, conservative journalism in the U.S. had consolidated within numerous journals and research institutions, which together formed what William E. Simon, president of the John M. Olin Foundation (the financier of much of the consolidation), called a "counterintelligentsia" (qtd. in Miller). A pillar of Simon's counterintelligentsia was the Claremont Institute, and the *Claremont Review of Books* was its cultural organ. John Alvis's *Claremont* review of *Lincoln*, titled "Lincoln as Nihilist," typified the cautious, sometimes confused, but ultimately friendly conservative response to Vidal's novel. Alvis's review alternates between praise and harsh criticism. Unlike the above critics, however, Alvis lauded the novel's structure and style, and even its historicity. *Lincoln*, he wrote, is "more like food for grown men than the thin whimsies from which much of contemporary fiction and drama are whipped up and eked out." The issue of characterization – the basis of most positive reviews – and, more specifically, the presumed ideology behind Vidal's characterization of Lincoln is what Alvis objected to. His review begins:

³⁹ Vidal's opposition to the so-called military-industrial complex was simultaneously radical and reactionary. His views rhymed with a more general opposition to internationalism and federal power associated with paleo-conservatism. Consequently, Vidal frequently took stands more associated with paleo-conservatism than U.S. radical leftism. He was an unreconstructed admirer of Charles Lindbergh. He was a critic of the income tax. Christopher Hitchens noted that "it is essential, in the understanding of Vidal, to know how conservative as well as how radical he can be" (*Unacknowledged* 68).

So trivial are the projects today's novelists set themselves that producing a noble failure in any large-scale political conception would raise the stakes of current American literature. To say Gore Vidal's recent novel fails nobly may go too far. But, if admirable is not the word, there is surely something wondrous in the audacity of the creator of *Myra Breckenridge* taking on the job of depicting the two presidencies of Lincoln. Whatever its cause, Vidal's new daring is welcome, and his abilities in most of the technical prerequisites of fiction writing are not negligible. One is tempted to judge the effort by the standard Dr. Johnson stipulated for dogs who walk on their hind legs and women who preach, not to require the thing be done well but applaud that it is done at all. In the last resort, however, both the strength and the weakness of Vidal's performance resides at the heart of his conception of the man, who, with Churchill, deserves the title of foremost statesman of the modern era. The treatment that shapes the novel is ample, strenuous, vivid, and at times moving. And hence the more disappointing for being at bottom inadequate.

The above paragraph is quoted in its entirety because, as an instance of "counterintelligentsia" prose from the early 1980s, it is such a full and representative artifact. It hits numerous conservative sweet-spots: Alvis quotes Samuel Johnson and praises Winston Churchill, two saints within the Anglophiliac strains of American conservatism. He calls modern novels "trivial,"

the aesthetic conservative's preferred designation (one need not bother even dismissing formal decadence and moral denigration, because it is always already trivial). He refers to Vidal as "the creator of *Myra Breckenridge*," echoing William F. Buckley's famous televised altercation with Vidal, during which Buckley attempted to dismiss Vidal's political commentary by referring to him, repeatedly, as "the author of *Myra Breckenridge*." Alvis's style mimics Buckley's more generally, a practice that had become endemic in conservative journalism (from George Will to William Safire) by the 1980s. The sentences are densely structured; predicates precede their subjects wherever they can; he never denies himself a long word, even where a short one will do. This is the preferred prose of the literate conservative, a hallmark of the genre.⁴⁰ It is what Keneally might call "dated." It may not be coincidental, then, that what Keneally found lacking in *Lincoln*, Alvis found in abundance: namely, a radical reinterpretation of Lincoln. Alvis continued:

Two of Vidal's earlier historical novels, *Julian* (the Apostate) and *Burr*, undertake to rehabilitate figures whom history has not treated kindly. ... *Lincoln* launch[es] a reinterpretation of America's past.

⁴⁰ In an essay on George Will, Christopher Hitchens described the style as the "affectation of languid, mannered, pseudo-English judiciousness" ("Pundit" 56). Buckley is generally cited as the style's root (Perlstein *Before* 70 – 72), and its ideological and rhetorical appeal among intellectual conservatives is not difficult to explain: it represents an old Tory, aristocratic conservatism (in one instance, Will brags of his desire to "legislate morality"), as opposed to the cultural populism of so much U.S. conservatism after the 1960s. Many U.S. conservatives expressed Anglophilia after Margaret Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979, when they jealously observed the British right-wing triumph after decades of marginalization within U.K. politics. For more on the politics of cultural populism and the U.S. conservative movement, see chapter five's discussion of the political rhetoric of the realist manifesto.

... If *Julian* and *Burr* revise the received historical estimate upward, *Lincoln* follows the more familiar path of downscaling. Obviously Vidal wants at all costs to avoid the sentimentalization of an “Honest Abe” hagiography descending from Whitman to Sandburg to the popular media. Hence he loses no opportunity to present the hard, relentlessly intriguing, party boss. Since this is part of a neglected truth about Lincoln, the novel, by emphasizing the Republican leader's obliquity and savvy, restores part of the whole truth. Vidal's anxiety to distance himself from sentimentalists leads him, however, to exploit a version of modern demonology.

For Alvis, this “modern demonology” took two forms: first, the suggestion that Lincoln's actions can be explained by subconscious psychic forces (what Alvis called the nihilistic “post-Freudian” tendency in modern fiction) and, second, the suggestion that Lincoln's actions are more readily explained by political, rather than purely ideological or ethical, considerations. Insofar as an official or institutional conservative response to *Lincoln* existed in 1984, it reflected anxieties about the field of Lincoln studies as a whole and the role of ideology versus realism in American politics, whether Lincoln's actions were driven by right belief or best action. (“Was Lincoln a good man?” was the most urgent question Pat Buchanan posed to Vidal during a combative debate about the novel.)

By the end of 1984, the initial reviews of *Lincoln* had been published. Over the next seven years, Vidal would engage in a heated public debate with historians over the historicity of *Lincoln*. On February 12, 1985, the Abraham Lincoln Association gathered for its annual symposium in Springfield, Illinois. One of the keynote speakers was Roy P. Basler, editor of comprehensive *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953) and former chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress. His address, "Lincoln and American Writers," dealt primarily with Vidal's novel, criticizing both its historical accuracy and its apparent interpretation of Lincoln. "More than half of the book could never have happened as told," argued Basler, singling out a scene between Walt Whitman and Chase as a particular offender. "Another 25 percent of the book is made up of episodes that might have happened, but never as they are told by Vidal." More importantly for Basler, however, was that Vidal's ruthlessly political Lincoln seems "cynical, and sometimes snide" (echoing Alvis' conservative critique). He quotes Lincoln (describing Stephen Douglas) against Vidal: "He has no right to mislead others, who have less access to history."

The following February, 1986, Lincoln scholar Richard N. Current published a fuller account of objections to *Lincoln*'s historical accuracy in *The Journal of Southern History*. Both Basler's address and Current's article were cited by historian C. Vann Woodward the following September, 1987, in the *New York Review of Books*. Woodward, reviewing William Safire's recently published *Freedom*, briefly but emphatically decried both the factual errors of Vidal's

narrative and the gumption of his claims of historicity, which he contrasted with Safire's apparent fidelity and humility.

Woodward's review got Vidal's attention, and Vidal responded to Basler, Current, Woodward, and Stephen B. Oates (another historian-critic) in an April 1988 article in the *New York Review of Books*. Woodward submitted a brief response to Vidal's article, and Current published a significantly lengthier response in August, to which Vidal published a (still longer) rebuttal. Meanwhile, the eminent Lincoln scholar Donald E. Fehrenbacher wrote "Vidal's Lincoln," a point-by-point critique of the novel, published in 1988 in an anthology, *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History* (edited by Gabor S. Boritt). Vidal published a rebuttal to Fehrenbacher's essay in *The American Historical Review* in February 1991. In August, he published his final essay on the subject, a decidedly less combative reflection on Lincoln's significance in U.S. culture, for the *New York Review of Books*.

Current's 1986 essay, "Fiction as History," began with a familiar lament about dwindling readership: in this case, it is readers of history who were dwindling because, according to Current, they are more apt to rely on novels (which he aligned with film and television) than on textbooks for historical knowledge (77). Current then distinguished between "historical fiction," which sets fictional characters and events in the past and uses historical persons and events as a backdrop, and "fictional history," which "pretends to deal with real persons and events but actually reshapes them" (77). This is not a distinction Current seemed to draw from literary criticism, and he offers examples of each

genre. Historical fiction, wrote Current, includes several novels published between 1901 and 1936, including Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905) and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Fictionalized history, he continues, includes more recent novels by William Styron (*The Confessions of Nat Turner* [1967]), Alex Haley (*Roots: The Saga of an American Family* [1976]), and Vidal (*Lincoln*). Current chose three extremely variant texts to define "fictional history." In a way, this lent credibility to Current's demarcation: between them, Styron, Haley, and Vidal represent a broad spectrum within with the supposed genre. But the texts themselves vary dramatically in the critical feature that, for Current, united them: their use and representation of historicity.

Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, the account of an 1831 U.S. slave revolt written from the perspective of the revolt's instigator, Nat Turner, is as much a psychological realist novel as an historical novel. It is also a characteristically 1960s novel, reflecting anxieties over Civil Rights, political leadership, revolutionary politics, and individualism. Although *Confessions* deals with actual historical personages, it is conventionally novelistic; Styron wrote in the first-person, and he invented characters and events liberally. In his foreword, Styron performs a short reading of Georg Lukács's *The Historical Novel*, and endorses the view that an historical novelist has an obligation to truthfully portray the broad period about which he writes, but should not be impeded by specific historical facts (xxiv – xxv). And although Styron claims to honor the "known facts" wherever possible, he does not (could not, in the case of Turner) claim to rely solely on the historical record or to rigorously separate fact from fiction

(xxiii). He deliberately chose Turner because the historical record was so scant. Writing novels about well-documented men like John F. Kennedy or Abraham Lincoln is “a risky matter,” argued Styron, “constricting for the writer himself who, while quite free to take liberties with the known facts (the shopworn but sound concept of artistic license), must still take care not to violate the larger historical record” (xxiii). But even Shakespeare, Styron hastened to add, did not worry too much about the historical record (xxiv). For Styron, the novelist was free to take liberties, and *Confessions* should be interpreted as imaginative fiction only tenuously connected to fact.

Haley, conversely, claimed that *Roots* was the product of arduous historical research. *Roots* was a notoriously difficult work to taxonomize, a kind of nonfiction novel with a prominent fictional component that is, argued its author, compatible with its historicity. Haley suggested calling it “faction” (qtd. in Woodward “Gilding”). The Library of Congress, meanwhile, classified *Roots* as “family history,” not fiction (Current 82). Drawing sources from the written record, primary documents, oral histories, and generous inference, *Roots* can be viewed as an instance (hardly the most radical) of African American resistance to the forms and conventions of European history and literature. According to its narrative logic, fictionality is a reparative necessity, a response to a lost history. Haley was compelled to infer and fictionalize gaps in his family record that existed because of elapsed time and memory, which was exacerbated by slavery and racism. (This approach, wrote C. Vann Woodward dismissively, “turn[s] from history by ‘hunch’ to history (or genealogy) by ‘feel’” [“Gilding”].) The fanfare

that surrounded its 1979 television adaptation was a result of the novel's historicity, its claim to offer a true, culturally suppressed narrative that, if not always factual, did not need to be factual.

Vidal's *Lincoln*, meanwhile, did not claim to excavate a suppressed history, but instead claimed to narrate a decidedly open and available historical record. If the function of Styron's fictionality was to capture a broader historical truth (per his reading of Lukács) and the function of Haley's fictionality was to create or resurrect history, then the function of Vidal's is to simply flesh out and arrange history, not alter and certainly not create it. According to Vidal, what cannot be known in the historical record remained unknowable in *Lincoln*.

Despite the differences of historicity between these three texts, the logic of Current's classifications is immediately apparent: historical fiction fictionalizes, while fictional history falsifies. Although this distinction is potentially compelling and useful, he did not dwell much on its broader implications.⁴¹ Instead, he turned immediately to *Lincoln*. As proof of Vidal's poor scholarship, Current listed numerous factual errors in the novel, ranging from the typographic (Vidal spelled jewelry and practice in the British manner⁴²) and the etymological (Vidal

⁴¹ It may be no coincidence that the historical fictions he approvingly cites were all published prior to World War II; although Current's essay purports to be a disinterested critique across genres, one can detect a bias against post-1960 developments within contemporary fiction in general.

⁴² Above, it was noted that Vidal did not attempt to reconstruct nineteenth-century prose in *Lincoln*. When confronted with these spellings, Vidal did not defend them on the basis of their historicity – in other words, he did not claim to have been imitating the prose and conventions of the 1860s – but instead admitted that these spellings were accidental holdovers from his last two U.S. historical novels, *Burr* and *1876*, which were written in the first-person and, therefore, did attempt to imitate nineteenth-century style but rather accurately represented the style in which the narrator would have written. Such low-stakes hairsplitting was representative of the debates between Vidal and the historians.

mistakenly had a character say “trolley” before the word was first used) to the minor (Vidal claimed that Seward’s favorite card game was poker, when it was actually whist) and the absurdly minor (Vidal wrote that Senator Sumner was attacked with “a stick,” when he was actually attacked with a cane) (78 – 79). But, Current added, “Vidal is wrong on big as well as little matters” (81). For Current and the Lincoln scholars who would defend his critique, these “big matters” were three specific claims in *Lincoln*: first, that Lincoln might have contracted syphilis in his youth and might have passed it on to Marry Todd; second, that Lincoln believed that emancipated slaves ought to emigrate from the United States to a new colony, in order to preempt an inevitable and continuous racial conflict, and that he held this belief to the end; third, that Lincoln’s policies and decisions – indeed, his whole career – can be explained by his singular ambition to exceed the accomplishments of his predecessors, specifically the U.S. founders. Current also criticized Vidal’s reliance on the writings of William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner in Illinois. More generally, Current wrote that Vidal’s Lincoln is “ignorant of economics, disregardful of the Constitution, and unconcerned with the rights of blacks” (81).

Current’s charges are echoed by Woodward, Oates, and (to a slightly lesser degree) Fehrenbacher. Insofar as historians took Vidal to task over small details, he defended his novel with elaborate accounts of each detail’s basis in fact. Insofar as the critics challenged his overall portrait of Lincoln, Vidal again responded with the historical record. The full, point-by-point defense comprises thirty-one exhaustive pages in the 1992 edition of Vidal’s collected essays. At one

point, the debate seemed to hinge on whether or not Ulysses S. Grant could have failed in the saddlery business if he was merely an employee of his father's tannery and not the owner. But although Vidal objected to criticisms of such minutia, he arguably invited them by encouraging literal-minded reading practices in the first place.

If there is a dominant interpretation of Lincoln in Vidal's novel, it is that of David Herbert Donald's 1947 essay "A. Lincoln, Politician." Donald served as Vidal's historical consultant on *Lincoln*. A classic of Lincoln studies, "A. Lincoln" argues that the sixteenth president's foremost skills and accomplishments were political, not ideological (Wilentz "Who Lincoln Was").⁴³ The essay's title evokes the great man's signature, a material mark of his existence, but also a truncation of his identity: "A. Lincoln." The signature is the Lincoln of paperwork, authenticated and reduced to, but also fleshed out within, a limited role: politician. And this is the thrust of Donald's influential essay, that in order to access and understand Lincoln, he must be reduced to his most elemental function. A lesser Lincoln, perhaps, but an authentic Lincoln, "a Lincoln."

Donald's essay was an early salvo in a generational shift among Lincoln scholars, who increasingly adopted a narrowly political analysis of the sixteenth president. Professional historians across fields were increasingly emphasizing the narrow and material over the broad and Hegelian. For scholars like Donald, the

⁴³ Donald's motivation for emphasizing Lincoln's political acumen at the expense of his ideological fervor is partially rooted in the moment of the essay's composition, which had witnessed the despotic and fiercely ideological careers of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Donald hoped to demonstrate that such ideological despotism was not native to U.S. political history by portraying Lincoln as a cunning pragmatist.

most essential fact about Abraham Lincoln was his occupation: politician. These scholars favored evidence and interpretations rooted in the immediate political realities of Lincoln's career. They eschewed broader historico-ideological concerns, which had been favored by older, more hagiographic historians. This shift in Lincoln studies coincided with the mid-century popularity of psychoanalysis among U.S. intellectuals. A light version of psychoanalysis underpinned the "psychohistories" written by psychologists such as Erik Erikson, historians such as Fawn Brodie, and even Lincoln scholars such as George Forgie and Dwight G. Anderson (Current 88). Psychoanalytic theory served as both a foil for the politico-materialist emphasis within Lincoln studies and a deterrent for Lincoln scholars, rendering forays into Lincoln's psychology virtually taboo. By 1984, "Lincoln as politician" was the dominant emphasis in Lincoln studies.⁴⁴

Attempts by conservatives (such as Alvis) to rescue Abraham Lincoln from the purely political could be attributed to what Sean Wilentz call the "anti-political" tendency in non-specialist accounts of U.S. history. But for the happily politicized conservative press of the 1980s, resistance to "Lincoln as politician"

⁴⁴ Around the time historians began responding to Vidal's *Lincoln*, an enterprising group of scholars – including Rodney Davis, Allen Guelzo, Douglas Wilson, and Donald's former student, Michael Burlingame – was beginning to reinvestigate the subject of Lincoln's mind, not with psychoanalysis but instead with clinical psychiatric definitions, which they applied to accounts of Lincoln that were universally accepted by historians as credible (Shenk). They combined interest in Lincoln's mental life with the practical/materialist ethos of Lincoln studies. Their work began to appear in journals in the late '80s, and by the late '90s their analysis had been incorporated into the framework of mainstream Lincoln scholarship. Vidal's *Lincoln* was published just before these studies began to appear, when any speculation about Lincoln's mind would appear psychoanalytical (and therefore suspect). Vidal's decision to render Lincoln's political instincts with more detail and emphasis than his mental pathologies was, in part, a deliberate act of association: Vidal sided with scholars over the psychobiographers and novelists.

was more likely rooted in a generalized opposition to academia, specifically historical scholars whose work seemed to undermine traditional accounts of the nation's most beloved president. For Alvis, Lincoln was (with Churchill) "the foremost statesman of the modern era" because he was good. For Donald, Lincoln was good because he was "the foremost statesman."

As noted above, Vidal wrote *Lincoln* under Donald's guidance, and the novel's most effective and entertaining scenes involve Lincoln working a room, usually to the surprise, consternation, or awe of the characters around him. Seward watches with condescension – and then incredulity – as Lincoln, whom Seward imagined himself to be manipulating, in turn manipulates Seward, consolidates the loyalty of the military leadership, and easily scraps the Secretary of State's plans to let the southern states succeed. Chase – a radical and therefore (in his own mind) "true Republican" – watches in horror as the president calms a group of disgruntled senators, whom Chase had gathered to help usurp Lincoln, and then turns them against Chase (542). Hay watches with dismay as the Tycoon, during a rare moment of political ineptitude, fails to persuade a roomful of African American leaders to endorse a policy that would relocate emancipated slaves to Panama.

This politically adept Lincoln also harbors massive political ambition. In one essay defending the novel, Vidal recalled a speech Lincoln delivered in 1838. After reflecting on the accomplishments of the Founding Fathers, Lincoln said:

This field of glory is harvested, and the crop is already appropriated. But new reapers will arise, and they too will seek a

field. It is to deny what history tells us to suppose that men of ambitions and talents will not continue to spring up. ... Towering genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions unexplored. ... It thirsts and burns for distinction; and, if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving free men. (qtd. in Vidal *United States* 683)

This, Vidal argued, was Lincoln warning us against himself, against the Cromwellian despot that Lincoln threatened to become. In the novel, Vidal placed this warning in the mouth of Stephen Douglas, who reminds Lincoln of the 1838 speech in an understated but dramatic scene. After Douglas references the speech, the novel describes Lincoln's response: he "stared down at Douglas. There was no expression in his face; he had frozen in attitude of attention; and nothing more" (*Lincoln* 109). Throughout the novel, Lincoln is most warm and boisterous when advancing his own mythology, and in scenes when Vidal's final interpretation of Lincoln is most clearly articulated, he becomes colder and more understated. Here, Lincoln cannot even speak, his face is expressionless, as if he has collapsed into a gap that Vidal could not represent, even from another character's perspective.

Alvis was noticeably ambivalent about scenes like these, which simultaneously exposed Lincoln's political (rather than moral) motives but also reflected favorably on him. And Alvis admitted that, at times, Vidal's portrayal of Lincoln was surprisingly (and refreshingly, for Alvis) old-fashioned.⁴⁵ This initial

⁴⁵ Alvis was pleased that Vidal's Lincoln sometimes speaks like a member of the Moral Majority (in one scene, the president explained to his son that "a libertine is a man who

conservative reaction to *Lincoln* would give way to a much stranger legacy: the novel would become a favorite of conservative politicians. By 1988, presidential candidates from both parties – and Ronald Reagan – claimed to have read *Lincoln* (Solomons). Of course, Vidal's reputation as an avatar of post-1960s leftism was still intact. After the 1994 midterm elections, the historic conservative sweep of the U.S. House of Representatives – led by Georgia congressman Newt Gingrich, resulting in the first Republican majority since 1957 – prompted right-wing radio personality Rush Limbaugh to declare that “the age of Lenin and Gore Vidal is over” (qtd. in Vidal *Last Empire* 379). But Gingrich would frequently cite *Lincoln* as one of his favorite books, and once admonished an acolyte for mocking Vidal. The Speaker did not want to hear “the author of the magnificent *Lincoln*” besmirched (qtd. in Hitchens “In Search of”). What Alvis' review treats as incidental – Vidal's occasional kinship with conservative aesthetic and ideological sensibilities – proved to be a dominant feature in the novel's long-term reception. The novel's unusually subdued approach to its subject, which upset reviewers like Keneally and Jones, actually helped it secure an audience, albeit one not typically drawn to Vidal.

This reception occurred in the context of a broader cultural shift, one that placed Vidal and his conservative critics on similar sides: the social and aesthetic backlash against postmodernism, which Frederic Jameson famously described as the “cultural dominant” in the year of *Lincoln*'s publication. Attacks against

loves liberty only a little, not a lot like us,” much to Alvis' delight). Three years before Iran-Contra, Alvis also approved of Vidal's *Lincoln*'s tough stance on the Constitution (i.e., it must be suspended to be saved).

postmodernism became increasingly common and vigorous, even in non-academic venues, from across the politico-cultural spectrum. Vidal is one of several novelists who responded with special aggressiveness to postmodernism's literary techniques, and his novels after 1973's *Burr* represent increasingly direct responses to postmodernism's perceived excesses.

3. Vidal, Jameson, and postmodernism

By 1984, backlash against the unwieldy, difficult to define, but apparently ubiquitous phenomenon of "postmodernism" was nothing new. But the backlash began to emerge with more forceful articulation by members of the increasingly disenfranchised political left. As Terry Eagleton observed: "In 1976, a good many people in the West thought that Marxism had a reasonable case to argue. By 1986, most of them no longer felt that way" (13). The 1980s, in other words, had produced a political vacuum in the West (and particularly in the United States) to the left of, say, Walter Mondale. Ideas and articulations which had seemed viable ten years earlier no longer were. This created conditions for imagining, describing, and critiquing a regressive cultural (as opposed to political) dominant. Postmodernism was no longer a target exclusive to the culturally and ideologically conservative. In June 1984, *New Left Review* published Fredric Jameson's essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," a significant critical event that looms larger in retrospect. Jameson argued that postmodernism had effectively depoliticized ideological, aesthetic, and intellectual domains formerly occupied by the left. Apolitical, ahistorical, avowedly capitalistic: postmodernism, in Jameson's reading, proliferated through

a kind of faux populism, “empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous” (1 – 3). Its origins could be traced to the post-war academy, which canonized and institutionalized high modernism’s anti-Victorian, anti-bourgeois revolution. Ever since, lamented Jameson, the young “will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics, which ‘weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living’” (4). The Marx quotation segued nicely to Jameson’s assessment of postmodernism’s ultimate origins: the marketplace, “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever great rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (4 – 5). Jameson continued: “I must remind the reader of the obvious; namely, that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.”

Ahistoricity is a central component of the depoliticization Jameson describes in “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” He makes this point most forcefully in his analysis of E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1977), the chief instance of literary postmodernism described in his essay. *Ragtime* traces an American family (comprising characters simply named Father, Mother, Brother, etc.) through the first decades of the twentieth century, and intersperses these fictional characters with historical personages. Describing the novel, Jameson wrote:

All historical novels, beginning with those of Sir Walter Scott himself, no doubt in one way or another involve a mobilization of previous historical knowledge generally acquired through the schoolbook history manuals devised for whatever legitimizing purpose by this or that national tradition.... But Doctorow's procedure seems much more extreme than this; and I would argue that the designation of both types of characters – historical names and...family roles – operates powerfully and systematically to reify all these characters and to make it impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior interception of already acquired knowledge or doxa – something which lends the text to an extraordinary sense of déjà vu and a peculiar familiarity one is tempted to associated with Freud's "return of the repressed"...rather than with any solid historiographic formation on the reader's part. (23 – 24)

In other words, Doctorow's postmodern representation of the early twentieth century serves to make the past a kind of prehistorical memory. The historical novelist "no longer [gazes] directly on some putative real world, at some reconstruction of a past history which was once itself a present" (25). *Ragtime's* historical referents – Teddy Roosevelt, Emma Goldman, Harry Houdini – are ahistoricized. To use a framework that Jameson does not, *Ragtime* is simply historical realism emptied of the historical relationships that Lukács describes as nineteenth-century realism's primary achievement: the ability to represent the

relationship between individual and event, between the material forces of history and the consciousness of the historical actor. Postmodern ahistoricization effectively depoliticizes the past, and so Doctorow's project contributes to what Jameson called "the left's 'experience of defeat'" (23). It also projects the present onto the past in ideologically troubling ways. The experience of defeat Jameson describes was especially acute among the Marxist left in 1984. "No one with left sympathies can read these splendid novels," he writes, "without a poignant distress that is an authentic way of confronting our own current political dilemmas in the present" (24 – 25).

Ragtime produces an aura of ahistoricity all the way down to its style and typography. The novel is brimming with physical details of Gilded Era homes and historical figures; the narrative moves from event to event smoothly without much spatial or temporal variation (no cuts, no "jumps" or flash-forwards); only the chapters mark spaces where scenes change. The narration includes a single voice and admits only limited free indirect discourse (lines like "[Father] was shocked" or "She didn't dare confess" are the extent into which we enter characters' minds) (109, 51). Historical figures – Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman – mingle with nameless fictional characters, and the narration makes no distinction between the two. When characters speak, the text does not bracket their words off in quotation marks. Instead, their voices blend into – and are neutralized by – the larger narrative voice. All this generates an effect not of history-in-process, but of history uninterrupted, completed, flattened, and folded ornately back on itself. Facts, objects, events, and quotations flow one into the other and constitute an

historical *whole*, rather than form constituent and ontologically independent pieces of an historicized representation, as in *Lincoln*.

Doctorow described the process of writing *Ragtime* in mystical, almost scriptural, terms. When, in an interview, he was asked if *Ragtime* represented the “stretched truth” of history, Doctorow replied, “Oh no, not stretched: the appropriate word is *discovered* or *revealed*” (“Art of Fiction”). He insisted that “everything in that book is absolutely true,” a claim which differs substantially from Vidal’s insistence that almost everything that occurs in *Lincoln* is verifiably factual.

Ragtime was very much on Vidal’s mind when he constructed and defended the literary realism of *Lincoln*. In his last public defense of *Lincoln*, he reflected, almost wearily, on the overlooked affinity between himself and the academic historians who were his harshest critics:

There is a problem with historical fictions or fictionalized histories, and I tend to be on the side, if not of the paid propagandists for our corporate way of life, of those historians whose teeth are set on edge by the fantasies of the talented E.L. Doctorow or the wistful musings of the author of *Roots*. For a people as poorly educated as Americans...it is a mistake to play any sort of game with agreed-upon facts. Certainly, it is hardly wise, in what looks to be a factual account, to have Harry Houdini chat with Walt Whitman aboard the *Titanic*, or whatever. Fantasy, as such, must be clearly labeled, even for our few remaining voluntary readers. I trust I am, in this,

as reactionary as any turf-protecting bureaucrat of academe.

(*United States* 700)

In this passage, Vidal made explicit an ideological position that had been implicit in his historical novels, the numerous essays that accompanied them, and his many public statements. After years of defending himself against charges of historical misrepresentation and revision, Vidal finally concluded that the argument over *Lincoln* is a disagreement without any real difference. He and his critics had more in common with each other than either have with actual revisionists (who reinterpret history ideologically), postmodern historians (whose “fictionalized histories” posit that the entire process of historical interpretation is inseparable from ideology), or their corollaries in the realm of fiction, the magical or postmodern novelists (Doctorow is named outright, but an index of names and titles is easy to infer). In addition to defending the accuracy of his facts, Vidal’s defended himself by appealing to his narration. Whenever he was charged with falsifying Lincoln’s thoughts or motives, he quickly pointed out that he “never writes from Lincoln’s perspective.” On the other hand, whenever he wishes to ambush an avant-gardist who bends history, he makes a remark like the following:

[A] given scene ought to be observed by a single character, who can only know what he knows, which is often less than the reader. ... when it comes to a great mysterious figure like Lincoln, I do not enter his mind. I only show him as those around him saw him at specific times. This rules out hindsight, which is all that a

historian, by definition, has; and which people in real life, or in its imitation the novel, can never have. (*United States* 678)

For example: Vidal audaciously claims for these novels an untroubled continuity with the historical record. “I set my fictions within history,” he writes in *The American Historical Review*. “Imagined characters intersect with historical ones. The history is plainly history. Fiction fiction” (*United States* 700). Vidal’s extended defense of *Lincoln*’s basis in fact – three essays in *The New York Review of Books*, one in *The American Historical Review*, and countless interviews and speeches – underscored the strange nature of his historical project: historical fiction without poetic license. Fiction that solicits belief. He all but outright divorces himself from fictionality. All but. When asked, in an interview in 1988, whether he worried that too many readers took the fictional *Lincoln* as fact, Vidal responded, “My fiction is fact.”

Such a claim – “my fiction is fact” – inverts the postmodern historiography described by Doctorow, Hutcheon, and others in chapter one (where facts are placed just out of reach behind a curtain of fictionalized narrative). For Vidal, the real disagreement exists not between himself and his historical critics, but between those who value factuality, even in a work of fiction, and those who are willing to indulge aesthetic license and alter the historical record. This is the debate as Vidal would have us see it. He does not reflect on the extremely weird position in which this places him, as a writer of fiction. We may infer that his commitment to fact was stronger than his commitment to fiction, but he nevertheless found fiction a sturdy enough mold

within which to organize and render his precious facts. Few historical novelists have so aggressively tested the sturdiness of fiction's boundaries.

Afterword: Some Reflections on Literalism – A Tale of Two Readers

Fact, realism, reality: these modes of structuring knowledge – and the shades between them – have provided the raw material for novelistic representation since its inception, as Gallagher and others have demonstrated. A concept that has orbited this analysis without entering it is “literalism.” Vidal’s insistence on *Lincoln’s* factual credibility was not simple posturing, or at least not simply posturing. It represented a unique stance on the logic of fictionality and the function of the novel, a stance made possible by the ideological and rhetorical shifts of late postmodernism. By the 1960s and ‘70s, literary postmodernism had struck an ostensibly anti-representationalist posture that amounted, in the most typical cases, to a reflexive anti-realism. In these cases, realism was understood to posit an unproblematic relationship between signifier and signified, or the willingness to attempt to portray events and persons accurately in language. In postmodernism, language precedes meaning; language precedes history. This is the story of American literary postmodernism.

By the 1980s, new ideas had framed the social, political, and aesthetic environment of the United States. In the public sector, institutions of art increasingly found themselves the subject of scrutiny by governmental agencies, which in turned faced continued pressure by citizen organizations to defund

specific art projects on ideological grounds. In the private sector, readership began to decline and the literary marketplace began to shrink. On February 14, 1989, while Vidal was furiously engaging his historian-critics, an event in literalist reading practices occurred. The Ayatollah Khomeini, politically weak after a disastrous decade-long war with Iraq, declared a *fatwa* on novelist Salman Rushdie for his postmodernist novel, *The Satanic Verses*. The *fatwa* centered on Rushdie's experimentation with an apocryphal tradition in Islam wherein the Prophet Muhammad admitted a series of verses authored by Satan into the Qur'an. Radical fundamentalists insisted that readers interpret Rushdie's playfully postmodern novel literally, and in turn interpret it as blasphemy against Islam. These were precisely the kind of readers Vidal seemed to wish for *Lincoln*, but they were attracted to a literalist reading practice not by a realist novel but by a self-consciously difficult, diffuse, and playful postmodern fiction. The Rushdie affair was only one of numerous events in the late 1980s and early '90s that pitted postmodern aesthetics against radical-populist conservative readers.⁴⁶

Does postmodernism invite such literal-minded readership? Is realism somehow implicit in avant-garde experimentalism?

⁴⁶ Wendy Steiner's 1995 study of contemporary aesthetics, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism*, usefully reflects on these phenomena. Steiner examined several fractious aesthetic events of the late 1980s and early '90s, skirmishes in the culture wars that pitted political ideology against aesthetic representation. These events ranged from the 1990 obscenity trial of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center for its Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition, *The Perfect Moment*, to Andrea Dworkin's heavily publicized attacks on pornography. She offers a cogent analysis of political rhetoric and postmodern art at the height of the so-called culture wars, the mid-1990s. Steiner devotes a chapter of her book to Western responses to the Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 *fatwa* against novelist Salman Rushdie.

A scene in Rabih Alameddine's debut novel, *Koolaid's: The Art of War* (1998), illustrates one possible answer to these questions. *Koolaid's* is a didactic postmodernist novel – a novel of ethics – set during the Lebanese Civil War and the height of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S., both events during the Reagan administration (Reagan is a prominent figure throughout the novel). But its narrative weaves in and out of these settings to include scenes outside the space-time continuum, where Arjuna and Krishna exchange philosophical musings with Eleanor Roosevelt and Tom Cruise. The narration shifts regularly and without notice between four first-person narrators, and occasionally shifts from first-person to third-person. In addition to conventional narration, the novel comprises e-mails, editorials, newspaper articles, dialogues, and other unconventional narrative modes, both diegetic and extradiegetic. The novel is divided not into chapters, but relatively short narrative fragments, some only a few sentences in length. In short, the style and structure of *Koolaid's* is self-consciously (and, by 1998, conventionally) experimental.

Before turning to fiction, Alameddine was primarily known as a painter, and painting is a prominent feature in *Koolaid's*, so much so that the experience of the novel might be characterized as painterly. The title page features a painting by Alameddine, and paint is a kind of submedium of the novel. The chief protagonist, Mohammad, is a painter living with HIV, and much of the novel's ethical vision hinges on both Mohammad's relationship to himself, his illness, his art, and his national-ethnic identity, and other characters' responses to Mohammad. In a key scene, Alameddine organizes these relationships around an

art exhibition featuring Mohammad's work, in which two reading practices – two types of readers – are juxtaposed. Because of the tone of Alameddine's prose (which alternates between didacticism and simple clarity), there is little ambiguity about the preferred reading practice. The scene is written from the perspective of Samir, another Lebanese-American living with HIV, who goes to Mohammad's show with his boyfriend, Mark, and meets an art dealer named Jack:

[Jack] said Mohammad's paintings were already some of the best collections in the country. ... "I love his abstractions more than his realistic paintings," he said.

"I have never seen his abstract paintings," I said.

Both Mark and Jack looked at me strangely.

"These are abstract paintings, dear," Mark said.

"Oh, really?" I was embarrassed. I really did not know much about art. "I thought if you could tell what they are, they are not abstract."

"Can you tell what these are?" Mark asked. "They are all just paintings with irregular rectangles."

"Oh sure, but they are sides of our houses. That's what they look like in our villages. He painted them beautifully. I can see the stones clearly. That's how the stones look back home. Exactly that yellow color. All the other color highlights in each painting are different because of light conditions." (100 – 101)

“I thought it was clear as day,” Samir thinks to himself (101). “That is why I found the paintings beautiful. They were of my home village. ... Mohammad, by placing these large paintings around the gallery, had turned the place into a Lebanese village.” Jack, surprised by this revelation, confronts the director of the exhibit. Mohammad overhears their conversation, laughs, and approaches Samir with a knowing smile:

“You had to ruin it, didn’t you?” [Mohammad] said in Arabic.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it. I thought everybody would see what the paintings were when they saw them. Nobody did, so I didn’t tell them. Makes you wonder about these Americans.” (101)

The stunned director interrupts their conversation and says to Mohammad, “If you had told me what these paintings were about...I would have promoted the exhibit completely differently” (102). It is possible the director would not have rejected Mohammad’s work had he understood its representational nature, but he would have promoted the exhibit by appealing to a different aesthetic sensibility: instead of ahistoricity, universality, and abstraction, he might have emphasized ethnicity, locality, authenticity. Both sensibilities are common enough among the educated, upper-class patrons of the art in the United States. They represent a spectrum from detached avant-gardism to multicultural realism. In this scene, however, the difference lies not in the practice of the artist but the practice of the reader. The

type of reader you are determines whether you see avant-garde experimentalism or straight realism.⁴⁷

Alameddine leaves little doubt about which mode of reading he favors.

The narrative reveals that there is a correct interpretation of the paintings and Samir, without trying (that is, without being suspicious or paranoid) gets it, sees the reality behind the abstraction, and “ruins” Mohammad’s (minor) con. The correct reading comes by way of literalism, seeing what is there and what others refuse or cannot see.

⁴⁷ We might interpret this scene as a parable, perhaps of the reception of a literary genre like magical realism. To the middle-class readers in the First World, magical realism seemed boldly avant-garde. To its audiences in the developing world, however, it was (or claimed to be) a thoroughly realistic representation of a certain kind of experience. One’s ability to access the latter reading was limited by one’s experiences as a Westerner, just as the great European and American realist novels of the nineteenth century created visions that were inaccessible, at least as realism, to non-Western audiences. This narrative simplifies the actual, historical reception of both nineteenth-century realism and magical realism, of course, but it is a narrative that becomes important at the end of the twentieth century, when realism (as Wendy Steiner has noted) was increasingly viewed as the domain of non-white, non-male novelists.

Chapter III

Writing What You Don't Know:

The Liberal Subject in the Historical Novel

“Let’s regain our grip on things.”

- Don DeLillo, *Libra* (15)

Foreword: A Lincoln simulacrum

At the beginning of this chapter, I will dwell on two novels that were published just beyond the parameters of the long 1980s: Philip K. Dick’s *A. Lincoln, Simulacrum* (1969) and Gore Vidal’s *The Smithsonian Institute* (1998). Fifteen years before Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*, which sought to represent Abraham Lincoln as accurately as could be achieved in literature, Philip K. Dick described the construction of an “authentic” Abraham Lincoln simulacrum. Dick’s novel, *A. Lincoln, Simulacrum*, was published in *Amazing Stories* in 1969 but was set in a futuristic 1981. Dick imagined a fledgling electronic music company whose owners, Louis and Maury, decide in a moment of entrepreneurial zeal to divert company funds into the production of two robots: first of Abraham Lincoln’s Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, and then of Lincoln himself. They undertake the project because Maury is convinced that the public is obsessed with the U.S. Civil War. Early in the novel, Maury asks Louis:

“What’s on the mind of America, these days?”

“Sexuality,” I [Louis] said.

“No.”

“Dominating the inner planets of the solar system before Russia can, then.”

“No.”

“Okay, you tell me.”

“The Civil War of 1861. ...It’s the truth, buddy. This nation is obsessed with the War Between the States. I’ll tell you why. It was the only and first national epic in which we Americans participated; that’s why. ... It matured we Americans. ... I could stop at a busy intersection of any big downtown city in the U.S. and collar ten citizens, and six of those ten, if asked what was on their mind, would say, ‘The U.S. Civil War of 1861.’ And I’ve been working on the implications – the practical side – ever since I figured that out...” (*We Can* 11)

“The practical side” is the simulacra project: Louis and Maury would design self-aware, intelligent robotic recreations of the major figures in the American Civil War. Maury claims to have an anti-war motive for the project (Vietnam is one of the novel’s essential subtexts), and speculates that the current president might abolish warfare in favor of a recurring reenactment of the U.S. Civil War (*We Can* 19). Louis and Maury’s company would produce simulacra of the war’s actors – from Lincoln, Stanton, and Ulysses S. Grant all the way down to three million “simple” soldiers – all of them intended to satiate national bloodlust and ease national insecurity. Maury’s grand proposal is sidetracked by an inter-corporate

battle over patents, and only the Stanton and Lincoln simulacra are ever produced. The novel eventually spirals into a characteristically twisted Dickian interrogation of the relationships between subjectivity, reality, schizophrenia, and technology; by the end, the reader is led to retroactively question Louis's sanity and reliability as a first-person narrator. The middle third of the novel, however, offers an intriguing representation of Abraham Lincoln.

Maury's schizophrenic daughter, Pris, is charged with the task of constructing the Lincoln simulacrum from a collection of every known photograph of the president. Pris idolized Lincoln as a young girl: "You know how it is when you're a kid, everything you read in books is real. Lincoln was real to me. But of course I really spun it out of my own mind...my own fantasies were real to me" (*We Can* 57). Louis warns Pris that her affection for Lincoln may taint the project, and admonishes her to "separate the actual Lincoln" (i.e., the Lincoln of historical record – in this case, mostly photographs) from her idea of the president. Pris responds with manic confidence: "The real Lincoln exists in my mind. ... I really have Lincoln in my mind. And I've been working night after night to transfer him out of my head, back into the outside world" (*We Can* 58). Thus, Dick introduced the novel's central concern, the schizophrenic subject, by way of the problem of historicism: the gaps in historical knowledge that Pris desires to eliminate but knows, ultimately, are structural and inaccessible. Schizophrenia – which in Dick's fiction was not merely a pathology but also a kind of productive bad faith – offers a paradigm to circumvent the limits of historical knowledge and access extrahistorical reality. Pris surrounds herself with

material to conjure and embody historical reality: photographs, speeches, primary texts, tangible objects. But in *A. Lincoln*, these materials are only shadows of Lincoln, whose existence is most fully realized outside the cave of material history, inside Pris's mind.

When the Lincoln simulacrum is complete, Pris demonstrates a strong mental affinity with it (*We Can* 87). Dick implied that Pris's fractured mental state had somehow been transferred to the simulacrum and that certain qualities of its personality and behavior (e.g., its deep melancholy or its strange, sometimes disturbing presence and utterances) were manifestations of Pris's mind (*We Can* 63, 87). These manifestations, however, only serve to render the simulacrum more natural and authentic to Louis and Maury, who like the moody, gnomish Lincoln. In fact, the simulacrum seems least natural and authentic to Louis and Maury when it speaks words and delivers speeches attributed to the historical Abraham Lincoln (90 – 91). Dick's simulacrum performs the postmodern historiography described in chapter one: facts and empirical data are less authentic than the narrative frame that shapes them. In Dick, Lincoln's actual words are less authentic than the simulation that conveys them.

The novel's title, *A. Lincoln, Simulacrum*, not only refers to David Herbert Donald's influential essay ("A. Lincoln, Politician") but also operates as a pun, providing us with an alternate, homophonically identical title: *A Lincoln Simulacrum*. In wordplay characteristic of Dick, the title suggests that the historical Lincoln, the man who signed his name "A. Lincoln," is essentially a simulacrum (just as Donald argued he was essentially a politician): A. Lincoln,

Simulacrum. The historical record (such as might exist in a document signed by Lincoln) offers only a simulacrum of reality. The alternate title suggests that the Lincoln simulacrum is potentially one of many (*a Lincoln simulacrum*), none of which necessarily simulate an historical or material actuality – including, arguably, the flesh and blood Lincoln of history. The word “Lincoln” functions adjectivally in the second title, a quality embedded in the noun “Simulacrum.” As always in Dick, material reality is subordinated to the ideal, which is, Dick suggested, usually the best substitute for reality (and may, in fact, be reality). When Maury advertises the simulacrum as “an authentic reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln,” readers smile knowingly at the characteristically Dickian term “authentic reconstruction” (67). A reconstruction is not authentic, except when (in Dick) it might be. Dick’s readers would add that only the ideational is authentic, as with Pris’s ideas of Lincoln.

Despite his pseudo-Gnosticism, Dick anticipated certain aspects of Vidal’s literary project, particularly his obsession with authentication. Dick’s representation of Lincoln is echoed in Vidal’s late fabulist novella, *The Smithsonian Institute* (1998). In the novella, a young boy named T. spends a night in the Smithsonian Institute and witnesses the exhibits come to life. As in Dick, the mechanism through which this fantastic situation is achieved is a blend of science fiction and mysticism (Vidal’s plot involves Robert Oppenheimer and quantum physics). T. interacts with reanimated Charles Lindbergh, Albert Einstein, and Grover Cleveland (who has two wives, because the First Lady exhibit featured mannequins for both of his non-consecutive terms). Meanwhile,

the *actual* Abraham Lincoln of history appears via a time travel device. But the president has lost his memory: rescued from John Wilkes Booth at the moment the bullet hit (but did not enter) his skull, Lincoln has suffered a traumatic head injury and cannot recall his identity. Lincoln attempts to reconstruct himself by reading Carl Sandburg's biography, and so becomes a comic parody of his historical self.⁴⁸ In other words, the physical Lincoln of *The Smithsonian Institute* attempts to embody the virtual Lincoln, Sandburg's Lincoln.

This foreword represents two approaches to the authentication of a representation of a well-known historical figure (in both cases, the figure is President Abraham Lincoln). Insofar as Dick's Lincoln, a simulacrum, is uncannily real, it is because he is embedded with the ideational Lincoln by way of Pris. Insofar as Vidal's Lincoln, the physical man himself, is unconvincing, it is because he is imbedded with the ideational Lincoln by way of Sandburg. This essential difference between the texts represents two attitudes toward the possibility of historical knowledge: in Dick, it is always highly mediated and inseparable from its own representation. In Vidal, it is mediated only with great difficulty but remains, ultimately, accessible and available to the present in physical form. Over the thirty years that followed *A. Lincoln, Simulacrum*,

⁴⁸ Sandburg also appears in *A. Lincoln, Simulacrum*. Louis turns to Sandburg's biography to gather historical background on Abraham Lincoln. Louis concludes that Sandburg "kept blurring the point; he seemed to talk around the matter" of some central issue in Lincoln's life (*We Can* 151). This central issue, Louis concludes, is that Lincoln suffered from schizophrenia (*We Can* 153). Schizophrenia is, for Dick, the fractured mental state that provides special access to ideational reality. By diagnosing the Lincolnian lacuna of Sandburg's text – the essential Lincoln that Sandburg blurs and talks around – with schizophrenia, Dick only further establishes the real Lincoln as an ideational construct. In the novel, the simulacrum itself also reads Sandburg's biography, just as Vidal's Lincoln does in *The Smithsonian Institute*.

novelists who sought to represent major historical figures – including U.S. presidents – increasingly came to rely on devices and tropes that favored Vidal's, rather than Dick's, interpretation of the relationship between representation and history. These novelists included high postmodernists, neorealists, and other writers who sought to balance the strategies of experimental fiction with realism. This chapter will examine a small canon of those novels that represented U.S. presidents, analyze their strategies of authentication, and trace their commonalities. These novels exemplify the challenges faced in any novelistic representation of a figure who, like a U.S. president, essentially resists categorization as what Jonathan Franzen calls "the liberal subject" ("Liberal Form"). In Franzen's account, the novel is an essentially middle-class form and must consolidate its characters into "liberal subjects," anonymous middle-class figures whose authenticity on the page is achieved via the representation of middle-class consciousness, something a king or a dictator – or a president – would lack. Most of the novelists considered in this chapter (even those who engage in realist representational strategies) face this challenge by circumventing the liberal subject altogether, engaging in postmodern de-emphasis of the subject, and privileging plot over characterization. Others, such as Robert Coover in *The Public Burning* (1977), create spaces and conditions of middle-class consciousness within an otherwise postmodern text for the figure of the president (in Coover's novel, the unique figure of Richard Nixon) to inhabit. But despite their varied strategies of representation, these novels place a common emphasis

on the president's physical, material being, the same strategies employed by Vidal (and described in chapter two) for his own simulacrum of Abraham Lincoln.

1. "Write What You Know": The Presidential Subject

For a novelist at the end of the twentieth century, the decision to write a realist representation of an historical U.S. president came with a particular aesthetic challenge. A sensibility had developed around experience and knowledge in literature, condensed into the MFA institutional edict "WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW." Authorial experience (or simply the convincing construction of an author's experience for the reader) became a mode through which a literary text's authenticity was validated. But the imperative to write what one knows did not restrict writers to their own lives, the settings and periods with which they were familiar. The imperative had less to do with the writer's biographical experience and more with the construction of authenticity, a negotiation between writer, reader, and text in which the believable feeling of experience (as opposed to, say, the believability of facts or events) was the chief value.⁴⁹ This negotiation could occur within the representation of any historical setting: historical realism remained a vibrant and popular genre, both among mass audiences and critics, on the Best Sellers list and in prestige-oriented literary contests. Historical realists often seemed compelled to internalize historicity, to inhabit an historical space as fully as possible. And for writers who identified their work with social or

⁴⁹ Mark McGurl provided a convincing institutional history of this sensibility in *The Program Era*. He aligned "write what you know" with two other dicta – "show, don't tell" and "find your voice" – these form the process of autopoiesis that, he argued, was the primary U.S. innovation in literary form in the second half of the twentieth century (*Program Era* 24 – 25).

psychological realism, historically significant personalities seemed to demarcate the limits of novelistic representation.

One of realism's champions at the end of the twentieth century, Jonathan Franzen, described his sense of those limits:

[The] novel is a bourgeois liberal form, and it succeeds to the extent that it confers importance on relatively Everyman figures – on the nonfamous, on the nonconsequential. It's not a tragic form. It works just the opposite of *Macbeth*. It's a matter of what you're able to experience as you read. What a president is able to experience is so far beyond most readers' ken as to not produce a recognizable texture. There are obviously exceptions to this, but I think the broad majority of novelistic production is based on forging some kind of connection between the texture of a fictional character's life and the ordinary reader's life. Somehow it's a lot easier to do with a child soldier in Africa than with Idi Amin. The child-soldier character gets to live as a character, whereas the Idi Amin character walks around in the chains of being Idi Amin. There is a large body of historical fiction about these great figures and about the specialness of them, but I find it unreadable, pretty much to a book. ... By and large, though, fiction thrives on the anonymous. The anonymous life can be inhabited, the public life is closed to you. ("Liberal Form")

Franzen concluded, “Historical fiction works more like a kind of nonfiction. It’s nonfiction in all but name to write about the king, the president, the great one. I prefer straight biography and imagination.” Franzen detected a limit of the novelistic form. This limit is rooted in the history of the novel, but it is ultimately not contingent on that history.⁵⁰ The limit is, instead, contingent on the novel’s essential *social* function. Franzen seemed to indicate that the novel form, conceived during the rise of the bourgeois, liberal classes in Europe, exists symbiotically with bourgeois liberalism. Without the middle classes, there would be no novel, and the limits of the middle class imagination define the contours of its form.

Although Franzen and Vidal spoke with common emphasis on “experience” as a virtue for any novel writer, Vidal would object to Franzen’s ultimate interpretation of the novel form. Through his public statements, we can construct a Vidalian counterargument to Franzen: where Franzen described a formal limitation embedded in the novel from its historical inception, Vidal saw a narrow (and more recent) set of practices, a failure of imagination. During a 2000 interview, Vidal was asked for his perspective on the future of the novel. Vidal answered by reciting a list, which he attributed to Mary McCarthy, of the limits that writers of contemporary fiction needlessly imposed on themselves:

⁵⁰Franzen added a coating of historical analysis to the MFA edict. This suggests that his reflections on the challenge of representing Idi Amin did not simply concern the contemporary aesthetics and production of novels (for which the edict “write what you know” is a dominant but ultimately impermanent fixture), but rather concern the structure of the novel since its inception. This type of historical analysis recurred in Franzen’s meditations on the novel form; he alluded frequently to scholars of the early novel, from Ian Watt to Catherine Gallagher. Franzen was one of the few major contemporary novelists to engage regularly and seriously with scholarly theories of the novel.

[McCarthy] made a list of all the things a novelist may not do, if a novelist is [to be] considered serious. You can't have a sunset. You can't have an election. You can't have a really good dinner party. ... She lists all these things that made classic literature great, that have been carefully put away. "Oh, that would be corny. Oh we don't know enough about elections. Have a president in a book? What are you, some kind of fantasist? You don't know any presidents." ("In-Depth")

Vidal was clear that McCarthy did not approve of these prohibitions, but merely described them. This was not the first time Vidal cited McCarthy's list. In 1988, in one of his many essays on *Lincoln*, Vidal wrote:

The fact that there is still a public eager to find out who we [citizens of the United States] are and what we did ought to encourage others to join me [i.e., write novels about U.S. history] but, by and large, the universities have made that impossible. They have established an hegemony over every aspect of literature.... They have also come to believe that a serious novelist deals only with what he knows and since...our class system is uncommonly rigid he is not going to have much chance to find out about any world other than the one he was born into – and the school he went to. Certainly, he will never, like his predecessors, be able to deal with his nation's rulers. They prefer the shadows. Mary McCarthy recently listed all the things that cannot be put into a serious novel

– from sunsets to a hanging to a cabinet meeting. (*United States* 671)

Vidal fused the problem of historical representation with the problem of experience in ways that actually echo Franzen: well-known historical figures (“his nation’s rulers”) cannot appear in “serious fiction” (“they prefer the shadows”). But whereas Franzen demarcated a structural limit of the novel’s representational possibilities, Vidal only described a failure of will on the part of novelists to break their own edict (“write what you know”) and innovate new strategies that will allow them to represent major historical figures.

Vidal’s first allusion to McCarthy’s analysis of “serious” contemporary fiction can be found in a 1980 essay, in which he reveals its source: McCarthy’s *Ideas and the Novel* (1980). Vidal described that book’s thesis: “McCarthy notes that since the time of Henry James, the serious novel has dealt in a more and more concentrated – if not refined – way with moral relations of characters who resemble rather closely the writer and his putative reader. ... In addition, for Americans, sincerity if not authenticity is all-important; and requires a minimum of invention” (*United States* 147). Vidal agreed with McCarthy that James, whose style Vidal both admired and tried to emulate, nevertheless was the source of ideas about the novel which (after James) unnecessarily limited the representative capacity of fiction, specifically in the United States. In the following passage, McCarthy described Jamesian style and constructed the list that Vidal would later cite. McCarthy wrote:

It [the contemporary novel] is a formal, priestly exercise whose first great celebrant was James. ... The Jamesian model remains a standard, an archetype, against which contemporary impurities and laxities are measured. ... When you think of James in light of his predecessors, you are suddenly conscious of what is not there: battles, riots, tempests, sunrises, the sewers of Paris, crime, hunger, the plague, the scaffold, the clergy, but also minute particulars such as you find Jane Austen – poor Miss Bate’s twice-baked apples, Mr. Collin’s “Collins,” the comedy of the infinitely small. It cannot have been simply a class limitation or a limitation of experience that intimidated his pen. It was a resolve, very American, to scrape his sacred texts clean of the material factor. ... He etherealized the novel beyond its wildest dreams and perhaps etherized it as well. (5 – 6)

Here is the list that made such an impression on Vidal and that, given the dates, he would have first encountered during the early stages of researching and drafting *Lincoln*. Although the thrust of Vidal’s summarization was basically accurate, his versions of the list were quite different from McCarthy’s, and increasingly different as time passed. Vidal and McCarthy’s lists truly overlapped on only one point (“sunrises”), which Vidal got wrong twice (he says “sunsets”). Vidal added the political elements: “elections” and “cabinet meetings.” Vidal also elided the second half of the list entirely, the “minute particulars” that added to “the material factor” of a given text. But as the previous chapter demonstrated, Vidal had, by

Lincoln, apparently internalized McCarthy's lesson, and his Lincoln is emphatically physical, material, an amalgamation of actions and deeds that resisted what McCarthy would call etherealization. He avoided representing Lincoln's consciousness, not for the reasons Franzen would avoid it ("What a president is able to experience is so far beyond most readers' ken as to not produce a recognizable texture"), but precisely to avoid the representative model upon which the contemporary novel depends for recognizability: psychological realism. Vidal created his "recognizable texture" elsewhere: in his descriptions of physical scenes, events, conversations, and persons.

Vidal was not the only novelist in the 1980s who sought to represent a recognizable but historically distant texture in his prose. We have already seen how novelists like Cormac McCarthy simulate the diction, syntax, and typographic conventions of nineteenth-century prose. Cormac McCarthy's words do not merely describe history, but act as self-referential signs that produce an historical aura, a resurrection of history, authenticity in the place of accuracy. Meanwhile, most ambitious historical novels published in the years before and after *Lincoln* – novels that range from the strictly realist to the wildly experimental – validate the authenticity of their representations without prominently depicting well-known, well-documented historical personages.⁵¹ Virtually none represent historical personages as exclusively as Vidal does (there

⁵¹ Consider the historical fictions of McCarthy but also Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, William Kennedy, William Golding, as well as the popular fiction of Herman Wouk and Ken Follett. Novels from this period that focus on well-known historical figures tend to be either postmodernist and experimental (John Barth, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon) or popular genre fiction, not realist.

are only a handful of fictional characters in *Lincoln*, and nearly all of them are minor).⁵² But the few novels that *do* feature historical presidents reveal a set of practices that seem to aggregate around the representation of well-known, well-documented historical figures: practices that attempt to authenticate the novelistic representation of an experience that the novelist does not know, and that the reader knows the novelist does not know.

As I described in chapter one, the relationship between postmodern literary aesthetics and literary realism was formulated along the following lines: because a postmodern novel represents by way of contradiction, fabulation, fracture, difficulty, and irrationality, it can potentially represent those aspects of experience and reality that traditional aesthetic realism necessarily miss. In other words, postmodernism claimed to be more realistic than realism. In the 1960s and '70s, U.S. postmodern fiction tended to figure its representations through the demystification and disarticulation of language, to represent without (naively) describing. Hence, the pivotal historical event toward which *Gravity's Rainbow* inevitably builds – the bombing of Hiroshima – is represented as a material fragment. Slothrop, a U.S. soldier wandering through post-war Germany, finds a wet scrap of newspaper dampened and torn beyond readability, with a photo of

⁵² Consequently, a work like the Sean McCann's study of presidents in U.S. fiction since World War II, *A Pinnacle of Feeling: American Literature and Presidential Government* (2008), focused almost exclusively on the idea or figure of the president or on fictional U.S. presidents. Very few of the texts featured in *Pinnacle* represent historical U.S. presidents; in those texts that do, the president himself is not a prominent feature. McCann's introduction – "The Executive Disease: Presidential Power and Literary Imagination" – takes its title from Vidal, who in *Burr* describes the ambition to run for president as "the executive disease." Vidal is otherwise absent in McCann's study.

the atom bomb and the fragmentary letters (rendered hieroglyphically, as follows):

MB DRO

ROSHI

The language is literally fragmentary. It does not describe the fact or event of the atomic bomb, but rather visually portrays the fact and the event, like a picture.

This moment functions not only as the culmination of the novel's thematic energies but also as one of the novel's many mile-markers: the dates and settings within *Gravity's Rainbow* are notoriously difficult to determine with each new scene, and so moments like this allow the reader to orient themselves historically (okay, thinks the reader, it's August now). Dates and events: these are the kind of information Pynchon does not entrust to direct or descriptive language. In an earlier scene, Slothrop learns that President Roosevelt has died through a similar moment of graphic disorientation. He is in Berlin during the Potsdam conference of Allied leaders:

Like the walls of the Chicago Bar brought outside, giant photographs are posted out in the Friedrichstrasse – faces higher than a man. Slothrop recognizes Churchill and Stalin all right, but isn't sure about the other one. "Emil, who's that guy in the glasses?"

"The American president. Mister Truman."

"Quit fooling. Truman is vice-president. Roosevelt is president."

Säure raises an eyebrow. “Roosevelt died back in the spring. Just before the surrender. [...] I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t anybody tell me?” Slothrop was going into high school when FDR was starting out in the White House. Broderick Slothrop professed to hate the man, but young Tyrone thought he was brave, with that polio and all. Liked his voice on the radio. Almost saw him once, too, in Pittsfield, but Lloyd Nipple, the fattest kid in Mingeborough, was standing in the way, and all Slothrop got to see was a couple wheels and the feet of some guys in suits on a running-board. Hoover he’d heard of, dimly - something to do with shack towns or vacuum cleaners - but Roosevelt was *his* president, the only one he’d known. It seemed he’d just keep getting elected, term after term, forever. But somebody had decided to change that. So he was put to sleep, Slothrop’s president, quiet and neat... (373 – 374)

The presidents, Truman and Roosevelt, are either entirely reduced to a hard material representation (an enormous photograph, disorienting like the newspaper scrap) or filtered through subjective experience (a glimpse of FDR) that, again, relies on the small physical detail, an icon, a metonym: the two wheels and the running board, the Hoover vacuums, or Truman’s glasses. Pynchon does not admit a balance between the two, the sort of objective but familiar distance with which Vidal represents Lincoln. But compared to the rest of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which is structurally and stylistically different from *Lincoln* in nearly every way,

this moment adopts a representational posture that is similar to Vidal's. The weight Pynchon gives to both the subjective and narrowly material experience of history typifies a strain of literary experimentalism of which *Gravity's Rainbow* is exemplary, and also points a way forward for novelists who wish to portray well-known historical figures.

While Pynchon was composing *Gravity's Rainbow*, Vidal was experimenting with his own methods of fictionalizing history. *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Burr* were both published in 1973. Though Vidal's novel of the American Revolution contained none of the hallucinatory paranoia or wild linguistic density of Pynchon's World War II narrative, *Burr* can, in retrospect, be read as a missing link between the heavily fictionalized historical representation practiced by Pynchon, Barth, et al, and the transparent factuality that Vidal claimed to present in *Lincoln*. Narrated from the first-person perspective of the fictional Charlie Schuyler, *Burr* represented towering figures in U.S. history – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton – third-hand, via Aaron Burr via Schuyler. Vidal employed a complicated framing device, so that the whole novel is set in 1834 and 1835 but deals mostly with events from the 1760s through the 1820s. Events are narrated not in chronological order, but as Schuyler works his way through Burr's memoirs. In addition to the first-person narration and Burr's journals (presumably read to us by Schuyler), Vidal included newspaper clippings and letters. Consequently, *Burr* draws attention to its own structure, mediating information to the reader through convoluted channels that make the novel seem

fragmentary and multi-faceted (if not compared to Pynchon or Barth's novels, then certainly compared to *Lincoln*).

As in *Lincoln*, Vidal's representations of Washington and Jefferson emphasized the bodily. But the physicality in *Burr* is far more irreverent than in *Lincoln*. (Burr's memoirs tell us that Washington was a "large, rather ungainly man" with "the hips, buttocks, and bosom of a woman") (44). And these representations are conveyed by way of suppressed or revisionist history. Burr is an anti-hero with secret knowledge, someone whom the other characters in the novels regard as politically dangerous. The novel is thick with conspiracy: the Vice-President (and future President) Martin Van Buren is rumored to be Burr's illegitimate son. The setting, 1830s New York, is seedier and more sexualized than 1860s Washington. Burr's memoirs, the text within the text, offer a counter-history Schuyler consumes eagerly because the wider myth had taken hold. Vidal's next historical novel, *1876*, brought back Schuyler, thirty years older than in *Burr*, as a first-person narrator. Published in 1976, the U.S. bicentennial, *1876* dealt with the eponymous year's U.S. centennial celebrations, as well as the contentious presidential election between Samuel Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes, the last days of Ulysses S. Grant's administration, and the political culture of the U.S. a decade after the Civil War. The novel's narrative was not as heavily mediated as *Burr*. The narrative frame was Schuyler's journal, and information is conveyed second-hand through him. Consequently, the novel assumed a much less conspiratorial tone and feels less explicitly revisionary. The subject matter – the 1870s, the corrupt Grant administration, a forgotten election scandal between

a minor Republican president, Hayes, and a now-unknown Democrat, Tilden – was not, as in *Burr*, the stuff of monuments.

In short, Vidal was scaling back his historico-fictional project considerably. Narratologically, Vidal's project evolved in potentially parallel ways. From *Burr* (1973) to *1876* (1976) to *Lincoln* (1984), Vidal had transitioned from heavily framed, first-person narration(s) to a straight first-person narration to third-person omniscient narration laced with free indirect discourse. The latter two novels do not plot back and forth along multiple decades, but occur along a simple and chronological timeline.

If Vidal seemed to be scaling back in the year of the U.S. bicentennial, other novelists were reveling. Ishmael Reed published *Flight to Canada* that year, a raucous narrative of three slaves who escape from Virginia during the Civil War and, as the title suggests, flee toward Canada. The novel is, like much of Reed's work, heterogeneous and multi-generic. Several chapters comprise prose and verse, while others are split between third-person and a first-person narrator, the protagonist, Quicksill, who reflects back on the novel's events from the future (these first-person sections are marked by italics). President Lincoln appears as a character, but Reed's Lincoln is a deliberately loaded signifier. He serves to index hundreds of different cultural representations that constitute the popular conception, the myth, of Lincoln.⁵³ Reed described Lincoln as "Gary Cooper-awkward, fidgeting with his stovepipe hat, humble-looking, imperfect – a wart

⁵³ A character in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is named Woodrow Wilson Jefferson. Here again, presidents appear in order to index: in this case, to ironically index the corrupt, racist history of the Democratic Party in the name of an impoverished black man.

here and there – crawl and skuttlecoat, shawl” (22 – 23). As in Pynchon and Vidal, the president is rendered excessively physical, a sum of his material parts.

Compared to Vidal’s, Reed’s Lincoln seems a postmodern caricature. But Reed’s Lincoln is not a simple caricature; he is multiple caricatures. The reference to Gary Cooper invokes the Hollywood Lincolns (Henry Fonda in the background, perhaps), the stovepipe hat invokes the Lincoln of fable. But Reed invokes the myths to overturn them, and his characters take delight in upending the (by 1976) received Lincoln to produce a reverse caricature: an inept, bumbling country bumpkin. Reed’s omniscient narrator is complicit in the glee, such as when Lincoln salutes a Confederate soldier (45). In another scene, the novel’s villain, the slave-owning Master Swille, holds an improbable meeting with the president (*Flight to Canada* is, like much of Reed’s work, a mixture of historical fiction and fabulation). During their conversation, Swille lectures Lincoln on his reputation abroad. The content, though definitely not the tone or style, could come out of Vidal’s *Lincoln*:

“Cut the yokel-dokel, Lincoln. [...] Oh, you know – log cabin origin. That’s old and played out. Why don’t you get some new speech writers? [...] Well, look, Lincoln, I don’t want that war to come up here because, to tell you the truth, I’m not the least bit interested in that war. I hate contemporary politics and probably will always be a Tory. Bring back King George. Why would a multinational like myself become involved in these queer crises? Why, just last week I took a trip abroad and was appallingly and

disturbingly upset and monumentally offended by the way the Emperor of France was scoffing at this...this nation, as you call it. They were snickering about your general unkempt, hirsute and bungling appearance – bumping into things and carrying on. And your speeches. What kind of gibberish are they? Where were you educated, in the rutabaga patch?” (23 – 24)

Reed’s style and language in *Flight to Canada* flatten the novel’s historicity by confusing and conflating referents from across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a technique he also used in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Allusions to pop culture appear anachronistically throughout those novels. Reed wrote *Flight to Canada* in the present tense, which heightens the effect of this historical flattening. As a postmodern exercise, the novel is dynamic. As an historical fiction, it is intentionally dynamic.

Robert Coover added a wrinkle to this type of historical flattening in 1977, a year after *Flight to Canada*, in his novel of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg execution, *The Public Burning*. The wrinkle was Coover’s representation of Richard Nixon, who is an exceptional figure in Coover’s otherwise wild, colorful, and at times cartoonish characters from the early 1950s. *The Public Burning* portrayed how the Rosenberg’s were nearly saved by Supreme Court Justice William Douglas, who granted a stay of execution at (literally) the eleventh hour, which his fellow justices eventually overturned. Coover dedicated the novel to Douglas, who, he wrote, “exchanged a greeting with me while out walking on the old canal towpath one day not long after these events” (vii). The novel begins

with a long, meandering prologue: a history of the Cold War and overview of the Rosenberg case, written like a “March of Time” newsreel read by a speaker whose diction alternates between carnival barker, war correspondent, and the folksy dialect of Hollywood Westerns. This is the voice of Uncle Sam, a character who, in some scenes, stands in for President Dwight Eisenhower and who, in other scenes, represents an amalgamation of Cold War logic, governmental conspiracy, and public will to kill the Rosenbergs. At its most extreme, Uncle Sam’s dialogue reads like the following: “Don’t let the bastards grind ya down! I know the gloomy night before us lies like a black arse in a coal-hole, but jumpin’ jig-a-jig! we ain’t weak if we make a proper use of those means which the God of Nature has placed in our pockets!” (108). Uncle Sam holds forth in this style for long passages, narrating historical events and flattening the reader’s experience of historical time into a satirical, anti-Cold War cartoon. And yet Coover, like Reed, flattened history to make a deadly serious point. *Flight to Canada* attempted to reconstruct received U.S. history to accommodate a suppressed narrative: that the deep criminality of slavery and segregation is not an historical anomaly, but is embedded in the structure of the United States. Similarly, *The Public Burning* reconstructed the (then recent) past to accommodate a new narrative: that the Rosenbergs were the victims of a mass-hysterical witch hunt and that the logic of the Cold War was absurd. As in *Flight to Canada*, large portions of *The Public Burning* are written in the first-person, a practice that heightens the sense of the past’s recoverability. In short, Both Reed and Coover were operating according to Doctorow’s interpretation of historiography: that narrative fiction can serve as

well as the historical record to render historical truth. One of *The Public Burning*'s (five) epigraphs is a line from H.E. Porter and Robert Middlemass' *The Valiant*, a play about a condemned prisoner, which Ethel spoke during a 1930s performance: "That's what I'm counting on the most of all – the stories" (qtd. in Coover vii). The crimes of history can be more than described by stories: they can be rectified

If the early years of the Cold War was Coover's setting and the history he wished rectify, then Watergate and the fall of Nixon was his novel's immediate context. His chapters alternate between two perspectives: one composed in third-person, narrating the manic speeches of Uncle Sam, who changes his shape and voice, who stands in Eisenhower and the government and the U.S. as a whole, and who, in one scene, closely resembles Abraham Lincoln. The other chapters are composed in first-person, written from the perspective of Vice President Nixon. Relative to the rest of the novel, these chapters are remarkable for their realism, particularly their fidelity to the diction and mannerisms of the young Nixon. Coover opted to make Nixon a straight-man against which to play his postmodern tragicomedy: like Pynchon's Slothrop, the paranoid soldier who navigates the carnivalesqueries of post-War Europe, Coover's Nixon is a paranoid partisan who navigates the comic absurdities of Washington during the Cold War. The historical Nixon was famously a pragmatist whose relationship to ideology was notoriously slippery, and Coover used this to great effect. His Nixon describes with relative objectivity the cynicism of Cold War politics, how fear and anxiety was exploited by politicians to secure office and consolidate power. He describes

all this rather than illustrates it, whereas the Uncle Sam chapters illustrate with the usual postmodern tricks: didactically and dialectically, in scenes of obvious comic exaggeration that are composed with generic, stylistic, and textual multiplicity (poems, dialogues, dialect, newspaper clippings, et al.). And Coover's portrayal of Nixon is also an exercise in psychological realism. He resembles a middle-class Roth protagonist more than he resembles a character from Pynchon or Barth. Coover depicted Nixon dwelling on his insecurities, reflecting on his marriage, or indulging in cryptic daydreaming, as during a contentious vote in the Senate: "I tried to maintain a semblance of order for the sake of the visitors up in the galleries, and watched the doorways (seven, like the holes in a man's head) to see who was coming and going" (59). Even as the plot, toward the end, departs from the historical record and represents extreme improbabilities (e.g., exaggerated encounters between Nixon and Ethel Rosenberg), Nixon's voice and narration remain fundamentally convincing. Nixon has become, in essence, Franzen's liberal subject, a relatable and believable figure who authorizes the historicity of the text.

The figure of the *head* (mentioned by the fictional Nixon in the above quote) is important in all these renderings of presidents. The U.S. president is of course simultaneously the head of government and the head of state, but in these fictions the head – whether an inaccessible space, as in *Lincoln*, or porous, as in *A Public Burning* – represents consciousness: or, more precisely, it represents the author's capacity to represent and the reader's capacity to access consciousness. A closed head is inaccessible. For Coover and the writers who followed him, Nixon

would represent an exceedingly open head. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), a hinge text between late postmodernism and the millennial novels that James Wood would characterize as "hysterical realism," the character Klara watches Watergate unfold with great ambivalence: "[Klara] didn't enjoy it the way her friends did. Nixon made her think of her father, another man of frazzled mind, rehearsed in his very step, his physical address, bitter and distant at times, with a loser's bent frame, all head and hands" (373). Nixon, like the liberal subject (Klara's middle-class father), represents an excessiveness of the head, a subject readily available to be liberalized despite the fact that he is a president. As we will see, the head remains a trope for dealing with the presidential subject in future novels.

Of course, simply by rendering Nixon as a straight-man, clearly paranoid but basically sound and knowledgeable, Coover was, in 1977, having a joke with his reader. By 1977, after a decade that produced thousands of caricatures of the easily-caricatured Nixon through every imaginable cultural venue, a realistic Nixon would have seemed comically anti-realist. The two U.S. presidents in *The Public Burning* achieve two separate anti-realisms: Eisenhower as the cartoonish Uncle Sam, the avatar for a massive amalgamation of pernicious public and governmental energies, and Nixon as sympathetic first-person protagonist.

The avatar-president remained a popular image among postmodern novelists in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan, the first president to emerge from the film industry, seemed to literalize the notion of the president-as-icon or president-as-simulacrum. Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, written

in the late '70s but not published until 1984, featured elaborate, pornographic scenes in which Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter enact different models of masculinity and sexual violence. The representation was intentionally shallow, almost purely typographic: the name of the president, not the representation, is what matters. Acker invoked the presidential name to index institutional violence and power. She repeated this practice with Reagan throughout the 1980s. The head of government is reduced to a head in *My Death My Life* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1984), when a character imagines that Reagan is kidnapped by the Japanese and executed in retribution for Hiroshima, his head “stuck on a white pole yellow with dog piss” (320). Elsewhere, a newspaper (repository of truncation and iconicity) declares that “All Americans are Reagan,” a transparent double-irony: Acker means that all Americans are decidedly not, but she simultaneously suggests that they might be (297). The president does not represent the people in Acker’s novels, and his actions are repeatedly figured as violence committed against the people. But victimhood is always a deeply fraught state for Acker, and presidential violence is emblematic of social violence that both victimizes and implicates the victim in violence. These are themes that Acker would develop in her later work, in which presidents appear less frequently. When Reagan is named in Acker’s late fiction, he is a fact of history, the author and enactor of specific policies. He is no longer an avatar; his head is taken off the pole and his administration decried.

The reception of a president from material being into historical memory is one of the chief preoccupations of Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988). The novel

represents the life of Lee Harvey Oswald from his childhood in the Bronx to his death. DeLillo attempted to represent not only historical figures but a relationship between history and the individual, a network of fact, memory, materiality, and ideation analogous to astrology, which DeLillo described as “the truth at the edge of human affairs” (175). The president, John F. Kennedy, enters the novel as an ethereal figure. In one scene, Oswald’s wife, Marina, imagines the president inhabiting the fantasies of American women:

She wondered how many women had visions and dreams of the President. What must it be like to know you are the object of a thousand longings? It’s as though he floats over the landscape at night, entering dreams and fantasies, entering the act of love between husbands and wives. He floats through television screens into bedrooms at night. He floats from the radio into Marina’s bed. There were times when she waited for him, actually listened late at night for a few words of a speech or a news conference recorded earlier in the day, waited for the voice of the President, the radio on a table near the bed. (324)

This etherealization of the president stands in stark contrast with the concrete representations we have seen thus far, consisting of facts and avatars and physical descriptions. But DeLillo was interested in precisely this contrast between the concrete and the ideational. With the exception of the assassination scene, Kennedy enters the novel either as an ideational construct or as the raw materials – photographs, films, sound recordings – that constitute and frame the ideational

construct. In short, DeLillo does not represent John F. Kennedy but instead represents the experience through which people in general typically encounter and conceive a president and through which his characters encountered and conceived President Kennedy.

In a frame narrative, DeLillo created the character of Nicholas Branch, “hired on contract [by the CIA] to write the secret history of the assassination of president Kennedy” (15). Branch’s work branches out into every detail of Dallas, November 22, 1963 and the material evidence accumulated from that day:

Six point nine seconds of heat and light. Let’s call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let’s devote our lives to understanding this moment, separating elements of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams. (15)

The reconstruction of “actual men” from material facts occupies much of Branch’s time, and the overwhelming surplus of a single day’s materiality consumes years of his life. The excess of this materiality stretches Branch’s skills to their limit. The twenty-six volume Warren Report, he muses, “is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he’d moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred” (181). The novel reminds the reader that Kennedy’s brain is missing from the national archive, a reminder that always carries a suggestion: that if we had the brain, we could construct a more complete picture of November 22, 1963.

“Let’s regain our grip on things,” reflects Branch – his project consists entirely of collecting and consolidating *things* into history (15). “Somebody will have to piece me together,” reflected Jack Ruby in one of the novel’s epigraphs, and Branch’s project consists precisely of that (215). He (and DeLillo) rely on Lee Harvey Oswald’s historical diary to piece together the assassin (198 – 199). But Branch struggles to reconstruct a convincing portrait of Oswald, in part because his material traces are so excessive. There are too many remnants from his life, too many photographs: “Oswald even looks like different people from one photograph to the next. He is solid, frail, thin-lipped, broad-featured, extroverted, shy and bank-clerkish, all, with the columned neck of a fullback. He looks like everybody ... Four or five men face the camera. They all look like Oswald. Branch thinks they look more like Oswald than the figure in profile, officially identified as him” (300).

Photography recurs as one of the major fixtures of the novel. Oswald works with photography, developing pictures for the air force. Oswald is photographed, and appears in photographs, continuously throughout the novel. The moment of the famous Life magazine cover is captured, “carried forward by light and time into the frame of official memory” (279). One of the conspirators muses that a black man cannot be photographed, and this is why blacks cannot be trusted. In *Libra*, photography is a means through which the actuality of the individual touches the more ethereal processes of history.⁵⁴ The individual liberal

⁵⁴ In DeLillo’s 1997 novel, *Underworld*, the figure of the American president appears via his excessive capacity to be photographed. Baseball players Bobby Thomson and Ralph Branca appear in a series of photos that appear throughout the novel in reverse chronological order with every U.S. president since Eisenhower.

subject can, it seems, occur simultaneously with the historical subject in photographs, and so the project of the novel becomes clearer: DeLillo attempted, in portraying Oswald, to wed the liberal subject with the historical subject, to represent both at the same time.

This struggle to unite liberal subject with historical subject was shared by Edmund Morris, author of Ronald Reagan's official biography, *Dutch* (1999). Morris employed a unique and controversial method of sidestepping the challenge: he fictionalized the biography, which is subtitled "a memoir of Ronald Reagan" and written from the perspective of fictional author named Edmund Morris who (unlike the historical Edmund Morris) was born "on August 9, 1912," the same year (and in the same town) as Ronald Reagan (9). This fictional Morris meets and interacts with the actual Reagan, whose words and actions are extensively footnoted. He describes scenes and events in Reagan's life that the historical Morris could not have witnessed from the perspective of the fictional Morris. He stumbles in and out of Reagan's timeline: "The first girl I embraced at Eureka...turned out to be Dutch's [Reagan's] sweetheart" (65).

In many ways, *Dutch* inverts Vidal's *Lincoln*: Vidal wrote a novel about Lincoln in which he does not speculate about the president's thoughts. Morris wrote a biography about Reagan in which he does nothing *but* speculate about the president's thoughts. "What thoughts ran through Dutch's *head* on placid forenoons, when the river was an unbroken swell through his clip-on shades...? As it happens, we know" (58, emphasis mine). Reagan had "doodled" his thoughts while sitting on the shore and then published them in his high school

yearbook. "Watching him [swim]...helped me understand at least partly the massive privacy of his personality. ... Often I have marveled at Reagan's cool, unhurried progress through crises of politics and personnel, and thought to myself, *He sees the world as a swimmer sees it*" (61 – 62). Contemplating a December visit to Illinois, the fictional Morris speculates that "subconsciously I'm hoping that some bitter cold will shock me into a clear understanding of Dutch's personality" (639).

Steven R. Weisman's *New York Times* review of *Dutch* found the effect of Morris's experiment disconcerting: "Whether out of inspiration, writer's block or despair, Morris has produced a book unique in the annals of serious biography, a partly fictionalized account narrated by an imaginary contemporary of the former President. ... Most journalists, historians and nonfiction writers will find this unacceptable. The fictional characters are not clearly identified as such; often they are unnecessary and distracting." Such a blending of fact and fiction stands in marked contrast with the methods employed by Vidal, but both respond to a similar problem, as does each novelist listed above: the problem of how to consolidate a president into a liberal subject. Later in the review, Weisman quoted Morris directly: "He was truly one of the strangest men who's ever lived. Nobody around him understood him. I, every person I interviewed, almost without exception, eventually would say, 'You know, I could never really figure him out.'" Reagan's inscrutability was doubtlessly part of his own individual personality, but the difficulty Morris described in his role as a biographer is not purely biographical: it is also the difficulty of representing a subject in the novel

form who resists liberal subjectivity. For Lincoln, Vidal created an empty space at the center of an omniscient narration. Other novelists flattened Lincoln into caricature. Coover took Richard Nixon from caricature to character by infusing a distinctly middle-class sensibility into the former president. Pynchon represented presidents in solely material terms. Acker treated Reagan as an avatar; DeLillo elided Kennedy, except as an ethereal presence drifting ghostly among the body politic. And Morris constructed fictional liberal subjects to surround Reagan, to speculate about the president's state of mind, rather than approach his subject directly.

Vidal's misquotation of Mary McCarthy's passage about which subjects do not appear in "serious" fiction described a dilemma which, for Franzen, was structural to the novel itself. Certain subjects cannot appear in novelistic fiction, Franzen argued. Vidal argued that they could, yet his own fiction is careful to construct barriers around their own subjectivity. The challenge of writing what one does not know remains intact in all the historical fiction surveyed in this chapter – none of the "serious" writers noted above dares write the presidency straight from history.

2. "All Persons Fictional": Characterization, Plot, and Historicity

The previous section of this chapter concerns the liberal subject's viability when an author adopts the perspective, or even merely chooses to write about, a major historical figure. This is a question of characterization, and it is also a question of the structure of the novel as a genre. The liberal subject that is, on some level, at the core of every novel (per Franzen's assertion) competes with any

attempt to represent subjects who exceed the anonymity of the liberal subject. As we saw in chapter one, postmodern fiction often resolves this conflict by turning from an emphasis on characterization to an emphasis on plot, allowing postmodern novelists to engage large questions of history and historicity.

By the mid-1980s, Don DeLillo was, by virtue of critical recognition and popular visibility, at the forefront of a reconfiguration of the relationship between postmodern literary aesthetics and realism. This reconfiguration deemphasized the challenge postmodernism had traditionally posed to language and, taking the linguistically- and historically-contingent bases of experience and representation as a given, sought to re-inscribe more conservative conceptions of aesthetic truth and experience onto the postmodern project. A novel such as *Libra* assumed the linguistic and historical contingency of any version of the events in Dallas on November 22, 1963. There was no need for DeLillo to demystify or deconstruct the Warren Report. The Report reached *Libra*'s audience – who was presumably literate, educated, living in 1988, and interested in the latest Don DeLillo novel – as a self-evident fiction, not by virtue of gaps in its account of the assassination, nor by evidence of conspiracy or its authors' ideological bias, but by the brute fact of its own textuality.

An idea that felt radical a few decades earlier had, for the postmodern novelist of the mid-1980s, become an obligatory operating assumption: our perception of historical reality is underwritten by narrative construction, and therefore, by fiction. In *Libra*, this anti-foundational foundation allowed DeLillo to compose a fictional history that was, on its own terms, totally free of conflict

with actual history – and, therefore, one could posit that it allowed DeLillo to write actual history.⁵⁵ Indeed, one way to understand the reconfiguration within U.S. postmodernism is to consider the role of conflict in postmodern fiction since the mid-1980s. Like Vidal, DeLillo admitted no conflict between his fiction and fact, albeit for radically different reasons. Vidal sought to validate *Lincoln's* historicity with the expert's stamp of approval (Harvard's Professor Donald) and the veneer of research (a veneer, he would contend in his defensive articles, composed of sweat expended in the library and the archive). DeLillo dispensed with such niceties; all he required was the writer's imagination.

Nevertheless, *Libra* is profoundly ambivalent about its own historicity. DeLillo's practices of historical representation in the novel are diverse. The novel is structurally and stylistically heterogeneous, like a conventional postmodernist text. But DeLillo obeys certain conventions and limits of realism. He portrays Kennedy from a distance, and the actions and lives of the historical characters in the novel fit the broad contours of the historical record. When he takes novelistic liberties, describes Oswald's thoughts or obviously fictional conversations, he does not describe intentionally or wildly improbable scenarios (e.g., Reed's Lincoln paying tribute to a comically villainous slave-owner on a Virginia plantation). The scenes, dialogue, and streams of consciousness are all rendered realistically. DeLillo leaves the door ajar for the kind of totalizing historical narrative that earlier postmodernist novels eagerly subverted. In many ways, *Libra* participates in the possibility of a totalized history, and presents itself as a

⁵⁵ This is the argument of Timothy Parrish's *From the Civil War to the Apocalypse: Postmodern History and American Fiction*.

fictional contribution to an always-inadequate historical record. (This is the reason the novel was criticized in the popular press by journalists like George Will) (Michaud).

These inadequacies are the empirical gaps: in his introduction in the 2005 edition of *Libra*, DeLillo reflected that, in the future, new technologies may be able to isolate the number of shots fired in Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963. If this happens, wrote DeLillo, “then, perhaps, there will be an answer. Three gunshots, Oswald acted alone. Four gunshots, there was another shooter” (ix). The pregnant “perhaps” aside, DeLillo seems to accept the capacity of acoustic evidence to describe an historical event. But then he moves, without transitional language, directly into the next paragraph:

In *Libra* there he is, the second shooter, a man with a name, a face and a nationality. This is how lost history becomes the free weave of fiction. He stands behind the stockade fence on the grassy knoll, weapon in hand, watching the limousine approach. He is not the answer to the question that investigators, scientists, historians, government officials and countless others have been asking through the decades. He is simply the man who stands in the blank space. (ix)

What was DeLillo saying in this passage? He was either describing what fiction does not do – that is, answer questions unanswerable in the historical record. Or he was making a positive statement about what fiction does do, what it contributes to “the blank space,” which exists in the historical record.

How to deal with the blank space? Unsurprisingly, DeLillo seemed torn between characterization and plot. One of his characters, David Ferrie (based on a real-life figure who haunts conspiracy theories of the Kennedy assassination), advises the reader to “think of two parallel lines”:

One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny. (339)

The first line is character (“Lee H. Oswald”); the second line is plot (“the conspiracy”). The third is an attempt, by Ferrie (and DeLillo), to articulate a synthesis between the contradictions of character and plot, to articulate the forces by which action can occur in a plot without resorting to the crude historical determinism of a plot in itself. DeLillo’s novels are profoundly ambivalent about plot (and postmodernism’s tendency to privilege plot over character). Everywhere DeLillo’s characters are wary of the “...the deathward-tending logic of a plot” (363). One of the conspirators reflects:

Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of

armed men. The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death. A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of the death outside the book, play it off, contain it. (221)

And just as plot leads toward death, so does death punctuate and create its own sense of plot. This is apparent when Nicholas Branch reflects on the data he has accrued:

In 1979, a House select committee determined there was nothing statistically abnormal about the death rate among those who were connected in some way to the events of November 22. Branch accepts this as an actuarial fact. He is writing a history, not a study of the ways in which people succumb to paranoia. There is endless suggestiveness. Branch concedes this. There is the language of the manner of death. Shot in the back of head. Died of cut throat. Shot in police station. Shot in motel. Shot by husband after one month marriage. Found hanging in tattered pants in jail cell. Killed by karate chop. ... There is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations. There is no need, he thinks, to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions. (57)

Plots lead to death; where death already exists, plots appear ready-made. The creation of plots is at best a futile, at worst a deadly, endeavor. In other words, DeLillo was questioning the viability of plot-making as the novel's primary mode

at precisely the moment that Linda Hutcheon was describing a “return to plot” in the works of High Postmodernism (or, in her words, historiographic metafiction). But DeLillo was not willing to endorse the return to characterization that many neorealists championed. In many ways, the whole of *Libra* is an extended meditation on whether a third possibility exists, whether a novel can navigate through the shoals of characterization and plot to represent the elusive relationship between them. DeLillo wanted to represent the intersection of character and plot, a challenge that obsesses *Libra*, its characters, and the numerous threads of its plot.

In a brief author’s note that followed the novel, DeLillo wrote

This is a work of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I’ve made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. Any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I’ve altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters. (457)

Although DeLillo’s novel would easily be classified as more experimental than Vidal’s *Lincoln*, DeLillo’s account of his engagement with the genre of historical fiction is surprisingly conventional when compared to Vidal’s. By distinguishing between the imagined and the real, DeLillo is discouraging a factual analysis of his novel. Vidal invites such an analysis, and rigorously engages critics when they rise to the challenge. DeLillo’s language overlaps significantly with Vidal’s

afterword (described in chapter two: “How much of *Lincoln* is generally thought to be true? How much made up? This is an urgent question for any reader; and deserves as straight an answer as the writer can give.”). They both refer to the “historical record” and “fact.” They simultaneously omit more nebulous concepts of “history” and “truth” or more heavily theorized concepts of “artistic representation” and “historical realism.” Any of these omitted concepts would provide the authors with long traditions that justify aesthetic renderings of historical events, and therefore provide them with ready-made alibis against charges of deception that both authors seem to anticipate. Instead of taking recourse in these alibis, DeLillo and Vidal invite readers to consider their fiction against the more concrete, less forgiving historical record. DeLillo positions his narrative in the “blank spaces” of the historical record, in the gaps that are permanently unknowable and therefore open to speculation. Vidal reproduces these gaps. What is unknowable about Lincoln in the historical record is unknowable in his novel. DeLillo frames his novel as a negative image of the historical record; Vidal frames his novel as a positive reproduction of the historical record.

One of the ways in which to gauge an author’s sense of their own historicity and its relationship to fictionality is to examine the “All Persons Fictional” statement that precedes an historical novel, located on the opening page of the book. *Libra*’s original, 1988 “All Persons Fiction” statement (which appears in *addition* to his brief author’s note, quoted above) reads: “This is a work of fiction. It draws on the historical events surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and many of the real-life persons associated with those

events appear in this work as characters. However, insofar as this work expresses any opinions or theories about the assassination of the persons involved, those opinions and theories are solely the product of the author's imagination."

Compare this to Ishmael Reed's, preceding *Flight to Canada*: "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales are entirely coincidental." Or consider the relatively abrupt statement that precedes Joe Klein's anonymously published 1996 novel of the Bill Clinton campaign, *Primary Colors*: "Several well-known people – journalists mostly – make cameo appearances in these pages, but this is a work of fiction and the usual rules apply. None of the other characters are real. None of these events ever happened." Finally, consider the statement that precedes Morris's convoluted blend of fact and fiction, *Dutch*: "This is an authorized biography and a work of extensive scholarship. All the words (written or spoken) of Ronald Reagan, all his recounted thoughts and acts, and indeed those of every historical character in the text, are matters of fact and of record." Each of these statements reveal the different shades of each writer's sense of their work's own historicity and of their responsibility to that historicity. Some of these statements are written in a terse, almost bureaucratic style (Morris's, for instance); others are loose and confident (Klein's assertion that "this is a work of fiction and the usual rules apply"). But despite the varied styles and genres of novel these statements represent, each statement shares a conviction that the doctrine of poetic license will protect the

writer's engagement with historicity. Of course, the fact that DeLillo included *both* an "All Persons Fictional" statement *and* an author's disclamatory afterword – and then in 2005 published a *third* statement exploring the relationship between fiction and history – indicates that he was more vexed by the question of poetic license than were the other authors described here. This is further evidence that *Libra* represents a meditation on the challenge of historical representation itself that refuses the easy solutions offered by either postmodernism or neorealism.

If we return, once again, to Vidal, we find that no "All Persons Fictional" statement precedes *Lincoln*: there is only the author's afterword, which asserts the novel's near-literal adherence to the historical record. Such "All Persons Fictional" statements surely vexed Vidal. In an interview, he once stated:

"One of the absolutes of bookchat land is that the historical novel is neither history nor a novel. On the other hand, a literal record of a contemporary murder is, triumphantly, a novel. This is what I call 'the Capote confusion,' his monument. Actually there is no such thing as The Novel as opposed to novels. No one can say what a novel ought to be. But history is something else. Although I try to make the agreed-upon facts as accurate as possible, I always use the phrase 'agreed upon' because what we know of a figure as recent, say, as Theodore Roosevelt is not only not the whole truth – an impossibility anyway – but the so-called facts are often contradicted by other facts. So one must select; and it is in selection that literature begins. (*United States* 672)

Vidal is not here endorsing anti-positivism, the essential fictionality of historical narrative *per se*, but rather a soft admission of epistemological uncertainty and competing interpretations where the facts are not “agreed upon” and indisputable. The bedrock of fact remains, upon which everything must be predicated. More interesting than his historiography, however, is his observation that there is “no such thing as The Novel as opposed to novels.” Vidal is eager to embrace a kind of literary empiricism that eschews genres – that is, specific practices – that might categorically undermine the historicity of a novel like *Lincoln*. He does not want a technicality of literary taxonomy to render irrelevant the question of his imagined reader, “Is it true?” History is governed by facts, and historical fiction ought to be governed by history. Elsewhere, Vidal said: “Historical fiction is a curious phrase. If it’s fiction it’s not history and if it’s history it’s not fiction. I have worked out a blend over the years, in which my history is history, historical figures do what they did and say what they did” (“In Depth”). (He added, referring to the recently published *Dutch*: “I know Edmund Morris slightly, and it may be that he picked up something from me along the way, about the mixture”).

Ambivalence toward fictionality aggregates around, and is set into relief by, the novels considered in this chapter. Although these examples contrast usefully with one another, they also reveal a narrative: a common direction of U.S. the novel, and its relationship to historicity, fictionality, and realism, at the end of the twentieth century. This direction moved toward a more optimistic relationship between a work of fiction’s historicity and the possibility of faithful historical representation. Some writers, such as Vidal and Morris, were wildly

optimistic about this relationship. Others, such as DeLillo, were more ambivalent, but this ambivalence nevertheless reflected a shift *away* from the hard, anti-positivist suspicion toward historical fact that had characterized High Postmodernism in earlier decades. The next chapter considers what role paranoia, a key structural device in postmodern fiction and the theories that surround it, would play in this shift toward greater optimism about the possibilities of realism, representation, and verisimilitude.

Chapter IV

The Anti-Paranoid Style in American Literature:

Vidal, Sedgwick, and the Last Days of Suspicion

“He is writing a history, not a study of the ways in which people succumb
to paranoia.”

- Don DeLillo, *Libra* (57)

Nicholas Branch, Don DeLillo's fictional CIA archivist, must remind himself of the distinction between plot-making and paranoia as he pieces together an official history of the John F. Kennedy assassination. By the time of *Libra*'s publication in 1988, paranoia in the United States seemed to have undergone a serious permutation from its heyday in 1973, the year of Watergate and *Gravity's Rainbow*. That novel, as Leo Bersani wrote in 1989, was an opus of High Sixties paranoia that actually measured a distinct shift in the nature of paranoia: “For all the shifts of interpretative perspective on paranoia, the word, faithful to its etymology...has always designated a mental disorder. At least until *Gravity's Rainbow*” (101). He continued:

All the paranoid thinking in the novel is probably justified, and therefore – at least in the traditional sense of the word – really not paranoid at all. I say “probably” because Pynchon is less interested in vindicating his characters' suspicions of plots than in universalizing and, in a sense, depathologizing the paranoid structure of thought. Were he content to certify that all the plots

they imagine are real plots, he would be making merely a political point.... (101)

Such political points, Bersani wrote, marked Pynchon's output in the 1960s but did not reflect the complexity of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which sought to depathologize paranoia as merely a state of mind that reflects the connectedness of things in the world.⁵⁶ "Would we ever want a life without paranoid terror?" asked Bersani (102). He answered with a quote from *Gravity's Rainbow*: "...there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long" (qtd. in Bersani 103). For Bersani, individuals seeking a "route of escape" from paranoia might be drawn to "randomness": "Power depends on the control of information, on the ordering of data; what happens when data resist the ordering process? This is presented as a particularly seductive possibility in *Gravity's Rainbow* (as in anarchy, the political corollary of unprogrammed events and acts)..." (104). But can one resist paranoia *without* randomness and total unconnectedness? This is the condition Nicholas Branch imagines in *Libra*, when he is tracing the branches of conspiracy but *not* writing "a study of the ways in which people succumb to paranoia." Conspiracy without paranoia was a condition that Pynchon, according to Bersani, found unthinkable in 1973. By 1988, DeLillo imagined precisely such a condition as a response to

⁵⁶ Rita Felski, in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), distinguished between suspicion and paranoia on the grounds that paranoia is too associated with pathology and the language of psychoanalysis, and so argued that any account of the hermeneutics of suspicion should not conflate paranoia with suspicion (34 – 36). No two critical terms can ever be truly conflated, but Bersani's reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*, with its useful concept of a depathologized paranoia, allows us to approach and analyze suspicion with paranoia close at hand, and to proceed as if the two terms, though not identical, are kin.

history, which is rife with conspiracy (or what DeLillo frequently called “plot”). For Bersani, revisiting Pynchon in 1989, literature could not protect the individual subject from conspiratorial plots because “literature is on a continuum with those [plot-making] forces by which it has habitually proclaimed itself to be menaced”⁵⁷ (116). But much had changed between 1973 and 1989. This chapter will explore how events in the years between had reconfigured the possibility of conspiratorial-thinking within an anti-paranoid frame, and the consequences, both productive and problematic, of this new paradigm for literary realisms.

This chapter will engage with two figures: Gore Vidal and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, both of whom reflected extensively on the function and role of paranoia and suspicion in the long 1980s. I will argue that Vidal cultivated a style and mode of reading and writing, which he applied to both political commentary and literature, that cut against the grain of the cultural paranoia which dominated his era and developed a unique form of anti-paranoia. Further, he welded this mode to his conception of literary realism, most clearly represented in his historical fiction. This chapter contends that the primary aim of Vidal’s historical realist project in the 1980s was to create a space for literary innovation within the discursive parameters that other novelists had established in the 1970s and 1980s. These discursive parameters simultaneously favored thorough historicity and institutionalized, self-conscious experimentalism. Exemplary historical novels

⁵⁷ “If there is a menace,” Bersani continued, “it is not to literature as guardian of cultural and ethical values but rather to literature as a *preeminent* plot-maker. ...Pynchon’s fiction....participates – even exuberantly participates – in an insanely industrious plotting that is also the object of his characters’ anxious – and probably justified – suspicions” (116 – 117).

from this period range from E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975) and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and DeLillo's *Libra*.⁵⁸ These novelists described, with painstaking attention to detail, the material and ideological conditions of the eras their novels represented; yet these novelists (with the complicated exception of Morrison) were quick to reinforce by-then prevalent dogmas that downplayed, or outright denied, the ability of literary forms to represent these conditions with meaningful accuracy or precision. Vidal's novels and essays from this period demonstrated less sensitivity to the self-imposed limits that ostensibly experimentalist novelists were placing on themselves. This chapter will also demonstrate how, in his biography, essays, and public statements, Vidal negotiates dominant currents in 1980s U.S. cultural and political discourse –anti-institutionalism, paranoia, and cultural fragmentation – in the defense of an ideological and aesthetic sensibility, the cornerstone of which is his peculiar brand of literary realism.

To help navigate Vidal's relationship to the cultural and political discourse, and paranoia in particular, this chapter will engage with Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading. Sedgwick first introduced this concept in a 1997 essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" as a response to the dominant hermeneutic practice of paranoid reading in literary studies (what Paul Ricœur called "the hermeneutics of suspicion"). Sedgwick argued that "strong theory" had become uniquely adept at exposing hidden structures of violence in liberal forms and media, but that, from the 1980s through the present time, "forms of

⁵⁸ Several of these novels are considered in greater detail in the previous chapter.

violence that are hypervisible from the start may be offered as an exemplary spectacle rather than remain to be unveiled as a scandalous secret” (133, 140). The problem with “the paranoid consensus,” wrote Sedgwick, was that “rather than entirely displacing [hidden structures of violence], it may simply have required a certain disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing...” (144). In other words, the hermeneutics of suspicion – the dominant form of literary and cultural criticism for a generation – may have accomplished little more than the foreclosure of other, better forms of knowledge.

Although I will not argue that Vidal proposes a wholly reparative project as Sedgwick described it, I find Sedgwick’s concept useful as a mechanism of triangulation, one that allows us to assess and define other, paranoid reading practices. Sedgwick’s essay serves an additional function, that of an historical essay. Although critics have most often utilized Sedgwick’s concept of reparative reading for the powerful alternative it provides to the hermeneutics of suspicion, her essay is also an incisive ethical polemic about the very specific historical period, and concerning several of the same issues, that shaped Vidal’s aesthetic-ethical project. As such, Sedgwick’s essay will function in this chapter as much as a primary source as it does a critical text.

1. Against Institutions

In November 1984, Ronald Reagan was reelected with nearly 59% of the popular vote and every state except his opponent’s, Minnesota – a landslide by any measure. Insofar as Reagan’s massive victory can be attributed to political rhetoric and discourse (and not, say, the fortuitous economic recovery of the

preceding year), it depended on the successful articulation of a conservative populism. Reagan's populist appeal was not rooted exclusively in the chest-beating nationalism that we most commonly associate with right-wing populist movements (although that was certainly a component). Instead, he regularly appealed to the broad center of the American electorate by romantically describing two policies that, prior to Reagan, rarely held much populist appeal: deregulation and decentralization. This rhetoric allowed him to recruit enough erstwhile Democrats to win decisive majorities in two presidential elections. Among conservatives, a narrative began to emerge: dreams of a permanent Republican majority, a new conservative consensus to replace the old liberal consensus, an age of Reagan to bookend the age of Roosevelt. The success of this political project has been mixed, but the underlying assumption that the United States is, basically, a center-right society is now a token of faith even among the American left.⁵⁹ This was Fredric Jameson's nightmare, as he described it in the year of Reagan's reelection – the erasure of a viable American left by faux populism, by an economically rooted, politically viable new cultural dominant: postmodernism.

To popularize deregulation and decentralization, Reagan needed to rely on an anti-institutional bent in the cultural imagination, a bent that was shaped by

⁵⁹ This was the operative assumption of Rick Perlstein's exhaustively researched popular histories of the conservative movement, *Before the Storm* (2001), *Nixonland* (2008), and *The Invisible Bridge* (2014). Historian Sean Wilentz takes a more moderate view in his 2008 study, *The Age of Reagan*, but ultimately cedes that Reagan and his conservative base effected a right-ward shift in the American political consensus. Daniel T. Rodgers challenged this narrative in *The Age of Fracture* (2011), an analysis of the fragmentation of political, social, and intellectual discourse between 1973 and the millennium.

generalized paranoia (in the depathologized sense that Bersani observed in *Gravity's Rainbow*) about the cultural and political institutions of the postwar era (most of them shaped by the New Deal and the Cold War). Historians have commented extensively on the development and proliferation of paranoia in American society immediately before, during, and in the wake of the 1960s and '70s: suspicion of the government, suspicion of the media, and suspicion of authority of any sort abounded. The intricate networks of paranoia that structured the Nixon White House and led to the 1972 Watergate break-in parallel the networks of paranoia that structures the experience of Slothrop, protagonist of *Gravity's Rainbow*. This paranoia continued into the 1980s, but it was altered slightly (in part by the public relations tactics of the Reagan administration) into a kind of world-weary naïveté. As historian Gil Troy noted, the recent memory of Watergate had a curious dual effect on the society: it encouraged journalistic inquiry into, for instance, the Iran-Contra affair while simultaneously diffusing popular outrage against presidential misconduct. Troy attributed journalistic vigor to “a generation of Americans – especially reporters and prosecutors – [who were] now primed to mistrust the president, to see conspiracies in sloppiness, chicanery in buffoonery” (253). Meanwhile, he attributed public apathy toward the crisis – and, further, popular support for Reagan shortly after the crisis – to a general reluctance to “[repeat] the Watergate trauma.” But surely the first explanation (paranoia) is powerful enough to account for both coverage of the crisis and subsequent public apathy. If, after Watergate and during Iran-Contra, the culture was prone to ignore or approve of conspiratorial misconduct at the highest levels,

then the cultural mood could be characterized as excessively paranoid – to the point of muting the effects of its own paranoia, producing a paranoia without undue suspiciousness, a paranoia without symptoms.

At first glance, Vidal might appear to be the paranoid reader *par excellence*. Heather Love has colloquially defined paranoid hermeneutics as “thinking about all the bad things that have happened in order to be ready for all the bad things that are still to come,” a definition that describes Vidal’s public persona quite well (237). This was partially a function of Vidal’s patrician posturing that always seemed to circumvent outrage or disbelief over events in his lifetime, from the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the excesses of Vietnam to the scandals of Watergate to the rise of Ronald Reagan. But Vidal’s posture also shielded him from excessive paranoia. In fact, Vidal was in many ways a model of a writer and public intellectual who disengaged with paranoid thinking. He regarded conspiracy theorists with contempt. For Vidal, there were only open secrets and outright corruption, all of which were exposed to broad daylight. Nothing in American life should surprise anyone who paid even cursory attention to U.S. history, which was (for Vidal) an open book. However, Vidal did he always expect the worst from his country. He ran for national office twice. His annual “State of the Union” speeches were filled with serious and earnestly stated proposals. The solution was not paranoia or cynicism but right thinking. “I want him to meet someone *really cynical*,” said Saul Bellow upon introducing his son to the author of *Burr* and *Myra Breckenridge* (Kaplan). Vidal balked: “*Realistic*.” In a period when public intellectuals and everyday citizens openly embraced

paranoia, Vidal was quick to resist it. Despite his knowing façade, Vidal was not easily categorized as paranoid.

Another important current in the long 1980s, which often coincided with paranoia, was anti-institutionalism. As historians Troy, Sean Wilentz, and Daniel T. Rodgers have all demonstrated, the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s represented a broad period of anti-institutionalism, decentralization, deregulation, and fragmentation in U.S. politics and culture. Vidal's multifaceted career may be read as an exemplary instance of artistic anti-institutionalization. A certain antipathy toward institutions pervades his biography and, eventually, his identity as an author. He began his life enmeshed in the structures and institutions of the New Deal, only to spend eight decades disentangling himself from them. Vidal's youthful fascination with Charles Lindbergh was magnified by his father's work in aviation and a personal connection with Amelia Earhart. This fascination – along with his close relationship with his isolationist grandfather, Senator Thomas Pryor Gore, and his conservative extended family – bolstered Vidal's sympathy with the America First Committee and, in turn, his opposition to the defining positions of the Roosevelt administration: economic centralization at home and military intervention abroad. Speaking of his time at Phillips Exeter Academy, Vidal said, “[My success] has nothing to do with any school. I ha[d] never been so bored in my life” (“In Depth”). He was born and reared in Washington D.C., where his father worked for the Roosevelt administration as head of the Bureau of Air Commerce. Despite his burgeoning isolationism, Vidal's first institutional affiliation as an adult was with the U.S. Army Reserve, where his grandfather's

connections secured him a relatively safe post in the Aleutian Islands. Vidal is one of the few literary figures of his generation to have never attended or been affiliated with a university, and did so out of choice rather than necessity. Instead, after the war, Vidal moved to New York City to pursue a career as a novelist. He recounts struggling for funds during this period, competing with Truman Capote and other post-war novelists for fellowships and grants. (*United States* 857).

Institutions would not provide Vidal a safe haven within which to forge an identity as an American writer. He did not secure a grant, but this early institutional rejection was quickly followed by an institutional success: his first novel, *Williwaw* (1946), was almost universally acclaimed by professional critics. In interviews, Vidal described *Williwaw* (with characteristic modesty) as the first American novel about World War II. In 1948, he published *The City and the Pillar*, which he described as the first American novel to portray an explicit, uncoded homosexual relationship. Both claims of originarity are likely unfounded, but reveal Vidal's anxiety about precursors and affiliation.⁶⁰

Institutional power turned against Vidal after *The City and the Pillar*. In response to the novel's frank treatment of homosexuality, the *New York Times*, an early

⁶⁰ One does not need to read many interviews with Gore Vidal before discovering that he was obsessed with his own origins, and with his status as an original figure. He claimed to have written the first American novel of the Second World War, and to have published the first American novel to feature uncoded gay sex. For this reason, he expressed displeasure when he was not included in anthologies of war literature or queer literature. He pretended to have been the first public figure to guess, sometime in 1960, that Ronald Reagan would be president. He even extended amazing claims of originality to his family. He frequently said that his father invented the airline industry. His grandfather, he claimed, invented the state of Oklahoma. His father's family fought for the union and his mother's for the confederacy. When it comes to originality and innovation, Vidal protested a bit too much.

champion of Vidal's work, declared a moratorium on all reviews and advertisements of both *The City and the Pillar* and any subsequent novels by Vidal (*Conversations* 105 – 107, 130 – 131). *Time* and *Newsweek* quickly followed suit. A sympathetic editor at the *New York Times* secretly advised Vidal to “do something else or write under a pseudonym” (*Conversations* 106). After two years of nearly universal praise, Vidal had been blacklisted by mainstream literary journalism. However, his age, politics, and parentage apparently precluded the charge that invariably followed homosexuality in the late 1940s: communism. Vidal discovered that he was employable in Hollywood as a screenwriter. He wrote screenplays for film and television, and continued to write fiction under pseudonyms. By the 1950s, his screenwriting began to produce income. Within a decade, Vidal had earned enough money to circumvent the need for institutional support, whether for income or reviews. In 1960 he ran as the Democratic candidate for the U.S. House in a heavily Republican district in upstate New York. Although he did not win (and did not expect to win), he was much more competitive than expected. The Democratic Party asked him to run again in 1964. He declined, and retired that year to Italy, where he returned to writing novels. He also began to cultivate a prodigious career in freelance essays and television appearances, and to develop a public persona. Retirement was Vidal's declaration of independence. “From ‘54 to ‘64 I made enough money for the rest of my life,” said Vidal in an interview, “which gave me an independence that the John Updike Chair of Quality Lit at Rutgers would not have” (*Conversations* 107).

The U.S. policies of decentralization and deregulation translated into an increasing dependence on free markets to perform work previously entrusted to institutions of government. Similarly, a writer who deinstitutionalizes must rely on the market of readers in order to survive. In his numerous statements in opposition to institutional affiliation, Vidal echoed a slew of increasingly vocal novelists – from Tom Wolfe to Jonathan Franzen – who, since the late 1980s, have expressed hostility toward both the academic institutionalization of the novelist and experimental postmodernism. Like Vidal, these writers tended to be proponents of the various shades of contemporary realism and their palatability with the most prized of audiences: the general public.

Unlike these other writers, however, Vidal displayed occasional antipathy toward the whole project of fiction-writing, in part because it had, by the latter half of the twentieth century, become so enmeshed in the institution of the academy. Joyce Carol Oates recalled a statement made by Vidal in 1967, in which he blithely declared that he was done with novels: “three centuries is quite long enough for any literary form,” he said. Vidal had other reasons to abandon fiction. In 1974, seven years after the comment that Oates recalled, Vidal discussed the work of writing in an interview for the *Paris Review*. In the interview, Vidal described the narrative fiction of several postmodernists as instances of “language doing the work of the imagination.” In response, the interviewer asked, “What is there in writing except language?” Vidal replied:

In the writing of novels there is the problem of how to shape a narrative. And though the search for new ways of telling goes

on...I don't think there are going to be any new discoveries. ...
 There is no new formula. Some of us write better than others; and
 genius is never forced. There are signs that a number of writers –
 university or U-writers, as I call them – are bored with the
 narrative, character, prose. In turn they bore the dwindling public
 for novels. So Beckett stammers into silence, and the rest is
 cinema. Why not? [“Art of Fiction”]

Vidal, already an accomplished screenwriter and dramatist, would have had ample opportunity to continue literary production after prose fiction had, in his estimation, exhausted itself as a form. And yet, as Oates noted, his response to this problem of the exhaustion of novel devices and innovations is to keep writing novels. Throughout his essays on contemporary fiction, Vidal objected to postmodern fiction on two grounds: the problem of institutional affiliation and the problem of innovation. The two problems are related. It is difficult to innovate in a literary market of rampant formal and narrative experimentation, and yet, for Vidal, the market seems to be fixed against actual innovation. Vidal speculated in numerous essays about whether experimental or “university fiction”⁶¹ would even exist if its primary purveyors – Barth, Gass, Barthelme, et al – operated outside the academy (*United States* 137). He lodged the familiar but persistent argument that experimental novels are written primarily to be taught; the fact that the majority of experimental novelists are also instructors of creative writing

⁶¹ His term for postmodern fiction, against which he pits the generic term “mainstream fiction” – a category that includes, presumably, his own.

constitutes, in his view, a conflict of interest.⁶² His opinion of academically unaffiliated postmodernists (e.g., Pynchon) tended to be, if not favorable, at least more favorable than his opinion of university writers. Such novelists, in his view, were more free and apt to address a broader public. This sentiment is fairly typical among writers who seek success in the free market. Among writers who, like Vidal, seek a balance of popular success and literary prestige, an aesthetic emerges from this market-oriented ethic, of which anti-institutionalization is a major component. One might characterize such anti-institutionalism as a kind of paranoia, and where the broader social attitude toward institutions during the 1970s and '80s is concerned, one would be correct. But Vidal vehemently resisted charges of paranoia. Granted, this alone does not constitute a negative diagnosis (if anything, resisting too much is a symptom). Vidal's stance toward paranoia, however, marked at least an attempt to construct a possibility of relating to a plot-ridden world without suspicion.

2. Against Paranoia

Vidal's resistance to paranoia is especially visible in his late career writings on one of the most paranoid, conspiratorially-minded figures in U.S. history: Richard Nixon. The late-twentieth century break-up of the New Deal consensus forced liberal scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals in the 1980s

⁶² Vidal in a C-SPAN interview: "The novel is going through a rough patch. It's become academicized. Most of the writers and certainly, practically all of the reviewers seem to be English teachers. I don't think this is necessarily a good thing. You can make books out of books...but anterior to literature is something called life. If you haven't had a life, a really involved one, even if it's an interior life – sitting by a pond in New England – you aren't going to be very interesting. The writers now working, particularly the schoolteachers in universities, they've had so little experience of the world and there's so much they've shut out." ("In Depth")

and '90s to reevaluate the vexing figure of Nixon, who was once their *bête noire* but who, after twelve years of Reaganism followed by Newt Gingrich's Contract With America and liberal purges within the Democratic party, seemed (sometimes to their horror) comparatively palatable.⁶³ Although he remained an unreconstructed Nixon critic, Vidal arrived relatively early to this party. In a 1983 *Esquire* piece, Vidal jokingly observes that "of all my literary inventions, Richard Nixon is the most nearly autonomous. Like all great literary creations – Beowulf, Gargantua, Little Nell – one does not know what on earth he might do next" (*United States* 900). Vidal had "invented" Nixon twice: his 1960 play *The Best Man* featured a character that seemed to cross the Nixon personality with the Joseph McCarthy archetype, and his 1972 play *An Evening with Richard Nixon* rendered the president explicitly. Although the *Esquire* piece pokes fun at Nixon's famously protean and insecure public persona, and although he claims (at least partial) authorship of that image, Vidal had, by 1983, apparently been seduced by the latest Nixonian makeover. Writing in the period of Deng Xiaoping's radical liberalization of Chinese financial markets, which retroactively amplified (perhaps exaggerated) the significance of Nixon's 1972 trip to China, Vidal struck a favorable tone toward the man he had lampooned for nearly three decades: "Today we are all of us in Nixon's debt for seizing an opportunity (*ignore his motives: the world is governed by deeds, not motives*) in order to make sense of close to one third of a century of dangerous nonsense" (*United States* 904). To

⁶³ Historian David Greenberg has described this period as the last of Nixon's famous makeovers. By the 1980s and Reagan, Nixon was recast as an elder statesman and foreign policy guru; by the '90s and Clinton, Nixon seemed to be the last New Deal president.

prefer deeds over motives is not an especially natural position for a novelist in the late twentieth century to take. To be sure, Vidal was operating in historian-essayist mode for the *Esquire* piece. His aim was clearly to draw his readers' attention away from the pervasive pop cultural image of a wicked president and toward the substance of actual historical achievement. But he was also writing in 1983, when he is in the late stages of *Lincoln*, a novel that would assiduously avoid representing the inner motives of the sixteenth president (even if, by avoiding them, he seems to obsess over and set them into relief).

What makes this mode of historical and novelistic representation – one that emphasizes deeds instead of motives – desirable to an historical novelist in the early 1980s? Vidal gave us another clue in the *Esquire* piece, which goes a step further in its humorous reappraisal of Nixon:

Neither personally nor auctorially did I feel sorry for Nixon during the days of Watergate and his resignation. After all, he was simply acting out his Big Loser nature, and, in the process, he turned being a Big Loser into a perfect triumph by managing to lose the presidency in a way bigger and more original than anyone else had ever lost it before. That takes gumption. No, I only began to feel sorry for him when the late, much dreaded Fawn M. Brodie, a certifiable fool (of the dead only the truth), wrote one of her pseudo-psychobiographies of him and plowed him under as if he were a mere Thomas Jefferson (a previous victim of her somber

art) in pursuit of mulatto nymphets. I said to myself; do not inflict
this Freudian horseshit on Nixon – *my* Nixon. (*United States* 902)

David Greenberg quotes from the above passage in his 2003 study *Nixon's Shadow*, which analyzes the cultural image of which Vidal claims partial authorship. Vidal's anti-diagnosis of Nixon, writes Greenberg, is "closed-minded."⁶⁴ He even links Vidal's stance with H.R. Haldeman's flat dismissal of all psychoanalytical speculation about Nixon as "100 percent baloney" (the first time, no doubt, that Vidal and Haldeman had been united on a matter of politics) (Greenberg 253). Vidal, writes Greenberg, was "notoriously eccentric, "a prime candidate for psychoanalytic investigation, but he apparently couldn't tolerate the notion that he might not always understand his own unconscious, let alone someone else's." Greenberg's snipe at Vidal's legendary ego is not without merit. Throughout his essays and interviews, Vidal was dubious about all branches of psychology: "I've never understood psychiatry. I mean there's no one's advice I want on anything to do with my life" (*Conversations* 164). Despite claims to the contrary by its conservative critics, Vidal's *Lincoln* almost totally ignored recent psychological reevaluations of the sixteenth president by historians.

Vidal's rejection of psychology is undoubtedly related to his rejection of paranoia: modes of knowledge that operate (or that plot) from the outside in are,

⁶⁴ Fawn M. Brodie is one of the most well-known practitioners of Freudian psychobiography, a genre of historical research from the 1960s and '70s that examined history through the lens of psychoanalysis (as Vidal notes, Brodie's most famous work dealt with the psyche of Thomas Jefferson). This type of work, no longer fashionable, deserves more serious consideration, contends Greenberg. Vidal and Haldeman's "ignorant dismissals" overlook psychoanalysis' "genuine contributions" to presidential biography (253).

in his project, unnecessary. Reality as it exists on the surface should suffice. In Vidal's work, this applies to history as well as to the mind – history is readily available and accessible to all. Vidal's reading of Nixon, which was so surface-oriented, helps us understand his construction of Lincoln and of the innumerable other historical figures he would represent after *Lincoln*.

Vidal's literary project parallels aspects of Sedgwick's critical project. Despite being published in 1997, Sedgwick's essay used U.S. politics and history in the 1980s as an essential frame and context for her essay. Sedgwick argued that the paranoid mode of literary analysis – the dominant mode since at least the 1960s, which Sedgwick (following Ricœur) called “the hermeneutics of suspicion” – was insufficient to the task of the critic in the contemporary context, which she defined as specifically Reaganite or post-1980 (3 – 4). This mode had found its way beyond humanistic scholarship and into the culture at large. What cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk called “enlightened false consciousness” is, for Sedgwick, precisely “wised-up popular cynicism” that is “near-ubiquitous [and] paranoid in structure” (21). She cited D.A. Miller's influential 1988 study *The Novel and the Police* as a representative, if late, instance of the paranoid mode, and although her critique attacked Miller's hermeneutics of suspicion on logical grounds, noting in particular its circularity (in *The Novel and the Police*, “everything can be understood as an aspect of the carceral, therefore the carceral is everywhere” [Sedgwick 14]), her primary appeal was ethical. According to Sedgwick's summary, Miller cited the “modern liberal subject” as the center of Western discourse since the Enlightenment and, through a conspiratorially-

minded analysis, he excavates the rotten core at the heart of the modern liberal subject: a “hidden violence,” the seeds of the police state (18). But, Sedgwick countered, one can hardly argue that the modern liberal subject (or the liberal values and the liberal society that are supposedly constructed around it) was any longer a normative category in the age of Reagan, supply-side economics, fundamentalist Christianity, and AIDS. She wrote:

[I]t’s becoming easier to see ways in which such a paranoid project of exposure may be more historically specific than it seems. ‘The modern liberal subject’: in the latter 1990s it seems, or at least ought to seem, anything but an obvious choice as the unique *terminus ad quem* of historical narrative. Where *are* all these supposed modern liberal subjects? I daily encounter graduate students who are dab hands at unveiling the hidden historical violences that underlie a secular, universalist liberal humanism. Yet these students’ sentient years – unlike the formative years of their teachers – have been spent entirely in a xenophobic Reagan-Bush-Clinton America where ‘liberal’ is, if anything, a taboo category; and where ‘secular humanism’ is routinely treated as a marginal religious sect.... (18)

In other words, violence is no longer lurking beneath a benign, liberal humanist surface. Instead, the liberal humanist surface is now the object of violent attack. Later, Sedgwick turned this argument into a more direct jab at Miller:

Writing in 1988 – that is, after two full terms of Reaganism in the United States – D.A. Miller proposes to follow Foucault in demystifying “the intensive and continuous ‘pastoral’ care that liberal society proposes to take of each and every one of its charges.” As if! I’m a lot less worried about being pathologized by my shrink than about my vanishing mental health coverage – and that’s given the great good luck of having health insurance at all. Since the beginning of the tax revolt, the government of the United States – and, increasingly, those other so-called liberal democracies – has been positively rushing to divest itself of answerability for care of its charges (cf. “entitlement programs”) – with no other institutions proposing to fill in the gap. This development is the last thing anyone could have expected from reading New Historicist prose [which, for Sedgwick, is emblematic of paranoid criticism], which constitutes a full genealogy of the secular welfare state that peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, along with watertight proof of why things must become more and more like that forever. (19 – 20)

In other words, if paranoid readers are so good at being paranoid, they should have anticipated the disintegration of the welfare state. One could question the sincerity of Sedgwick’s complaint that paranoid criticism in general, and New Historicism in particular, lacks a strong predictive agency.⁶⁵ But granting this

⁶⁵ Sedgwick takes seriously Miller’s assertion that “surprise...is precisely what the paranoid seeks to eliminate” (qtd. in Sedgwick 20). At times, she seems to confuse

much, Sedgwick's ethical objection remains: paranoid criticism shuts down the critic's ability to respond positively to political, historical, and personal despair.

3. Against Fragmentation

Although she does not use the terms in her essay, despair and discouragement are the conditions that inspire Sedgwick's polemic. Of course, one might quibble with the despair with which Sedgwick describes the state of liberalism in the 1980s and '90s. But for persons with AIDS and, in particular, for members of the gay community who had lived through the public apathy toward the epidemic, such a tone is justifiable. It was, after all, the AIDS epidemic that ostensibly prompted Sedgwick's essay. In the opening pages, she describes a conversation that led her epiphany about the hermeneutics of suspicion:

Sometime back in the middle of the first decade of the AIDS epidemic, I was picking the brain of a friend of mine, the activist scholar Cindy Patton, about the probable natural history of HIV. This was at a time when speculation was ubiquitous about whether the virus had been deliberately engineered, or spread; whether HIV represented a plot or experiment by the U.S. military that had gotten out of control, or perhaps that was behaving exactly as it was meant to. After hearing a lot from her about the geography and economics of the global traffic in blood products, I finally, with some eagerness, asked Patton what she thought of these sinister

paranoia's desire to circumvent surprise with a claim to prophesy, so that a critic who adopts the paranoid style must, in her view, not merely expect the worst but also predict it with a fair degree of accuracy.

rumors of the virus's origin. "Any of the early steps in its spread could have been accidental or deliberate," she said. "But I just have trouble getting interested in that. I mean, even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren't actively hated; that the military deliberately researches way to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things – what would we know then that we don't already know?" (3 – 4)

Sedgwick goes on to write that, apart from its "congenial, stony pessimism," Patton's account of the origin of AIDS and its total apathy toward conspiratorial speculation was actually "enabling" (4). What it enables, Sedgwick hopes, is a new kind of literary criticism. But before we examine that, compare this passage to any of Vidal's comments about U.S. history, including this one – typical, interchangeable with many like statements – from a 1994 interview on the *Charlie Rose* show:

Vidal: I really wrote books like *Burr* and *Lincoln* because the public schools do such a lousy job of teaching history...

Rose: You wanted to teach about who Burr really was, and his time, and who Lincoln really was.

Vidal: Well, and what kind of country it is and what the real issues are. You know, there've been nothing but race wars from the very beginning. Why not face up to that, instead of becoming evasive?

When describing U.S. history as “nothing but race wars from the very beginning,” Vidal’s tone is resigned and tired, as if he believes he is restating the obvious and not exposing a scandalous or controversial counternarrative. Historians and teachers do not hide or suppress information; they simply evade it. Again, no special knowledge exists by reading from the outside in. The knowledge is already available on the outside.

Sedgwick was similarly committed to engaging with what was already available on the outside. In her essay, she described the reparative position as “the position from which it is possible in turn to use one's own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole - though, I would emphasize, *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*. Once assembled to one's own specifications, the more satisfying object is both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn” (128). The entire critical work of reparative reading is committed to engaging with “part-objects,” to which Sedgwick applied mechanical metaphors of assembly and repair. The ultimate goal is to reassemble these part-objects into “something like a whole” – not to expose or disclose underlying “bad” structures but to treat structures as if they possessed a capacity for “good” wholeness, if only the correct practices are applied.

This led Sedgwick to propose – or at least to imagine – strange alliances. A reader of “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” cannot help but notice Sedgwick’s curious critical voice, which was alternately scholarly and casual. In the essay, Sedgwick intervened in post-Kleinian psychoanalytic discourse and attempted to synthesize a critique New Historicism, but she also described encounters with her graduate students and reflected, with considerable pathos, on her own terminal illness. She cited hard research and personal anecdotes side-by-side; she used exclamation marks generously. In one instance, quoted above, she referred to the “*terminus ad quem* of historical narrative” and, a page later, responded to D.A. Miller with the Valley Girl-ism “as if!” (18 – 19). This essayistic voice, which juxtaposes tones so readily, was obviously strategic. The type of project Sedgwick endorsed is more optimistic, more direct, and more reader-friendly than the hermeneutics of suspicion by virtue of being more open: specifically, it is open to the reader-oriented qualities of pleasure and amelioration, qualities dismissed by paranoid criticism as the “merely aesthetic” or the “merely reformist” (22). Her style, at once scholarly and casual, reflected her project. But if a reader risks a historicization of Sedgwick – a risk because it is precisely the sort of reading that Sedgwick rejected – then a peculiar aspect of her project becomes clearer. It is an aspect of which Sedgwick was not entirely unaware (as we will see), and it centers on her use of the colloquial Valley Girl-ism, “as if!” In the year of Sedgwick’s essay (1997), the most famous instance of the colloquialism was from the 1995 film *Clueless*, in which the female protagonists used “as if!” as a catchphrase. Any use of “as if!” in the years

immediately following *Clueless* was, to some degree, a citation. The film, a loose adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma* and, therefore, a self-conscious mix of populist and highbrow pretensions, is set in a California high school and derives most of its plot, humor, and character development from the figure of the Valley Girl, which by 1995 was a hardened, identifiable U.S. archetype whose well-known, oft-satirized dialect included frequent use of the phrase "as if!" The term "Valley Girl" originated with teenagers of the San Fernando Valley who, due to the middle-class boom in California suburbs during the postwar era, grew up in relative affluence (along with their patterns of speech, Valley Girls were arguably most immediately associated with shopping malls and mall culture). The Valley Girl is a type inextricably bound with the white, suburban conservatism of southern California, a conservatism that produced Ronald Reagan and, by the 1980s, was figured as culturally normative. If forced under a political lens, *Clueless* is an amusing exercise in mid-90s soft or conservative feminism. The protagonist, Cher Horowitz, does not challenge misogynist notions about female intelligence or agency but instead embraces and uses them to assert (modest) power within the universe of the film. Sedgwick's use of "as if!" could be construed as a kind of appropriation of the phrase by a radical queer feminist, to anti-conservative ends; but it functions in the essay not as a challenge but as an opening, a space that invites – allows – a more relaxed, less paranoid reading. It is an artifact of consumer-oriented conservative culture that disrupts the reading by surprising the reader with such an unexpected colloquialism. It is, in this sense, a populist gesture, borrowed from a key figure in of conservative populism.

The suggestion that Sedgwick's abrupt exclamation – “as if!” – requires her project to commune with conservative populism may seem tenuous. But one of the suggestions this chapter seeks to make is that any attempt to construct an open, realist, anti-paranoid, anti-conspiratorial mode of reading in the 1980s and '90s must have necessarily confronted and, to a degree, embraced the figures and tropes of the white, conservative populism. As we see in the following quotes, Sedgwick was aware of this surprising association with far-right conservatism. She quotes from Richard Hofstadter's 1964 classic of mid-century liberal consensus, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” in which Hofstadter spoke about gun control after the assassination of John F. Kennedy:

Shortly after the assassination of President Kennedy, a great deal of publicity was given to a bill . . . to tighten federal controls over the sale of firearms through the mail. When hearings were being held on the measure, three men drove 2,500 miles to Washington from Bagdad, Arizona, to testify against it. Now there are arguments against the Dodd bill which, however unpersuasive one may find them, have the color of conventional political reasoning. But one of the Arizonans opposed it with what might be considered representative paranoid arguments, insisting that it was “a further attempt by a subversive power to make us part of one world socialistic government” and that it threatened to “create chaos” that

would help “our enemies” to seize power. (qtd. in Sedgwick 20 – 21)

After this quote, Sedgwick wrote: “To look from a 1990s vantage at [Hofstadter’s essay] is to see the extent of a powerful discursive change” (20). This change is that the rightward drift of society that had made paranoid reading seem obsolete. She goes on to call Hofstadter’s essay “a prime expression of the complacent, coercive liberal consensus that practically begs for the kind of paranoid demystification in which, for example, D. A. Miller educates his readers” (21). But, wrote Sedgwick, the “powerful discursive change” of the 1970s and ‘80s had rendered such paranoid demystification (at best) unnecessary, redundant, irrelevant and (at worst) pernicious, complicit with oppression. Ultimately this led Sedgwick to an obvious self-association with far-right conservatism:

I won’t deny that a person could get nostalgic for a time when paranoid gun-lobby rhetoric sounded just plain nutty – a “simple and relatively non-controversial” example of “distorted judgment” – rather than representing the uncontested platform of a dominant political party. But the spectacular datedness of Hofstadter’s example isn’t only an index of how far the American political center has shifted toward the right since 1963. It’s also a sign of how normative such paranoid thinking has become at every point in the political spectrum. In a funny way, I feel closer today to that paranoid Arizonan than I do to Hofstadter – even though (or do I mean *because*?) I also assume that the Arizonan is a homophobic

white-supremacist Christian Identity militia member who would as soon blow me away as look at me. (21)

In short, Sedgwick tentatively embraced the figure of the symbolic minutemen of the modern right, the fathers of Reagan. Although Sedgwick did not mention it, Hofstadter's choice of example – Arizonan gun-rights advocates – is not arbitrary; they were, in some sense, a marginalized group when Hofstadter wrote the essay. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" was first delivered as a speech in November 1963, the month of President John F. Kennedy's assassination, an event many Americans initially blamed on the country's small but vocal conservative minority. After the assassination, state campaign offices of Arizonan conservative icon and Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater received threats; several offices were attacked (Perlstein *Before* 247 – 248).

As scholars of critical race or queer theory in the 1980s and '90s (Sedgwick foremost among them) would have hastened to point out, any project that attempts to admit the white, heterosexual male as a potentially marginalizable subject position fundamentally misreads or disarticulates the structure of the white, heterosexual male identity. The preexisting social construction of white, heterosexual male identity is rooted in Enlightenment liberalism and predicated on a fusion of three ideologies – white privilege, heteronormativity, and patriarchy – that necessarily attempt to colonize non-white, non-straight, non-male subjects, to create a fictional "universal liberal subject" in their own image. (That this social construction was no longer hidden in cultural texts by a social conspiracy, but instead openly flaunted by living and visible actors, is one of the

premises of Sedgwick's essay.) Proponents of critical race theory would argue that the intrinsically oppressive structure of whiteness is the reason that attempts by conservative populists to render the "white, heterosexual male" as a subject of socio-political oppression (sometimes called reverse discrimination) appear so disingenuous. If the white, heterosexual male identity is to be incorporated into a radical democratic project, the identity itself must be thoroughly radicalized beyond recognition. Even if we introduce categories of class or regional origin and examine specific instances of white marginalization in U.S. history, proponents of critical race theory would argue (correctly) that non-whites, working class, queer, and female subject positions have never been granted access to the position of oppressor (at least not without resorting to the tropes of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and middle-class white privilege). This powerful negative example is evidence of an ideational superstructure that organizes access to political power and that necessarily excludes the white, heterosexual male subject (though naturally not individual white, heterosexual males) from a radical democratic politics.

Throughout his essays and public appearances, Vidal is hostile to the above formulation of a social superstructure. Although he does not directly address critical race theorists, he frequently responds to their arguments, and to identity politics more generally. An unjust power structure exists in the U.S., Vidal argues, but it is not hidden and it is not linked to identity or subject position. Further, a radical disarticulation of the universal liberal subject is not required to more fully democratize U.S. society; if anything, the universal liberal subject is

the democrat's greatest asset. To articulate this opposition, Vidal often relies on the familiar tropes of ghettoization and disunity – the diminishing returns of a self-imposed minoritarianism – that are so often lobbied against identity politics. Be he relies equally on the logic of factuality that is such a central component of his peculiar literary realism. Vidal frequently employs factual claims and fact-oriented thinking in response to both identitarian rearticulations of U.S. history and paranoid or conspiratorial formulations of power.

Vidal's hostility can also explain his antipathy toward both identity politics and cultural projects that reformulate U.S. history along identitarian lines. Questions of identity and its relationship to Vidal's politics occur most frequently around the subject of Vidal's sexuality, and it is here that his antipathy for identity politics is most pronounced. "I don't categorize," said Vidal on many occasions, expressing a sentiment that he reiterates throughout his essays and public statements. "That's the first position I take. There is no such thing as a homosexual person. There are homosexual *acts*..." (*Conversations* 158). This recalls Vidal's statement about Nixon, that *deeds* rather than *motives* matter. Again, the emphasis is on the act.

The AIDS epidemic is one of the essential backdrops for Sedgwick's reevaluation of paranoid reading. Coincidentally, it also provides the pretext for some of Vidal's most illuminating statements about his own attitudes toward identity politics and paranoid formulations of power. In a 1992 interview with the novelist, playwright, and iconic gay-rights/AIDS activist Larry Kramer, Vidal spoke at length about the politics of sexuality. Kramer's own politics serve as a

neat foil to Vidal's. In the interview, Kramer's views function as a productive caricature of identity politics: earnest, extreme at times, and likely representative of the most thoughtful and dense academic identitarianism after it has circulated through, and been diluted by, the culture at large. When Kramer asked Vidal why he refused to "proudly" identify as a homosexual, Vidal said simply, "Because I don't believe in it" (161). Kramer was, again, incredulous: "But, Gore, you *are* gay." "I promise you I don't think of myself in these categories. It's like saying 'I'm a carnivore.' Well, yes, I *am* a carnivore, but I'm very fond of the movie *Airplane*." Vidal equated sexuality with one's preference for screwball comedies, an obvious attempt to get a rise out of Kramer, but also characteristic of Vidal's tendency to treat sexuality with a disinterestedness that is sometimes interpreted as minimization. Later in the interview, Vidal repeated one of his favorite claims, that homosexual affairs were both common and unremarkable in U.S. boarding schools before World War II: "I never thought [homosexuality] was a big deal. ... [It] was practiced quite widely in my adolescence. In schools, in camps, in the army. Some stayed with it and some didn't" (165). Vidal's fictional representations of sexuality in antiquity strike a similar tone,⁶⁶ but here it rings false. The claim that homosexuality was common in the 1930s is uncontroversial. The claim that homosexuality itself was uncontroversial, however, is a classic instance of Vidal's rosily pre-lapsarian view of U.S. culture before the Cold War. But even when Vidal's history is self-evidently myth, he presents it with the

⁶⁶ As Christopher Hitchens accurately observes, Vidal "does not follow...other writers in making the ancient world a location for the polymorphous perverse. He merely takes note of the fact that sexual love between men and men or women and women was not...considered either abnormal or profane" (*Unacknowledged* 76).

objectivity of fact and observation, without the passionate flourishes of a critic-historian revealing ideology or identity-structure organizing a hidden history (Kramer noted, and bemoaned, this lack of passion in the interview [166]). This is a decidedly anti-paranoid stance.

Vidal repeatedly responded to the charge that, by denying homosexual identity, he had denied the distinctive structure of homosexual oppression. Vidal's response was emphatic: "Don't be ghettoized, don't be categorized. Every state tries to categorize its citizens in order to assert control of them" (*Conversations* 158). When Kramer interjected, "But you're living in a time when many of us *want* to be ghettoized and categorized," Vidal responds simply, "Well, I disapprove." Kramer offered a pragmatic rationale for ghettoization: "There's safety in numbers and perhaps that's a way of exerting," and Vidal interrupted:

It never occurred to anybody before St. Augustine that there even *was* such a category [as homosexual]. I've never applied [these labels] to myself nor have I applied them to anybody else, even when they have invited me to. ... If the categorization is going in a vicious way, as it does on the part of our monotheistic, near-totalitarian state, then one *does* organize, and one does fight back. I have two things in my mind. One, that there is no such category, and two, that if the category is invented by the powers that be – largely Christianity, although the Jews are not much better on the subject – then, indeed, it must be fought. (158)

Vidal's account of homosexual categorization combined the hyperbolic (the U.S. in 1992 is "monotheistic" and "near-totalitarian") with the broad and shallow, compressing numerous accounts of the category's origin into the classic boogeyman: puritanical monotheism, which, for Vidal, always compared unfavorably to antiquity's polytheistic indifference to sexuality. This passage nevertheless demonstrates Vidal's overall position quite well: what exists only in ideology does not exist at all, has no claim to reality. And when Kramer challenged Vidal to affirm the deadly real, remarking that he has "not spoken too much about AIDS," Vidal replied grimly, "I'm not a virologist" (159). Here, Vidal's resistance to identitarianism approaches the absurd. He refused to connect the experience of the AIDS epidemic to any particular demographic niche, instead framing the whole issue as narrowly – clinically, biologically – as possible. He eventually revealed that his nephew, the painter Hugh Steers, had AIDS, but added (mystifying Kramer), "If I don't have anything useful to say, what am I to say? It's a terrible thing." The AIDS epidemic, which arguably constituted the most significant event around which gay identity was constructed in the 1980s, is also, coincidentally, one of the few subjects about which the famously opinionated Vidal had nothing to say. When Vidal revealed his family connection to the epidemic, Kramer was incredulous: "Is this not cause for you to write an essay of great strength and anger about what this country has not done to save this young man's life?" Vidal replied,

Don't you think it's better that I attack the national security state which has given us a kind of police state? Isn't it better I attack the

Supreme Court that takes away our rights? And isn't it better I attack Jesus Christ and Moses who have brought on the mentality that has done this? I'm radical – which means I go to the root. ... Why get upset only when [injustice] touches you personally? (159 – 160).

But Vidal's perception of a radical solution, which locates injustice in specific institutions, legislation, judicial rulings, and religious texts, is actually quite reactionary from an identitarian perspective. When Vidal again lodged the charge of ghettoization, Kramer tactically accepts Vidal's terms and said, "The ghetto is now so big that it's hardly a ghetto" (166). Vidal was not appeased: "But it's not the world and it's got a hostile government."

After a brief digression (Vidal brags of his large audience), the interview turns to the U.S. Constitution, of which Vidal is predictably defensive and Kramer dismissive. When Vidal taunted Kramer for his apparent disinterest in the foundational text of U.S. democracy, Kramer responds, "I don't think my constituency believes the Constitution is worth shit. Your nephew is not going to live because the Constitution has not extended the necessary rights to him that would force the NIH and the FDA and Congress to see that his disease is researched" (162). Vidal corrected Kramer: "Those things don't have anything to do with the Constitution, although there are many things wrong with the Constitution. It has to do with Congress." Kramer, perhaps sensing Vidal's agitation, attempted to provoke him: "*Fuck* the Constitution, Gore." Vidal repeated himself: "It has to do with Congress. It has to do with the rulers."

Kramer's hostility and Vidal's passivity are consistent with their respective ideological positions. Both Vidal and Kramer would agree that the alternative to identitarian liberalism is liberalism premised upon a universal human subject ("the world" to which Vidal refers above). The fact that U.S. democracy is theoretically premised upon, but does not historically practice, universal liberalism is, for Vidal, evidence of a historical failure in the *practice* of universal liberalism and, for Kramer, evidence of an ideological failure of the *theory* of universal liberalism. For Kramer, the structure of the ideology necessarily excludes homosexuals. For Vidal, the structure of the ideology is irrelevant: there are only practices, events, deeds, and actions.

These political and ideological positions are consequential for Vidal's literary realism. Late in the interview, Kramer broached the subject of *Lincoln*, and Lincoln's sexuality. He notably mislabeled Vidal an "eminent biographer" (rather than novelist) of Lincoln, and said:

Kramer: There has been talk in gay historical circles that maybe Lincoln had some sort of gay relationship.

Vidal: I'm fairly convinced of that, yeah.

Kramer: Well, isn't it important that this be written about?

Vidal: Yeah, but you see, I wasn't covering that period of his life.

Kramer: He had an alleged affair with a man, Joshua Speed, and the letters that they exchanged were very...

Vidal: Very odd.

Kramer: Very romantic. And then when they got married, they each wrote to the other that they...

Vidal: Found it hard going, yeah.

Kramer: But, who better to tell the world than you?

Vidal: If I'd been writing about the young Lincoln I would have done it, but I'm writing about the Presidency during the Civil War.

Kramer: But I want you to write about the young Lincoln! Who better to tell the world than Gore Vidal? It would be ten times more useful than attacking the Constitution, to tell this fucking country that its most beloved President was gay, or had a gay period in his life – it would do so much to shake the notion of sexual freedom and rights. ... I think it's important we claim our historical characters. It took us so long, for instance, to get Walt Whitman acknowledged as a gay writer. (167 – 168)

Vidal resisted Kramer's proposal on his favorite grounds: technical, historical. He was not writing about Lincoln's youth, so the president's alleged homosexuality had no place in the novel. But Vidal's also resists Kramer's assessment of the political use-value and impact of novelistic representation. Kramer asked (strangely, on behalf of either the gay community or the U.S. public), "Are there other gay historical figures that you know to have been gay that we don't?" (168). Vidal replied with his characteristic distinction between agreed-upon facts and speculation with evidence. His definition of "agreed-upon" is liberal in this instance: he explained that James Buchanan "is generally agreed to be,"

speculated about Franklin Pierce, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and then (much to Kramer's excitement) said that "there's also a great case to be made for George Washington and Alexander Hamilton" (169). Vidal explained his rationale, but first discouraged too much speculation without evidence:

I practically said it straight out in *Burr*. ... Hamilton was an extremely randy fellow, very handsome. ... At fourteen, he was a first-rate accountant, working for this man – a bachelor of twenty-eight or twenty-nine from New York, who liked him so much he sent him to college. Hamilton made his way by making older men fall in love with him. A lot of guys do this. The sex isn't that great, but the emotion is just the same. And specifically in the case of George Washington, it's very clear that Washington was very much in love with him. Whether anything happened I rather doubt. First of all, there was a great deal of speculation about Washington's potency...er, activity. He might not have been able to do *anything*. But he certainly was in love with Hamilton, who treated him so rudely when he was his Commander-in-Chief and then when he was Secretary of the Treasury. In effect, Hamilton was prime minister for eight years. Washington was king. Hamilton treated him like a beautiful boy would treat a sugar daddy: standing him up, being rude to him. There was this whole pattern there. For a young writer coming along it's a lovely theme,

the love affair between Washington and Hamilton – which
invented the United States. (170)

Vidal has stretched the definition of what constitutes agreed-upon interpretations of history considerably; we are a long way from avoiding Lincoln's consciousness, here describing Washington's romantic affection for Hamilton (which is, in this account, neither a secret nor hidden but "very clear"). Kramer, ecstatic with speculation, encouraged Vidal to write a play about the Washington-Hamilton affair. Vidal imagined the opening line: "Where is my whig, Alex"? (171). Kramer wasted no time making explicit what Vidal left implicit: he imagines that the famed wooden teeth are, post-fellatio, stuck around Hamilton's genitals. Vidal, meanwhile, followed a different and less titillating line of thought. He reflected on how "the United States [was] formed, mainly to protect Washington's investment out on the Ohio River" (170). Despite having raised the tantalizing possibility of homosexual affection between the towering figures, Vidal shifted his focus to the central issue (investments on the Ohio River, the central and non-conspiratorial scam behind the founding of the U.S.), for which his sexual speculations are merely the frame, not the object, as they were for Kramer. The United States is founded on an inequity and a scam for which sexuality is the metaphor, but the inequity is not necessarily structured along lines of sexual identity, as Kramer (and certain queer theorists) would have it. It is clear there is something Vidal disliked about the whole enterprise of queering history. It is telling that, when Vidal had the opportunity to portray Washington's

homosexual feelings in his fabulist novel *The Smithsonian Institute*, unencumbered by historical fidelity, he passed up the opportunity.

Although Vidal could not find ample reason to discuss the AIDS epidemic at length, he found time to engage in – and publish – correspondence with Timothy McVeigh, the domestic terrorist whose hatred toward governmental institutions inspired him to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 168 people. In 1998, Vidal controversially defended McVeigh’s sanity (if not his actions) against the popular narrative that McVeigh was a deranged conspiracy theorist. He argued instead that McVeigh acted with a clear mind and a clear motive that could be summarized in one word – “Waco” – referring to an event that, for both Vidal and McVeigh, was not (per the popular narrative) a bungled government attempt to pacify a group of violent extremists but (in Vidal’s words) “the largest massacre of Americans by their own government since 1890, when a number of Native Americans were slaughtered at Wounded Knee, South Dakota” (“The Meaning of”). Thus Vidal created a continuum between the genocide of American Indians and the killings at Waco, a narrative that reinforced (and seemed, to many, to apologize for) McVeigh’s logic and the rationale for the Oklahoma City bombing. Vidal’s 2001 *Vanity Fair* essay, “The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh,” would go further and explicitly romanticize McVeigh:

The stoic serenity of McVeigh’s last days certainly qualified him as a [W.E.] Henley-style hero. He did not complain about his fate; he took responsibility for what he was thought to have done; did

not beg for mercy as our always sadistic Media require.

Meanwhile, conflicting details about him accumulate – a bewildering mosaic, in fact – and he seems more and more to have stumbled into the wrong American era. Plainly, he needed a self-consuming cause to define him. The abolition of slavery or the preservation of the Union would have been more worthy of his life than anger at the excesses of our corrupt secret police. But he was stuck where he was and so he declared war on a government that he felt had declared war on its own people.

Here and elsewhere in the essay, Vidal recasts McVeigh as a would-be John Brown. He described McVeigh as “a soldier in a war, not of his making.”

Although he was careful to repeatedly condemn the Oklahoma City bombing throughout the essay, his personal admiration for McVeigh seemed clear.⁶⁷ He was particularly defensive of charges that McVeigh was more than only “a little paranoid” (McVeigh’s psychiatrist’s words, quoted by Vidal), and emphatic that McVeigh acted “not because he was deranged, but because he was serious” (again, Vidal quotes the psychiatrist – he seemed willing to accept psychological assessments when they appeared in the negative).

Vidal’s statements on McVeigh shocked many, though should not have surprised those who had read Vidal closely over the decades. From his sympathy with the America First Committee to his numerous writings on the overreach of the executive branch and (in his words) “the shredding of the bill of rights” (the

⁶⁷ Vidal’s relationship with McVeigh inspired a play, Edmund White’s *Terra Haute* (2006), in which a Vidal proxy meets and falls in love with the McVeigh character.

title of an essay that inspired McVeigh to first contact Vidal), he often wrote on topics and in tones that seemed equal parts radical anarcho-socialist and crypto-white nationalist. McVeigh's embrace of Vidal (who McVeigh invited as one of five people to witness his execution) followed naturally from some of Vidal's writings. In 1986, Vidal had called for an economic alliance with the Soviet Union against China and Japan – an “alliance...of the Northern Hemisphere,” a term he preferred to what his essay implied: an alliance of the white races against the “Asiatic world” (“Requiem for”). Even his fear of ghettoization reflected a desire to remain enfolded in the (white) majority, a desire to not be minoritized or ethnicized, a desire to remain part of a power structure that wore its power openly, not under layers of conspiracy.

Sedgwick's flash of sympathy with the Arizonan gun rights activists cannot be compared to Vidal's statements about McVeigh or his flirtations with white nationalists. But both reflect an anxiety about the status of whiteness; in Sedgwick's case, she merely observed and sympathized with the roots of this anxiety, whereas Vidal appeared to, on some level, experience it. Their ability to identify with anxious whites seems linked, however, to their ability to read – and their desire to repair – fractured structures (anxieties, despairs, violence) on the surface of things, rather than search for a superstructural core of violence underlying it all.

Afterword: “Make It New” – The Problem of Innovation

Vidal's *Lincoln*, in which the president's thoughts are never divulged, functions in part to allow for the possibility of a realistic, anti-paranoid reading

Abraham Lincoln. Vidal's essays help to clarify his final reading of Lincoln, which is implicit in the novel. *Lincoln* suggests that Lincoln worries about his ability to define the office and role of the president, which has already been defined by exemplary previous presidents. In short, Lincoln worries that innovation in the present is impossible. Lincoln becomes an embodiment of the problem of innovation. Vidal confirmed this interpretation in his long April 28, 1988 letter to *The New York Review of Books*, in which he cited an 1838 speech by Lincoln that fretted over whether the Founding Fathers had achieved too much, leaving behind nothing with which to equal them.

Vidal's final reading of Lincoln illuminates a theme of both Vidal's overall project and of the larger, more discursive issues related to literary production in the 1980s. Both Vidal and his Lincoln are obsessed with a diminishing potential for innovation. For Vidal, the innovation is aesthetic. For Vidal's Lincoln, it is political. Lincoln is not vain, and masterfully manipulates the aggrandized view that others have of him. But he is also intensely protective of his office and the union over which he presides. He worries about the legitimacy of his presidency and his claim to the states. This is apparent in the generous and fact-bending accounts he gives of his origins. Upon meeting a Union colonel from Indiana, Lincoln introduces himself as a fellow Hoosier. His secretary comments, "[Lincoln] has more states of origin than there are stars in the flag" (*Lincoln* 144). In the novel, Lincoln claims at different times to be from Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and – mysteriously – Virginia. Vidal argued – through the character of Stephen Douglas, and later in the essays that supplement the

novel – that Lincoln’s motives for seeking the presidency and, having achieved it, dramatically expanding its power were rooted in anxiety about precursors.

According to Vidal, Lincoln worries about his ability to define the office and role of the president, which has already been defined by exemplary previous presidents. In short, Lincoln worries that innovation in the present is impossible.

Innovation and anti-paranoia are linked. If everything is out in the open, there is no way to innovate. Postmodernism reveled in experimentalism in part because its premises relied on, and lent themselves to, paranoid modes of thinking – even if, as Bersani claimed, those modes were depathologized. For those realists who charted a way beyond postmodernism, whose projects were defined largely in backlash against postmodernism, the old High Modernist dictum to “make it new” presented a tremendous challenge, one that fueled anxieties about the death of the novel itself: how does one innovate after postmodernism? Should innovation be abandoned? The following chapter builds on these questions by examining neorealist manifestos that sought to point the way toward an American novel without postmodernism. Vidal composed many essays against postmodernism but never a manifesto toward a new literature (instead declaring numerous times that he would abandon literature altogether). The challenge of innovation led him to embrace a clear, surface, almost naïve realism, one without paranoia or suspicion, one that, I have argued, reflected well the socio-political conditions in which Vidal wrote. As his absence from anthologies and syllabi of post-1945 American literature testifies, however, Vidal’s project – with its reluctance to innovate – would eventually be met with critical and then popular

disregard, then silence, a kind of inattention that the one-time mainstay of late-night talk shows would never have been able to abide.

Chapter V

Stalking the Great Silent Majority:

Metaphors of a White Middle Class in Realist Manifestos

“I think the guys who write directly about and *at* the present culture tend to be writers who find their artistic invalidation especially painful.it really *hurts* them. It makes them *angry*. And it’s not an accident that so many of the writers ‘in the shadows’ are straight white males. Tribal writers can feel the loneliness and anger and identify themselves with their subculture and can write to and for their subculture about how the mainstream culture’s alienated them. White males *are* the mainstream culture. So why shouldn’t we angry, confused, lonely white males write *at* and *against* the culture? This is the only way to come up with what we want: what we want is to know what *happened*, why things *are* this way – we want the *story*.”

– David Foster Wallace, to Jonathan Franzen (qtd. in Franzen “Perchance” 52)

“Our society, like all societies, depends for its cohesiveness on common knowledge...without this link to the past, we are unmoored”

– National Endowment for the Humanities Chair Lynne Cheney (qtd. in Troy 272)

In 1992, Toni Morrison published *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, a wide-ranging analysis of the function of whiteness and darkness in American literature. The book was based on a series of three lectures Morrison delivered at Harvard University in 1990. Morrison’s lectures did not quite constitute a literary manifesto, but they possessed the force of one. *Playing*

in the Dark, while hardly an overlooked text, is not usually cited as a key text in the culture wars. But its place in the canon wars that broiled throughout the 1980s and early 1990s is surely as central as Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* and E.D Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. Morrison argued that, despite the apparent lack of black subjects in canonical American literature, blackness itself serves as the organizing structure behind the very possibility of subjectivity in American letters. This subjectivity, of course, had historically been white: "For the most part," Morrison declared, "the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*" (14 – 15, emphasis in original). But a problem underlay this project, argued Morrison, a kind of trapdoor through which blackness enters into the very center of the canon, indeed becomes the organizing principle of canonization in the U.S.: in American literature, Morrison wrote, "images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable – all of the self-contradictory features of the self." (59). "Whiteness," meanwhile, when uncomplicated by blackness, "is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say." Morrison's argument was convincing and, more importantly, influential. But while she made these arguments, two white, male American novelists were hard at work trying to transform whiteness – as an identity and as a literary trope – into neutrality, and neutrality into universality.

This chapter examines metaphors that run through two influential manifestos of literary realism: Tom Wolfe's "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A

literary manifesto for the new social novel” (*Harper’s*, November 1989) and Jonathan Franzen’s “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels” (*Harper’s*, April 1996). These metaphors include: machinery and mechanization; engineering; financialization; journalism; urbanization and urban planning; white flight; ghettoization; immigration; invisibility; and white identity. This chapter also situates their projects in the broader “culture wars” that embroiled U.S. cities and universities in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁸

Both Wolfe and Franzen responded directly to cultural and aesthetic crises which arose from rhetoric, resentments, and anxieties that fanned out across

⁶⁸ The term “culture wars” and its historic span are obviously nebulous. The term was popularized by historian James Davis Hunter, whose 1991 tour d’horizon *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America* consolidated a series of cultural tensions into a single (if always grammatically pluralized) event; rooted its origins, as ever, in the social and cultural tensions of the 1960s and early ‘70s; and distinguished the current tensions from those earlier tensions by noting their changed objectives and venues. Increasingly, conservative social institutions challenged liberal or progressive social institutions, not vice versa. Topics previously debated in broad terms – civil rights, social infrastructure, and American foreign policy – were retooled as narrower, localized, often policy-specific issues: affirmative action, gun rights, abortion rights, AIDS research, sex education, censorship, public religious practice, and the social status of homosexuals. Whereas ideologues had previously fought for control of the physical campuses of Berkeley and Columbia, now they fought for control over curricular details: “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Culture’s got to go” was a famous chant of the era, apocryphally attributed to Rev. Jesse Jackson (Troy 265). As Walter Benn Michaels and others have contended, “identity” is one of the few broad categories that remain critical to the vocabularies of the “culture wars.”

In addition to Rodgers, Tory, and numerous other historians, literary and art critics have found the concept of the “culture wars” useful as a bracket for a period of heightened consciousness of and sensitivity to the political content of art and literature. James Guillroy’s *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993) and Wendy Steiner’s *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in the Age of Fundamentalism* (1997), both published late in the period of written in direct and contemporaneous response to the events the “culture wars” comprise, use the era’s unique climate as a springboard for dramatic theorizations of aesthetic value. Since that time, literary historians such as Amy Hungerford, Mark McGurl, Michael W. Clune, and Walter Benn Michaels have found the term a useful shorthand for the cultural, political, and aesthetic tensions of that period. For Benn in particular, the “culture wars” as both a series of historical events and as a retroactive aggregation of those events represent a distraction from underlying class conflict, a distraction that benefits both conservative and liberal combatants.

diverse American cultural landscapes in the 1980s. Throughout the decade, established writers like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Joan Didion joined a chorus of journalists, public intellectuals, and conservative politicians who advanced a perception of the 1980s as an historically inevitable moment of correction: a check and antidote to the socially progressive '60s and the culturally disoriented '70s.⁶⁹ By 1984, when Tom Wolfe began publishing *Bonfire of the Vanities* as a serial for *Rolling Stone* and Franzen began writing his first novel, battles over curricula, the canon, and multicultural education inflamed political and ideological divisions in many prestigious humanities programs. The ensuing battles became public, particularly at Stanford University, and framed the period's most well-known work of reactionary pedagogy, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). By the time *Closing* became a surprise bestseller, decline and volatility seemed a permanent condition. The American economy was entering a period of retraction, inaugurated by the largest stock market crash since 1929, following four years of economic expansion, the largest since World War II. And even when the growing financial sector caused the overall economy to swell, the blessings were mixed. Financialization had boosted economies worldwide, especially in Japan, which became America's chief economic rival. Anxieties about the Japanese were racialized: journalists, novelists, and filmmakers described the growth of Japan in terms of invasion or theft and

⁶⁹ As historians such as Sean Wilentz and Catherine E. Rymph have argued, cultural memory inverts the impact of the 1960s and '70s. After 1965, the "New Left" progressives of the 1960s affected few concrete policy changes. By the mid-70s, progressives – particularly progressive feminists – were better organized and more efficacious.

portrayed Japanese investment in American firms and land as somehow illegitimate and Japanese business practices as both threatening and exotic. Further, Japanese growth contributed to the already developed fear of decline, this time as displacement by an ominous Other. As the economy worsened in the first years of the 1990s, the perception of the 1980s as a period of backlash, correction, and decline increased. A conventional literary history of this period would read as follows: by the late-1980s, the experimental novels of the '60s and '70s had been thoroughly canonized. They represented the zenith of a viable if no longer verdant genre, middle-aged amid a field of young writers who had often absorbed the lessons of experimental fiction but for whom identity – specifically affiliation within a racial, ethnic, or sexual minority – motivated much of the form and content of their fiction. Identity generated aesthetics.⁷⁰

These events and this literary history formed the scaffolding for Wolfe and Franzen's manifestos. Their language, logic, and metaphors derived from finance capitalism, urban planning, critical race studies, and other non-literary fields that had been, in the previous ten years, popular touchstones of the zeitgeist. The culture wars are the essential context for Wolfe and Franzen's manifestoes. They describe periods of literary correction and decline; bemoan literary excess; advocate marketability, utility; worry that the novel will be displaced by other genres, media; and warn of alienation between author and reader, or between the author and himself. Both manifestoes are nostalgic for periods of economic

⁷⁰ See Wendy Steiner's 1999 contribution to *The Cambridge History of American Literature* and Amy Hungerford's "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary" (2008).

expansion, when literary fiction commanded wide male readership: the late nineteenth century (Wolfe) and the mid-twentieth century (Franzen). As such, they constitute conservative responses to the cultural shifts in their period. Wolfe was a merry reactionary; Franzen's premises were no less reactionary, but his position and conclusions were much more ambivalent.

1. Invisible Fictions: Wolfe, Finance Capitalism, and the Machine of Realism

As the last paragraph of Evelyn Cobley's *Modernism and the Culture of Efficiency* reminds us, efficiency remained a dominant cultural value well beyond the early twentieth century, a value that is both protean and persistent. This section of my argument connects economic efficiency and post-industrial finance capitalism to Wolfe's rhetoric on the function and aesthetics of fiction in the United States during the 1980s. The relationship between literature, ideology, and economics in twentieth century U.S. has been well documented.⁷¹ Efficiency, a concept with economic origins, was touted as a virtue in wildly varying economic systems and social milieus from the eras of both Roosevelts to the era of Reagan, from Progressivism through the New Deal to supply-side monetarism. It was during that last period that defenders of supply-side monetarism began to praise the value of direct, undiluted access and clear, simple market relations (between consumers and products, between producers and markets). The trope of

⁷¹ Several important studies of the last decade have contextualized twentieth century American literary forms and literary history within broader economic shifts, from Michael Szalay's *New Deal Modernism* (the New Deal economy) and Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (the postwar economy) to Michael Clune's *American Literature and the Free Market* (post-industrial markets, monetarism) and James English's *The Economy of Prestige* (globalization).

invisibility (a useful explanatory concept since Adam Smith) was revived. The Invisible Hand became more of a mascot than a metaphor to promote freer markets. It could also describe, if not always clarify, the postwar financialization of Western economies, which peaked after the U.S. and Great Britain began implementing supply-side policies.⁷² Critics and proponents alike noted how financial markets generated profits from production that seemed, well, invisible. What could be more efficient?

During the same period, a categorical misunderstanding had occurred in U.S. literary culture. If you were reading reviews and essays by book critics and novelists during the supposed heyday of postmodern experimental fiction, you'd probably be unaware that non-experimental realist fiction was produced and consumed far more than the work of so-called postmodern writers (49).⁷³ In many of these essays, you would find "realism" ardently defended far more often than attacked.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, you would find experimental fiction derided for its difficulty, density, inscrutability, and inaccessibility. Also during this period, it seemed that advocates of literary realism preferred terms that were not politically

⁷² Finance capitalism refers to any system of markets wherein profits are accumulated not directly through the manufacturing and trade of goods, nor through the management of labor, but through the management and trade of currency itself (namely via stocks, bonds, interest, derivatives, etc.). Essentially, in a financial market, money makes money from money. "Postwar financialization" is a term that describes how financial markets constituted an increasingly significant sector of post-industrial economies in the decades after World War II.

⁷³ Invaluable historical work has been done on the subject of what was popular and not popular during the decades preceding 1970 by Gordon Hutner in *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel 1920 – 1960*. Hutner's epilogue offers insight into the continued prevalence of realism during the era of High Postmodernism and into the proliferation of the (mistaken) perception that postmodern literature constituted a hegemony in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

⁷⁴ See *Granta* 8 on "Dirty Realism" (1983).

innocent. The most strident such advocate was Wolfe, whose “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast” was a manifesto for “the new social novel” (a term that Wolfe uses interchangeably with the “big realistic novel”) (45, 48). The occasion for Wolfe’s manifesto, which was published in *Harper’s*, was the blockbuster success of his first novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), a purportedly realistic (and realist) account of New York during the 1980s.

Bonfire tells the story of Sherman McCoy, a wealthy Manhattanite bond salesman who, during a clandestine trip from JFK airport with his young mistress, takes a wrong turn into the Bronx. Fearful for his safety in a black-majority neighborhood, McCoy leaves the car to retrieve a burning tire that obstructs his exit from the Bronx, is approached by two young black men, and quickly returns to the car, whereupon his mistress (now the driver) hits one of the men with the car. Both flee the scene without reporting the incident to police. The young black man slips into a coma, and McCoy finds himself in the middle of a racially-charged political quagmire in the Bronx. A black minister and community leader decry the injustice of a young black man left for dead by a wealthy Manhattanite. Meanwhile, the Jewish District Attorney, up for reelection and known primarily for targeting non-white men, gleefully prosecutes McCoy’s case; McCoy is the perfect object of racial resentment that the DA hopes will turn the election in his favor. Subplots and minor characters abound, all thick with hypocrisy and rank motives. Wolfe was always unequivocal about his aim for *Bonfire*: nothing short of a photorealistic fictional portrayal of New York City at the peak of its status as the uncontested center of global finance capitalism.

In his manifesto, Wolfe moved between an overview of his career leading to *Bonfire* and an overview of literary history, complete with heroes and villains. He admiringly cited the nineteenth-century French and British realists, especially Emile Zola, who used journalistic techniques to research novels. Wolfe, who spent most of his career as a journalist and advocate of journalism's literary potential, claimed to imitate Zola when researching *Bonfire*. Wolfe's account of his novel's creation is a fascinating portrait of the writer as worker rather than artist – in this case, the writer as journalist. Since 1968 at least, Wolfe wanted to write a novel ("Stalking" 45). But journalism, with its offices and deadlines and regular paychecks, was more efficient work. Nonetheless, journalism allowed Wolfe to produce not only articles but also hugely successful books on cultural institutions ranging from the Black Panthers to NASA. Wolfe frequently struggled with writer's block, and worked with editors to produce deadlines to force him to write. In 1983, when Wolfe turned from nonfiction to write a novel, writer's block returned. He struggled and reached out to Jann Wenner, co-founder of *Rolling Stone*, hoping a deadline would increase his efficiency. It worked: by 1984, the novel was appearing biweekly in the music magazine. Wolfe described writing "a chapter every two weeks with a gun at my temple" (54).

A complete version of *Bonfire* was serialized in *Rolling Stone* by the end of 1985. Along the way, Wolfe described his inability to keep up with the efficiency of his own realism – he scrapped a description of a desperate white man on the subway confronted by black teenagers because it was written (but not published) just before the shocking real-life Bernhard Goetz shooting; Wolfe

worried he'd be accused of cribbing from the tragedy ("Stalking" 54). This motivated Wolfe not to embellish reality or make it more fantastic, but to work faster and harder. Thus, he wrote (none too modestly) that *Bonfire* accomplished what some critics called "prophecy" (55). It anticipated events like Al Sharpton's rise and the 1987 Wall Street crash before they occurred (54). But he was not, he wrote (half-sincerely), trying to be prophetic. He only wanted to "show what was obvious" to "anyone who had gone out and looked frankly at the new face of the city" (54). In short, he didn't want to reveal anything that his reader couldn't have seen for himself, if only he had been there and looking. This is a fiction structured around the clarity, accuracy, and the direct access of journalism.

One more detail about the version of *Bonfire* that was serialized in *Rolling Stone*: the protagonist, McCoy, is a journalist. This will shock anyone who knows the 1987 novel, in which McCoy is a bond salesman, a Wall Street broker so powerful he fancies himself a "Master of the Universe." In one scene in the 1987 version, during a weekend in the Hamptons, Sherman's young daughter stumps him with a simple question: "Daddy...what do you do?" (*Bonfire* 234) She wants to know because she has just learned that her friend MacKenzie's father (an old-money yuppie with a neighboring beach house) "makes books, and he has eighty people working for him." What does McCoy *do*, she insists? How many people work for him? He tries to answer in simple terms, embarrassingly – something about retrieving crumbs while other people are exchanging slices of cake (236). He also tries to tie his work to funds used for roads and hospitals, to which his daughter excitedly asks, "You build roads and hospitals, Daddy?" to which he

must reply, “No, I don’t actually build them....” (235) This might read as a socialist satire of finance capitalism, except that the joke isn’t on McCoy. It’s on his in-laws, who laugh as he struggles to explain, and on MacKenzie’s father, whose business is an inherited vanity project. When McCoy imagines himself as a “Master of the Universe,” he does so with Wolfe’s blessing. He is wielding the invisible transactions that fill the arteries of cities, and nations, with economic and cultural life. As a journalist in the 1984 version, McCoy could only have pressed his thumb against those arteries. As Wolfe turns from journalism to fiction, he moves his character from journalism to finance.

Wolfe’s manifesto centers on his dismay that the 1960s did not produce the type of novels that he would have expected those years to produce. This itself is an interesting question at the heart of literary historical debates across the ideological spectrum: why do certain periods produce certain types of literature, while other periods produce others? Wolfe was dismayed that the 1960s – a period of “confrontation,” “merry, rut-boar abandon,” a “sense of immunity,” when previously “low boil[ing]” racial resentments exploded into great conflagrations, engulfing whole cities period – had not produced a long, realist novel about itself on the nineteenth-century model (“Stalking” 46). He wanted a novel that condensed the decade’s contradictions into a single location (for Wolfe, New York City is the “obvious” choice), a social realist novel of the city (46). “To me,” he wrote, “the idea of writing a novel about this astonishing metropolis, a big novel, cramming as much of New York City between covers as you could, was the most tempting, the most challenging, and the most obvious idea an

American writer could possibly have” (45). “As I saw it,” he continued, “such a book should be a novel *of the city*, in the sense that Balzac and Zola had written novels *of Paris* and Dickens and Thackeray had written novels *of London*.... Thackeray and Dickens had lived in the first great era of the metropolis. Now, a century later, in the 1960s, certain powerful forces had converged to create a second one.” (46).

Wolfe absolved himself of his own negligence of the novel form during the 1960s and 1970s by appealing to his own project at the time: *The New Journalism*, the name of a 1973 volume he edited, and the nonfiction novel, the form that he was certain would displace the realist novel in American letters. Wolfe reminded the audience of his prediction from 1973 that nonfiction writing would eclipse fiction. He had been eager, he wrote, to fulfill this prophecy himself, but he worried that others would object: “Are you merely ducking the big challenge – The Novel?” (50). He elaborated:

Off the record, however...I was worried that somebody out there was writing a big realistic fictional novel about the hippie experience that would blow [my long-form journalism] out of the water. Somebody? There might be droves of them. After all, among the hippies were many well-educated and presumably, not to mention avowedly, creative people. (45)

But the writers of the 1960s and 1970s had not concerned themselves with the sort of project that Wolfe sought, and instead embarked, in Wolfe’s telling, on “one of the most curious chapters in American literary history” – the turn against social

realism (47). “The strange fact of the matter,” wrote Wolfe, “was that young people with serious literary ambitions were no longer interested in the metropolis or any other big, rich slices of contemporary life” (47). He quoted John Hawkes: “I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme” (49). The hippies at the center of the Sixties revolution, argued Wolfe, wanted the wrong kind of novel.

The idea of a novel that crammed “as much of New York City between two covers as you could” seemed so “obvious” to Wolfe, he couldn’t understand why had no one previously (or recently) had tried to do it (45). His explanation was postmodernism: “For a serious young writer to stick with realism after 1960,” he writes, “required contrariness and courage” (48). He described the apparent dearth of social/realist fiction from the ‘60s and ‘70s as a huge loss, and he accused the major writers of those decades of a dereliction of duty. Their dereliction resulted in part from the experimental postmodernist’s aesthetic and ideological bias against realism – they were conscientious objectors but (and this is the heart of his argument) they also wanted to avoid *work*. The realist novel was a middle class form, they contended, and bourgeois consciousness could no longer account for an increasingly fractured reality (47). But they did not write this new reality, rather they argued that the novel was “a sublime literary game” (48). They replaced work with play. Wolfe illustrates his peculiar view of realism’s function and power – and of its very constitution – when he writes:

One of the axioms of literary theory in the Seventies was that realism was “just another formal device, not a permanent method

for dealing with experience” (in the words of the editor of the *Partisan Review*, William Phillips). I was convinced then - and I am even more strongly convinced now - that precisely the opposite is true. The introduction of realism into literature in the eighteenth century by Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett was like the introduction of electricity into engineering. (50)

In his manifesto, the social dimensions of realist fiction are bound up with these industrial metaphors of electricity and engineering. “The dramas [in *Anna Karenina*],” wrote Wolfe, “would be nothing but slow-moving romances without the panorama of Russian society against which Tolstoy places them. The characters’ *electrifying* irrational acts are the acts of the heart brought to a desperate edge by the *pressure* of society” (51, *emphases mine*).⁷⁵ Realism functions like an engine, utilizing either electricity or pressure to achieve its results, but always doing so mechanically – as if without the author. The electric power of realism is most powerfully illustrated for Wolfe by Dickens’ sentimental representation of Little Nell, whose death moved the editor of the *Edinburgh Review* to tears (he “blubbered,” writes Wolfe, “boohooed, snuffled, and sighed”) (51). Later, Wolfe writes that verisimilitude and realism – especially the kind grounded in direct observation and journalistic techniques – are “the very greatest effects literature can achieve” (55). Such direct power over the reader is what postmodernists were abandoning, writes Wolfe: “it is as if an engineer were to set

⁷⁵ Franzen will later add, “It had always been a prejudice of mine that putting a novel’s characters in a dynamic social setting enriched the story that was being told; that the glory of the genre consisted in its spanning of the expanse between private experience and public context” (“Perchance” 40).

out to develop a more sophisticated machine technology by first of all discarding the principle of electricity, on the grounds that it has been used ad nauseam for a hundred years” (51).

Electricity is a principle or an agent, not a practice. And when you remove electricity, the production lines shut down. This is why, in his account, the postmodern ‘60s and ‘70s were one long fictional blackout. Electric power is also invisible, evidenced only by its effects. To describe how such realist electricity will function in the 1980s and beyond, Wolfe provides only himself as an example: he quotes *Bonfire* at two critical junctures in order to underscore realism’s power, and elsewhere describes scenes in detail, a practice that earned the essay quite a bit of derision. Wasn’t this evidence that the manifesto’s thesis was merely a function of the author’s well-known vanity, as much a part of “the Tom Wolfe schtick” as his white suits? Wolfe’s self-quotation is no doubt a function of his penchant for self-promotion, but it also illustrates something important about his conception of his project. Yes, he argues that only he is writing important social novels (by the end of the manifesto the hour is late, the future of literature is at stake, and he’s sounding the final alarm). But again and again, Wolfe implies that he is writing these novels because nobody else is doing it. To write a realist account of New York in the 1980s was obvious: “The material was rich and getting richer beyond belief” (47). The implication, rare from a writer of fiction, is that *anyone* could tell these stories. They’re easy to tell; to use a phrase all good writers are supposed to hate, they practically tell themselves. Writing these stories requires work, but it doesn’t require much

imagination.⁷⁶ And its profits (financial or literary) come from skimming some invisible resin from the surface of reality. In this way, the fiction of Tom Wolfe resembles the finance practiced by Sherman McCoy. Both are ex-journalists making profits, invisibly.

Postmodernists were not merely abandoning realism, they were “dismantling the realistic novel just as fast as they could think of ways to do it” (48). The image, again, is of luddite vandals committing acts of industrial sabotage. “The Puppet-Masters,” as Wolfe called them, “were in love with the theory that the novel was, first and foremost, a literary game” (49). They ignored not only the serious industrial prowess of the realist novel but the post-industrial prowess of their would-be material, the United States during the height of the Cold War. “Many of these writers were brilliant,” wrote Wolfe. “They were virtuosos. They could do things within the narrow limits they had set for themselves that were more clever and amusing than anyone could have ever imagined” (50). “But,” he continued:

...what was this lonely island they moved to. After all, they, like me, happened to be alive in what was, for better or worse, the American century, the century in which we had become the mightiest military power in all history, capable of blowing up the world by turning two cylindrical keys in a missile silo but also

⁷⁶ Wolfe is pretty hard on imagination: it is “powerless before what [one] knows he’s going to read in tomorrow morning’s newspaper,” he writes, paraphrasing Philip Roth. And to toss the newspaper aside and retreat into play is, he says, “the wrong conclusion.” (55).

capable, once it blew, of escaping to the stars in spaceships. We were alive in the first moments since the dawn of time in which man was able at last to break the bonds of Earth's gravity and explore the rest of the universe. [This achievement, Wolfe failed to mention in his rhapsody to the American century, was the Soviet's.] And on top of that, we had created an affluence that reached clear down to the level of mechanics and tradesmen on a scale that would have made the Sun King blink, so that on any given evening even a NeoFabulist's or Minimalist's electrician or air-conditioner mechanic or burglar-alarm repairman might very well be in Saint Kitts or Barbados or Puerto Vallarta wearing a Harry Belafonte cane-cutter shirt, open to the sternum, the better to reveal the gold chains twinkling in his chest hair, while he and his third wife sit on a terrace and have a little designer water before dinner... What a feast was spread out before every writer in America! How could any writer resist plunging into it? (50)

The sudden fleshiness of Wolfe's imagery is characteristic of his description of the "material" out of which novels are made, or rather the material that the realist machine processes. Throughout his essay, he referred to literary material as the beast; serious writers were those who were "willing to wrestle the beast" (56). The title of Wolfe's manifesto – "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast" – refers to the teeming masses that contemporary novelists should be stalking, the material for a thousand *Bonfires*. A billion-footed beast is an apt description of assembly-

line work during the era of Fordism (or, for that matter, of World War II's home-front assembly lines – both foundations of mid-century middle class prosperity). It conjures the image of a behemoth whose gargantuan strength derives from its millipedian substructure. Wolfe's beast is all potential, and its potential is for the production of realist novels. This production is achieved by clear, simple, direct access to raw materials. Fictionalization is an invisible process, analogous to financialization, one that creates value from raw materials without any apparent addition. Such novels are products that, unlike their baggy or self-reflexive experimental peers, render their own self-status invisible. They're mediators between reader and subject, hidden but powerful. It should go without saying that the project of Wolfe's manifesto is not only politically and ideologically problematic, but also doomed to failure. What is interesting is that Wolfe tried and that, after decades of working on nonfiction, his grand fiction project looked less like the literary equivalent of journalism than the literary equivalent of finance capitalism. He attempted to produce a novel that processed the material of cultural capital with the same efficiency that finance processed the material of industrial capital.

As we have seen, Wolfe predictably attacks novels that employ "language games" rather than straight realism. But he also, surprisingly, attacks what he called the "psychological novel," that is much loved by "the intelligentsia" and viewed as a "more refined form of fiction" (47). Because *psychological* is, along with *social*, one of the most common historical modifiers of the word *realism*, one wonders what Wolfe is up to. But Wolfe expressed animus toward deep

psychological (as opposed to social) explanations for behavior or identity-formation in his refusal (notable among white male realists of the 1980s) to explore the role of race or gender or culture in the formation of identity. Writers after 1960 retreated too deeply into the realm of the imagination, which is adjacent to the realm of the psychological.

In short, interiority was a problem for Wolfe. Granted, he bragged about his own use of stream-of-consciousness in *Bonfire*. But the problem, for Wolfe, occurred in novels that take interiority as their structuring principle. By contrast, the kind of novel Wolfe proposed is external, objective, social. Identity and ideology, but especially identity, affix external circumstances and conditions to an internal core. By 1989, identity was something an author possessed, fiercely. Identity seemed to demarcate an author's *authority*, and the question of a white writer's authority over black subjectivity was greatly resented by conservative writers. Wolfe had doubtlessly followed the controversy over William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in 1967. (Wolfe admiringly cites Styron as a realist in the essay.) Styron was criticized for writing, and (potentially) attempting to embody and inhabit a black identity, a black experience. Wolfe, a white man who proudly cited his Southern heritage, wrote a novel teeming with black characters and black caricatures in a Northern city, but without genuine attempts to embody or inhabit anything approaching an "identity" or "subject position." Wolfe does not try to avoid the embodiment Styron attempted. He is more brazen. His black characters are all exterior, all speech, all action. They are subordinated to an often crudely crammed social sphere, and are not allotted any individuality

apart from it.⁷⁷ “It strikes me as a folly,” he writes, “to believe that you can portray the individual in the city today without also portraying the city itself” (51). He bemoaned the postwar MFA dictum WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW, which had so elevated the personal dimension in fiction (52). He suggested that every writer should write only a one autobiographically-inspired novel, if that. *Bonfire* was a “novel of the city,” Wolfe proclaimed (46). He was not representing himself, nor was he representing consciousness, psychology, ideology, or racial, ethnic, and sexual identities (at least insofar as they constitute socially-determined consciousness-forming subject positions and not crude visible markers). He demonstrated an aversion to the psychological sphere similar to Gore Vidal’s aversion (as discussed in chapter four). He represented a simple social sphere where these qualities remain, happily for the white novelist operating according to Wolfe’s terms, invisible. Wolfe’s retreat from the psychological, the interior, and the individual was an attempt to remain unaccountable, to be absolved from the issues that plagued Styron, to be invisible.

Invisibility also offered Wolfe a way to navigate politically dicey waters. Part of Wolfe’s stated goal for *Bonfire* was to portray the full social strata of 1980s New York. Twenty-five years later, students of the period can find huge omissions and truncations in Wolfe’s portrait. Homosexuals are discussed secondhand, and gay culture is non-existent (AIDS is mentioned twice). Leftwing activists, including those who recently staged the world’s largest anti-nuclear demonstration in Central Park, do not appear. Non-black minorities and

⁷⁷ As critics (e.g., Christopher Hitchens) would note, the portrayal of blacks in Wolfe’s second novel, *A Man in Full*, contains tropes that border on minstrelsy.

immigrant communities are not seen or heard. Black characters themselves, drawn from diverse communities across the Five Boroughs, are all essentially taxonomized as either poor/dangerous or well-to-do/corrupt. In a period when hip-hop was experiencing something like its Cambrian explosion, Wolfe's black youth share the same vocabulary and walk with the same (crudely termed) "pimp roll" (Usborne). Likewise, white youth culture in the '80s – its niches and ecologies varying at times from street to street – is basically ignored. Reagan Democrats, ubiquitous among the city's white working class, appear mostly as cops. And the full scale of White Flight (perhaps the truly *big* sociological story of '70s/'80s New York) was never really conveyed.

Sensitive liberals were rightfully irritated by Wolfe's portrait of New York. Granting the problems with Wolfe's portrayal, I want to briefly observe how his omissions and truncations function within his literary project. The missing characters listed in the above paragraph fall roughly into two categories: identity-based (gay, non-black minority) or ideological (leftist, reactionary). To be sure, Wolfe describes hundreds of peripheral figures whose only identifying feature is their race or their gender. But Wolfe does not develop his major (or even minor) characters around their ethnic/gender/cultural identities or their political/ethical/religious ideologies. Instead, he makes "class" or "status" the central governing principle in his character development. Given their variety, his characters all have a startling sameness: their behavior and choices are motivated by the process of acquiring, maintaining, or reacquiring money and status. It is not surprising that in his literary manifesto, published two years after *Bonfire's*

publication, Wolfe became practically the only non-leftist in America arguing that the word “class” should be reintroduced into cultural discourse.

“Class” (or “status,” a term that for complicated reasons Wolfe uses interchangeably with “class”) is the second subject of the manifesto, after “realism.” Wolfe claims both “class” and “realism” are unjustly maligned, the first as a subject of the novel and the second as the novel’s natural mode.

Returning to his literary history of postmodernism, Wolfe wrote:

After the Second World War, in the late 1940s, American intellectuals began to revive a dream that had glowed briefly in the 1920s. They set out to create a native intelligentsia on the French or English model, an intellectual aristocracy – socially unaffiliated, beyond class distinctions – active in politics and the arts. In the arts, their audience would be the inevitably small minority of truly cultivated people as opposed to the mob, who wished only to be entertained or to be assured they were “cultured.” By now, if one need edit, the mob was better known as the middle class.

(“Stalking” 47)

Wolfe staked his reputation on the hope that his brand of realism would appeal to a (mostly white) middle class that aspired for the kind of capital that comes from reading a novel. Wolfe did not bait such an audience by appealing to their perspective or the themes that concerned their lives (the vast majority of middle class readers were not, after all, Manhattanites). Instead, he cultivated a neutral

perspective – or, more accurately, a non-perspective – that flattered its readers by universalizing their point-of-view.

Wolfe famously wore white suits, a habit that began when he moved from the South to New York City and began work as a journalist. At first he wore the traditionally Southern white suit as a mark of cultural particularity, an act of continuity between himself and his Southern heritage. But as his journalism career progressed, he noticed that the white suits disarmed his Northern subjects, and that he could hide his shyness and discomfort behind his peculiar sartorial habits, and thus he gained better interviews. His white suit became an invisibility cloak. Wolfe's prose functions in much the same way: it masks its cultural particularity behind a style that is white but fancies itself neutral, natural, and invisible.

2. “Reality Effects”: Literary Journalism in the Late Twentieth Century

Understanding the formal and generic context of Wolfe's, and later Franzen's, manifestos requires a brief overview of the growing role of the non-fiction essay and long-form journalism in American literature over the second half of the twentieth century. In his 1961 essay “Writing American Fiction,” Philip Roth wrote:

[T]he American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually

outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.

For Wolfe, this dilemma underscored the reasons why American writers had turned to journalism (in the form of New Journalism) and why he thinks American novelists should employ journalistic practices. Wolfe argued against the Modernist dictum that writers should MAKE IT NEW, arguing instead that they should make it news. He also argued against the MFA dictum WRITE WHAT YOU KNOW – “There’s nothing wrong with this rule as a starting point, but it seems to get quickly magnified into an unspoken maxim: The only valid experience is personal experience” (“Stalking” 52). Wolfe, like Vidal and others, emphasized the importance of experience in writing, but differentiated between firsthand experience (useful) and personal experience (overused). The former was an invaluable asset to the fiction writer, and had formed the basis for the great (if out-of-fashion) realists from Balzac and Dickens to Zola and Sinclair Lewis; the latter was overused, the basis for too many stories that Jonathan Franzen would deride as “My Interesting Childhood” (*How To* 80). Wolfe portrayed the journalists as occupying the high ground: “Of one thing I am sure. If fiction writers do not start facing the obvious [that literature requires reportage], the literary history of the second half of the twentieth century will record that journalists not only took over the richness of American life as their domain but also seized the high ground of literature itself” (55). His manifesto argued a clear imperative for novelists to accrue and use the kind of firsthand experience that supported journalism.

From their early symbiosis in the eighteenth century, the realist novel and print journalism have enjoyed a long and well-documented exchange. The tradition of novelists (typically authors of realist or naturalist fiction) acting as journalists is well-established, full of authors writing aesthetic or cultural commentary, covering sports, working political beats, or serving as war correspondents. By World War II, such non-literary assignments were given to prestigious authors with the expectation that they would leave their literary fingerprint on the story: Hemingway in World War II, Norman Mailer at the quadrennial Republican and Democratic conventions, Gore Vidal on nearly any topic, were hired on the basis of celebrity, prestige, and the mystical aura surrounding the novelist's unique brand of prestige. As Evan Brier has documented in *A Novel Marketplace*, writers like Mailer cultivated shamanist personae but also successfully staked their market value on these personae, expertly navigated the midcentury cultural industry (including its fascination with and fetishization of the public intellectual). Consequently, the popular "serious American novelist" – by Mailer and Vidal's time a practitioner of postwar realism, an extension of the representational strains of High Modernism – was a hip intellectual who could apply edge, savviness, an insider's access, an outsider's perspective, and profound sense of cultural consequence to a cocktail party on the third night of the 1968 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach.

Popular middlebrow magazines fueled this literary turn in journalism: *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and eventually *Rolling Stone*, among others. Mailer typically wrote for *Esquire*, as did Vidal. *The New Yorker*,

whose journalists write within a rigidly enforced house style, is more famous for the novelists who wrote short stories during its midcentury peak than for the novelists who wrote journalism in its pages. But it also funded the century's most famous fiction-journalism hybrid, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1959). The development of realist American fiction after 1960 occurs under the shadow of two colossi, John Updike and Philip Roth, whose careers were marked by a long-standing relationship with *The New Yorker*. Updike and Roth, however, wrote short stories. The so-called "New Journalism" of the late '60s and '70s was, according to Tom Wolfe in the introduction of his anthology of the movement (*The New Journalism* 1973), inaugurated with the publication of Capote's *In Cold Blood*. So the "movement" – a loose confederacy of writers ranging from Hunter S. Thompson to Joan Didion – could be interpreted as an unruly offshoot of *The New Yorker*. In 1973, Wolfe used the term "nonfiction novel," of which *In Cold Blood* was the exemplar, to describe both the freedom and limits of this new journalism: long-form works with the sensitivities, sensibilities, and stylistic range of novelists, but rendered in the service of actuality, of improving journalism. Wolfe's introduction echoed Roth's declaration about American reality and fiction, but it rallied writers around the flag of journalism, not fiction.

As a revolution, New Journalism was mostly a fiction. The term was deployed to describe the emergence of long-form journalism with literary sensibilities, and attempts like Wolfe's to consolidate its practitioners into a coalition invariably failed. Despite the fact that these writers were writing for a small pool of New York-based publications, their work was diverse and shared

little more than what was most obvious to an initial observer: a literary flourish applied to reportage. Gay Talese, cited by Wolfe as one of New Journalism's early innovators and one of the few to never write fiction, described this literary turn in old-fashioned journalistic terms: it was, Talese said, simply another approach to "fact reporting, leg work" (34). But most "New Journalists" were not much committed to journalism. Mailer returned to fiction after his massive "nonfiction novel," *The Executioner's Song* (1979). Others alternated between pure fiction, straight journalism, cultural criticism, and what would become the modern creative nonfiction essay. The impact of this work did not transfigure journalism, as Wolfe and Talese had hoped. Instead, it shaped an emerging literary genre (creative nonfiction) and redefined the job description of the American novelist who seeks prestige and an audience. Short works of nonfiction, both creative and critical, by aspiring and established novelists alike, were now as common as short stories had been in the 1960s.

The emergence of the modern literary essay was fueled by the shifting prestige of the short story genre in the 1970s and 1980s. Once featured prominently in middlebrow magazines and viewed by many writers as a gateway or supplement to the more substantial work of writing a novel, by the early 1980s the short story was the dominant genre within MFA programs and writers like Raymond Carver had caught the imagination of U.S. literary critics. Middlebrow magazines, meanwhile, had already begun to diminish as venues of "serious" fiction. The academicization of American literature shifted prestige toward less widely circulated university-based publications. Literary nonfiction, meanwhile,

could cross-pollinate between journalism and the academy: essays by writers from MFA programs were commonly published by the old middlebrow magazines and sometimes found their way back into the MFA classroom. In the 1990s, Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace were writing nonfiction pieces for *Harper's* the way John Updike or Philip Roth had written short stories for *The New Yorker*, and for many of the same reasons: entry-level recognition in the publishing industry; practice with deadlines and audiences; the suspicion that the practice and mastery of this smaller genre somehow graduates to success as a novelist; a little money; and a sense that this was all part of the job.

Throughout the postwar era, novelists who wrote for magazines, newspapers, or journals would revise and organize their nonfiction work and publish it as a collection of essays. For most readers, these collections codify the essays for posterity: they will only rarely be encountered in their original context. Anthologies of a novelist's non-fiction are hardly unique to the postwar era, but the number of these anthologies within a typical novelist's oeuvre increased during this period, as did the intervals at which they appeared. During his lifetime, Ernest Hemingway produced two book-length works of nonfiction; his memoirs, journalism, and other nonfiction works were all published posthumously. During his lifetime, Norman Mailer published six essay anthologies, all published between 1959 and 1982, a period during which he also wrote seven book-form works of nonfiction, two nonfiction novels, only one novel (serialized in *Esquire*), and a play. The overwhelming bulk of his nonfiction was written in two decades during which he wrote virtually no fiction, bookended by his career as a novelist.

By the end of the century, nonfiction anthologies were much more common and evenly interspersed through a novelist's corpus: Jonathan Franzen wrote four novels and published two essay anthologies between 1988 and 2012. The anthologies appear after the success of *The Corrections*, one in 2002 (immediately following *The Corrections*) and the other in 2012 (after *Freedom*; Franzen also wrote a memoir in 2006). David Foster Wallace's publication history is similar: two novels and five short story collections published between 1987 and 2004, along with two essay collections (1997 and 2003). Between 2000 and 2012, Zadie Smith produced four novels and one essay collection. Among winners and nominees for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction between 2000 and 2013, over half had either published at least one collection of essays, had published at least one book-length work of nonfiction, or had an extensive body of uncollected nonfiction writing.⁷⁸ Among those who have not, the majority of published occasional reviews or short pieces of nonfiction.

In 2011, James Wood wrote in a *New Yorker* review entitled "Reality Effects":

At present, the American magazine essay, both the long feature piece and the critical essay, is flourishing, in unlikely circumstances. Despite the slightly tedious nostalgia for the world of the New York intellectuals and the patient outlets of nineteen-

⁷⁸ Twenty-two total: Geraldine Brooks, Michael Chabon, Susan Choi, Jonathan Dee, Junot Diaz, E.L. Doctorow, Jonathan Franzen, Adam Haslett, Ha Jin, Jennifer Eagan, Louise Erdrich, Denis Johnson, Ward Just, Jhumpa Lahiri, Alice McDermott, Joyce Carol Oates, Annie Proulx, Marilynne Robinson, Richard Russo, David Foster Wallace, Colson Whitehead, and Joy Williams.

fifties high journalism, I doubt that Edmund Wilson or Alfred Kazin would rightfully find much to complain about. New and new-ish journals such as *McSweeney's*, *n+1*, *The Point*, and *The Common* have found their way; older magazines have been optimistically refurbished, or just optimistically survive anyway.

There are plenty of reasons for this. One is that magazines, big and small, are taking over some of the cultural and literary ground vacated by newspapers in their seemingly unstoppable evaporation. Another is that the contemporary essay has for some time now been gaining energy as an escape from, or rival to, the perceived conservatism of much mainstream fiction.

The conservatism of mainstream fiction, argued Wood, lay in the predictability of its devices; too much contemporary fiction, according to novelist-essayist Geoff Dyer, “strait-jacket[s] the material’s expressive potential. One gets so weary watching authors’ sensations and thoughts get novelized, set into the concrete of fiction, that perhaps it is best to avoid the novel as a medium of expression” (qtd. in Wood). In the same essay, Wood, echoing Wolfe to a different effect, referred to “the clanking train of novelistic grammar...the burdensome machinery of novelization...novelization and its clanking machinery.” The power source that would reinvigorate such machinery is, for Wood, not quite the electric realism that Wolfe identified. Wood described writers like John Jeremiah Sullivan, who wedded the stylistic freedom afforded by the novel to the strictures of journalism. For Wood, the strictures were key; these writers did not engage in the kind of free

speculation or formal ambiguities of New Journalism, blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction. They rigorously maintained the integrity of their material, writing as if a semi-objective portrait of that material could be offered – in a manner Wolfe would approve of – while taking advantage of the aesthetic, stylistic, and formal devices of fiction writing. These strictures provide freedom, argued Wood, from what Roland Barthes ultimately identified as the “fiction” of fiction: “the artifice of this artifice...the entire monstrous novelizing urge” (again, Wood echoed a metaphor for the novel and its material used by Wolfe: the beast). As Franzen wrote in 1996, “Print journalism...ha[s] become a viable creative alternative to the novel. ... The writer of average talents who wants to report on, say, the plight of illegal aliens would be foolish to choose the novel as a vehicle” (41).

When Wolfe and Franzen composed their manifestos, the American literary essay was in the process of evolving from the condition Roth described – when a novelist could spend an entire career without dabbling in nonfiction because fiction was still “the main event” – to the condition Wood described, when the literary essay was a viable alternative to both the novel and short story, and occupied a significant role in the careers of nearly every major American writer. This literary history coincided with a socio-political history that likewise challenged the centrality of fiction in the major institutions of American knowledge.

3. New York City and the Culture Wars

In “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” Wolfe wrote: “The past three decades have been decades of tremendous and at times convulsive social change, especially in large cities, and the tide of the fourth great wave of immigration has made the picture seem all the more chaotic, random, and discontinuous, to use the literary clichés of the recent past.” He continued: “The economy with which realistic fiction can bring the many currents [electricity metaphor] of a city together in a single, fairly simple story was something that I eventually found exhilarating. It is a facility that is not available to the journalist, and it seems more useful with each passing month” (56). The power of the novel to unify disparate threads was part of the reason Wolfe advocated a turn away from journalism back to the novel (even if he was pessimistic about the novel’s prospects in the age of postmodernism). Everywhere, he observed fragmentation: “Despite all the current talk of ‘coming together’, I see the fast-multiplying factions of the modern cities trying to insulate themselves more diligently than ever” (56).

For Wolfe, the source of much of this fragmentation was immigration. *Bonfire* opened with a long tirade about immigrants in New York: “It’s the Third World down here!” cries the mayor in a frustrated tirade aimed at New York City’s upper class (“Stalking” 51). The mayor (modeled on Ed Koch) is bombarded by a crowd of angry African-American voters, and in an extended stream-of-consciousness sequence (again, aimed at an imaginary audience of wealthy Manhattanites), he spits out the names of the nationalities who have taken refuge in the city: “Puerto Ricans, West Indians, Haitians, Dominicans, Cubans, Colombians, Hondurans, Koreans, Chinese, Thais, Vietnamese, Ecuadorians,

Panamanians, Filipinos, Albanians, Senegalese, and Afro-Americans! Go visit the frontiers, you gutless wonders! Morningside Heights, St. Nicholas Park, Washington Heights, Fort Tyron – *por qué pagar más!* The Bronx – the Bronx is finished for you!” (“Stalking” 51)

Franzen’s manifesto, “Perchance to Dream,” begins on a similar – if less shrill – note about immigration: “My despair about the American novel began in the winter of 1991, when I fled to Yaddo, the artists colony in upstate New York.... I had been leading a life of self-enforced solitude in New York City – long days of writing in a small white room, evening walks on streets where Hindi, Russian, Korean, and Colombian Spanish were spoken in equal measure” (“Perchance” 35).⁷⁹ Thus Franzen’s manifesto begins by describing, in essence, an act of white flight: Franzen fled the alienating fragmentation of the city, which fractured his connection to his neighbors but also to the rest of the nation, for an upstate retreat of likeminded souls. Later in the essay, Franzen would, in a detailed metaphor, compare the state of American fiction to a great, decayed American city.

In short, both Wolfe’s and Franzen’s manifestos took *the city* as their primary setting for the crisis facing the American novel and immigration as a central fact of that crisis. Franzen’s sense of crisis – about the novel but also about the culture at large – was especially acute in America’s largest cities. In

⁷⁹ “Winter” presumably refers to January 1991; by December 1991, nearly every major American institution was experiencing a kind of despair. The domestic jubilation over the Gulf War that so troubled Franzen early in 1991 (the war was “whipped on by William Safire and George Bush...whose approval ratings stood at 89 percent”; the nation as “preparing for war ecstatically”) was a memory, and the painful aftershocks of the 1990 – 1991 recession had severely eroded Bush’s approval rating (“Perchance” 35).

September 1990, four months before Franzen's retreat to Yaddo, *Time* magazine featured a dramatic cover story on "The Rotting of the Big Apple": the iconic "I ♥ New York" logo appeared beneath the iconic *Time* banner, with the heart cracking in two. A cartoon foregrounded the city's bright skyline (stormclouds overhead) with a dark storefront and apartments. Silhouettes – mostly of criminals assaulting their victims – filled each window and street corner. In October 1988, one year after the publication of *Bonfire of the Vanities*, a special grand jury concluded that Tawana Brawley, a black teenager from suburban New York, had staged her own violent sexual assault, verifying the assumption that black people could not be legitimate victims of crime. Earlier that year, Brawley's case was adopted by New York civil rights leaders as a *cause célèbre* within the broader struggle to expose the city's deep institutional racism: a fifteen-year old black girl brutally raped by a white civil servant. Previously local activists, including Reverend Al Sharpton, became national figures. But by summer, major holes began to appear in her account of the assault. White New Yorkers were quick to dismiss Brawley as a liar, and dismiss her supporters' broader argument – that New York City's racial composition and racist infrastructure were not just unrighteous but untenable, that the city was unraveling. Doubts about Brawley's story did not run strictly down racial line. In one poll, while fifty percent of black respondents felt that Brawley was lying, a full eighty-five percent of whites agreed: the margin (thirty-five percent) was, in the minds of many observers, a potential tinderbox (Seltzer101). The passions, anxieties, judicial confusion, and media ruckus aroused by the Brawley case apparently certified for Wolfe *Bonfire*'s status as a portent of things

to come: race tension in New York continuing to accelerate wildly. (He almost lamented, reflecting on the Brawley case, that he had not quite anticipated Sharpton) (“Stalking 54 – 57). The Brawley case was news well into 1989, when in April a white stockbroker was beaten and raped while jogging through Central Park. Five teenagers (four black, one Latino) were arrested and eventually became known as the Central Park Five. As with Brawley, the case caught national attention and quickly became a collider for racial resentments. Just as they were being stored away, the characters of the Brawley case – including Sharpton and even Brawley – were called back up. Race relations in New York had been strained by decades of white flight and black poverty and the latter was associated (in the white imagination) with rising crime rates, the influx of crack cocaine, and urban decay. Representations of New York City through the 1970s and 1980s had exploited the imagery of ethnic segregation and violent crime.

The focus on crime was largely a distraction from the economic crisis. As Joan Didion wrote: “At a time when the city lay virtually inert, when forty thousand jobs had been wiped out in the financial markets and former traders were selling shirts at Bergdorf Goodman for men, when the rate of mortgage delinquencies had doubled, when 50 or 60 million square feet of office space remained unrented..., and even prime commercial blocks on Madison Avenue in the Seventies were boarded up, empty...this notion of the city’s ‘energy’ was sedative, as was the commandeering of ‘crime’ as the city’s central problem” (709). But among the city’s white upper class and its black and white civil

leadership, “crime” was the favored scapegoat for urban despair. In 1989, to many New Yorkers, the city seemed plausibly set on the verge of a race war.⁸⁰

Arguably the greatest threat to New York City’s economic and social viability was slow bleeding away of its middle class through white flight, a decades-long event that was driven by economic shifts but that was blamed on (usually black) crime. Thus did whites again become figured as victims of black violence, this time on a socio-economic scale. Governor Mario Cuomo begged middle class New Yorkers: “Stay. Believe. Participate. Don’t give up” (qtd. in Didion 704). Newspapers and television reports at the time are full of tributes to the resiliency and nobility of the city’s dwindling middle class. Didion quoted Anna Quindlen of the *New York Times* rhapsodizing about the Central Park rape victim of 1989: “[she is] the New Yorker who has known the best, and the worst, and has stayed on, living somewhere in the middle” (689).

This anxiety over the disappearance of the white middle class mirrors another major event of the 1980s, one more intimately related to the perceived crisis of the American novel. Historians Daniel T. Rodgers and Gil Troy, both

⁸⁰ In June, Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* was released. An allegory of New York (and national) race relations set in Brooklyn’s black Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood on a single, brutally hot summer day, *Do the Right Thing* had been reviewed and overwhelmingly praised by critics (the film would become the cornerstone of Lee’s filmmaking career), but many regarded its summer release with trepidation. The film concludes with the death of a black youth by police, a small riot, and the targeted destruction of white property. A month earlier at the Cannes Film Festival, *USA Today* critic Jeannie Williams declared, upon seeing the film, “I don’t need this shit! I live in New York. I don’t need this movie in New York this summer. I don’t know what they’re thinking!” (Handleman 106–107). Her initial exclamation aside, Williams’s critique of *Do the Right Thing* was bifurcated and shared by many of her colleagues in print journalism: first, she complained that Lee’s Bedford-Stuyvesant was “too clean” and, second, that the film was crafted to instigate racial animosity at best, violence at worst (107–109).

authors of scholarly overviews of the unique political and cultural ecologies that developed between the aftermath of Watergate and the turn of the millennium, have identified the curriculum wars at Stanford University between 1987 and 1989 as an opening skirmish of the so-called “culture wars.” A “Western civilization” requirement dropped in 1969 was replaced by a “Western culture” requirement in 1980 (Troy 268 – 269). The change in terminology was telling: the conceptually sturdy term “civilization,” a centerpiece of Stanford’s curriculum for decades, was replaced by the more nebulous “culture.” Despite the softer term, conservatives were pleased to have the course reinstated. Meanwhile, humanists such as Stanley Fish railed against the new requirement, referring to “the whole idea of ‘Americanness’,” espoused by the course, as “assimilation” and “betrayal” (qtd. in Troy 270). The curriculum debates ultimately centered on how universities would reckon with Otherness, whether it was represented by U.S. minorities (African-American, Latino/a, women, LGBTQ, etc.) or by immigrant communities. Fish was among the figures conservative art critic Roger Kimball referred to in the title of his 1991 bestseller *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. This was one of many tirades against diversifying humanities curricula that rode Allan Bloom’s coattails to the bestseller list in the late 1980s. Bloom, a classicist at the University of Chicago, hostile to practically every change in the American university system since 1960, was encouraged by Saul Bellow to publish his pedagogically conservative views as a book. The result was the dense and idiosyncratic *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), which, despite dealing with Plato and Rousseau at great length,

became a bestseller. The success was largely due to the book's marketing: *Closing* was advertised as part-polemic, part-exposé of the nation's intellectual decay, a direct result of left-wing profligacy within what he calls "the nation's best universities." Part of Bloom's alarmism was the abandonment of Western civilization requirements. The same year as *Closing*, E.D. Hirsch published *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, which railed against the diminishing core of common knowledge – including knowledge of the largely white literary canon – in an every-fragmenting, increasingly diverse United States.

Of course, the American novel has been ethnically, racially, and sexually diverse since its inception. But the literary milieu of the 1980s marked a significant change. The period could be conveniently bookended by Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983 and generated severe, racist backlash, and Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, an event that generated little or no controversy. The culture wars had not ended in 1993, but the heat had dispersed to other areas of American life, and the champions of canonical diversity had won critical battles. But the early 1980s, when the mere presence of Walker on a syllabus generated controversy, was the period during which both Wolfe and Franzen began their novelistic careers. Franzen, who was more immersed than Wolfe in the publishing industry and the New York writer's scene (and therefore more sensitive to their fluctuations), addressed this change:

The current flourishing of novels by women and cultural minorities may in part represent a movement, in the face of hyperkinetic televised reality, to anchor fiction in the only ground that doesn't shift every six months: the author's membership in a tribe. ... It's often argued, in fact, that the country's literary culture is *healthier* for having disconnected from mainstream culture; that the universal "American" culture was little more than an instrument for the perpetuation of a white, male, heterosexual elite, and that its decline is just desert of an exhausted tradition. ("Perchance" 47)⁸¹

"There's little doubt," Franzen continued, "that many of these new novels are at some level dramas of assimilation, which are broadening our conception of the national culture just as Roth's novels of Jewish-American life did a generation ago" (47). He even suggested that sensibilities among white male novelists were changing ("Joseph Heller's depiction of women in *Catch 22* is so embarrassing," he wrote, "that I hesitated to recommend the book to my students") (47). But Franzen, like Bloom and others (if for different reasons), was bearish on the

⁸¹ The phrase "exhausted tradition" is not innocent to students of American literary treatises: John Barth's "Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), an attack on fiction that prioritized representation of midcentury, middlebrow American life to aesthetic innovation. Barth linked such fiction to *fin de siècle* realism: "...current novelists write turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics" (*Friday* 72). For Franzen, Barth's project had won and gone too far: novels like Gaddis's *The Recognitions* had alienated audiences and pushed them away from the novel. Barth's essay provides evidence, of which Franzen (though not Wolfe) is keenly aware, that "realism" had never been abandoned. As Franzen makes clear in his manifesto, postwar American literature was a succession of realisms, with very few novelists outright rejecting the term or the project of verisimilitude.

prospects of a diversified American canon: “[I]f multiculturalism succeeds in making us a nation of independently empowered tribes, each tribe will be deprived of the comfort of victimhood and be forced to confront human limitation for what it is: a fixture of life. History is a rabid thing from which we all...would like to hide” (54). (Here, as in Wolfe, the material is a beast.) The result of the curriculum wars was, for Franzen, a regrettable detachment from what National Endowment for the Humanities chair (and spouse of future vice president Dick Cheney) Lynne Cheney would describe as the “common knowledge” on which the “cohesiveness” of our society depends (qtd. in Troy 272). For Franzen, this might be termed something closer to common or universal human experience, but both he and Cheney lamented the loss of a national literature that bound the culture together.

4. Franzen Agonistes: The Return to the Novel

Economic shifts, and their socio-cultural implications for the middle class, dominate Franzen’s manifesto “Perchance to Dream,” just as postmodern writers’ betrayal of middle class audiences dominated Wolfe’s manifesto. The financial sector, which remained the primary source of national prowess, appeared by 1990 a more volatile, less stable component of the U.S. economy than it had when Wolfe wrote *Bonfire* and “Stalking.” For the white upper middle class, the bad times would not last: by its publication in 1996, the resurgent economy would render Franzen’s “Perchance to Dream” a kind of period piece of the bad-old-days, 1991, but not without a qualified, 1996-style happy ending (“The world was ending then,” Franzen concluded, “it’s ending still, and I’m happy to belong to

it”) (54). By the end, Franzen finally settled on a difficult-to-detect thesis, a “reason to write novels” (as the subtitle advertises): by turning inward in the correct manner, a novelist can turn outward and rejoin his community and the social realm. Franzen described this as a turn from “depressive realism” to “tragic realism.” Both realisms are practices that a novel can use in response to a common diseased condition (experienced by Franzen in the early 1990s and shared, presumably, in different forms by many novelists), but only tragic realism offers a “the possibility of a cure” (“Perchance” 53). All existential cures, wrote Franzen, are likely phantasmic. But whereas he associated the practices of depressive realism with a persistent inward focus, he associated the practices of tragic realism with an outward turn, a reaching out: a novelist who rejoins his community and the social sphere. Franzen’s similar but critically different realisms – depressive and tragic – attempt to synthesize the discrete categories described by Wolfe: “psychological” and “social.” The depressive realist accepted the futility of major cultural endeavors in an age of fragmentation and pushed the writer inward, away from his potential audience. The tragic realist accepted this futility but also found common cause with isolated islands (i.e., small audiences) across the archipelago of a fragmented culture, and therefore turned back outward to the (social) world.

If, for Franzen, literature was like Wolfe’s electricity-generating realism machine, the machine is obsolete, its functions outsourced. Franzen described literary production as follows: “The consumer economy loves a product that sells at a premium, wears out quickly or is susceptible to regular improvement, and

offers with each improvement some marginal gain in usefulness. To an economy like this, news that stays news is not merely an inferior product; it's an *antithetical* product. A classic work of literature is inexpensive, infinitely reusable, and, worst of all, unimprovable" (39). The machinery of literature in the early 1990s was not broken, as Wolfe might argue; it was economically outdated. For this reason, Franzen was much more bleak than Wolfe was about the prospect of its renewal. Yet "Perchance to Dream" is ultimately a comic manifesto, one that bends upward from despair toward hope and describes Franzen's return to the novel form after a period of abandonment.

In a trajectory opposite Wolfe's, Franzen began as an aspiring novelist and only later turned to journalism in order to avoid teaching. A Fulbright scholar to Berlin in the geopolitically tense early 1980s (he attended Freie Universität Berlin, 1981–1982), Franzen shared Wolfe's compulsion to interpret the social, cultural, and political tea leaves of his era via the novel. He published his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, in 1988; his second novel, *Swift Motion*, appeared four years later. In 1996 Franzen wrote that, despite his initial success, he felt troubled: he had published two well-received novels, both sprawling and mildly experimental, and so by contemporary standards fairly conventional. He had positioned himself – and been positioned by critics – as an aspirant Great White Postmodernist. Therefore, he felt the pressures of the tradition with which he identified – the Great White Postmodernist tradition of William Gaddis, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo – to "Address the Culture and Bring News to the Mainstream" through bold formal experimentation and literary subversion

(“Perchance” 54). This conflicted with Franzen’s motive for writing, the “desire to write about the things closest to me, to lose myself in characters and locales I love.” Consequently, “writing, and reading too, had become a grim duty, and considering the poor pay, there is seriously no point in doing either if you’re not having fun.”

For Franzen, an added challenge from the postmodern tradition came in the shape of *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller’s blockbuster masterpiece of World War II fiction and early Vietnam social anxiety. For Franzen, contemporaneity seemed to begin with *Catch-22* and, like Wolfe, he despaired at the state of the contemporary novel. Unlike Wolfe, Franzen’s issue is not with the writers but with their audience: “That no challenging novel since *Catch-22* had affected the culture anywhere near as deeply, just as no issue since the Vietnam War had galvanized so many alienated young Americans, was easily overlooked. In college my head had been turned by Marxism, and I believed that ‘monopoly capitalism’...abounded with ‘negative moments’...that a novelist could trick Americans into confronting if only he could package his subversive bombs in a sufficiently seductive narrative” (37). In short, Franzen wanted to write novels like *Catch-22* with audiences like *Catch-22*’s. *Catch-22* was not only a formally innovative critical masterpiece, but it amassed an enormous audience among middle class readers with cultural aspirations. For Franzen, the critical piece of evidence the novel’s impact was Heller’s appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine. Franzen was, like Wolfe, stalking the great silent majority:

Exactly how much less novels now matter to the American mainstream than they did when *Catch-22* was published is anybody's guess....I can report that my father, who was not a reader, nevertheless had some acquaintance with James Baldwin and John Cheever, because *Time* magazine put them on its cover and *Time*, for my father, was the ultimate cultural authority. In the last decade the magazine whose red border twice enclosed the face of James Joyce has devoted covers to Scott Turow and Stephen King. (38)

Turow and King were "honorable writers," contended Franzen, who nevertheless earned their *Time* covers from "the size of their contracts" (38). Franzen continued: "*The New Yorker* has banished fiction to the back pages and reduced its frequency; the *New York Times Review* now reviews as few as two fiction titles in a week (fifty years ago, the fiction to nonfiction ratio was 1:1); and magazines like *The Saturday Review*, which in the Sixties still vetted novels by the bushel, have entirely disappeared" (38). "When the Ayatollah Khomeini placed a bounty on Salman Rushdie's head, what seemed archaic to Americans was not his Muslim fanaticism but the simple fact that he'd become so exercised about a *book*" (41). The entire literary landscape had changed dramatically and for the worse in the time between *Catch-22* and Salman Rushdie's *fatwa*. Audiences, demand, and attention had diminished.

Whereas Wolfe was buoyed by the success of *Bonfire*, Franzen took no solace in the relative success of his first two novels. He was overwhelmed by the

decline of American readership in the wake of the midcentury culture of book clubs and *Time* magazine fiction reviews. To describe the current state of literature, Franzen evoked the image of literature as city: in this case, a city in the decaying post-Robert Moses era:

The institution of writing and reading serious novels is like a grand old Middle American city gutted and drained by superhighways. Ringing the depressed inner city of serious work are prosperous clonal suburbs of mass entertainments: techno and legal thrillers, novels of sex and vampires, of murder and mysticism. The last fifty years have seen a lot of white male flight to the suburbs and to the coastal power centers of television, journalism, and film. What remain, mostly, are ethnic and cultural enclaves. Much of contemporary fiction's vitality now resides in the black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, and women's communities, which have moved into the structures left behind by the departing straight white male. The depressed literary inner city also remains home to solitary artists who are attracted to the diversity and grittiness that only a city can offer, and to a few still-vital cultural monuments (the opera of Toni Morrison, the orchestra of John Updike, the museum of Edith Wharton) to which suburban readers continue to pay polite Sunday visits. (39)

The city is a metaphor Franzen returned to time and again in the manifesto. Elsewhere, he wrote:

In the past, when the life of letters was synonymous with culture, solitude was possible the way it was in cities, where you could always, day and night, find the comfort of crowds outside your door. In a suburban age, when the rising waters of electronic culture have made each reader and each writer an island, it may be that we need to be more active in assuring ourselves that a community still exists. ... I see the authority of the novel in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an accident of history, of having no competitors. Now the distance between the author and reader is shrinking. Instead of Olympian figures speaking to the masses below, we have matching diasporas. Readers and writers are united in their need for solitude, in their pursuit of substance in a time of ever-increasing evanescence: in their reach inward, via print, for a way out of loneliness” (51).

Elsewhere, Franzen expanded on the city-as-metaphor, explicitly racializing his language: “[T]here’s...evidence that young writers today feel *ghettoized* in their ethnic or gender identities – discouraged from speaking across boundaries by a culture that has been conditioned by television to accept only literal testimony of the Self” (48, emphasis mine). Such ghettoization, a sharply urban image, was, Franzen feared, literalized in the form of insular institutions like the university: “The problem is aggravated, or so it’s frequently argued, by the degree to which fiction writers, both successful ones and ephebes, have taken refuge from a hostile culture in university creative –writing programs” (48). Echoing Wolfe’s call to

reportage, Franzen lamented that such writers might not “depend on *manners*, on eavesdropped conversations and surmounted quotidian obstacles” (48). (“The competitor in me,” he added, “is glad that so many of my peers have chosen not to rough it in the free-market world. I happen to enjoy living with subway distance of Wall Street and keeping close tabs on the country’s shadow government.”) “By 1993,” he concluded, “I was as depressed as the inner city of fiction” (39). (Franzen’s depression was literal, but he resisted treatment. “The next six months were the most hellish in my life”) (41). Franzen’s depression would help him articulate his concept of depressive realism and tragic realism. These concepts are framed by metaphors of urban life after middle class white flight. All aspects of Franzen’s discontent with contemporary literature are conveyed with images of white middle class movement and minority infiltration.

Both Wolfe’s and Franzen’s prescription to Roth’s reality dilemma – how can the contemporary novelist keep up with modern life? – was more or less a form of reporting (“Perchance” 42). Franzen was more sanguine than Wolfe on the prospect of a literature in a fractured society:

...it’s fashionable on college campuses nowadays to say there is no America, only Americas; that the only things a black lesbian New Yorker and a Southern Baptist Georgian have in common are the English language and the federal income tax. The likelihood, however, is that both the New Yorker and the Georgian watch *Letterman* every night, both are struggling to find health insurance, both have jobs that are threatened by the migration of employment

overseas, both go to discount superstores to purchase *Pocahontas* tie-in products for their children, both are being pummeled into cynicism by commercial advertising, both play Lotto, both dream of fifteen minutes of fame, both are taking a serotonin reuptake inhibitor, and both have a guilty crush on Uma Thurman. The world of the present is a world in which the rich lateral dramas of local manners have been replaced by a single vertical drama, the drama of regional specificity succumbing to a commercial generality. The American writer today faces a totalitarianism analogous to the one with which two generations of Eastern bloc writers had to contend. To ignore it is to court nostalgia. To engage with it, however, is to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine technological consumerism is an infernal machine... (43)

The key material for the novel – what Lynne Cheney might refer to as a “common” or “cohesive” society – is available but inherently shallow; it does not provide a sturdy frame through which to access human experience. “Manners,” for instance, wrote Franzen, have suffered by the displacement of morality from evil: in “the world of consumer advertising,” “evils consist of high prices, inconveniences, lack of choice, lack of privacy, heartburn, hair loss, slippery roads” (43). Reports on such a culture will yield only limited value.

Franzen’s project diverged from Wolfe’s most markedly when Franzen began to suspect that the novel’s function of bringing “meaningful news about

what it means to live in the present” “is no longer so much a defining function of the novel as an accidental by-product” (48). Turning to the work of sociologist Shirley Brice Heath, he began to conceive of literature less as a machine and more as medicine – or, more accurately, a placebo against what he calls the “unpredictability” of life. “The shift from depressive realism to tragic realism, from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it, thus strangely seems to require believing in the possibility of a cure, though this ‘cure’ is anything but straightforward” (53). Tragic realism provided Franzen not only with a justification for returning to the novel, but also a mode through which “the great white majority” could be reconstituted as an audience for fiction: “Superficially at least, for the great white majority, the history of this country has consisted of success and more success. Tragic realism preserves access to the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness – to the human difficulty behind the technological ease, to the sorrow behind the pop-culture narcosis: to all those portents on the margins of our existence” (53). Tragic realism, in other words, preserves the white liberal subject as the primary focus of the novel form.

Franzen’s position toward his literary manifesto grew increasingly ambivalent in the years after 1996, especially following the success of his Oprah-sanctioned blockbuster, *The Corrections* (2001). Franzen scholar Stephen J. Burn described the consensus view of “Perchance to Dream,” which by the Oprah controversy was known informally as “the *Harper’s* essay”: “as a kind of preface to [*The Corrections*]” (50). Tiring of this treatment, Franzen revisited the essay in 2001 and was put off: a few years after its publication the essay seemed to him a

mix of priggish alarmism and muddled reasoning (*How To* 4). The essay was, by then, an unavoidable entry in Franzen's oeuvre, and so he set out to revise it for posterity in a collection, *How To Be Alone: Essays* (2002), with a new title, "Why Bother?"

So *The Corrections*'s success, the Oprah controversy, and Franzen's subsequent fame are perhaps sufficient explanations for the *Harper's* essay's long afterlife. Nearly every response to the essay was published after 2001. But the essay did make an impression upon its initial publication. In July 1996, *Harper's* devoted three full pages to letters of response. Journalist Michael Lind wrote a detailed, page-length letter. Journalist Michael Anton and author Tom Grimes also contributed. Kurt Vonnegut wrote a single unhelpful paragraph that, in attempting to dismiss Franzen's treatise, actually supported several of its basic claims: "Novelists are people who have discovered that they can dampen their neuroses by writing make-believe. We will keep on doing that no matter what, while offering loftier explanations" (7). (Vonnegut's response illustrates a reflexive animosity toward literary treatises, and aesthetic treatises more generally, in the late twentieth century.) One respondent presciently wrote: "Although Franzen dismisses all nonfiction as being technologically oriented, this is not true. The novel may be in decline, but this is truly the golden age of non-fiction. Excellent books on every conceivable subject are being published and sold every day" ("Letters" 7). Another respondent described Franzen's essay as "a laughable coupling of white-male angst and barely masked self-promotion," dismissing the complaints of any author who quotes personal correspondence with

Don DeLillo” (6). Grimes, a gentler critic, also singled out the issue of whiteness. Anticipating the essay’s eventual title, Grimes wrote: “As one of the tribeless white male novelists who inhabited (pre-Prozac) the obscure, lonely, and depressed plane that Franzen describes, I’ve asked myself the same question, ‘Why bother to write books?’” (5). Grimes continued:

I think the need to cling to a writerly "identity" and a sense of self-worth has led not only to desperation and depression but to the impulse for confession. The autobiographical novel dies, memoirs boom. If our imaginative forays into the world fail to catch our culture's attention, we'll go after it with the "truth," with self-exposure. In our late-capitalist culture, memoirs carry a kind of cash value. The reader is purchasing information about someone's life. Information is currency. But novels resist our frenzy for the literal, the gossipy impermanence of mass culture. (5)

Grimes, whose letter ended on a more hopeful note, shares Franzen’s sense that the shrinking market for literary fiction – or simply “the death of the novel” – is rooted in a culture-wide crisis of the individual, who is caught in the nexus of global capitalism and new media, fragmented, and consequently hungry for anything resembling identity.

Michael Lind’s letter was the most polemical, by far the longest, but also the most astute in its comprehension of Franzen’s ambition. Lind recognized the full social (rather than narrowly literary) scope of Franzen’s argument. He also stabilized Franzen’s slippery commitment to what Lind called the apolitical

“novel of manners,” what Wolfe might call “the psychological novel”: even in the moments where Franzen outright rejected this type of project on technical grounds, he remained profoundly nostalgic for its relevance and its cultural power. Lind also singled out the issue of race as the point where Franzen’s treatise, with its hesitation about “tribal writers,” appeared most vulnerable. Citing the recent adaptation of Wolfe’s *Bonfire*, Lind wrote:

If Franzen wants to learn about the two great conflicts reshaping American society – the new class war and the permanent, low-level race war – the last place he should go is the Cineplex. In "socially conscious" movies, you will find (a) sensitive young whites from the overclass fighting cruel, middle-aged whites from the overclass on behalf of victimized Others ...or (b) sad, victimized Others heroically fighting against middle-aged white overclass men, with assistance from sensitive young members of the white overclass. Social novels that are done as films are rewritten to fit the conventions of sentimental, genteel melodrama, which forbids depictions of ethnic conflict that hit too close to home. Thus in the movie version of *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe's Jewish judge became a black judge, his black courtroom mob became a multi-ethnic courtroom mob, and his British journalist became Bruce Willis. (4)

Lind continued by accusing Franzen of romanticizing a period that had produced complaints from the literati remarkably similar to his own. In other words, Lind

accused Franzen of committing a cultural redundancy:

Franzen looks back to a golden age of American fiction in the 1940s and 1950s. At the time, however, all the leading critics – Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, Malcolm Cowley, Irving Howe – were saying exactly what he is saying now: American culture is too thin to support the social novel, kitsch and midcult have defeated highbrow art, Hollywood is corrupting taste, consumer capitalism has homogenized society, etc. You would never know, from reading these end-of-ideology critics, that the United States was about to see a civil-rights revolution, mass immigration, riots, white flight, gay liberation, the rise of the religious right, and open class warfare. Nor would you know that Saul Bellow and William Kennedy, among others, would soon be writing some of the greatest social novels in American literature – the competition of real life notwithstanding. (4)

Lind went on to associate Franzen with a “literary tradition, descended from the novel of manners,” whose practitioners include Jane Austen and Henry James (4). Austen, James, and other novelists of manners, argued Lind, depend on social stability and hierarchy in their fiction. Theirs is a mimesis of exteriority over interiority, an aesthetics of form over content. Advocates for these novels, which for Lind include Trilling, Rahv, Cowley, and Howe, are figures of political retreat. For Lind, Franzen is yearning to join them. Indeed, “Perchance to Dream” begins with a description of retreat – to the artists colony in upstate New York –

and ends with an endorsement of interiority, albeit a highly specialized, sociable sort, accessed via tragic realism. Of all the early respondents to “Perchance,” Lind most fully comprehended – and agreed with – Franzen’s argument.

Franzen’s claim that he revised the essay in 2002 in order to pacify its tone, clarify its claims, polish its aesthetic blemishes, and set straight the record of *The Corrections*’s origins seems credible. Franzen rearranged the original essay’s paragraphs and tightened its sentences but made few major additions or cuts. Part of Franzen’s discomfort with the essay might have been its distillation of white male anxiety about cultural decline, the end of the Cold War, race and gender conflict, the proliferation of media and fragmentation of social life, the apparent death of the U.S. manufacturing industry, the (consequent) rise of the technology sector, and the (continued) growth of the financial sector. In twenty-nine pages, Franzen touched on each of these issues at least once. But he tread carefully across them: with the exceptions of the Republican party and visual media, Franzen was hesitant to strike. Where Wolfe was confident and zealous (the novel would die without an infusion of social realism! of the *Bonfire* variety!), Franzen was ambivalent about his own assertions, and oscillated wildly between claims. Throughout the essay, he frequently held an opinion and then dropped it. He was most delicate on the topic of race, noting that any project to re-universalize whiteness was of course deeply problematic. But as Junot Díaz would note,

A writer like Franzen, with each coming generation looks more and more absurd, and more and more like exactly what he is. ...

[H]e looks more like a white minority writer than I look like a Dominican immigrant minority writer.

This may be the ultimate effect of Franzen's project, but it is not the intention. Franzen strained against the idea of a white minoritarian literature. The phrase "white ethnic" – which is used to describe working class whites – is never used in these manifestos. Nothing approximating it is used. But despite Franzen's intention, tragic realism strains to articulate a particularity, something that can be novelized, while gesturing toward a universality that is, ultimately, white. Race may ghettoize writers, but Franzen's project fails to account for the inevitability of the ghetto and the inevitability of the universalist's tendency to gentrify the ghetto, to paint it white.

5. "Reports of My Death": the Novel's Persistence

Describing his book tour for *The Corrections*, Franzen paraphrased a typical opening interview question: "In your *Harper's* essay in 1996, you promised that your third book would be a big social novel that would engage with mainstream culture and rejuvenate American literature; do you think you've kept that promise with *The Corrections*?" (*How To* 3). Franzen assured each interviewer that this "promise":

had been invented out of thin air by an editor or a headline writer at the *Times* Sunday Magazine; and that, in fact, far from promising to write a big social novel that would bring news to the mainstream, I'd taken ["Perchance to Dream"] as an opportunity to renounce that variety of ambition. (4).

By the “hundredth or hundred-tenth interview,” Franzen decided to revisit the original essay, “to make clear what I had and hadn’t said in it” (4). He barely recognized the essay – “evidently written by me,” he wrote – and found its “painful stridency and tenuous logic” impossible to follow. He found no unfulfilled promise to write a big social novel, but he discovered a voice whose anger and despair no longer registered with his idea of a successful novelist:

In the five years since I’d written the essay, I’d managed to forget that I used to be a very angry and theory-minded person. I used to consider it apocalyptically worrisome that Americans watch a lot of TV and don’t read much Henry James. . . . I used to think that our American political economy was a vast cabal whose specific aim was to thwart my artistic ambitions, exterminate all that I found lovely in civilization, and also rape and murder the planet in the process. (4–5)

To the reader who followed Franzen’s non-fiction writings beyond 2002, it may come as a surprise that Franzen described his anger, theory-mindedness, concern about national television consumption, disdain for the U.S. politico-economic structure, and apocalyptic anxieties about the environment as a relic of the Clinton era. In the decade after *The Corrections*, Franzen would double down on his opposition to both mainstream or middle-brow realism (his heavily-publicized clash with Oprah and embarrassing statements about women’s fiction and female audiences) and difficult or experimental fiction (his less-publicized exchange with novelist Ben Marcus, prompted by a *New Yorker* essay in which Franzen

disowned his one-time idol, William Gaddis, whom Franzen dubbed “Mr. Difficult”). His anger over U.S. politics in the ‘90s would deepen to sheer exasperation and apathy under the George W. Bush administration. In interviews and in his 2010 novel, *Freedom*, Franzen openly critiqued and satirized the U.S. economic structure and the dominant role of visual and digital technologies in everyday life. He made apocalyptic despair over the failure of environmentalism one of the central themes of *Freedom*. And in his 2011 essay on the death of his friend, David Foster Wallace, he wrote at length about contemporary novel theory with the proficiency of an academic; in interviews and essays, he would remain among the most theory-minded novelists of his generation, especially among those who do not double as English professors. In other words, if Franzen cringed at “Perchance to Dream” in 2002, it was not because he had become less didactic, angry, or prone to despair. A broader shift had occurred, and the role of the novelist in society in 2002 looked markedly different than it had in 1989, the year of Wolfe’s manifesto, or 1996, the year of Franzen’s. This section will examine these changes and critique the pessimism inherent in both manifestos.

Although Wolfe and Franzen’s prognoses at times run parallel (both ultimately advocate a variety of social realism, if with different degrees of conviction, and both are hostile to rampant experimentalism), their approaches to the problem of writing novels and finding readers are very different. Their literary training, basic premises, and ideas about the novel do not overlap. If we take their manifestos not merely as literary essays but as literary projects, however, they converge on at least three critical points: both prescribe practices of realism that

respond directly to the commercially insecure, heavily politicized literary culture amid the so-called “culture wars”; both position themselves against “identity-fiction” or “identity-realism” that proliferated during the 1980s; and both deploy literary realism in defense of the white male monopoly on cultural experience. The notion of a benevolent white-identity writer resonated with Grimes, (one of Franzen’s original *Harper’s* respondents), if only because it foregrounded the “loneliness” of being without a tribe. Or, put differently, the white writer is part of a tribe in which loneliness is inherent. The loneliness inherent in this tribe reveals something important about its structure: tribal identity, for writers like Wolfe and Franzen, is unsustainable. They reject solidarity, or other means of assuming a benevolent white identity. They want the caché of the tribe without sacrificing either individuality or the benefits of universality. They want the benefits of particularity (you know who you are, you have a fixed identity, you have a tribe) without the setbacks (you don’t get to speak for everybody anymore...and you’re part of a persecuted minority). Both Wolfe and Franzen adamantly deny that they seek to universalize white identity, but it is the ultimate effect of their projects: Wolfe, through his project of invisibility, and Franzen, through his notion of tragic realism. Such ideas and maneuvers have been used to cultivate a benevolent white-identity by whites throughout the history of American literature. Norman Mailer argued that Ralph Ellison erred when he called the black individual an “invisible man,” argued that whites are the true invisible race – everyone notices a black man, whereas nobody notices a white man. (Mailer, of course, misread Ellison entirely.)

Racial issues aside, Wolfe and Franzen's concerns about American readership, and Franzen's accompanying anxiety about the rise of television (cinema receives scant attention in his essay), were not pulled out of thin air. In the introduction of their 1989 statistical study *Who Reads Literature?: The Future of the United States as a Nation of Readers*, Nicholas Zill and Marianne Winglee described "a widespread sense that...we are no longer 'a nation of readers', but a nation of watchers: watchers of movies, television, videocassettes, and computer displays" (1). This "widespread sense" felt so acutely by Franzen in 1996 and reflected in thousands of pro-reading campaigns (both privately and government-sponsored) throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, coincided with the contraction of the publishing industry. Although the industry remained profitable, it had grown unrecognizable to readers who began reading in the 1950s, who were weaned on Ray Bradbury and J.D. Salinger, and who could recall an attention-grabbing literary blockbuster every few years: novels like Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* (1956), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1958), Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966), Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), and of course Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), the novel whose reception made such an impression on Franzen.⁸² By the early 1970s, corporate mergers and conglomeration had reduced control of the nation's publishing industry to fifteen

⁸² As Evan Brier has expertly demonstrated, many of these novelists were savvy readers of midcentury mass culture, exploiting the proliferation of new media (particularly television) and its cults of personality to guarantee cultural prestige and economic security for ambitious literature. Franzen makes much of *Time* as a problematic-but-useful midcentury megaphone, but *The Tonight Show* may have been equally (if not more) influential in the dissemination of literary fiction.

companies (“SIC 2731”). By 1990, the number was seven. The 1980s had effectively reduced the number of parent companies of an already heavily consolidated industry by half. This reorganization changed the culture of the major publishing houses. Always profit-oriented, the publishing houses faced increased pressure to generate revenue: a Gale report on the period notes that “the industry, which once could be characterized as gentlemanly and literary, had quickly become more cutthroat” (“SIC 2731”). For example, during its midcentury heyday, large publishers rarely overinvested in a single product category (e.g., trade paperbacks, hardcover, children’s books, educational books, etc.). By the 1980s, publishers would invest disproportionately into one category at the expense of others (often, though not always, literary fiction). This left the industry more vulnerable to sudden economic shifts, such as the recession of the early 1990s, and to bubbles. Between 1985 and 1991, U.S. publishers invested heavily in children’s literature, increasing their output by twenty-five percent – a response to the small baby boom generated by the temporary affluence of the Reagan era. During that period, revenue generated by children’s literature tripled. By the end of the 1990s, sales of children’s books had halved.

By the time the *Harper’s* essay was published, however, the publishing industry was turning a corner, a shift driven by multiple factors: the success of big box bookstores like *Barnes and Noble*, Oprah’s Book Club, and the surge in Young Adult bestsellers that would culminate in the *Harry Potter* series (1997). Increasingly, the economic basis of Wolfe’s and Franzen’s doomsday tone in 1989 and 1996 seemed a blip, at least where the publishing industry was

concerned. And as Zill and Winglee note, demand for literature had never really dipped among one key demographic: women. This central fact, that reading was still common among women in the 1980s and early 1990s, illuminates sexist currents and premises in much of Wolfe and Franzen's arguments. They equated the decline of literature with the decline of *male* readership.

In other words, a strong argument can be made that literature in the late twentieth century never faced anything like a serious crisis or decline. In 1997, Janice Radway, a skilled detector of unfounded scholarly-critical snobbery, made this claim:

Corporate buyouts, mergers, and the downsizing that inevitably follows are not unique to the publishing industry of the 1980s and 1990s... It is not at all clear to me that a publishing industry determined to sell more books of a certain kind necessarily harms the cause of literature or is contributing to the death of the book. After all, this industry that is increasingly preoccupied with the blockbuster bestseller is also a sophisticated user of niche marketing and...is also using its sales acumen simultaneously to target particular kinds of buyers in particular kinds of bookstores, those with a taste for so-called quality contemporary fiction and serious nonfiction. ... [I]t is entirely possible that the size of the audience for self-consciously literary fiction has, and continues to remain, constant over the twentieth century. (356)

She used the phrase “death of the book” instead of “death of the novel,” suggesting that she felt little generic partisanship toward the novel and that her conception of literature is more elastic than Franzen’s. “The novel” for Radway runs along the more concrete continuum of “the book,” which will succeed and outlive “the novel” and which will always fulfill the kind of socio-cultural needs over which both Wolfe and Franzen fret.

Chapter VI

“Close to the Truth”:

Nicholson Baker’s Exhaustive Realism

“The sheer amount of memory it takes as you’re writing and you pause at some nominative juncture and review the options, and one by one reject those that file before your mind because you clearly recall or dimly suspect you’ve found an earlier home for them – the sheer mounting strain of this, like the strain of a chess player who has to keep every move of every game he has ever played available for immediate review – must be exhausting.”

– Nicholson Baker, *U and I* (75)

The period that the subtitle of this dissertation calls “the long 1980s” ends in or around 1996. In that year, Jonathan Franzen published “Perchance to Dream” and David Foster Wallace published *Infinite Jest*. The latter would prove more influential on two generations of writers: first, the old postmodernists whose careers rebooted in the late 1990s, and second, the emerging crop of Anglophone writers who sought to write big ambitious novels and to, in Franzen’s words, “bring news to the masses.” “A genre is hardening,” wrote James Wood in 2000, reflecting back on four years of large, formally ambitious novels by Wallace (*Infinite Jest*, 1996), Thomas Pynchon (*Mason & Dixon*, 1997), Don DeLillo (*Underworld*, 1997), Salman Rushdie (*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, 1999), and Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*, 2000) (Wood “Human”). To this one could add the work of Jonathan Safran Foer, Mark Z. Danielewski, Dave Eggers, William H. Gass, and a slew of other novelists who garnered critical attention at the turn of

the millennium. Wood dubbed this genre “hysterical realism,” a marked departure from the kind of realism that Franzen, Wolfe, and others had championed over the previous two decades, but also not quite postmodernism. Wood parodied the style of these novels in a 2000 essay:

If, say, a character is introduced in London, call him Toby Awknotuby (that is, “To be or not to be”—ha!) then we will be swiftly told that he has a twin in Delhi (called Boyt, which is an anagram of Toby, of course), who, like Toby, has the same very curious genital deformation, and that their mother belongs to a religious cult based, oddly enough, in the Orkney Islands, and that their father (who was born at the exact second that the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima) has been a Hell’s Angel for the last thirteen years (but a very curious Hell’s Angels group it is, devoted only to the fanatical study of late Wordsworth), and that Toby’s mad left-wing aunt was curiously struck dumb when Mrs. Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979 and has not spoken a word since. And all this, over many pages, before poor Toby Awknotuby has done a thing, or thought a thought! (“Human”)

Wood continued: “This is not magical realism. It is hysterical realism.

Storytelling has become a kind of grammar in these novels; it is how they structure and drive themselves on. The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked.” The genre, as Wood correctly predicted, would dominate prestige fiction for at least a decade,

particularly among ambitious novelists who sought to represent broad swaths of society. Storytelling – a continuation of what Hutcheon called the return to plot – would dominate this strand of ambitious prestige fiction.

In other words, the projects of Vidal, Wolfe, Franzen, and others that have been described in this dissertation would ultimately fail. A new era dominated by hard historical realism or social realism would not come to pass. Instead, novels that sought prestige and highbrow status would play with exaggeration and form in the genre that Wood called “hysterical realism” and another critic would call “descriptivitis” (qtd. in Thompson 307). These terms pathologize style, and suggest that the prestige novel at the end of the twentieth century was, in a sense, warped. These novels cannot be categorized as postmodern; the perception that these novels suffer from a kind of literary pathology suggests that the conventions of postmodernism (which by 1996 were highly conventional) had been warped within them. Yet aspects of these novels – from their great length to their playfulness – reveal the indelible stamp which postmodernism proper left on the literature that followed it. They are High Postmodernism’s legacy; novels such as *Infinite Jest* and *Mason & Dixon* punctuate syllabi in literature courses on postmodernism. But these novels also inherited a rich legacy from realism, as Wood’s term “hysterical realism” suggested. This legacy can be traced to the 1980s and to ways in which self-consciously experimental fiction absorbed the strategies employed by neorealists. Indeed, the devices we have examined upon which the neorealists relied – factuality and literalism – played an expansive and vexed role in the fiction contemporary to, and following, the neorealists. From the

beginning, postmodernists were obsessed with *truth*, what Tim O'Brien called the "story truths" that escaped realist fiction.

This chapter aims to demonstrate that the phenomena described in the previous chapters – an emphasis on factuality, empiricism, and literalism in literary representation – was not restricted to realist or neorealist novelists. As Catherine Burgass has written, "Postmodern fiction is often and appropriately characterized by a concern with ontological categories, an exploration of the boundaries between fact and fiction, the world and the text" (399). This exploration of the boundary between fact and fiction often served to blur any distinction between the two categories in the service of O'Brien's "story truths." "In postmodern fiction," Burgass continued, "thematic and plot devices are designed specifically to question linear history and temporality" (402). But these attributes of postmodern fiction, correctly described by Burgass as they pertained to postmodern novelists of the 1960s and 1970s, were challenged by certain experimental writers of the 1980s. In particular, the flexibility between fact and fiction – the testing of boundaries between different modes of truth-making – hardened in a process that critic Josh Toth has identified with "renewalist sensibilities," a turn away from the ontological skepticism of High Postmodernism (*Passing* 132 – 133). In certain works, this hardening compelled experimental writers to adopt strategies parallel to those used by neorealist and realist novelists, described in earlier chapters. For one avid experimentalist, Nicholson Baker, exhibited a pronounced desire to balance the experience of "story truths" with a renewed faith in concrete, positivist approaches to literary

representation. In an interview, Baker stated, “I like the feeling of unexpectedness and verbal decoration that is part of the experimental, but I like to be as close to the truth as I can be. So I do tracery work on the hinges of the cabinet, but want to be building a functional object, as opposed to a piece of nonsense sculpture” (qtd. in Rebein 20). This chapter will use Baker’s work in the late 1980s as a case study in the incorporation of those neorealist experiments with historical and temporal representation into self-consciously experimental literature. In a sense, this chapter serves as an appendix to rest of the dissertation, one that charts the legacy of 1980s realist novels as experimental fictions continue to proliferate beyond them.

This chapter contends that Baker consolidated sensibilities from the neorealists of the 1980s, particularly the sensitivity to fact, actuality, and literalism, into his brand of fiction. These modes of literary representation were present in postmodernism prior to Baker, but Baker’s careful attention to them – and his refusal, despite his general playfulness, to treat the process of literary representation as a game – reflect the influence of socio-cultural attitudes that were also influencing neo and other realists at the end of the twentieth century. In short, Baker’s literary output carefully – at times obsessively – partitions fact, actuality, and empirically verified reality from fiction, perception, and remembrance.

Critics frequently cite Nicholson Baker’s early work as a hinge between the High Postmodernism of the 1960s/1970s and the “hysterical realism,” in Wood’s terms, of writers such as Wallace and Eggers (East, Hathcock, Toth 133).

This chapter will examine two works by Baker composed and published in the late 1980s and early 1990s: *The Mezzanine* (1988) and *U and I* (1991). The first is a work of fiction, an account of an office worker's wandering mind as he ascends an escalator from the first floor of his office complex to the mezzanine. The second is ostensibly an autobiographical account of Baker's relationship with the writings of John Updike, a collection of memories and quotations, including a large number of false memories and incorrect quotations that are corrected in-text. Both works defy what Dorrit Cohn called, citing Philippe Lejeune, "the Autobiographical Pact," engaging in a variety of signals that provoke both fictional and autobiographical reception (*Distinction* 59). Both works also engage in what might be described, amending John Barth slightly, as an aesthetics of exhaustiveness: they attempt to capture as much of reality as can possibility fit within their representational horizons.

1. Nicholson Baker's Microhistorical Realism

The Mezzanine is the account of a young office worker, Howie, who, holding a newly purchased pair of shoelaces, a cookie, a carton of milk, and a Penguin paperback edition of Marcus Aurelius, ascends an escalator from the ground floor to the mezzanine of his office building. The entire novel, narrated by Howie from an unspecified point in the future, is an account of his thoughts during that escalator ride. These thoughts, remembered by Howie's future self but presented to the reader as clear and accurate, include long meditations on mundane subjects – the architecture of the stapler or the history of the plastic straw, for instance – that concerned Howie on that afternoon's escalator ride. The

material is dense and heavily footnoted. The novel is ultimately a meditation on the nature of thought and memory (57). Upon publication in 1988, Baker's *The Mezzanine* received numerous comparisons to Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, in large part due its obsessive attention to detail and memory. In *The Mezzanine*'s multi-framed narrative, Baker goes to incredible lengths to demarcate memories from thought processes; empirically verifiable data from recalled history; categorical or ideational constructs from particulars; and multiple versions of the past from one another.

Baker's style relies heavily on analogy and vivid observation of everyday objects. Toyota turn-signal switches "move in their sockets like chicken drumsticks: they feel as if they were designed with living elbow cartilage as their inspiration" (27). A dress shirt makes "the sound of a flag at the consulate of a small, rich country" (50). Critic Ross Chambers described this as the novel's "descriptivitis" (qtd. in Thompson 307). This excess of analogy and description is not just an aesthetic quirk – these details are essential to Baker's theory and his larger literary project. As we will see, Baker's prose posits a theory of thought that is also a theory of memory, and it seeks to represent, almost empirically, the oscillations and overlap between thought and memory.

Walking toward the escalator at the end of his lunch break, Howie instinctively "scroll[s] the tops of the cookie bag, the CVS bag, and the milk bag *as one* into [his] curled fingers, as if [he] were taking a small child on a walk" (8). He does not, however, reflect on this instinctive action until he has returned to work and approaches the escalator for the mezzanine:

It was only just now, near the base of the escalator, as I watched my left hand automatically take hold of the paperback and the CVS bag together, that I consolidated the tiny understanding I had almost had fifteen minutes before. Then it had not been tagged as knowledge to be held for later retrieval, and I would have forgotten it completely had it not been for the sight of the CVS bag, similar enough to the milk-carton bag to trigger vibratiuncles of comparison. Under microscopy, even insignificant perceptions like this one are almost always revealed to be more incremental than you later are tempted to present them as being. It would have been less cumbersome in the account I am giving here of a specific lunch hour several years ago, to have pretended that the bag thought had come to me complete and “all at once” at the foot of the up escalator, but the truth was that it was only the latest in a fairly long sequence of partially forgotten, inarticulable experiences, finally now reaching a point that I paid attention to it for the first time.

In the stapled CVS bag was a pair of new shoelaces. (8 – 9)

This paragraph represents the way that thought can be observed sequentially. Baker did not want to represent thought as synchronic event – he wanted to map its unfolding. Baker’s vocabulary – thoughts are “watched,” observed, in their “microscopy” – is the language of science, empiricism. This is a theory of consciousness, whatever its basis in reality, allowing Baker to treat each thought

as an empirical unit that can be observed. Instead of thoughts occurring “all at once,” they occur “more incremental than you later are tempted to present them as being.” From a representational perspective, it might seem more challenging to represent thought synchronically, because an author would have to capture a multiplicity of thoughts in a single moment. For Baker, this synchronicity – which would be the more post-modern mode of representation – is actually the tempting, easy way out. The more challenging mode of representation, and the one he adopts, is the incremental, diachronic train of thoughts that can be organized into units and each represented individually.

Baker’s theory of thought is also a theory of memory. Far from distorting the past or blurring the distinction between past and present, memory is, for Baker, a fairly reliable access point to thought.

I have, then, only one unit of adult thought about milk to weigh against dozens of childhood units. And this is true of many, perhaps most, subjects that are important to me. Will the time ever come when I am not so completely dependent on thoughts I first had in childhood to furnish the feedstock for my comparisons and analogies and sense of the parallel rhythms of microhistory? Will I reach a point where there will be a good chance, I mean more than a fifty-fifty chance, that any random idea popping back into the foreground of my consciousness will be an idea that first came to me when I was an adult, rather than one I had repeatedly as a child? Will the universe of all possible things I could be reminded

of ever be mostly an adult universe? I hope so – indeed, if I could locate the precise moment in my past when I conclusively became an adult, a few simple calculations would determine how many years it would be before I reach this new stage of life: the end of the rule of nostalgia, the beginning of my true Majority. (47)

In this passage, memory constitutes something like selfhood for the narrator. It is precisely because memory is such a resilient and clear vector for thought that the narrator can rely on it to reconstruct his own consciousness. The narrator is paranoid that, because so many of his memories come from childhood, he cannot achieve full adulthood until the majority of his memories come from his adult years. “What I found was that I did not retain a single specific engram of tying a shoe, or a pair of shoes, that dated from any later than when I was four or five years old, the age at which I had first learned the skill. Over twenty years of empirical data were lost forever, a complete blank” (16). In Baker’s system, when data are not retrievable by memory, they are irrevocably lost. Importantly, this does not provide Baker with grounds for postmodern, historicist speculation. There is no epistemological system that can fill in the gaps of history or retrieve lost historical data. Unlike the fictions of Barth, Pynchon, and others, Baker’s fiction does not allow for any easy, speculative space. Later in the novel, Baker goes so far as to present a mathematical equation for how many years of new thought he must remember in order to achieve the adult majority. After determining that his earliest memories began at age 6, the narrator decides that he has “laid away in storage seventeen years worth ($23 - 6 = 17$) of childish

thoughts... I needed simply to continue to think more new thoughts at the same daily rate until I passed the age of forty ($23 + 17 = 40$), and I would finally have amassed enough miscellaneous new mature thoughts to outweigh and outvote all those childish ones..." (58).

In total, this representation of thought and memory – Baker's theory of consciousness – is in fact a theory of the representation of history or, in other words, a theory of historical realism. Howie's two shoelaces break within 48 hours of each other, prompting the trip to CVS that precedes the escalator ride. "The near simultaneity [of the shoelaces breaking] was very exciting – it made the variables of private life seem suddenly graspable and law-abiding" (15). Small events having a traceable and testable underlying structure. Another example of this occurs when the narrator describes purchasing a rubber stamp with his return address as "a life-ordering act, which had taken time now, but would save time later, *every bill I paid*" (22). An object such as a rubber stamp becomes life-ordering in Baker's system. This is the key to what Baker at one point calls "microhistory," a term I find especially illuminating for the rest of his literary project. Baker's approach to the literary representation of everyday minutiae mirrors that of a historian and of the historical realists described in previous chapters: data are either readily available and open for empirical observation or inaccessible and lost to historicity. This moment was exciting because it reveals the underlying structure and ensures that these moments will not be lost. Indeed, at the novel's end, the narrator is thrilled to discover that a scientist named Z. Czaplicki had published a paper on "methods for evaluating the ebrasion,

resistance, and knot-slippage strength of shoe laces” (132). This discovery verifies for the narrator that knowledge on even the most minute subject is retrievable, verifiable, and reliable.

In his essay on *The Mezzanine*, Graham Thompson argued that Baker’s novel served a dual function: it attempted to represent the 1980s as an experiential phenomenon and to apply this representation to an experience of history more broadly, one that disassociates periodization from the concept of the *event*. Thompson noted the “widespread impulse in Baker’s novel to shift engagement with the details of the material world consistently onto the axis of temporality” (302). Baker’s project is, for Thompson, “completely at odds with both the event-driven narratives [of traditional historical accounts of the 1980s] and an essay published just a few years before *The Mezzanine* – Fredric Jameson’s ‘Periodizing the 60s.’” Although Jameson wrote that his essay attempted to “produce the *concept* of history” through his engagement with different modes of periodization as they related to the 1960s (qtd. in Thompson 304), Thompson faulted Jameson for “still rel[ying] on the event” as an organizing principle (304). Like the traditional historians whom Thompson cited (Gary Wills, Sean Wilentz), Jameson relied too heavily on the belief that events must have occurred in the manner and sequence in which they occurred, that no counterfactual or alternative history was possible. Thompson turned to Eve Sedgwick’s critique of paranoid reading as an alternative account of periodization: as Sedgwick wrote, “the future may be different from the past...[but] the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (qtd. in Thompson 306). Thompson argued that

Sedgwick's model of reparative reading, which rejected inevitability, "has consequences for reading a novelist like Baker who constantly transforms the material of the mundane – both objects and experiences – to the lane of the surprising and the pleasurable, not to say the celebratory and jubilant" (306). Sedgwick identified her alternative to inevitability as "a heartbeat of contingency" (qtd. in Thompson 306); this is the kind of contingency we see represented time and again in Baker. Thompson wrote: "The inverse of a generational narrative, indeed almost the inverse of a linear narrative of any kind, *The Mezzanine* undermines all kinds of temporal classifications in its stalled form. It is the temporal frame of Sedgwick's 'heartbeat' in which Baker is interested and in the possibilities that can be nurtured in this infinitesimal temporal unit." Thompson continued:

By making a visual experience the occasion for a meditation on temporal phenomenon Baker draws attention directly to the object as it is positioned in time. Clearly influenced by Proust, the novel is much less concerned, however, with deep memory than texture and detail – bubbling rust and an incremental understanding of connectedness that can only be appreciated if time is virtually stalled, or at least reduced to such slow motion that it may be recorded with a forensic attention to granular structure. (302 – 303)

Ross Chambers contended that *The Mezzanine* "substitutes for the principle of narrative, which inevitably tends toward closure, the principle of meditative genres of thought and writing, which is the idea that one thing leads, not to an

end, but to another” (qtd. in Thompson 307). *The Mezzanine*, in other words, is a historical novel of process.⁸³

This process is, in part, the experience of periodization. Baker referred at one point to “the *periodicity* of regularly returning thoughts,” and his narrator attempts to map this periodicity (126). The everyday objects that occupy the narrator’s thoughts provide the texture of history and the basis for periodization:

...emotional analogies were not hard to find between the history of civilization on the one hand and the history within the CVS pharmacy on the other, when you caught sight of a once great shampoo like Alberto VO5 or Prell now in sorry vassalage on the bottom shelf of aisle 1B, overrun by later waves of Mongols, Muslims, and Chalukyas – Suave; Clairol Herbal Essence; Gee, Your Hair Smells Terrific; Silkience; Finesse; and bottle after bottle of the Akbaresque Flex. ... For now...the CVS pharmacy is closer to the center of life than, say Crate & Barrel or Pier 1, or restaurants, national parks, airports, research triangles, the lobbies of office buildings, or banks. Those places are the novels of the period, while CVS is its diary. (114 – 116)

⁸³ This contrasts with DeLillo’s conception of plot in *Libra*, in which plot always ends in death. Baker’s interest in process over plot offers a circumvention around the problem of the relationship between plot and death; or else it reconceives plot as something that can continue in perpetuity, avoiding the pitfalls that worry DeLillo. *Libra* and *The Mezzanine* were both published in 1988, and both novels exhibit a vexed relationship with their postmodern predecessors.

This passage, typical of *The Mezzanine* but also exceptional in its awareness of its own representational processes, represents Baker's microhistorical vision fully realized.

Toward the end of the novel, Howie recalls a passage from Marcus Aurelius that diminishes the significance of a single life by reducing it to infinitesimal objects: sperm and ash. "Observe, in short, how transient and trivial is all mortal life; yesterday a drop of semen, tomorrow a handful of spice and ashes" (120). This passage produces a violent reaction from Howie: "Wrong, wrong, wrong! I thought. Destructive and unhelpful and misguided and completely untrue!" Marcus Aurelius glossed over the individual moments of life instead of marking each one diachronically. Further, he attempted to dismiss the value of life by way of its minutiae. For Baker, it is precisely this minutiae that allows for the richness and full representation of life.

Baker's 2008 non-fiction book, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization*, contained little more than a cascade of facts, each contained in a few short sentences and demarcated by white space on the page, without obvious editorialization. Lev Grossman, writing for *Time* magazine, complained that "facts, even tragic ones, require context and interpretation. They don't speak for themselves. That's why we need historians." For Baker, however, the accumulation and curation of data is precisely the function of a historian.

2. Memory and Memoir: Baker's *U and I*

Few would describe Baker's early writing as especially economical, but he is extremely concerned about the amount of wasted details and unnecessary

images that appear in his own writing. This concern occupies Baker's *U and I* (1990), a memoir of his imaginary friendship with John Updike. The memoir foregrounds the issues of thought, memory, and historical experience this chapter explored in *The Mezzanine*; to these issues, the memoir adds the complicated layer of autobiography.⁸⁴ "...I was trying," wrote Baker of *U and I*, "to record how one increasingly famous writer and his books, read and unread, really functioned in the fifteen or so years of my life since I had first become aware of his existence..." (27).

Baker's memoir begins (in a moment of characteristic precision) at 9:46 A.M. on Sunday, August 6, 1989, two weeks after the death of Donald Barthelme. He contemplates writing a letter to *The New Yorker* on the occasion of Barthelme's death:

I thought very briefly of writing a neoJamesian story about a guy who hears of the death of a big-name writer he has long admired and who agonizes over the letter of condolence to the big name's editor, reproaches himself for having to agonize rather than simply and spontaneously to grieve, worries about whether he should destroy his early drafts of the letter, which betray how hard he worked to hit the proper spontaneous note, or whether such a compounding of deceptions, by robbing biographers of this material, furnished brave proof of how lightly he took his literary

⁸⁴ The autobiographical element is not wholly absent from *The Mezzanine*. As in Proust, Baker's novel tempts the reader to conflate the narrator with the author; the narrator's name, Howie, is barely mentioned in the novel. *The Mezzanine* signals the autobiographical pact to the reader at numerous points.

prospects. But fictionalization was, so I thought, a far more crudely opportunist use of my bewilderment at Barthelme's death than a lushly quotable letter would have been. (6 – 7)

Barthelme's death prompts anxiety around the genres Baker contemplates as an appropriate reaction to the death: biography, letter, memoir, and fiction. Of these, Baker settles on a memoir, not of Barthelme but of John Updike as the appropriate response. Baker continues:

...the dead gain by death. The level of autobiographical fidelity in their work is somehow less important, or, rather, extreme fidelity does not seem to harm, as it does with the living, our appreciation for the work. The living are 'just' writing about their own lives; the dead are writing about their irretrievable *lives*, wow wow wow.”
(10)

This thought about the living and the dead led Baker to two conclusions: “‘I should,’ I typed that morning, ‘write some appreciation’ of Updike. And ‘it has to be done while he is alive’” (13). He immediately makes a list of details he remembers from Updike's fiction and the role of Updike's fiction in his own life, a list which includes:

- (2) mom reading *Too Far to Go* in a hotel when we were visiting some family – maybe around the time she and Dad had decided on a divorce
- (5) The Chateau Mouton Rothschild [*sic*] that the man gives the kid in Updike's first story

- (6) 'The blue below is ultramarine. Sometimes the blue below is green.' Misquoted
- (7) The Bulgarian Poetess, title – and some sense of her: pulled back hair, 'coiffed.'
- (10) The ice cube in Rabbit, Run
- (14) 'and the sad curve of time it subtends,' dedication in Problems
- (16) *'Seems' or 'seemed' – constantly used word
- (17) Leeches climbing up legs in some short story
- (20) Divot the size of an undershirt, that made Mom laugh so hard that Sunday. (16)

The significance of this list is that it shows Baker's memory at work in a manner that is both systematic and random and so, represents the process of the writerly mind as it begins to make order out of thought. These are the kind of details that will occupy *U and I* the way that small, material details occupied *The Mezzanine*.

It is interesting that Baker chooses to write about Updike, the arch-realist, instead of Barthelme. Four writers play significant roles in *U and I*: Updike, Barthelme, Henry James, and Tim O'Brien. Updike is the memoir's subject. Barthelme, an arch-experimentalist, is the catalyst for the memoir. James's name recurs throughout as a mode of fiction-making that Baker considers and aspires to. O'Brien appears as a character in the memoir. O'Brien's presence in the memoir functions as a stand-in for postmodernism. O'Brien's Vietnam literature, including his 1973 memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* and his 1990 story collection *The Things They Carried*, exemplify the role

of factuality in postmodern fiction: O'Brien blended biographically accurate accounts of his experiences in Vietnam with fictionalized accounts to achieve what he called "story truths," or the deeper truth that fiction can achieve. This allows O'Brien to suspend the demarcation between fact and fictionality. Baker, conversely, wrote texts that attempt to preserve the integrity of fact from speculation, memory, or remembered experience: in short, to preserve the integrity of fact from the very mortar of O'Brien's "story-truths."

Baker decided not to reread any of Updike's work while writing the memoir, nor read any work by Updike that he had not already read. The latter category included the majority of Updike's output. "[T]his spottiness of coverage is, along with the wildly untenable generalizations that spring from it, one of the most important features of the thinking we do about living writers: as with nearby friends we seldom see because their very proximity removes the pressing need to drop by, so the living writer's continuing productivity dulls any urgent feelings we might have about filling in our unread gaps in his oeuvre" (32). The goal was to preserve the authenticity of his experience with Updike's fiction at the moment of Baker's composition. To that end, Baker layers a second draft of the memoir over the first: making use of brackets, he corrects his memory with recollections of Updike's fiction wherever he has misquoted or misrepresented Updike's work. For instance, Baker (outside the brackets) quotes Updike: "'Their conversation was like a basket woven underwater around a useless stone'" (46). He continues, in brackets: "[No no no – the sentence really goes: 'The important thing, rather than the subject, was the conversation itself, the quick agreements, the slow nods,

the weave of different memories; it was like one of those Panama baskets shaped underwater around a worthless stone’]” (46). Elsewhere he quotes another memorable line of Updike, then continues: “The second line, which like the first may not exist...” (113). Not only does he maintain gaps in his memory but he records false memories as actuality because they represent his authentic lived experience. However, unlike O’Brien and his “story truths,” Baker finds it necessary to amend the lived experience with the historical record presented in brackets.

The passage in Nicholson Baker’s memoir that exemplifies this commitment appears near the middle of the text:

In some review or address Updike praises the capacity to lie as being of all traits the most important to the novelist. I felt myself disagreeing so violently as I read this that my whole imaginary friendship with Updike was momentarily disrupted: it was, first, a cliché of American writing seminars and book reviews, and it went utterly against what I believed (which was that the urge *not* to lie about, not to be unfair to, not to belie what was there was the dominant propellant, and the desire to undo earlier lies of our own or of otherwise was what drew us on to write further, and that intentional lying came in only at those always dissatisfying points where the futile pursuit of coherence or economy temporarily won out).... (69 – 70)

This passage establishes more clearly than any other the stakes for Baker: that truth and fiction can and must exist simultaneously without any postmodernist maneuvering. For Baker, this truth is almost always accessed through the unit of the fact or the datum.

Throughout the memoir Baker carefully tracks his false memories and the imagined aspects of his friendship with Updike, distinguishing them from the verifiable record of Updike's oeuvre and his real-life encounters with him. While he disagrees with Updike, Baker later recalls Vladimir Nabokov's "naïve-sounding (but correct) contention that fiction is a gradually evolving effort to be more accurate about life" (70). This confirms Baker's commitment to not just fidelity in fiction, but precision and accuracy. Elsewhere, Baker notes that he should read Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, but worries about the affect the text would have on his memoir. He cannot read Bloom; he cannot reread Updike. He is too concerned with preserving the authenticity of experience for his narrative.

Afterword: Identity and the Novel

This dissertation has examined the ways in which certain novelists in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s sought to reassert a hard realist aesthetic in order to reclaim ground they believed was lost during the period of High Postmodernism. This ground included the ability to know and accurately represent history; the devices and sensibilities of nineteenth-century realism; the liberal subject as the structural core of the novel; and even the possibility of connecting with other people. Underlying all this is a concern with the *voice* of the novel, or the *person* through

which the novel speaks. Vidal's historical fiction moved steadily from first-person to third-person narrations. Wolfe wrote in the third-person from the beginning. Franzen once advised, "Write in the third person unless a really distinctive first-person voice offers itself irresistibly" ("Ten rules"). Implicit (sometimes explicit) in this concern is the desire to preserve a racial- and gender-neutral voice, an invisible master SUBJECT who can free the novel of unnecessary identitarian limits and avoid what Saul Bellow called "the minority tone." As decades of critical race theory has demonstrated, such a universal master subject is almost always figured as *white* and *male*. This is part of the critique of traditional realism, with its near-omniscient narrators: novels that seek a universal subject are colonizing narratives, perpetrators of all manner of ideational violence. But the desire to resuscitate ground that was lost during the era of postmodernism did not disappear with the neorealist project. Instead, it takes an interesting turn in a highly unusual passage from Baker's *U and I*.

At one point in the memoir, Baker reflects on the fact that both he and Updike suffer from psoriasis. "When my psoriasis turned inward, arthritizing first one knee and then a hip and ankle joint, I took this to be a manifestation of our difference: he had the surface involvement – style – while I had the deep-structural, immobilizing synovial ballooning of a superior minded" (133). Updike is renowned as a great stylist whereas Baker focuses on the underlying structural integrity of his fictional forms and of fictionality itself. In *U and I*, Baker reflects on the nature of this underlying structure as it regards the novel:

The novel is the greatest of all literary forms – the most adaptable and subspeciality-spanning and roomiest and most selfless, in the sense of not imposing artificialities on its practitioners and letting the pursuit of truth pull it forward – and as a result one recognizes the need to posit a certain variety of accompanying intelligence that is itself more adaptable, more multiplanar, sloppier, more impatient of formal designs, roomier, and more truth-drawn than other kinds, a variety that Proust, for instance, has a whole lot of. But what I have only slowly begun to see, over the past five years, is that dreadful degree of inefficiency and outright waste there is in the transmutation of this invisible and evasive, but real, intelligence into a piece of readable prose. ... Updike is a better writer than I am *and* he is smarter than I am – not because intelligence has no meaning outside the written or spoken behavior form it takes, but because all minds, dumb and smart alike, do such a poor job of impanating their doings in linear sentences. (134)

It may be surprising that, at the end of a memoir, Baker dubs the novel “the greatest of all literary forms,” but this is consistent with Baker’s preoccupation with the compatibility of fictionality and fact. He seems to be very generous about the novel’s representational possibilities and also about its limits. Every mind is equally limited in its ability to represent the world “in linear sentences.” The novel’s elasticity can adjust to allow even a limited mind great representational possibilities.

Given this generosity, it is curious that Baker then turns to the subject of identity and writes a disclaimer about the novel along identitarian lines. He continues:

Heterosexual male novelists don't for the most part really *get it*, instinctively: they agree with Jane Austen that the novel is a magnificent thing, toward whose comprehension all other forms of writing, and indeed of art, aspire, and this big-time grandeur attracts them, but they find, much to their perplexity, that they can't internalize and refine upon its ways with quite the unstraining unconscious directness they displayed when thrashing happily through earlier intellectual challenges. (136)

The novel is unlike other intellectual fields, such as math, science, the epic, et al., in which straight men have dominated. The novel is the place where they run up against their ability to simultaneously prosper, succeed, and maintain direct control (that is, be in charge). Baker is saying, in other words, that the novel is the one thing white, heterosexual males cannot conquer on their own.

This dissertation has concerned white male novelists who defensively posit realism not only against postmodernism, but against the encroachment on the novel by writers of different identities. The presumption by most of these realists is that realism is a non-identitarian form; my presumption has been that this type of realism often encodes white male identitarian concerns as universal norms. The historical presumption behind these realists' project, whether they say it or not, is that the identitarian concerns was a new development in the novel

during the long 1980s. Baker here suggests that this development is not new at all, that it is structurally inherent to the novel itself. The neorealist project was always already a failure. The novel cannot be reclaimed for white heterosexual men because it was always anathema to the white heterosexual male identitarian sensibilities.

Coda

Fiction as Rhetoric or Genre?

In 2007, narrative theorist Richard Walsh described “a growing sense of a paradigm shift” that required critics to “re-examine fundamental questions in narrative theory through the prism of a new conception of the rhetorical nature of fictionality” (qtd. in Dawson “Ten Theses” 75). This “new conception,” which has been called “the fictionality turn,” would posit fictionality as a mode of rhetoric, one which could be deployed within a broader system of arguments or generic contexts – even within a single text. One might assume that such a conception of fictionality would resolve the structural issues that plagued neorealism’s relationship with factuality in the 1980s. But the consequences of this reconception is more complicated than that. In this coda, I will briefly map out the debate that has ensued in recent years over the status of fictionality and consider its consequences for the novels I have examined in this dissertation.

Walsh’s *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* inspired a series of papers that culminated in the January 2015 special issue of *Narrative*, which featured two articles on the subject of fictionality: one entitled “Ten Theses about Fictionality,” co-authored by Walsh, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and James Phelan, and the other “Ten Theses against Fictionality,” authored by Paul Dawson. The first article argued for a “rhetorical conception” of fictionality, which would “make[...] it a cultural variable rather than a logical or ontological absolute” (66). The second article argued that fictionality could only be understood in the context of a genre: the novel, for instance, or the Greek tragedy.

The first article aimed to outline ten principles of fictionality as a discourse, and to distinguish fictionality as “formally closer to irony/ironic discourse than to an individual genre such as comedy or tragedy...” (62). The distinction between fictionality as discourse and fiction as genre was critical to the authors’ theses:

Where a genre designation provides a global framework for understanding a text as a whole, irony may either be global or local. It may provide a framework for thinking about a text such as “A Modest Proposal,” but it may also appear intermittently within a text governed by a different generic framework, as with Shakespeare’s use of the Fool in *King Lear*. Thinking of fictionality as similarly flexible opens our eyes not only to its widespread presence outside of generic fictions but also to its multiple functions. (62)

They continued: “...communicative agency and intention are more significant than any a priori divide between fiction and nonfiction based solely on textual features. ... No formal technique or other textual feature is in itself a necessary and sufficient ground for identifying fictive discourse” (64 – 66). In other words, fictionality occurs as a device used by an agent, a communicator (e.g., a character, a person, an author, a narrator, etc.), and cannot be identified in itself as an aspect of any given text.

Dawson's rebuttal, meanwhile, attempted to reestablish fiction as a category that could only be understood in relationship to genre. Dawson contended that:

the theoretical separation of fictionality from fiction designed to enable the study of fictionality across media and nonfictional discourse is supplemented by a claim that this will also provide a fresh perspective on the genre of narrative fiction. This perspective is the familiar claim that fiction is neither escapist nor a nonreferential discourse ontologically quarantined from the actual world, but serious discourse that has the capacity to change received opinion in the world. Rather than offering a new philosophical perspective on fiction, or a new mode of textual analysis, the rhetoric of the fictionality turn offers a way to understand the use-value of fiction. Like the narrative turn, it simultaneously seeks to expand the significance of fiction while undermining its specificity. (94 – 95)

Nielsen, Walsh, and Phelan, meanwhile, argued that “the use of fictionality is not a turning away from the actual world but a specific communicative strategy within some context in that world, a context which also informs an audience's response to the fictive act” (62 – 63). This combination of communication and response is what distinguishes fiction, they argued, from lying. “Fictive discourse neither refers to actual states of affairs nor tries to deceive its audience about such states. Instead it overtly invents or imagines states of affairs in order to

accomplish some purpose(s) within its particular context” (63). Further, they argued, fictive discourse – “the ability to invent, imagine, and communicate without claiming to refer to the actual” – “is a fundamental cognitive skill, one crucial to humans’ interactions with their world and their fellow beings in that world.” Along these lines, their first thesis reads, “Fictionality is founded upon a basic human ability to imagine.” Thus did they nod to the field of cognitive studies, which had developed over the previous decades as an alternative methodology for scholars who sought new universalizable principles behind literary phenomenon after the heyday of narratology in the 1980s had ended. Above all, Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh emphasized fictionality’s rhetorical flexibility: “From the perspective of the sender, fictionality is a flexible means to accomplish a great variety of ends. ... From the perspective of the receiver, fictionality is an interpretive assumption about a sender’s communicative act” (65 – 66).

This conversation has consequences for the arguments laid out in this dissertation. “Even as fictive discourse is a clear alternative to nonfictive discourse,” wrote Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh, “the two are closely interrelated in continuous exchange, and so are the ways in which we engage with them” (64). Such an interrelation could be grounds for theorizing, for instance, Gore Vidal’s peculiar brand of historical realism: one could posit *Lincoln* as a globally nonfiction novel with elements of fictionality, or as a globally fictional novel with elements of nonfictionality. *Lincoln*, and Vidal’s project more generally, appears inscrutable when analyzed alongside the doctrine of poetic license or what Dorrit

Cohn called “the distinction of fiction,” but can be understood as an internally consistent, if remarkably hybrid, novel if fictionality is merely a rhetorical device. When Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh wrote that “the use of fictionality is not a turning away from the actual world but a specific communicative strategy within some context in that world,” they could be writing on behalf of Vidal. They continued:

...fictionality is...relative to communicative contexts rather than intrinsic to the discourse itself. No technique is found in all fiction and/or only in fiction, even though *within certain cultural and historical contexts* certain textual features can become strong conventional indices of a fictive communicative intent (e.g., zero focalization in the era of the realist novel). ...it is wiser to talk about degrees of fictionality rather than the distinction of fiction. (66)

Such degrees of fictionality could vary within a text as readily as between texts, and so render a hyperrealist or nonfiction novel as internally coherent. As Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh wrote:

We can analyze the interplay of fiction and nonfiction in such cases by distinguishing between global and local fictionality. Global fictions can contain passages of nonfictionality, and global nonfictions can contain passages of fictionality. Thus, nonfictionality can be subordinate to fictive purposes, and fictionality can be subordinate to nonfictive purposes. (67)

The author of a novel like *Lincoln* can claim global fictionality but engage in the rhetoric of nonfictionality, thus circumventing structural problems that arise when fictionality is treated as distinct. Likewise, the author of a novel like *Libra* would no longer need to fret about the relationship between fictionality and historicity: the two could operate together in a single work seamlessly.

Vidal, however, did not treat fictionality as rhetoric: he treated fiction and fact as genre categories that could be interchangeable (and without reliance on radical postmodern epistemology). Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh wrote, “The employment of fictionality in political discourse will tend to contribute – again for better or worse – to a logos-immunization of the discourse whereby arguments and counter-arguments have to take place on other levels and with other forms of appeal than those based in facts and documented evidence” (69). But Vidal forewent such “logos-immunization” in *Lincoln*; he insisted on fictionality’s ability to sustain “forms of appeal...based in facts and documented evidence.”

In his theses against fictionality, Dawson disputed the claims of Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh’s reconception of fictionality as rhetoric. He identified “two tenets of the new fictionality studies: degrees of fictionality rather than the distinction of fiction; and fictionality as a double exposure of the imagined and real” (83). On the former, Dawson pointed out that these two tenets “really [do not] help us understand fiction unless we want to start identifying signposts of factuality” (84). He cited Gregory Currie, who asked: “Is a work fictional if even one of its statements is fictional in this sense? Must the greater proportion of the whole be fiction? These are bad questions” (qtd. in Dawson “Ten Theses” 84).

Ultimately, Dawson contended that while “the theoretical separation of fictionality and fiction may help us to understand nonfictional narratives, and fictionality as a general feature of communication, ...the question remains whether it sheds new light on the genre of fiction itself” (83). Dawson concluded that it did not. Vidal would have agreed with Dawson. A novel like *Lincoln* possessed no “signposts of factuality”; fiction and fact, as he said, existed simultaneously in his work.

Two years before the debate in *Narrative*, Dawson had authored *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction*. That study argued that continuity in twenty-first century fiction could be found in its insistence on omniscient narrators, in contrast with the dominance of first-person (or otherwise unreliable) narrators throughout the twentieth century. What Dawson declared was nothing less than the end of the reign of Henry James as a model for focalization. Dawson wrote: “[T]he narrative voice of contemporary omniscience is symptomatic of the broad anxiety within the literary field over the cultural capital of literary fiction, and hence the public authority of the novelist” (9). In other words, the narrative of the novel’s decline persists, and – in a twist that might have surprised the struggling neorealist in 1996, when his project seemed lofty and doomed to failure – prompts a return to omniscience as a kind of power grab. Dawson expanded on this point: “The chief characteristic of omniscience, authorial presence, is a performance of narrative authority over both characters, in the moral judgment of them, and readers, in assuming their complicity with this judgment” (56). Citing a long list of

twentieth-century theorists (Jonathan Culler, Jean-Paul Sartre, Mikhail Bakhtin, Mark Seltzer, D.A. Miller, and Michel Foucault), Dawson united the decades-long resistance to omniscient narration with a resistance to authority. Such resistance was understandable when the novel possessed real power, but in the crisis of cultural capital that the novel faces in the twenty-first century, authors are desperate for authority. Thus, wrote Dawson, omniscient narration is used by authors as varied as Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, David Foster Wallace, Adam Thirlwell, Gail Jones, Michel Faber, Edward P. Jones, David Lodge, Nicola Barker, Tom Wolfe, Rick Moody, Zadie Smith, Don DeLillo, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers. Dawson studied late twentieth- and early twenty-first century works by each of these writers, and argued that each resurrects omniscient narration in their own way, never exactly in the traditional William Makepeace Thackeray mode, but always as a means of establishing authority over the text and the reader. For such authority to be sustained, a novel must be closed, not open to competing rhetorical modes such as “nonfictionality” or “factuality.” Hence, Dawson’s sharp critique of Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh. The idea that fictionality may be a mode of rhetoric, wrote Dawson in *Narrative*, “simultaneously seeks to expand the significance of fiction while undermining its specificity” (95).

The debate between those who would understand fiction as rhetoric and those who would understand fiction as grounded in genre, alongside Dawson’s conception of the return of the omniscient narrator, reveals how some of the issues described in this dissertation persist into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Authors seek new ways to expand their authority, and continue to

test the structure of fictionality (whether fictionality is understood as open or closed) in order to innovate, represent, and interact with their subjects and their audiences. But the debate does not resolve the unique and peculiar events of the long 1980s, when fictionality was conceived by authors like Vidal and Wolfe as neither open nor closed but capable of simultaneously possessing factuality (historical fact for Vidal, journalistically observed fact for Wolfe) without any pores, without sacrificing its inherent integrity or distinction. Neither Vidal nor Wolfe, nor the neorealists in general, would cede fictionality as merely a rhetorical mode. But they would insist that its distinction and specificity does not preclude fictionality from possessing something more than mere resonance, verisimilitude, or “story truths.” They would insist that fiction can touch something like reality itself.

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