

# The Program Era

POSTWAR FICTION

AND THE RISE OF CREATIVE WRITING

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## Preface

counsel, timely advice, useful references and the like that I have received over the years, and you have a book that has accumulated more institutional debts than its author can possibly repay.

But more than any other, this book is owed to the institution of Sianne Ngai.

## Introduction: Halls of Mirror

It had to be U.

RICHARD POWERS, *Galatea* 2.2

## EROS AND INSTITUTION

"I am sick of teaching, I am sick of teaching, I am sick of teaching," wrote Vladimir Nabokov to his friend Edmund Wilson, desperate to get back to working on the novel whose outsize success would, in fact, free him forever from his teaching duties at Cornell University.<sup>1</sup> In its peevish negativity, the complaint seems perfectly opposed to the famously lilting opening of that same novel—"light of my life, fire of my loins"—and could be offered as a nonfictional counterpoint to its virtuoso verbal music: Lo. Lee. Ta. *Sick of teaching, sick of teaching, sick of teaching.*

The irony being that, with a small twist of fictional fate, the school-girl idealized by Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1955) might have become a collegian of the sort who packed Nabokov's classes and emitted stacks of exams that needed to be graded before he could turn to more personally rewarding tasks. Humbert's pathologically narcissistic love for Lolita is all but unimpeded by the interests of the real little girl named Dolores who is its victim, but this same girl grown into a college coed would have personified the intractable otherness and obduracy of material necessity as it impinged upon Nabokov's real life as an artist. Throughout the writing of the novel he was, as he put it, in "miserable financial difficulties" with "no way out of academic drudgery (ill-paid to boot)."<sup>2</sup> Not that he ever lowered himself to attending faculty meetings, or sitting on committees, but he met his teaching responsibilities head-on.

Nabokov's fictional European gentleman-scholar, with a steady income inherited from a rich American uncle, has no such money troubles, and he does not need to teach—not even his nubile charge, whom he tries merely to distract. And yet, set free to act upon his fantasies, he ends up in the prison cell from which he narrates his tale of forbidden love. For his well-behaved author, it was something like the reverse. The more powerful fantasy for Nabokov seems to have been one of ideal working conditions, a release from the prison of the classroom into the richly reflexive freedom of artistic expression. This, as much as anything else, is what is at stake in the creation of a narrator like Humbert, whose ethical complexity is a form of authorial defiance. He is unreliable in the usual sense that the reader cannot necessarily trust what he says, but on another level he represents Nabokov's aestheticism, his high-handed commitment to the "unreliability" of art itself, which should not be tasked with the fulfillment of extra-artistic ends—certainly not moral-pedagogical ones, perhaps not even the end of paying the bills.<sup>3</sup> According to his biographer Brian Boyd, Nabokov never dreamed in all the years he was writing it that *Lolita* would make him serious money, assuming instead (correctly) that it would be difficult even to find a publisher for such a work. It was in many senses a labor of love. That an assertion of artistic freedom ended up earning him

his financial freedom was from his perspective a miraculous windfall, if a well-deserved and overdue one. Then again, once upon a time, so had the opportunity to escape the deadly chaos of wartime Europe for a life of teaching in the United States seemed a miraculous windfall. The Nazis had been advancing upon Paris. Nabokov's wife, Véra, was Jewish. They had a very small son. There are necessities and necessities.

This book will take up residence in the gap between freedom and necessity—or rather, in the higher educational institutions that have been built in that gap, with gates opening to either side. On the one hand, nothing could be more constrained than the modern American school, which, never mind the plight of émigré authors, is anchored K-through-Ph.D. in the unbeautiful realm of social needs, hemmed in all around by budgets and bureaucracy and demography. On the other hand is the shimmering vision of self-realization-through-learning toward which it bends. We go to school, or are made to go, to become *richer* versions of ourselves, however that might be defined. This doubleness is readily apparent in the educational endeavor called creative writing, whose profound contribution to postwar American literature will be my central concern in the chapters that follow. Conceived, as D. G. Myers has taught us, in the firmament of early twentieth century progressive educational reform, creative writing is surely one of the purest expressions of that movement's abiding concern for student enrichment through autonomous self-creation.<sup>4</sup> What could be further from the dictates of rote learning, or studying for a standardized test, than using one's imagination to invent a story or write a poem? At the same time, and especially to the degree that it would end up linking the profession of authorship with classrooms and committees and degree-credentialing and the like, creative writing cannot help pointing toward the unglamorous institutional practicalities of literary life in the postwar U.S. and beyond. This, as we shall see, is the realm not only of institutions but also of technologies, the hard and soft machines in and by which literature comes into being.

In his classic account of Anglo-American literary modernism, *The Pound Era* (1971), Hugh Kenner mapped the innovative tendencies of in-

terwar writing through the work of the great poet, editor, and all-purpose publicist of high cultural endeavor, Ezra Pound. Taking inspiration from Kenner but turning his methodological investment in the dominant individual inside out, my book traces the fate of U.S. literary modernism after World War II, when the modernist imperative to “make it new” was institutionalized as another form of original research sponsored by the booming, science-oriented universities of the Cold War era. The literature of this period would remain obsessed by individuals and their individuality (and so must this book be, to a degree), but its true originality, I will argue, is to be found at the level of its patron institutions, whose presence is everywhere visible in the texts as a kind of watermark. Arriving in the U.S. in 1940, Nabokov entered the picture too early to profit from what was at that point little more than a twinkle in the eye of Paul Engle, Wallace Stegner, Elliott Coleman, Baxter Hathaway, and the many others who would soon be forging a new place for writers in the American university. This place was the graduate creative writing program, which turns writers into salaried writing professors and students into tuition-paying apprentices. Creative writing had been offered in scattershot fashion to undergraduates since before the turn of the century, but the graduate program represented a dramatic escalation of the relationship between the profession of authorship and the school, a systematic coupling, without (as of yet) a final merging, of art and institution.

Nabokov got a taste of creative writing instruction when he touched down at Stanford University to teach a summer school class in playwriting, his very first teaching assignment in the U.S. But after that it was low-paid Russian language instruction and lecturing on literature at Wellesley College for several years, and then more of the same, minus the language teaching, at Cornell. We can only speculate, but it’s hard to imagine that he would have turned down the opportunity to teach creative writing classes, which in the standard form of the workshop consists of a small group of students sitting around a table discussing each other’s stories, with the professor sitting in as a moderator and living example of an actual author. On the other hand, once Nabokov had his lectures written, he

delivered them year after year, never changing the syllabus and making no pretense of taking any interest in his students (Thomas Pynchon famously among them) as individuals. So perhaps in the end, even with the stacks of exams, that was the less demanding assignment. It is in any case hard to imagine Nabokov genuinely approving of the *idea* of the creative writing program, which begins with a commitment to the importance of individual creativity he shared but immediately surrounds it with the dubious trappings of institutionality.

“I write [only] for myself in multiply,” he declared in clear violation of the sociable spirit of the creative writing workshop, with its provisional ceding of authority to the peer group which evaluates an unpublished work while its author, by custom, listens in squirming silence.<sup>5</sup> The creative writing program would replicate the spirit of communal endeavor and mutual influence found in the Paris and Greenwich Village café scenes of an earlier era, but Nabokov was not one for that sort of esprit de corps. He was a militant Cold War individualist who did not admire “sticky groups,” who did not “write for groups, nor approve of group therapy” (*Opinions*, 114)—to which, sure enough, the creative writing workshop has sometimes been compared. It was after all a thing born (although of course it had many stages of birth stretching back through time) in the thirties, with the founding of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1936, and the “group-ness” of that decade could easily be detected in its rituals.<sup>6</sup> But since the founders of Cornell’s creative writing program, one of the nation’s first, seem to have disliked their notoriously self-delighted colleague, Nabokov was not invited to compromise his distaste for group endeavor for the benefit of his own career. He therefore presents us with the interesting case of a writer famously associated with a university—and a university, in turn, famously associated with the rise of creative writing—who nonetheless missed a date with institutional destiny. Like many of the figures who will make memorable appearances in this book, he is as interesting to us for how he didn’t quite get with the program as for how, in a way, he did. Certainly it would have made his life a lot easier if his fiction writing had been defined, as it is for the tenured creative writing professor

of the present day, as a kind of “research” for which he needed, like the scholar, paid time away from the classroom.

Not that Nabokov was a stranger to research. In fact, one of his best-known quirks was a scientific passion for a certain family of butterflies, the Blues. If the creative writing professor can be described as a practitioner of a sort of disorganized science of creativity, or the creative process, Nabokov was actually both a writer and a scientist. Between his classes he devoted a lot of precious time to catching butterflies in the wild and even more to pinning them down in elaborate classificatory arrays at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, making lasting contributions to their study. There is a touch of inadvertent irony in the fact that the linguist Roman Jakobson’s witty rebuke to the notion of hiring a fiction writer to teach literature at Harvard—“What’s next, shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?”—came at Nabokov’s expense, but only a touch.<sup>7</sup> Nabokov pursued his zoological passion in a proudly scientific but obviously anachronistic spirit, never aligning himself in any serious way with the broader field of professional entomology. Without any advanced degree to his name, a professorship in that field was even less plausible than one in literature.

He was, in other words, an “amateur” in the literal, not necessarily derogatory, sense—a lover of the objects of his knowledge no less than Humbert is a lover of nymphets. With its obvious kinship to aesthetic miniaturism, his scientific work on beautiful little butterflies speaks powerfully to the importance of pleasure in study, which had been another of the themes of progressive education. Although it is in some ways the opposite of a campus novel (i.e., a road novel), *Lolita* recalls the many works in that genre—from Robie Macauley’s *The Disguises of Love* (1952) to Philip Roth’s *The Professor of Desire* (1977) to Joyce Carol Oates’s *Unholy Loves* (1979) to John L’Heureux’s *The Handmaid of Desire* (1996) to Michael Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* (1995) to (and especially) Francine Prose’s *Blue Angel* (2000)—that are fascinated by the scandalous persistence of Eros in the social life of otherwise risibly politically correct institutions.<sup>8</sup> The broader point, though, is that to the degree that educational institutions have em-

braced progressive educational ideals—beginning, let’s say, with the revolutionary idea of student “electives” concocted by Harvard’s Charles Eliot in the late nineteenth century—they are structured as well by an appeal to Eros that can take any number of forms. An elective course in creative writing is one of these. The frequently “sticky” group dynamic of creative writing workshops is another. Both are distant descendants of Plato’s erotically charged symposium, and their leaders, the creative writing teachers, can be counted on to love literature (if not necessarily the teaching of literature, or even the teaching of writing) with a passion. Exemplary in this regard was John Hawkes, a wildly experimental writer who taught at Brown University for many years. His student Rick Moody summarizes his notoriously amorous approach to teaching thusly: “He wanted us to believe in literature. He felt he had done his job if we could explain why *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was a masterpiece, from the standpoint of language and construction. Hawkes played favorites, which was bad; and he loved women a lot more than men, which was bad too; and he allowed us to drink wine in class, which in my case was an incredibly bad idea, since I was developing a drinking problem. All these things were inadvisable, but what was not was the idea of emotional commitment to the process, a strong relationship between student and professor.”<sup>9</sup>

The author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov, had no strong relationships with his students that we know of, but he did communicate the strongest possible belief in literature, even to the point of descending into a fussy sort of fetishism. Contrary to their reputation for luminous brilliance, the lectures on literature that he delivered for a paycheck were, on the cruel evidence of the notes he never meant to be published, surprisingly dutiful exercises in low-level formal analysis and plot summary. Like his lab work on butterflies, which mostly entailed paying dogged attention to minute differences of anatomy for hours on end, the lectures by design contain a minimum of interesting ideas about literary works and a maximum of what he called the “fondling” of their details.<sup>10</sup> Not that the entreaty to *pay close attention* wasn’t delivered with consider-

able personal aplomb, and not that it didn't speak to a matter of legitimate concern to lovers of literature. Perhaps because the novels leading up to *Lolita* sold so poorly, Nabokov was able to perceive with great acuity what the fundamental threat to traditional literary culture in the postwar U.S. would be: distraction.<sup>11</sup> Consecrated by the charismatic presence at the podium, the university lecture hall was one place where a novel or poem could still command center stage as an object of reverent scrutiny. But Nabokov was not interested in synthesizing his close observations of literary texts to produce a compelling *reading* of any of them.

To perform an interesting reading, we can surmise, would have been to start down a path of critical self-imposition leading to the kind of ego-maniacal insanity we see in *Pale Fire* (1962), where Charles Kinbote woe-fully (but amusingly) distorts the meaning of a long poem he is supposed to be faithfully annotating so that it refers to himself.<sup>12</sup> And true enough, to "have a reading" of a novel, as contemporary literary scholars like to put it, is to lay claim to a successful act of interpretive appropriation that can at times seem competitive with the simplest account we might give of the author's lucidly conscious intentions.<sup>13</sup> But in stark contrast to Kinbote's flagrant nonsense—*Pale Fire* would be a better book if his annotations were more disturbingly believable than they are—the success of these appropriations usually stems from their plausibility, from the sense they give us of coming closer to the meaning of the literary work even as it is tied to some larger context (theoretical, historical, or otherwise) that has conditioned the author's intentions without his necessarily being fully aware of it. In this dialectical interplay of text and context the fondling of details begins to have an intellectual as well as experiential payoff for the reader, and the value of the work—even, ironically, when the work is subjected to an irreverently "political" critique—is increased.

Although Nabokov was more concerned with satirizing a certain kind of scholar than scholarship itself, it is easy to read this novel as the first broadside in the sneering war between creative writers and scholars in the university, who upon the fading of the great poet-critics of the 1940s and 50s from the leading edge of literary scholarship came to seem di-

vided by their shared object, literature, even as their offices were still often found side by side in the same hallways. As an author Nabokov did not hesitate to produce fictions that uncannily refer to himself, as when the much-abused scholar Krug is saved at the end of *Bend Sinister* (1947) by the *deus ex machina* of his author, or when the fictional Timofey Prnin encounters his fellow émigré Vladimir Nabokov in the novel *Prnin* (1953).<sup>14</sup> Alfred Appel has called the obsessive reflexivity of Nabokov's work an aesthetic of "involution," and it was of a piece with a broader postwar codification and intensification of modernist reflexivity in the form of what came to be called "surfiction" or, more durably, "metafiction."<sup>15</sup> But lecturing on the literature of geniuses (there were only a handful) could only be a process of slowly and respectfully *experiencing* their work in the most immediate sense, not thinking about it for oneself, and still less contextualizing it as part of a broader human drama: "Let us worship the spine and its tingle. . . . The study of the sociological or political impact of literature [is] for those who are by temperament or education immune to the aesthetic vibrancy of authentic literature, for those who do not experience the tell-tale tingle between the shoulder blades" (*Lectures*, 64).

Although one can credit Nabokov with not forgetting the physicality of aesthetic experience, tingle worship would not cut it as an approach to literature even among academic critics as eager as he was to protect literature from politics and sociology, of whom there were (and are) many. For better or worse, the modern university is predicated on the values of the Enlightenment, on the attempt (however difficult, perhaps even futile) to trade our childish enchantments for valid knowledge, including knowledge of the ways and means of enchantment. Valuing the experience of enchantment above all else, Nabokov's theory of literature short-circuits the pursuit of literary knowledge on behalf of a mystical submission to aesthetic authority felt along the spine. His is the crudest form of what a certain kind of literary scholar calls the "ideology of the aesthetic," and in generally less militant forms it is endemic to the discipline of creative writing, whose ultimate commitment is not to knowledge but to what Donald Barthelme called "Not-Knowing."<sup>16</sup> This is not a commitment to igno-

rance, exactly, but it does entail a commitment to innocence: the aura of literature must be protected at all costs, and the mysteries of the creative process must be explored without being dispelled. Although literary studies as we know it is probably unthinkable except as built upon a foundation of awe—supplying it one of its strongest motives—Nabokov's scholarly contemporaries were better equipped than he to make literary criticism seem a genuinely intellectual, if not exactly a scientific, endeavor.

In fact, by the time he arrived in the U.S., Nabokov was not much of an intellectual, if by that term we mean someone profoundly interested in the conflict of literary and cultural ideas. If it is easy to mistake him for one, it is because he was such a theatrical holder of opinions. Henry James was a "complete fake . . . a pale porpoise [of] plush vulgarities";<sup>17</sup> Hemingway and Conrad were "hopelessly juvenile" (*Opinions*, 42); the idea that any of William Faulkner's "corncobby chronicles" could be considered a masterpiece was an "absurd delusion, as when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair" (*Opinions*, 57). Proclamations such as those found throughout the aptly titled *Strong Opinions* (1973) are little more than vamping performances of judgment, all the more impressive because unreasonably extreme, if not simply stupid. The same streak of anti-intellectualism is evident in Nabokov's fiction. Its obsessive reflexivity produces an intimidating effect of hyper-cleverness, true, but this is less the working out of an interesting idea than a career-long compositional *reflex*: everyone in the novels, including the person at the source of their utterance, is subject to an ongoing process of figural doubling, division, rotation, and reversal—a sequencing of formal-ontological differentiation along various axes of identity. Humbert is the reverse of his nemesis, the playwright Quilty, and both are versions-in-reverse of Nabokov, the well-behaved author of the autobiographical text *Speak, Memory* (original version, 1951), who in *Pale Fire* splits himself between the married poet Shade and the homosexual critic Kinbote, who may or may not be the same person in the fictional world of the novel, and so on.

It makes sense that he would refer to his writing ability as a "com-

binational talent" (*Opinions*, 15). And he did not dispute the idea that he was quite repetitious. "Artistic originality has only its own self to copy," he granted, meaning not only that he was doing his own thing as a novelist but that writing those novels was a process of "evolving serial selves" from the unique self at their origin, Vladimir Nabokov (*Opinions*, 95; 24). As he makes clear in his lectures, no matter what a book is about, its "style constitutes an intrinsic component or characteristic of the author's personality," which even in the most impersonal narrative "remains diffused through the book so that his very absence becomes a kind of radiant presence" (*Lectures*, 59; 97). In this sense, even beyond the nonfictional memoir *Speak, Memory*, all of his writing might be described as *programmatic self-expression*. And this too, although he remained mostly an outsider to the new institutional arrangements of the Program Era, makes Nabokov's work emblematic of something central to the institution of creative writing, and of the ends to which its technologies are put.

Even more than self-expression, his fiction could be described as an act of programmatic self-establishment, an elaborately performative "I am." Using his own preferred idiom of fairy tale and romance, it could be described as a way for a king-in-exile to recover his country and reassert his rule on a linguistic-aesthetic plane. Nabokov's lifelong attraction—sometimes ironic, sometimes not—to the traditional romance motif of unrecognized royalty is fabulously evident in *Pale Fire*, where the deranged editor Kinbote has (at least in his own mind) been chased from the throne of the nation of Zembla to his ignominious dwelling at Wordsmith College, U.S.A. As the descendant of Russian nobility cut off from the vast country estate he roamed as a child, and from the language, Russian, in which he first made his name as a novelist, Nabokov had a more plausible biographical claim to a fantasy of royal restoration-in-language than most. But even for him this was essentially metaphorical, a way of imagining a life of uncompromised and exalted individuality. Certainly the fantasy is transposable to the inhabitants of the democratic United States, the immigrant nation where, as it has been well and untruly said, "every man is a king."<sup>18</sup> And it certainly fits quite snugly into the progressive school's

commitment to enhancing students' self-esteem. It's good to be king (or queen); and to recover one's throne in the enchanted realm of one's own writing is to bend the arrow of personal experience around until it reattaches to its origin like a golden Möbius band. Instead of testifying to a permanent condition of disadvantage in the face of physical necessity, or to the relentless humiliations exacted by social institutions, or to a perpetual process of wounding at the hands of history, "personal experience" is redeemed in this manner as a proud and vibrantly reflexive textual presence.

That anyway is the idea. Of course, in practice, time marches on and nothing really comes full circle. And when we pull back from the therapeutic enchantments of literary experience to a wider angle of vision, we see something slightly less mystical than a golden Möbius band: a world in which the category of "personal experience" has over the course of the twentieth century, and in the postwar period in particular, achieved a functional centrality in the postindustrial economies of the developed world. These economies in turn inhabit what Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and others have described as a "reflexive modernity."<sup>19</sup> The utility of this concept for understanding the metafictional impulse in postwar writing leaps off the page, suggesting that literary practices might partake in a larger, multivalent social dynamic of self-observation. This would extend from the self-observation of society as a whole in the social sciences, media, and the arts, to the "reflexive accumulation" of corporations which pay more and more attention to their own management practices and organizational structures, down to the self-monitoring of individuals who understand themselves to be living, not lives simply, but *life stories* of which they are the protagonists. It would be absurd to deny the large payoff to individuals living in the inherently pluralistic conditions of reflexive modernity, who are vested with a thrilling panoply of choices about how they will live their lives. But it would be equally wrong to deny the degree to which, as Beck puts it, modern people "are condemned to individualization." To be subject to reflexive modernity is to feel a "compulsion for the manufacture, self-design, and self-staging" of a biography<sup>20</sup> and, indeed, for the obses-

sive "reading" of that biography even as it is being written. And in this project there are a host of agencies, including schools, waiting to help.

One of the many names for the economic forms native to reflexive modernity is the "information economy," which isolates the importance of data and communications in the economic life of our times, and it will be of some help in defining the broader environment in which the system of creative writing moves. Although millions of people in the U.S. and abroad continue to work in factories and in the fields, this term does begin to limn the situation of the enormous and growing segment of the population, most of them college graduates, whom C. Wright Mills called the "white collar masses," and Christopher Newfield simply calls the "middle class."<sup>21</sup> Andrew Hoberek is right, in turn, to remind us that to the extent that these people can be described as middle class, it is a middle class quite distinct from either the European bourgeoisie or the yeoman farmers of the early Republic in that it is not comprised of independent owners of the means of production but of *employees*.<sup>22</sup> On one level, of course, the information in which these employees traffic plays the other to literature. As William R. Paulson has recounted, since the nineteenth century texts have been considered "literary" to the degree that their value does not seem reducible to the information they convey, and an author is in fact distinct from the typical information worker to the extent that she is an independent producer and owner of the fruits of her labor. And yet if we conceptualize literature, as Paulson does, as a kind of "noise" that opens the world of information to its outside—and thus to generation of new and potentially useful orders of information—it can be seen to have a special sort of utility in that world, a job to do.<sup>23</sup>

But even with these or similar dialectical adjustments, the term "information economy" does not adequately register the pleasurable existential narratives and dazzlingly colorful media spectacles increasingly associated with postwar economic life, missing the way it continually solicits from its actors a range of emotional responses, from bemused curiosity to laughter and tears and shame and shock and awe. This limits the term's reach as a descriptor of the environment of creative writing, and threatens



to sell us on a set of images of corporate life—in effect, the world of the man in the gray flannel suit—that have been out of date since the 1960s, when (as recounted by Thomas Frank and others) the energies of the counterculture began to be integrated into business practices.<sup>24</sup> What the business authors Joseph Pine and James Gilmore instead call the “Experience Economy” is one in which all commodities are at risk of “commodification”—the catastrophic deflation of their brand-name value (and per-unit profitability) in the direction of undifferentiated natural resources.<sup>25</sup> As an antidote, they suggest the staging of business transactions as a set of memorable experiences that would in theory be as various as the individuals who enjoy them, and thus immune from the consequences of the encroaching de-differentiation of their material vehicles. Which is really only to say, in a final realization of the logic of modern advertising, that marketing (or, rather, the experience of being marketed to) must in a sense be the thing being sold. The experience economy generalizes the affective protocols of consumerism such that they become relevant across all economic sectors.

Providing a compelling critical account of what Pine and Gilmore now offer in the glib spirit of how-to, Dean MacCannell long ago described the world of the experience economy as one of generalized tourism, a world in which the “value of such things as programs, trips, courses, reports, articles, shows, conferences, parades, opinions, events, sights, spectacles, scenes and situations of modernity is not determined by the amount of labor required for their production. Their value is a function of the quality and quantity of *experience* they promise.”<sup>26</sup> This, as MacCannell notes, marks the domain of cultural production as the leading edge of modern capitalism, which, in a way that Marx’s account of the commodity fetish did not quite foresee, trades more and more in purely symbolic, notionally “immaterial” goods. Instead of reifying the social relations of production in the form of a thing, as Marx had it, these symbolic goods (as it were) flip those relations over, trans-coding labor into leisure, production into consumption, with only a begrudging concession to their material substrate.

One of the jobs of this book will be to illuminate and appreciate postwar American literature by placing it in this evolving market context, examining how the university stepped forward in the postwar period both to facilitate and to buffer the writer’s relation to the culture industry and the market culture more broadly. While I have less to say about the nitty-gritty of writer-publisher relations than I might, and even less about such things as the corporate consolidation of the publishing industry and the demise of the independent bookstore, the market is everywhere relevant to the story I will tell, even beyond being something that must be held at bay for the health of literature. A novel is, after all, a very good example of an “experiential commodity” whose value to its readers is a transvaluation of the authorial labor that went into its making, and most often has little to do with the economic value of the pulp upon which it is pressed. This is brought into relief by the even better example of tourism, where the tourist pays simply *to be* in a certain place but hedges the immateriality of his experience by taking pictures and purchasing durable souvenirs. Since reading novels and being on vacation are so often aligned in popular practice, we might well suspect a deep link between the two. Isn’t the printed matter of the novel put back on the shelf in a sense the “souvenir” of the quasi-touristic imaginary experiences that were had inside it? For the reader of *Lolita*, this “tourism” is well nigh literal. Escaping from the town of Ramsdale just as Nabokov escaped from his job in Ithaca, New York, in pursuit of butterflies, the novel becomes a narrative of travel into the charming-innocence of American fakeness represented by the corny motels and tourist sites that Humbert and his captive visit along the way.

To the extent that it, too, can be understood as an experiential commodity that the student purchases with tuition money, creative writing instruction can be understood in similar, if less artifactual, terms. As an elective element of the undergraduate curriculum, creative writing issues an invitation to student-consumers to develop an intensely personal relation to literary value, one that for the most part bypasses the accumulation of traditional cultural capital (that is, a relatively rarefied knowledge of great authors and their works) in favor of a more immediate identification with

the charisma of authorship. Taking a vacation from the usual grind, the undergraduate writer becomes a kind of internal tourist voyaging on a sea of personal memories and trenchant observations of her social environment, converting them, via the detour of craft and imagination, into stories. By contrast, to read and analyze a novel in a regular literature class is to turn around and head back toward the workplace—back, that is, toward the submissiveness of homework. The detritus of this process—the little library of novels, poems, and plays the English major carries with him into life—is both a souvenir of the “college experience” and a materialization of the cultural capital which he worked hard (or not so hard, as the case may be) to acquire there.

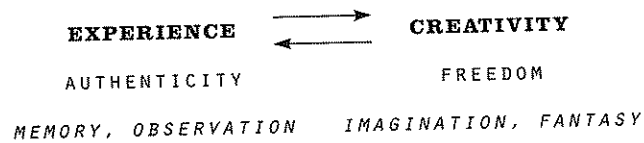
This is not to say that the self-tourism of creative writing is necessarily easy. Writing well is by all accounts very hard work, and part of the value of the program for graduate students in particular is in the outsourcing of self-discipline it facilitates, where the artifice of deadlines and grades helps the apprentice push through the quagmire that leaves untold thousands of citizens in the perpetual state of (not) “working on their novel.” Indeed it has been argued that one of the benefits of creative writing instruction is an increased appreciation, on the part of the student, of the true difficulty of the achievements of “real” writers. A nicer way to put that would be to say that creative writing makes for “creative readers”—which is to say, more involved readers, which may be true. (But if this is so, then creative writing should be integrated much more widely into the English curriculum and not held in reserve, as it so often is, for students who demonstrate talent. It would likewise be interesting to see what would happen if all faculty in English departments, even the most hardened historicists, were asked to teach creative writing.)

Like all progressive educational initiatives, however, creative writing does have a reputation for leniency, and why wouldn't it? In creative writing more than any other subject, it can seem that the teacher is grading a person, not a paper, or answers on an exam. It is, after all, a therapeutic educational enterprise in a way that, say, a physics class could only inadvertently be. No wonder then if, as poet-teacher Anna Leahy has ob-

served, self-esteem is a “hidden guiding principle in our pedagogy.”<sup>27</sup> My sense is that this is true even on the graduate level, where plumbing one's depths as a writer has been defined as a potential occupation. Of course one hears about cases like David Foster Wallace, who was said to have been harshly criticized by his teachers in the M.F.A. program at Arizona for his experimental impulses, but the most reliable source of negativity in the graduate workshop is no doubt other students—the competition—not the teacher. The teacher knows that for the vast majority of her charges the M.F.A. will not in fact function as a professional degree leading to a job but rather as a costly extension of their liberal education. In this sense it is a prolongation of the “college experience,” an all-too-brief period when the student is validated as a creative person and given temporary cover, by virtue of his student status, from the classic complaint of middle-class parents that their would-be artist children are being frivolous.

But to speak of creative writing as inhabiting an “experience economy” does not go far enough in correcting the emphases of the term “information.” To be sure, as we shall see, making this link begins to explain the deep affinity of workshop fiction (not to mention that curious new thing, “creative nonfiction”) to the nonfictional genre of the memoir, but it leaves unexplained the specific role, precisely, of creativity—and relatedly, fictionality—in the enterprise of creative writing. In the fiction workshop the student writer is invited to do something she cannot do anywhere else in her studies except at risk of expulsion: make stuff up. Although the practice of creative writing is grounded in the value of personal experience, it is in theory “set free” by the imagination which reshapes that experience to a greater or lesser degree. Creativity may stem from, but is not finally reducible to, personal experience: this is one thing that Nabokov's complex deployment of narrative unreliability in *Lolita* insists upon.<sup>28</sup> The difference between evil émigré Humbert and his not-so-evil émigré author, or between Philip Roth and the “counterlife” lived by his novelist-character Nathan Zuckerman, or even between the author Richard Powers and the character called “Richard Powers” in the novel *Galatea 2.2* (1995), is the all-important difference made by the creative counterfactual,

by fiction as a cipher for freedom. And this, in turn, echoes an understanding of creativity that began to emerge in the Renaissance, where human beings are understood to have the power to exceed the world as empirically given, turning the gift of free will toward the perfection of humankind, the harmony of nations, the invention of the new. The importation of this idea into the rationale for creative writing instruction is sometimes quite direct, as when David Fenza, making the case for his dis-



Here I introduce the first of several dynamic oppositions of value embedded in the practice of creative writing as it has been collectively understood and enacted in the postwar period. Its basic terms (in practice always intertwined and hard to distinguish) are inherited from two millennia of thought about art and art making, from Aristotle and Plato to the Renaissance to, perhaps most importantly, nineteenth-century romanticism. In recognition of the fundamental importance of self-reference in and to this practice, I will call the act of authorship in the Program Era the "autopoetic process," and here designate as two of its most basic interacting elements the values of creativity and experience, leaving for later the equally important value of "craft." We can flesh out these terms with the more overtly ideological values with which they have often been associated, and we can furthermore attach them to the cognitive faculties which they typically assume will be brought to bear in the act of writing. To write "from experience" is either to plumb the depths of memory or to engage in quasi-journalistic reportage; in either case the fiction so created will (in theory) have the ring of authenticity. To be "creative" in one's writing is, by contrast, to imagine the world anew, "improving" upon experience so that it makes for a good story, part of whose excitement will stem from the sense that "anything can happen" in the freedom of fictional worlds.

cipline, speaks of how "creative writing classes often demonstrate the efficacy of the human will—that human experience can be shaped for the good."<sup>29</sup>

Hence the irritation one so often encounters on the part of professional authors in the face of what seems to them a limiting biographical reading of their fiction. Alfred Appel notes on Nabokov's behalf how those readers who note some similarities between author and narrator and "immediately conclude that *Lolita* is autobiographical in the most literal sense" have fallen into a cunning trap set by the author, who is much more sophisticated than that.<sup>30</sup> As John Irving's *The World According to Garp* (1978)—the story of an only-somewhat-John-Irving-like novelist—puts it, "Garp always said that the question he most hated to be asked, about his work, was how much of it was 'true'—how much of it was based on 'personal experience.' . . . Usually, with great patience and restraint, Garp would say that the autobiographical basis—if there even was one—was the least interesting level on which to read a novel."<sup>31</sup>

But, contra Garp, readers who go in for the biographical reading of fiction are not only naïve but also savvy, drawing potentially interesting if perhaps inherently indeterminate conclusions from the proper name—e.g., "John Irving"—on the cover of a book. They know that fiction emerges in the most literal sense from the experiences of the author—writing fiction is one of those experiences. And they know that in the literary culture in which the fictional author named Garp came to exist, "personal experience" and "creativity" are primary values that relay one to the other in a relation of mutual authorization, distortion, and augmentation. They know that part of the value of the modern literary text, quite apart from the "relatability" of its characters, is the act of *authorship* that it records, offering readers a mediated experience of expressive selfhood as such. If, as in *Speak, Memory*, that story is essentially true to experience, there is still the fascination of the conversion of memory into felicitous expression. If, as in *Lolita* or *Garp*, that expression is dazzlingly ironized, turned inside out and around and folded thrice, all the better. The complexity of the situation can be seen in the fact that there is little doubt that

John Irving shares the opinions of his character on the limitations of biographical reading—little doubt that Garp is in general the author's (as they say) mouthpiece. Furthermore, the novel itself takes considerable interest in the way the raw material of Garp's life experiences is used in the manufacture of his fiction, some of which (oddly enough) was published separately under the name John Irving. The indeterminacy of the relation between author and character is in this case quite real, a matter of pragmatic fact, but to make it a principle (whether by way of prohibitions against the "biographical fallacy," as the New Critics called it, or in the absurd declarations of the "death of the author" that were heard in the 1960s) is to risk missing one of the most basic dynamics of postwar literary production.<sup>32</sup>

The name for the economic world in which the principle of personal indetermination will always be paid flattering respect is the "Creative Economy," which proceeds on the simple theory that anything is possible except the restraint of capital. This is Richard Florida's alternative, borrowed from John Howkins, to Pine and Gilmore's Experience Economy. While his account hits some of the same notes as theirs, it is broader in conception, drawing attention not only to the suffusion of contemporary commerce with experiential fictions, but to the necessity of providing the right social climate (liberal, diverse) for creativity.<sup>33</sup> It also, more simply, draws attention to the increasing importance in our time of research and development as engines of the new, and to the way—this is Howkins's emphasis—intellectual property in the form of new patents, trademarks, and copyrights has become the digital bedrock upon which the contemporary economy is built. There is, in other words, a deep continuity between *creativity* and *R&D*, and nowhere more so than on the campus. While they are also (with museums) our culture's primary custodians of the obsolete, it would be an understatement to say that modern universities have been eager participants in the pursuit of the new. As centers of basic and applied research, they lend aid to the development of the local, regional, and national economies they inhabit, doing their bit for the unending project of capitalist "creative destruction" celebrated by the economist Joseph Schumpeter in the 1940s.

Of course, nothing much is "destroyed" by creative writing, not literally. It remains for the most part a rather low-tech and quaintly humanistic, if increasingly sprawling, affair whose role is rather to give something back to the student which the perpetual displacements of modern life—Nabokov knew more than his share of these—might seem to take away. It is easier, in other words, to see creative writing as one of the forms of obsolescence conserved by the university than as part of its R&D wing. Even so, the remarkably smooth entry of the discipline of creative writing into the U.S. university over the past fifty years or so has been facilitated by the concurrent rise of creativity as a value beloved by American artists and scientists and corporate types alike—by everyone, really, certainly including literary scholars like me.

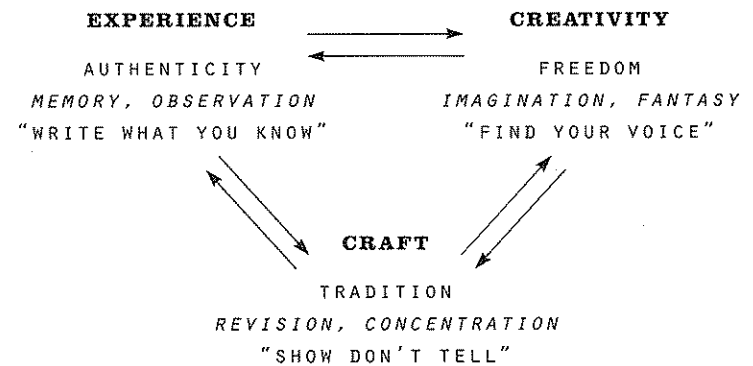
Who doesn't love creativity? "No word in English carries a more consistently positive reference than 'creative,'" observed Raymond Williams in 1961, and since then its reputation has only improved.<sup>34</sup> The fervor of our lip service to creativity is matched only by the enthusiasm of our paeans to personal experience. If, in the chapters that follow, I seem too willing to discount the enchantments of the first, and question the authority of the second, it is only in the interest of restoring some balance in favor of the claims of the collective life we live through institutions. Or rather, as the systems theorists would less flatteringly put it, the collective life that institutions live through us.

## GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM

The American writer's intimacy with the university in our time is not an entirely unprecedented phenomenon. If only as students, and occasionally as teachers, writers have been spotted on campus before now. The gradual conjoining of the activities of literary production and teaching over the course of the postwar period is, however, in the sheer scale of the institutional program building upon which it has depended, and in the striking reversal of attitudes that it suggests, about as close to a genuine literary historical novelty as one could hope to see. Once perceived as the stuffy

enemy of modernist innovation in the arts, the last place a self-respecting artist would want, or be welcomed, to ply his trade, the university has with the rise and spread of classroom instruction in creative writing, and with it the creative writing professorship and other forms of writer-in-residency, become perhaps the most important patron of artistically ambitious literary practice in the United States, the *sine qua non* of countless careers. "All this represents a very great change," wrote Alfred Kazin in the mid-1950s, already amazed by the transformation he was witnessing. "When I was in college in the 'thirties, it was still well understood that scholars were one class and writers quite another. They did not belong to the same order of mind, they seemed quite antithetical in purpose and temperament, and at the very least, they needed different places to work in."<sup>35</sup>

Of course there were some obvious exceptions to Kazin's rule—most importantly the New Critics, who had previously convened in the environs of Vanderbilt in the 1920s as the Fugitive poets, and whose later promotion of the practice of close reading of literary texts in the classroom would harmonize conspicuously well with the obsessive concern for "craft" that began to define writing programs at roughly the same time. This can be seen in Jay McInerney's recollection of how, when he submitted his apprentice fiction to Raymond Carver at Syracuse University, "manuscripts came back thoroughly ventilated with Carver deletions, substitutions, question marks and chicken-scratch queries. I took one story back to him seven times; he must have spent 15 or 20 hours on it. He was a meticulous, obsessive line editor. . . . Once we spent some 10 or 15 minutes debating my use of the word 'earth.' Carver felt it had to be 'ground,' and he felt it was worth the trouble of talking it through. That one exchange was invaluable; I think of it constantly when I'm working."<sup>36</sup> The idea is that stories, prose though they may be, and preferably (for a writer like Carver) grounded in everyday speech, should nonetheless be constructed with the same precision and subtlety as the Metaphysical poem, with every word weighed and measured and balanced for meaning and effect.

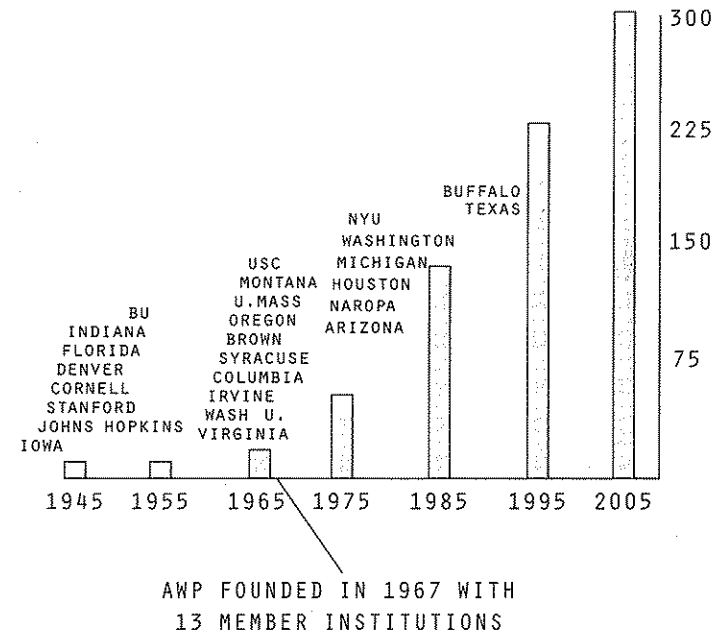


Here I fill out the abstract model of the autopoietic process as the Program Era has understood it, adding the all-important value of craft and its associated elements to the values of personal experience and creativity. This diagram abstracts from the totality of the rhetoric of postwar creative writing the key components of the autopoietic process, separating this specifically literary endeavor from the "writing process" or "creative process" more generally. The values of experience, creativity, and craft can be understood as the psychic and symbolic resources upon which a writer draws in the act of writing, and here they are supplied with the pedagogical imperatives with which they are commonly associated. Craft—also called "technique"—adds the elements of acquired skill and mental effort to the process, and is strongly associated with professional pride and the lessons or "lore" of literary tradition. The imperative to "show don't tell" is, in turn, strongly associated with the disciplining of the "natural" impulse to express oneself as a self, that is, with the classically modernist value of "impersonality."

However untrue, it makes sense that the aforementioned Fenza, in his role as Executive Director of the AWP (Associated Writing Programs, founded in 1967), would claim for his organization the honor of having "rescued literature from the exhumations of the philologists to elevate literature's status as a *living art*"; that was the achievement of the New Crit-

ics, many of them poet-critics, who began as relatively marginal figures in academia, with low status even at places like Vanderbilt, but lived to see their ideas lodged at the core of American literary studies in the postwar period.<sup>37</sup> In this they can be taken as emblematic of American writers more broadly, who have gradually, since the founding of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, seen the "extramural" consciousness of their modernist predecessors turned inside out—or, rather, outside in.<sup>38</sup> The handful of creative writing programs that existed in the 1940s had, by 1975, increased to 52 in number. By 1984 there were some 150 graduate degree programs (offering the M.A., M.F.A., or Ph.D.), and as of 2004 there were more than 350 creative writing programs in the United States, all of them staffed by practicing writers, most of whom, by now, are themselves holders of an advanced degree in creative writing. (If one includes undergraduate degree programs, that number soars to 720.) Fenza estimates that the total contribution of this, "the largest system of literary patronage for living writers that the world has ever seen," runs to at least 200 million dollars annually.<sup>39</sup> You don't have to be a dogmatic historical materialist to believe that a transformation of the institutional context of literary production as fundamental as this one might matter to a reading of postwar American literature.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, one might imagine that the rise of the writing program would have already attracted considerable attention from literary scholars, who have after all been on hand to watch it occur at close range. But in fact—perhaps as a result of its occurring at *too* close range—it is only a small exaggeration to say that the rise of the creative writing program has been entirely ignored in interpretive studies of postwar literature. Discussion of the writer's relation to the university has instead largely been confined to the domain of literary journalism, and to the question of whether the rise of the writing program has been *good* or *bad* for American writing.<sup>41</sup> Whether couched in populist or elitist terms, the suspicion running throughout these discussions is that there may be something inherently wrong with artistic activity being, as critics ominously say, *institutionalized* in such a way. Published to considerable fanfare in *Harper's Magazine* in



A cluster of creative writing programs appeared in the immediate postwar period, but with the progressive educational revival of the 1960s, the numbers exploded. Note that, while creative writing is a relatively cutting-edge educational phenomenon, its most prestigious or notable instances (indicated by the names superimposed upon the bar graph, arrayed roughly according to the year of a given program's founding) are correlated with relatively long duration. As of 2004 there were well over 300 graduate programs affiliated with the AWP, while the total reported individual membership (faculty and students) in the AWP was some 25,000, according to the AWP website: [www.awpwriter.org](http://www.awpwriter.org).

1989, Tom Wolfe's "manifesto" for a new social realism, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast," is perhaps the most notorious of these critiques, complaining of "writers in the university writing programs" who in "long, phenomenological discussions" have "decided that the act of writing words on a page [is the] real thing and the so-called real world of America"

is the fiction.<sup>42</sup> In place of this effete and tedious navel-gazing, Wolfe would have writers return to the robust example of nineteenth-century literary naturalism, where the practices of novel writing partially converged with those of investigative journalism.

Others such as John W. Aldridge have given thumbs-down to the writing program not only for its removal of writers from the manifold stimulations of the real world, but also for the damage it has done to the originality of the individual authorial voice. Demonstrating the continuing appeal of the romantic conception of the artist as an original genius, "assembly-line" writing programs are blamed by Aldridge for producing a standardized aesthetic, a corporate literary style that makes a writer identifiable as, say, an Iowa writer. The claim here is that the collective pursuit of perfectly crafted, workshopped prose has the effect of eliminating the salutary unpredictability of the students in question, ironically reproducing the machine-made quality of formulaic genre fiction on another, slightly more elevated or rarefied cultural level. The result, according to Aldridge, is that products of the writing program become, not writers, but "clonal fabrications of writers" who can only be expected to produce "small, sleek, clonal fabrications of literature."<sup>43</sup>

A nervousness surrounding these issues is evident even in the official history of the illustrious program at Iowa, available on its website, whose rhetorical curlicues are a typical response to the simple but difficult questions that have haunted creative writing programs since their inception:

Though we agree in part with the popular insistence that writing cannot be taught, we exist and proceed on the assumption that talent can be developed, and we see our possibilities and our limitations as a school in that light. If one can "learn" to play the violin or to paint, one can "learn" to write, though no processes of externally induced training can ensure that one will do it well. Accordingly, the fact that the Workshop can claim as alumni nationally and internationally prominent poets, novelists, and short story writers is, we believe, more the

result of what they brought here than of what they gained from us. We continue to look for the most promising talent in the country, in our conviction that writing cannot be taught but that writers can be encouraged.<sup>44</sup>

Tilling the symbolic ground between teaching and development, teaching and encouragement, this cannily argued document manages on the one hand to pay respect to the "popular" idea of natural individual genius and to communicate a strong sense of Iowa's considerable historical importance and continuing prestige. The point here, indeed, is to make populism and elitism indistinguishable. The same sort of fusion is evident in the creative writer's distinct claim to prestige in the English departments to which writing programs tend to be attached: although typically relatively undereducated for that milieu, such a writer may actually be known to a nonacademic readership. This fact, combined with the spiritual privilege derived from the writer's intimate commerce with the Muse, and with the apparently bottomless desire of undergraduates to take creative writing classes, offsets to some degree the intramural dominance of Ph.D. scholars who largely run the place but who are famous, if at all, only to each other.

Writing programs: pro or con? There is nothing wrong with this debate, but surely it's time for the museless pedants to have their say. What is needed now, that is, are studies that take the rise and spread of the creative writing program not as an occasion for praise or lamentation but as an established fact in need of historical interpretation: how, why, and to what end has the writing program reorganized U.S. literary production in the postwar period? And, even more important for my purposes here, how might this fact be brought to bear on a reading of postwar literature itself? Focusing on fiction at the expense of the equally interesting (and potentially inter-illuminating) cases of poetry and the other arts, this book will take some steps toward answering these large questions and only in conclusion will circle back around to sketch a new and I think more interesting form of appreciation—a *total* appreciation—of what the program hath

wrought. The challenge will be to generate concepts and critical vocabulary broad enough to describe an entire literary historical period, but flexible enough to admit that the phenomena they name were in fact gradually assembled over many decades, and continue to transform under our eyes. To facilitate a perception of historical process, I have divided the chapters of this book into three roughly chronological parts: the first tracks the gradual assemblage of the system as we know it across the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, culminating in the founding of the Iowa Writers' Workshop; the second examines the upheaval and elasticity of that system in the pivotal and famously "expressive" period of the long 1960s, when the program really began to multiply; the third analyzes its normal functioning since then as one of the signal educational practices of reflexive modernity.

The first term in my critical vocabulary is therefore the "Program Era" itself. If only for the allusion it makes to Kenner's magisterial account of interwar modernism, this term would be a little risky, setting a standard for critical vivacity and acumen that I cannot hope to match. A more consequential risk is that it can seem simultaneously too broad and too narrow in defining a critical domain. How can I offer this book as an account of an era when that era has evidently not yet concluded—indeed, is perhaps best thought of as having just recently gotten fully underway? How, for that matter, can I all but ignore the genre of poetry that was Kenner's central object of attention? I could try to justify my focus by saying that the postwar period is, in some deep sense, a "novelistic" and not a "poetic" period, and I might even half believe it. Certainly the increasingly mediated and aesthetically "impure" qualities of postmodern culture have a compelling precursor in the history of the novel genre as described by Mikhail Bakhtin.<sup>45</sup> By the same token, the sheer garishness of postwar image culture has as often been declared the occasion of the "death of the novel" as it has been declared novelistic. Better, then, to admit that a restriction to fiction is simply one of the innumerable limitations I have had to accept in order to lend coherence to the critical narrative I want to construct, which will not come to the resounding conclusion of a post-program era but will trail off into an uncertain future.<sup>46</sup>

That said, one of the interesting side effects of the rise of the creative writing program is the way that it tends to divide its denizens, teachers and students alike, into either a fiction or poetry or nonfiction "track," and the way that this bureaucratic convenience ramifies throughout the postwar literary field. (An even more extreme division is enacted between these genres and dramatic writing, which has over time disengaged from the English department entirely in favor of an affiliation with Drama). For instance, a writer like Raymond Carver may have felt himself to be equally a poet and a short story writer, but his professional identity suggested starkly otherwise. While his plainspoken poetry is mostly ignored, his short fiction has become required reading for students of creative writing, the very model (with Hemingway) of writing as painstaking understatement. The social-professional and patronage networks of fiction and poetry are substantially different from one another, and so is the situation of these genres in the economy at large. In contrast to poetry, which (as a paying profession at least) has been all but entirely absorbed by institutions of higher education, the situation of fiction remains complex, extending outward from the institutionally subsidized high-art experimentation of publishers like Fiction Collective 2 and Dalkey Archive into economically viable domains of serious middlebrow fiction and from there to Oprah-enhanced bestsellerdom and multi-phase movie deals. The Brat Pack phenomenon of the 1980s, when program products like McInerney and Bret Easton Ellis were promoted as a glamorous new Lost Generation, could not have happened if the brats had been poets. More recently, the impressive cultural entrepreneurship of Dave Eggers, with its literary magazines and publishing ventures and community centers, could not have been built on a foundation of poetry. An account of the Program Era in poetry would therefore look substantially different from this one, and not just on the question of marketability. Insofar as literary forms are specific to literary genres, the effort to link forms with their contexts will be relatively specific.

Of course, the residually if inconsistently viable relation of fiction to the market might be another reason to object to the term "Program Era," since it would seem to marginalize all those postwar writers—for instance,



Don DeLillo, John Updike, Cormac McCarthy—who have only glancingly, if at all, gotten with the program. They have instead been supported by book sales, by the healthy per-word rates of a magazine like the *New Yorker*, or by the largesse of non-academic institutions like the Guggenheim Foundation. And yet consider the seemingly banal fact that virtually all contemporary American fiction writers, including the three named above, have attended college, and that the most “out on the range” among them (McCarthy) got his start by publishing stories in the campus literary magazine at the University of Tennessee.<sup>47</sup> In previous generations this would not likely have been the case, both because fewer individuals of any kind went to college before the postwar advent of mass higher education and because a college education was not yet perceived as an obvious, and still less a necessary, starting point for a career as a novelist. Rather, as the uncredentialed, or rather press-credentialed, example of the high school graduate Hemingway makes clear, the key supplementary institution for the novel until mid-century was journalism, which remains importantly “on the map” of the field of literary production to this day. (Think here of the careers of Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Donald Barthelme, Tom Wolfe, William T. Vollman and the like, or of the obvious importance of the *New Yorker* and a few other reportage-dominated, large-circulation magazines to the fate of postwar American fiction.)

Thus we will want to be attentive not only to the program in isolation and as such but also to something larger, what Langdon Hammer has called the “culture of the school.”<sup>48</sup> At its farthest reaches, this might encompass phenomena as broadly spread as, say, the importance of Augie’s reading of the Harvard Five Foot Shelf of classics in Saul Bellow’s *Augie March* (1953), which reflexively explains that novel’s celebrated amalgam of learned and demotic speech, or Eggers’s using the proceeds from his best-selling memoir and novels to found a community writing workshop and tutoring center for youth, 826 Valencia. If we were feeling especially expansive, we might note that two of the most phenomenal best-sellers of our or any time—J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series and Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*—are both in different ways conspicuously “scholarly”

fictions, suggesting a deep well of utopian longing on the part of readers for meaningful education and the (alas) hard-won pleasures of erudition. My thesis is not that creative writing programs preclude all other forms of literary patronage or venues for a career, but that these programs are the most original production of the postwar period, its most interesting and emblematic—and, yes, increasingly hegemonic—literary historical transformation. Having learned a great deal from the pioneers (Ihab Hassan, Marcus Klein, Tony Tanner, Morris Dickstein, Jerome Klinkowitz, Robert Scholes, and others) who established the viability of academic criticism of contemporary literature, and from the critics (Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Philip Brian Harper, and others) who have most acutely defined what we mean when we say “postmodern fiction,” I want however to shift the discussion to the actual institutions, technologies, and practices from which postwar fiction emerges. Building upon the work of those (Gerald Graff, John Guillory, D. G. Myers, and others) who have drawn our attention to the function of literature as an institutional value in and of the postwar American academy, and taking what I will from recent work in systems and media theory, I aspire to offer an account of postwar fiction that is at once more concrete and more comprehensive than usual, ranging from close encounters with literary works and their authors up to the flagrant abstraction of the diagram.

By way of introduction to this project, I want to take the two charges most frequently heard against program fiction in literary journalism—that it is *self-involved*, that it is *unoriginal*—as occasions to begin the non-partisan examination of the *reflexivity* and *systematicity* of postwar American literary production which I will carry out in the course of this book. Whatever opinion one may have of the fact, it is true that contemporary literary authorship is a profoundly self-conscious occupation, and also true that, under the auspices of the creative writing program, the ways and means of literary education have been structured in new ways. As the poet William Matthews put it in his foreword to the 1980 edition of the ever-fattening *AWP Catalogue of Writing Programs*: “What is clear is that the process of literary education has become increasingly formalized, and so perhaps

easier to begin to describe, since the propagation of creative writing as a formal study appropriate to universities."<sup>49</sup>

Venturing to map the totality of postwar American fiction, I will describe it as breaking down into three relatively discrete but in practice overlapping aesthetic formations. The first, "technomodernism," is best understood as a tweaking of the term "postmodernism" in that it emphasizes the all-important engagement of postmodern literature with information technology; the second, "high cultural pluralism," will describe a body of fiction that joins the high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice; the third, "lower-middle-class modernism," will be used to describe the large body of work—some would say it is the most characteristic product of the writing program—that most often takes the form of the minimalist short story, and is preoccupied more than anything else with economic and other forms of insecurity and cultural anomie. These more or less barbarous neologisms are obviously not native to the rhetoric of creative writing and postwar fiction which they seek to describe. They are rather the self-consciously "reductive" instruments of a scholar reviewing the situation from a point of critical remove and trying to organize it afresh, and would ideally be thought of not as separate baskets into which individual works can be placed but as principles around which they gravitate at a greater or lesser distance. This obviates the need to force hybrids and outliers into a false conformity, and dissuades us from turning classification into a parlor game. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer once observed that "classification is a condition of knowledge, not knowledge itself, and knowledge in turn dissolves classification."<sup>50</sup> In that spirit we can take for granted that the whole truth of any given instance of art exceeds its membership in some category; but that insofar as the category might help to make that excess visible, it is all the more useful.

Technomodernism, high cultural pluralism, lower-middle-class modernism: I will describe the variable tendency to "involute" self-reference in all of these aesthetic formations as "autopoetics." It may be true that

the dominant aesthetic orientation of the writing program has been toward literary realism and away from the experimentalism we naturally associate with reflexivity.<sup>51</sup> This is mostly accurate as a description of the programs at schools like Iowa and Stanford, which emerged from the richly descriptive regionalist literary movements of the thirties, and have generally remained committed to some version of literary realism ever since. Still, one can find obvious exceptions to this rule even at these places—for example, Kurt Vonnegut at Iowa, Gilbert Sorrentino at Stanford—and it seems a fairly weak description of programs at schools like Johns Hopkins, Brown, and SUNY Buffalo, all of which have been and remain strongly supportive of experimental writing. T. Coraghessan Boyle recounts how, when he was studying with John Cheever at Iowa in the seventies, "I kept making noises about 'experimental writing' and hailing people like Coover, Pynchon, Barthelme, and John Barth, but Cheever would have none of it. He couldn't make any sense out of *The Sot Weed Factor* and didn't see that it was worth the effort of trying. Further, he insisted that his writing was experimental, too, but I didn't really get what he meant till he published his collected stories five years later. . . . All good fiction is experimental, he was telling me, and don't get caught up in fads."<sup>52</sup>

The struggle between a dominant "conventional realism" and a minority "radical experimentalism" is an ongoing one in the creative writing establishment, but it is a classically dialectical struggle in which opposing sides begin, despite themselves, to interpenetrate. For instance, as we shall see, bodies of realist fiction founded on the experience of racial difference always incorporate, if only as a structural principle, an "outside" observer of that difference. In these works a racial identity, no matter how realistically described, is a reflexive identity, and ethnic realism is a perforce a reflexive realism (as W. E. B. Du Bois could have predicted). So, too, the realism of a Cheever or Carver, while it entailed a rejection of the extreme formal experimentalism of Barth and Barthelme and Coover, and of the influence of important academic promoters of experimental writing like Robert Scholes and Jerome Klinkowitz, is nonetheless rife with reflexive consideration of writing as an occupational and existential condition. The

autopoietic processes they exhibit speak to the fundamental non-naïveté of modern literary authorship, which as a product most broadly of reflexive modernity and, more specifically, of the school, cannot help seeing and knowingly announcing itself as authorship of one or another kind. This is literally true in creative writing Ph.D. programs—the latest advance over the M.F.A., opening up a wider range of academic jobs to program graduates—where students write a creative dissertation but typically supply it with a critical preface that, as the University of Denver policy states, “situates it in its literary context.”<sup>53</sup> The idea is that, caught up in the systematization of writing in the university, most postwar writers exhibit this autopoietic self-referentiality and most of their work gravitates toward one or another or several of these formations—and that to the extent that they don’t, that is interesting.

These terms will be set off in subsequent chapters against some of the indigenous rhetoric of creative writing itself, where the values conveniently designated by the terms “experience” and “craft” and “creativity” have been in more or less constant dialogue across the Program Era. One way to flesh out this dialogue is to look at the familiar set of prescriptive slogans in which they are complexly encoded: “write what you know”; “show don’t tell”; “find your voice.” To be sure, no self-respecting creative writing teacher of the present day would be caught dead using such hackneyed phrases (except perhaps the last) without heavy scare quotes, but I believe they accurately frame the implicit poetics of the program. This principled avoidance of clichés—“write what you know” goes back at least to the nineteenth century, “show don’t tell” to the early twentieth, and “find your voice” to the neo-romantic 1960s—is no doubt admirable in many ways, but it is symptomatic of a general avoidance of systematic reflection on classroom protocols in the discipline of creative writing.<sup>54</sup> “What, after all, is the discipline of creative writing? If we taught it, what would we be teaching?” Shirley Geok-lin Lim asked this question in 2003, when the discipline was some fifty years old, and to a remarkable degree, no one in the field even tries to answer it.<sup>55</sup> The current head of the M.F.A. program at the University of Michigan, Eileen Pollack, could be speaking

for thousands of program graduates when she recalls how her teachers at Iowa “commented on what they liked or did not like about a particular story, offered isolated bits of advice about technique, but most of us got through two years of instruction without any formal discussions of theory or craft, New Critical or otherwise.”<sup>56</sup>

Partly this neglect has to do with the fact that, as we saw in Iowa’s self-description above, many of those involved in the field of creative writing *agree* with their critics that it cannot be taught, though unlike them they believe that writing should be *occasional* in the classroom nonetheless. Partly it has to do with the fact that historically, as with Nabokov, a teaching job for writers has been an add-on to what they *really* do, which is write. As the protagonist of Karl Shapiro’s novel *Edsel* (1971) admits to his creative writing class on the first day of the semester: “The hard thing to say is that as a teacher I am not a writer; as writer I am not a teacher. Writing is solitary, absolutely between you and your piece of paper. Not an act of self-expression but of self-love, an act of exclusion, so to speak . . . I am just putting myself on record, to introduce myself and let you in on this paradox . . . Why do universities let us writers in? Don’t ask me,” I chuckled, “but it’s a fine thing for writers that they do.”<sup>57</sup> In this way creative writers are somewhat like elite academic researchers in other disciplines, who are good teachers (when they are good teachers) almost by accident. For all the lip service paid to the nobility of teaching, an artist or a scholar (or better yet, “thinker”) is a much more revered being than a teacher, and it is hard to fault the wish to be the one more than the other, if possible. The former represent the essence of professional autonomy and cultural authority, while the social position of the schoolteacher, like all feminized labor, tends toward low-paid subjugation to societal need.

The rationale for this disregard of teaching method in the institution of creative writing is, however, unique to itself: it is the notion that the relation between student and teacher in creative writing is one of *apprenticeship* rather than of teaching per se—the idea being that a master craftsman communicates her knowledge informally, in daily practice, not by means of a systematic presentation tied to a formal syllabus. One flaw in this no-

tion is that, in fact, neither undergraduate nor graduate student writers typically sit alongside their teachers all day as they practice their craft, as the anachronistic term "apprenticeship" implies. Rather, they show up in the classroom or office hours at the appointed time, then leave. Moreover, the teacher's own writing is only rarely introduced into the workshop; class time instead is given over to the consideration of works of (more or less) contemporary fiction by name writers or, after students have had a few weeks of classes to generate their own work, writings by the apprentices themselves. As Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice have noted, the name for the knowledge disbursed under these conditions is *lore*.<sup>58</sup>

The apparent informality of creative writing pedagogy—in fact it is as systematic in its way as any repetitive human activity—can usefully be contrasted with that other, more utilitarian, and generally non-elective form of writing instruction frequently attached to English departments, composition. Over the many years of its existence, this increasingly autonomous discipline has devoted a great deal of attention to what exactly the process of expository writing is and how it can best be taught; and, what's more, a considerable amount of time is spent teaching its student-teachers how to do this teaching. The pedagogical professionalism of composition puts that of creative writing (not to mention traditional literary studies) to shame, but that shame is on another level a point of pride. No one has ever proved that creative writers make the best creative writing teachers, but that sort of proof is evidently beside the point. What the literary artist is presenting to students in the classroom is a charismatic model of *creative being*. This means that, notwithstanding the ample amounts of testimony supplied here in the form "so-and-so taught me X," the task of tracing the "lessons" of creative writing from the classroom into the literary texts of the Program Era will be a somewhat indeterminate enterprise. Influence of course takes many forms, and the absorption of precepts or rules of literary composition is only one of these. Critics and champions of the writing program have always asked: can it be taught? The scholar of the program era is stuck with a different and equally difficult question: *has it been taught?*

To discover the narrative poetic system latent in the proudly "unsystematic" endeavor of creative writing instruction, and to determine the ways it has structured postwar American literary production, will therefore require some work, and is bound to be elliptical in its conclusions. But it is worth doing if only for the new tools it will give us to read postwar American fiction itself. This, I believe, is as rich and multifaceted a body of literary writing as has ever been, and whether this is so thanks to, or in spite of, the rise of the creative writing program, should be at no risk of seeming less so for our unliterary efforts to understand it.

### TECHNOMODERNISM

It's hard to say when exactly the presence of writers on campus came to seem natural—assuming that it ever has. Certainly as late as the mid-1960s, by which time creative writing programs were beginning to multiply exponentially, the sense of strangeness hovering about this juxtaposition of scholars and writers had not yet diminished. This can be seen from the prefatory "Cover Letter to the Editors and Publisher" attached to the long, bizarre comic novel *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), where John Barth notes that "like most writers these days, I support myself by preaching what I practice."<sup>59</sup>

This, he playfully explains, is how he came into possession of the original manuscript of the work we hold in our hands, brought to his office on campus one afternoon by a curly-bearded, smelly young man he wrongly assumed to be an undergraduate of the aspiring-writer type. Of course, what is more plausibly explained by this apparition "so like a certain old memory of myself," putting him "in mind of three dozen old stories wherein the hero meets his own reflection," is how there could have come to be a novel like this one, subtitled *The Revised New Syllabus*, the entirety of which takes place on a strangely altered modern university campus. On Barth's imaginary campus, divided into East and West, there is little difference between the University and the Universe as such; here all humanity is known as Studentdom, and all of Studentdom is studying for

an ominous Final Exam. Indeed, the ingenuity and doggedness with which Barth finds allegorical analogues to world history and the cold war ("Quiet Riot") and reconfigures them as features internal to campus life is impressive. First educating John Barth as an undergraduate, then as a graduate student in creative writing at the John Hopkins Writing Seminars, and now employing him as a creative writing instructor in a "fiction-writing seminary," the university appears in this novel to have captured his imagination entirely.<sup>60</sup>

Much of the plot of *Giles Goat-Boy* revolves around the growing commitment of the smelly goat-boy—sired somehow by the all-powerful West Campus computer system, but raised among the animals at the Agriculture School—to his academic-messianic destiny as Grand Tutor. The crucial technological advance represented by this computer is the addition of an algorithmic Eros, an intuitive and passionate "humanity" that counters and radically complicates its old-hat capacity for calculation. Not only does this make the computer "creative," but it becomes subject as never before to a kind of bio-mechanical lust: indeed its enthusiasm for the act of reproduction, evident in its fervent practice of genetically engineering student bodies, meshes the acts of social and biological reproduction typically distributed to the institutions of the school and the family. This makes the computer called WESCAC seem a sort of condensation and literalization of the social technology of the progressive educational institution, whose pleasures are aimed at the erotic production and reproduction of the social system. At the same time, and somewhat presciently, WESCAC is represented as the materialized principle of what Barth calls the Campus's "informational" (as opposed to industrial) economy, its economy of signs. If, as Daniel Bell has argued, the university is the "axial institution" of postindustrial society, then the computer tape reels of WESCAC are the medium in which it spins.<sup>61</sup>

To prove his divinity, the goat-boy who is the human issue of this desiring machine must depart the pastoral innocence of the Ag School farm, travel with various hangers-on to Commencement Gate, vanquish a devilish pretender to his role, and answer the great riddle of Passage and

Failure. Something like a comic, novelistic version of "The Waste Land," the novel patches together conventional elements from a range of mythic, epic, and biblical-allegorical literary traditions but then, quite unlike Eliot's *noir-ish*, urban poem, projects them into the pastoral scene of American higher education. Hence, in a way, Barth is already working the themes of the novel when he refers in the "Cover Letter" to his teaching duties as "preaching." The link between professing and preaching, syllabus and Bible, makes sense in a novel that will ask the reader not only to think of the university as a universe, and vice versa, but also to see the modern, secular research university as re-imagined by the quasi-sacred literary tradition of which it is now the custodian.

One could also see the novel, somewhat differently, as a dramatized return of the repressed history of the American university. In the United States a fitful transition from religious to modern secular institutions began soon after the Civil War, as the older private colleges, traditionally associated with one or another Christian denomination, were divided into autonomous fields of scientific inquiry and reoriented toward systematic research and knowledge-production. Here, as in so many other institutions, the "modernity" of the university was achieved in its simultaneous outward expansion and internal differentiation. When the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 made resources available for the founding of public universities, these "land grant" institutions were generally of a practical-industrial bent and followed the same disciplinary research model, continuing the drift away from curricular religion.

Even as this happened, however, the Sciences of the university were supplemented by a newly invigorated and expanded Arts (alternatively "Humanities" or "Letters") curriculum, centered on the study of literature, to which fell the responsibility in the new context of disciplinary specialization of "making knowledge cohere." Jon H. Roberts and James Turner have argued that this expansion of the Arts, whatever its intentions may have been, helped to smooth the passage to a modern university system by sublimating the traditional moral-religious emphases of antebellum liberal arts training in the secular values-discourse of humanistic

aesthetics.<sup>62</sup> And in fact, while they may have begun as an institutional placeholder for the Unity of knowledge once represented by God, the Arts soon came under the sway of the pluralist regime of disciplinary specialization as well. Bastard progeny of religion and science, the Arts of the university have experienced periodic bouts of schizophrenia ever since.

John Barth began to write *Giles Goat-Boy* at Pennsylvania State University, a land-grant institution where, as he later explained, "in an English department of nearly one hundred members" he taught his classes "not far from an experimental nuclear reactor, a water tunnel for testing the hull forms of missile submarines, laboratories for ice cream research and mushroom development, a lavishly produced football program . . . a barn-size computer with elaborate cooling systems . . . and the literal and splendid barns of the animal husbandry departments."<sup>63</sup> Massively infused with federal funding for the support of Cold War weapons technology and other scientific research, but still catering to a regional and state economy (and its large football fan base), the secular university has become, for Barth, comically expanded and diversified in its worldly pursuits, nothing like the pious gentleman's college of yore. In this Barth echoes what was no doubt the most influential and widely read account of higher educational institutions in the early sixties, Clark Kerr's *The Uses of the University* (1963), which proposed the neologism "multiversity" as a description of these institutions that are, as Kerr later reiterated, "pluralistic in several senses: in having several purposes, not one; in having several centers of power, not one; in serving several clienteles, not one." The multiversity, in short, "worship[s] no single God" and "constitute[s] no single, unified community."<sup>64</sup>

In *Giles Goat-Boy* this pluralistic multiverse is re-unified by literature, as the messianic goat-boy sets about synthesizing the fundamental dualities and differences of campus existence, descending into the bowels of the campus computer system and re-emerging with a mystical vision of Unity. Reading the disciplinary allegory he embodies, we could say that the role of the literary goat-boy is to speak for the higher Unities that the experimental sciences have left behind in their pursuit of knowledge of

diverse things like submarines and ice cream. In hindsight, what is bound to seem most remarkable in this project is that in 1966, just in advance of the campus cultural nationalisms of the late sixties, this Unity can still be imagined as the synthesis in and of a transnational literary tradition such as was "made new" in high modernism.<sup>65</sup> That is, the Campus of this novel, divided by many things, is not yet overtly differentiated by race, ethnicity, class, or gender (or their bureaucratic expressions), and it is assumed that one literary tradition, one Grand Tutor, will do for the unification of all. As we shall see, the collapse of this assumption inaugurates the regime of high cultural pluralism.

At the same time, since the hero in *Giles Goat-Boy* is "all of us, writ large,"<sup>66</sup> one could argue that the novel represents literature as a mode of appreciation of individualistic agency in an otherwise highly organized, bureaucratic environment. In this it would echo the progressive educational rationale for introducing creative writing into the grade school curriculum earlier in the century. Here, in works like Hughes Mearns's influential *Creative Youth: How a School Environment Can Set Free the Creative Spirit* (1928), the newly dubbed activity of "creative writing" was promoted as an antidote to rote learning and the conformist genres associated with it: the translation, the theme, the report.<sup>67</sup> In this sense, as suggested earlier in the discussion of Nabokov, the heroism of the goat-boy could be understood as a figure of democratized Authorship itself, of the spiritual authority of even the lowliest man or woman to play God in the domain of his or her own imagination, if nowhere else.

And yet—and here one can begin to register the absurdity the novel attaches to the goat-boy's messianic activities—Barth's disciplinary allegory works in both directions. If it re-imagines the secular research university in terms of a spiritually elevated literary tradition, it also strongly associates the "preaching" and practice of literature in the university with the scientific research being conducted in the same institutional space. Clark Kerr had done the same when he began to rationalize the presence of creative writers and other artists on campus by linking them to scientists: "Another field ready to bloom is that of the creative arts, hitherto the

ugly ducklings or Cinderellas of the academic world. America is bursting with creativity in painting, music, literature, the theater with a vigor equaled in few other parts of the world today. . . . In the arts the universities have been more hospitable to the historian and the critic than to the creator; he has found his havens elsewhere. *Yet it is the creativity of science that has given science its prestige in the university.* Perhaps creativity will do the same again for the humanities . . . though the tests of value are far less precise [than in the sciences]."<sup>68</sup> Updating the traditional term, Barth echoes Kerr in associating creative writing in the university not with the dusty workshop but with the modern Cold War laboratory.

Often labeled postmodernist, this literary enterprise would, I think, be more usefully described as "technomodernist." This term reasserts the obvious continuity of much postwar American fiction with the modernist project of systematic experimentation with narrative form, even as it registers a growing acknowledgment of the scandalous continuity of the literary *techne* (craft) with technology in the grosser sense—including, most importantly, media technology. Seen in the sickly light cast by the latter, modernist narrative becomes visible not as the antithesis of debased genre fiction, but as a genre in its own right called "literary fiction"—which relativization does not, it should be noted, disable the distinction between high and low (one common account of what postmodernism entails) but rather situates it in a larger cultural industrial system. Indeed, the high/low distinction floats everywhere in this system, internally differentiating "genre-fiction" genres and literary fiction alike along various scales, including those of greater or lesser consumability, originality, and self-conscious attention to craft.

The potential for such an acknowledgment of kinship between high literary *techne* and media technology was already latent in an earlier modernist fascination with technology explored by Kenner in *The Mechanic Muse* (1987), and in the high literary appropriation of low media that one sees in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930–1936). And while the term is most easily applied to those writers like Barth, mostly white males, who have gained prominence by featuring techno-mediatic themes—Thomas

Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Joseph McElroy, Richard Powers, et al.—works like Samuel Delany's *Dahlgren* (1975) and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), with their simultaneously ethnicized and media-saturated landscapes, and their ethnically marked authorship, suggest a broader reach. Just as modernism's relation to an antecedent romanticism (in some ways continuous, in some ways a break) has been a matter of some debate, so, too, is technomodernism shadowed by what can only be called technoromanticism; this will become clear in Chapter 4, when I discuss the simultaneous emergence of a fascination with the authentic ethnic voice and the tape recorder in sixties fiction. The most literal contemporary instantiation of technomodernism, meanwhile, is found in the emergent field of electronic literature, including foundational hypertext fictions like Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* (1987) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995). Strongly associated with Brown University, where the proprietary software used to create hypertext fiction was developed, and with the pedagogy of Robert Coover, an English professor and writing instructor at the same institution, electronic literature remediates the values and practices of textual modernism (the fragmentation, difficulty, and general "literariness" still so abundant in Coover's own print productions), replaying the venerable modernism/mass culture dialectic in its status war with a non-literary commercial variant, the video game.

Electronic literature's literalization of "program fiction" is prefigured in one of the paranoiac conceits of the novel *Giles Goat-Boy*: formally divided not into parts but into magnetic computer tape "Reels," it may have been written by the all-powerful WESCAC itself. In that case it would seem, alas, that Unity and individual heroism are merely generated by the campus computer system as some of its narrative effects:

"GILES, SON OF WESCAC"

Milk of studentdom; nipple inexhaustible! I was the Founder; I was WESCAC; I was not. I hung on those twin buttons. I fed myself myself.

"DO YOU WISH TO PASS"

I the passer, she the passage, we passed together, and together cried "Oh, wonderful!" Yes and No. In the darkness, blinding light! The end of the University! Commencement Day!<sup>69</sup>

Here it appears that Graduation from the all-engulfing University can only be imagined as self-annihilating sublimity, figured here as the unification of the ultimate division in humankind, the division of sex.<sup>70</sup> Like the high/low binary to which it is often attached, but even more pervasive and various in its uses, the male/female binary floats throughout the system of higher education, the creative writing program, and postwar fiction alike: one can point to the division between the (hard) sciences and the (soft) humanities, or to the division between the low-status "schoolmarm" and the high-status "professor," or, perhaps most interestingly, to the distinction between feminized "caring" institutions (e.g., the hospital) and masculinized "disciplinary" ones (e.g., the army). The school is neither a "feminine" nor a "masculine" institution per se but is rather the scene of countless micro-struggles between "maternal" love and punitive "paternal" judgment as two different forms of institutional authority. This reflects at long distance the advent of large-scale coeducation in the postwar period, and the related entry of (some) women into the professional-managerial stratum of the corporate workforce.

The merging of the "feminine" and the "masculine" technological institution as a threat to male autonomy is easiest to see in the persona of the steel-breasted phallic mother of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Nurse Ratched, who is an agent of what the novel calls the Combine. It is more subtly implicated in Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*, in which a novelist named Richard Powers becomes involved in an effort to create an artificial intelligence whose answers on an M.A. exam in English Literature can be passed off as the work of a female human graduate student. As this undertaking becomes intertwined with the narrator's recollections of a failed relationship with a woman who had been his student, the gendered making (man makes woman) referenced in the novel's title is

set alongside, but ultimately against, a more threatening idea of biological reproduction and mothering (woman makes man). In Neal Stephenson's engrossing science fiction work *The Diamond Age; or, a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1995), the ultimate in intelligent, interactive textbooks is designed by a man, a nanotechnological engineer, but it is "staffed" from afar by an empathic woman, a thespian who becomes a virtual mother to the neo-Dickensian gamin into whose hands the textbook falls.<sup>71</sup> The best-case scenario of the merging of different forms of reproduction, however, was imagined in the M.F.A. program at Brown, where Shelley Jackson's feminist hypertext fiction *Patchwork Girl* was conceived and executed for credit toward a master's degree.

A compendium of various linked elements including diagrams, samplings of feminist theory, and the instruction manual for the hypertext compiler, Storyspace, with which it was made, this work is most importantly a rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* that draws the novel's allegorical meditation on the complexities and contradictions of female authorship to the surface. For Katherine Hayles, Jackson's hypertext is most interesting for the way it attacks traditionally "male" notions of literary originality, privacy, and copyright, confessing everywhere that it is a patchwork of previous works and attesting to the socially occupied nature of the individual who scripted them. Not only this, but in drawing attention to the technology with which it is executed, the work refuses the virtual transparency of the medium of print, which after centuries of use has become too familiar even to be noticed. For Hayles, the novelty and reflexivity of Jackson's hypertext enacts a critique of the exaltation of the mind over the lowliness of a corporeality aligned, in the cultural imaginary, with the maternal body of the woman: "In *Patchwork Girl*, the unconscious of eighteenth-century texts becomes the ground and surface for the specificity of this electronic text, which delights in pointing out that it was created not by a fetishized unique imagination but by many actors working in collaboration, including the 'vaporous machinery' that no longer disappears behind a vaporous text."<sup>72</sup>

Another way to read this text, however, is as a testament to the pos-



sibilities of systematic creativity—creativity authorized and sponsored by erotically technologized institutions like Brown. And here it is the creative writing program, the institution, the social technology, that too easily plays the part of “vaporous machinery,” receding from our view even as we become interested in the properties of print and pixels. It is the university that provides the technology for hypertext, and it is the university that doles out the cultural capital and technical expertise that Jackson puts on display, never more so than when she mashes feminist *theory* into her creative work. While it only rarely leads to genuine acts of collaboration—literary authorship remaining, unlike scientific authorship, an overwhelmingly individualistic enterprise—the conviviality of the workshop and the direct involvement of others in the writing process are no less a threat, for some, to the “fetishized unique imagination” of the mythical heroic male artist on the craggy mountaintop than the materiality of the text.

In one of *Patchwork Girl*’s most readable clusters, the various body parts that have gone into the making of Mary Shelley’s/Shelley Jackson’s female monster “speak for themselves,” suggesting rather vividly how a corporate body might retain, and not cancel, the individualities it subsumes. “I don’t want to lose the self,” writes Jackson in an essay on her work, “only strip it of its claim to naturalness, its compulsion to protect its boundaries.” She “would like to invent a new kind of self which doesn’t fetishize so much, grounding itself in the dearly-loved signs and stuff of personhood, but has poise and a sense of humor, changes directions easily, sheds parts and assimilates new ones.”<sup>73</sup> This is the self as “team player,” and for all of Jackson’s commitments to the avant-garde, it is not hard to see it as the model of an unresisting employee, the office worker willing and able to learn the new software.

### AUTOPOETICS

*Giles Goat-Boy* is only one of the odder of innumerable examples of a conspicuously flourishing genre in the postwar period, the campus novel.

Typically written as satire, this genre usually registers not the metaphysics but, more humbly, the ironies of institutionalization. Unlike works from earlier in the century, like Owen Johnson’s best-selling football romp, *Stover at Yale* (1911), or throwbacks to that earlier era like Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), the postwar campus novel is most often written from the perspective of the faculty, taking as its focus one or another ludicrous dimension of departmental life, and almost always portraying literary scholars as the petty, cynical idiots we are. At its best, the genre of the campus novel capitalizes on the resemblances between a college campus and a small village, deploying its relative social coherence and richly articulated social-professional hierarchies in a revivification of the gossipy comedy of manners.<sup>74</sup> “Furness adored, as he frankly confessed, reversals and sudden shifts of fashion—the life of a small college charmed him as a microcosm of high society”: Mary McCarthy’s send-up of a progressive college in *The Groves of Academe* (1951) is one of the better known of these, and the sentiments of her character indicate how the genre’s typical smallness of concern might open it to the charge of triviality and banality.<sup>75</sup> This is why one finds defensive blurbs like the one on the dust jacket of Saul Bellow’s *The Dean’s December* (1982), which assures its readers that this “extraordinarily vivid book” is “anything but a campus novel,” as though these two things are fundamentally at odds.<sup>76</sup> In this sense, since virtually every novel would be a “vivid” one, the implicit subject (or project) of every campus novel is the existential triumph, by satirical objectification—this may be true even of *Giles Goat-Boy*—of the writer over the institution that would institutionalize him.

The proliferation of universities as settings for novels is, in other words, what we might call a thematic symptom of a larger shift in the institutional arrangements of postwar literary production as such. The question is whether and to what degree all novels aspiring to the honorific status of literature must be considered campus novels of a sort. Beyond the question of a novel’s setting, for instance, how might we see the metafictional reflexivity of so much postwar fiction as being related to its production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical

environment? That, certainly, was Wolfe's implication in "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast." Pursuing this line of inquiry, but setting aside Wolfe's negative evaluation of the phenomenon, we could read the reflexive prose experiments of academic creative writers such as Nabokov and Barth and Shelley Jackson not as radically "deconstructive," as they sometimes are, but as radically conventional, as testaments to the continuing interest of literary forms as objects of a certain kind of professional research.

At least one contemporary strand of theoretical endeavor, systems theory, would insist that we understand reflexivity not as an invitation to the abyss, but as a necessary component of any system's self-constitution, its "autopoiesis."<sup>77</sup> Self-reference in this view is perfectly routine, not impeding but participating in the making and organizing of things, including literature, whose reflexive construction of autonomous fictional realities serves, according to Niklas Luhmann, to make visible "the inevitability of order as such."<sup>78</sup> While reflexivity, as systems theory sees it, is the general condition of reflexive modernity—this is why Mark Seltzer can produce such a powerful diagnosis of what he calls the pathological public sphere from a reading of the lowly true-crime genre—an aura of intellectual sophistication still attaches to overtly reflexive (that is, reflexively reflexive) projects like Nabokov's and Barth's and Jackson's, inviting critics to take them seriously as participating in the modernist/postmodernist high literary tradition.<sup>79</sup> Holding up a flattering mirror to the critic's own sophistication, these invitations are of course often accepted, but at the risk of a tiresome redundancy (who needs criticism when literature adopts a critical relation to itself?).

What this means is that, in the modernist tradition, the portrait of the artist is not only an important single book and an important genre, but also a name for one of the routine operations of literary modernism. For the modernist artist, that is, the reflexive production of the "modernist artist"—i.e., job description itself—is a large part of the job. Flouting the strictures against personality proposed by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," works like Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*,

or Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, or—looking ahead to a profusion of postwar examples—Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* stage the autobiographical drama of heroic self-authorization that accounts for their own existence. Taking the suggestion of Barth's notionally computer-generated heroism in *Giles Goat-Boy*, we might understand these acts of authorial self-making not—or not merely—as the feats of radical individuation they often represent themselves to be, nor as evidence of a final dispersal of subjectivity in and across social institutions and the mediasphere, but as moments in the operation, the autopoiesis, of a larger cultural system geared for the production of self-expressive originality. The name for this overall project is "technoromanticism," and taking advantage of a common Greek root in autopoiesis (self-making) and poetics, and forcing an obvious but helpful pun, we can call the routinely reflexive operations it calls for "autopoetics."<sup>80</sup>

The campus novel and the portrait of the artist are, then, two of the signature genres of the Program Era, each of them allegorizing, in complementary ways, the autopoietic agendas they also enact. But they are after all only thematic symptoms, and do not exhaust the characteristic genres of postwar writing, which also include the workshop story collection, the ethnic family saga, meta-genre fiction, and various forms of prison narrative, including a form I will call the meta-slave narrative. A more complex mode of reflexivity than the thematic representation of authorship is enacted at the level of narrative form in the dynamics of what is popularly known as "point of view." The systematic concern for what critics, after Gerard Genette, now tend to call "focalization" made its first appearance on the American scene in Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), which was essentially an expansion and codification of the narrative theory developed piecemeal across Henry James's prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels. Its most basic lesson—that the technical question of narrative perspective has profound aesthetic consequences for the work—is one that would reverberate throughout the rest of the twentieth century and beyond.

Indeed, whether in the form of "stream of consciousness" narration

in Joyce or Faulkner, or “unreliability” in Nabokov, experiments with point of view would become one of the earmarks of modernism. If, as Franco Moretti has argued, the quintessential narrative form of nineteenth-century realism was free indirect discourse, which systematically coordinated the perspective of the individual character with that of his community, the modernist tradition markedly disintegrates this relation into its component parts.<sup>81</sup> In the twentieth century, point of view would become both an object and a vehicle of cultural politics, a matter of explicit debate: is it wrong for a white writer to write a first person narrative from a black point of view? Will the student who makes her way through all of the many selections in a short story anthology (another key genre of the Program Era) called *Points of View* (1959/1995) be a better person, as well as a better reader, for having exercised her sympathetic imagination so many times?<sup>82</sup> Debates about these sorts of questions typically encode two competing conceptions of the narrative point of view. The first would ground it in personal experience, and sees the point of view as a virtual claim to intellectual property in a certain domain of experience; the second sees the inherent mobility built into the artifice of point of view as a lever with which one is pried loose from the determinations of identity and allowed to see the world differently. The chapters that follow will give plenty of airtime to these and related questions. Here I want simply to step back and notice how, beyond the question of one’s mobility (or not) between narrative positions, the dynamics of narrative focalization project a simplified model of the modern pluralistic society as an assemblage of different and sometimes conflicting, but always aesthetically redeemable, points of view.

The ways and means of interwar literary modernism have been modified in the postwar period, where they have been codified in the pedagogy of New Criticism and then disseminated to a range of student populations previously underrepresented in the writing profession. Among other effects, the institutionalization of modernism has conspicuously strengthened and broadened its social functionality by coupling it with the educational system. Once the product of urban coterie, circulating in the

tiny sphere of little magazines, now the texts of the modernist tradition reside helpfully on the syllabus as objects of study; its canon of literary practices, including a demand for self-conscious attention to technique, is pursued across the land in classes in creative writing; and its latter-day practitioners attend faculty meetings. For a small percentage of these practitioners—Kingston, Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Tim O’Brien, and others—this coupling has created a significant student market for their wares. The rest exhibit the same more or less vexed relation to the publishing market as their modernist forebears did, selling relatively modest numbers of books, not intentionally, exactly, but by design. Meanwhile the autopoietic thematization of authorship in the various projects of postwar literary fiction has continued unabated.

Consider the case of Philip Roth, who between 1959 and the present, even as he has frequently associated himself with colleges and universities (including, briefly, the Iowa Writers’ Workshop) as an adjunct faculty member, has published some thirty novels and other books. In that period he has developed what it seems fair to call a singular authorial persona, where an unmistakably forceful and mostly invariant writing style—a “foaming confluence,” as he puts it in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), of “diatribe, alibi, anecdote, confession, expostulation, promotion, pedagogy, philosophy, assault, apologia, denunciation”—is matched with an obsessive attachment to a small constellation of patently autobiographical themes: masculinity, sexuality, family, Jewishness, and authorship itself.<sup>83</sup>

Even beyond the explicitly interrelated Zuckerman novels, the internal coherence and serial continuity of this autopoietic enterprise over so many years and so many novels are astonishing, and Ross Posnock is wholly justified in interpreting Roth’s oeuvre as “one vast text with each book to be read within and against the larger whole.”<sup>84</sup> Roth can seem by turns endlessly inventive in finding new ways to manipulate its few terms, and to be without any imagination at all, a nasty narcissist lost in a highly polished hall of mirrors. The hall of mirrors effect is most forcefully introduced into the system by the Zuckerman novels, which provide a kind of running commentary on the life and career of a Jewish American novelist

named Nathan Zuckerman, who, we are given to understand, has written his own versions of Roth's non-Zuckerman books, including most importantly the controversial National Book Award-winner, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959; Zuckerman's *Higher Education*) and the hugely best-selling *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969; renamed *Carnovsky*).<sup>85</sup>

With Zuckerman, Roth is able to record and redeploy as fiction the response of readers to his best-known works, incorporating into his own serially-renewed discourse the voices of the rabbis who have found his representations of Jews unflattering, the feminists who find his work misogynist, the literary critics who find his work crude and repetitive, and the mass audience that, with the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, began to find him fascinating, a celebrity. It's impossible to say, encountering this process, whether it suggests the radical openness of Roth's fiction, constantly overtaken by its own discursive outside, or its radical closure, an imperial absorption of that outside. Beginning with *Zuckerman Unbound's* crazed Zuckerman fan Alvin Pepler, the cybernetic circularity that produces this ambiguity is exemplified in the appearance in the novels of a certain kind of character. Approaching Zuckerman in public places, these accosting strangers assume an immediate familiarity with the famous novelist who they assume (not any more unreasonably than we do when we think of Zuckerman as some form of Roth) has been speaking for and as himself in his fictions. But if these characters therefore seem, on one level, to personify popular (pepler) "reader response," they don't only do that. Routed back through the narrator, this response becomes intertwined with Roth's own voice such that the character projected into the fictional world seems a curious amalgam of other and same—that is, a double. Their manic verbal energy—Pepler speaks uninterruptedly for pages on end—and their childhood connections to Jewish Newark are always strongly reminiscent of Roth's own well-known versions of the same thing.<sup>86</sup>

Reflexively enough, this "critical" understanding of the accoster-as-double, as well as the possible seed of the very novel we are reading, is already provided in the pages of *Zuckerman Unbound* itself when we are

shown the journal notes that Zuckerman is scribbling even as he is trying to slip away from Pepler by stepping into a crowded funeral home: "But: the bullying ego, the personal audacity, the natural coarseness, the taste for exhausting encounters—what gifts! Mix with talent the unstoppable energy, the flypaper brain . . . [the] brute strength, the crazy tenacity [and you get] The Jew You Can't Permit in the Parlor. How Johnny Carson America now thinks of me. This Peplerian barrage is what? Zeitgeist overflow? Newark poltergeist? Tribal retribution? Secret sharer? P. as my pop self? . . . Book: *The Vrai's Revenge*—the forms their fascination takes, the counterspell cast over me."<sup>87</sup> The very oddness of this journal-keeping activity, attended to when Zuckerman is literally on the run, makes an important point. Henry James's famous injunction to aspiring writers to be "one of those on whom nothing is lost!"—embodied in James's own life-long practice of note-taking—is shown here to be at one and the same time a handmaid to literary realism and to a vertiginously "postmodern" reflexivity: encouraged to "write what you know," the novelist eventually is driven to represent his intimate knowledge of the writing process and its consequences, to address the fact of fiction making.

This lends another level of irony to a moment in *The Anatomy Lesson* when Zuckerman learns that the student editors of the University of Chicago newspaper want to "interview him about the future of his kind of fiction in the post-modernist era of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon" (280). Sent to him in writing, one of their questions reads, "*Do you feel yourself part of a rearguard action, in the service of a declining tradition?*" (281). "Yes," mumbles Zuckerman to himself in response, but his sense of the "declining tradition" is not necessarily the same as theirs. Rather, the systematic reflexivity that produces both the "realist" Zuckerman novels and Barth's technomodernist *Giles Goat-Boy* has devolved here into a kind of sickness of circular self-consumption: "My life as cud, that's what I'm running out on. Swallow as experience, then up from the gut for a second go as art" (196)—and then down again, we might add, as the biographical consequences of that art. Zuckerman has dreamed of curing himself of his illness by quitting writing altogether and going back to school. This

time, however, it will not be English literature that he will study, but medicine. This is not quite the novelistic journalism called for by Wolfe, but its effects would be similar. Attaining scientific knowledge of other bodies will, Zuckerman hopes, give him access to "the real thing, the thing in *the raw*, and not for the writing but for itself" (204). Ultimately, though, he cannot escape his fascination with the body most closely at hand, his own, and so in more senses than one he cannot "escape the corpus that was his" (291).

The first point to mention here is that the pervasive reflexivity of Roth's many novels, however dizzying the spirals it makes, however spiritually sickening it may have become, has been anything but disabling of his writing, but is rather the motive principle of its serial continuance. The constantly troubled interplay between "fiction" and "autobiography," creativity and experience, in Roth's corpus is what in systems theory is called the cut—the primary distinction—that initiates its very existence. At the same time, the making of this distinction implicitly posits a third position, a point of remove from which the initial distinction is made, from which its operations will be observed, and in which its terms do not necessarily apply. Observing this third space from yet another point of remove (call it the literary-historical perspective), Roth's fictions can be seen for what they obviously, in one respect, are: real. They are real not because they are "true" but because they are the real products of a writer situated at specific positions in an evolving literary field.

The second point, then, is simply that however claustrophobically self-enclosed Roth's autopoietic enterprise might seem—such that even a historical novel like *I Married a Communist* (1998) is legible as a blow-by-blow allegorical account of Roth's tumultuous relationship with the actress Claire Bloom<sup>88</sup>—it is in fact a series of events that take place in a larger system that constantly produces reflexivity of various kinds and degrees and is ultimately a trans-individual enterprise. Indeed, the unmistakable singularity of Roth's voice and persona and the continuity of their presence on the scene of American literary fiction for the last forty years can make his career seem, paradoxically, among the most contextually

determined the system has produced. This is why his project is subject to being skewed in the direction of hyper-experimentalism, as in Ronald Sukenick's *Up* (1968), or replicated, as in Joyce Carol Oates's "Roth novel" *The Tattooed Girl* (2003).<sup>89</sup> Those accosting doubles in Roth's fiction are not, or not only, evidence of the solipsism of his diegesis; they also record the discovery of the systemic contextual-environmental other in himself, and are evidence that he is part and product of his own externality. Call it the Roth ecology.<sup>90</sup>

This conspicuously "networked" feature of his individualistic autopoetics is recorded in other, simpler ways as well—for instance, in the prideful Jamesian literary professionalism that Roth began to assume in college and graduate school. From his earliest short stories, Roth has been intent to show the high stakes, high drama, and high difficulty of group membership. Excepting the "community of writers," familial, ethnic, religious, and especially heterosexual romantic ties are placed under awful pressure in his work. But Roth makes a comparatively effortless identification with, first, the modernist masters (James, Kafka, et al.) whom he learned to appreciate in school, then the Eastern European writers (such as Milan Kundera) whose wide exposure to English-speaking audiences owed a lot to his editorial efforts, and finally the warm friendships among writers, mostly male, that make their way (as in *The Ghostwriter* [1979]) into his fictions. This identification produces volumes such as the well-nigh Portnoyan orgy of professionalism, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (2001).

Yes, for all the self-involvement and "individuality" of his fiction, Roth is very much a man of the system. He cares for literature, teaches it to students, worries about its fate, and is frankly snobbish about the cultural encroachments of television (which he only rarely deigns to appear on) in a way that younger academic writers might find anachronistically touching. In a 1996 interview Roth spoke of a "drastic decline, even a disappearance, of a serious readership" in the United States that is "inescapable, given the pressures in the society," and is "a tragedy."<sup>91</sup> The plot of *The Human Stain* (2000), a campus novel that could be said to be all about

various forms of illiteracy, is founded on the irony that even elite liberal arts colleges now endorse poor reading skills, as the scholar-protagonist (a Newark-raised African American passing as a Jew) is held responsible for his students' misunderstanding of the word "spook."

### HIGH CULTURAL PLURALISM

Another way to get at the impressive typicality of the figure of Philip Roth would be to note how, seen against the forty-year backdrop of the field he has inhabited, he can seem to figure either as a culturally conservative white male writer, staunchly upholding high modernist literary values, or, as was more plainly the case in the 1960s, as a conspicuously "ethnic" writer ("The Jew You Can't Permit in the Parlor") who introduces cultural difference into that system. Braiding these roles together, he could be said to hold in suspension the elements of the form of postwar literary fiction that I will call high cultural pluralism, which combines the routine operation of modernist autopoetics with a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership preeminently, though by no means exclusively, marked as ethnic. Paired with and against the complementary aesthetic of technomodernism, and (as we shall see) supplemented by the inverse aesthetic of lower-middle-class modernism, high cultural pluralism has governed the production of a very wide swath of postwar American fiction.

"Cultural pluralism" is of course a term historically associated with figures like Randolph Bourne, Alain Locke, and especially Horace Kallen, the American pragmatist philosopher and Zionist who began in the early twentieth century to transpose the philosophical pluralism of his teacher at Harvard, William James, into the domain of cultural identity. I prefer it to the more recent and essentially synonymous "multiculturalism" for the way it helps to return us to first principles unburdened by accretions from the so-called "culture wars" of the 1980s and 90s, in which the mass media took a brief interest in the "scandal" of differentiation, making hay with what was in fact the orderly appearance of new subfields in the humanities, new writers on the syllabus, and so forth. This will allow us to link

it more soberly than we otherwise might to the institutional context of its emergence, and facilitate our seeing how its dominant association with race and ethnicity does not begin to exhaust its meaning. Decades later, but with no mention of race or ethnicity, Clark Kerr would also trace the intellectual origins of his conception of the multiversity back to James's philosophical pluralism, presenting it not as an ethos but as a matter of fact: in the modern world everything, including universities, grows more complex. No wonder, then, that cultural pluralism and the multiversity have coupled so nicely. Both are driven by the logic of expansion and differentiation, and the continual birth of new scientific subdisciplines is echoed, on the other side of campus, in the emergence of Ethnic and Women's and Cultural Studies, and, within English departments, in the demarcated study of alternative literary canons.

High cultural pluralism enacts a layering of positively marked differences: in the modernist tradition, it understands its self-consciously crafted and/or intellectually substantial products as importantly distinct from mass culture or genre fiction, although in practice—for example, when Joyce Carol Oates flirts with low genres, or when Roth produces a best-seller on the titanic scale of *Portnoy's Complaint*, or when Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) is read by Oprah's Book Club—this distinction is often blurred or intentionally put at risk.<sup>92</sup> The high cultural pluralist writer is additionally called upon to speak from the point of view of one or another hyphenated population, synthesizing the particularity of the ethnic—or analogously marked—voice with the elevated idiom of literary modernism.<sup>93</sup> Thus, while one path to literary distinction in the postwar period has been to assert the themes of technomodernism, another, though sometimes overlapping, path has been to forge a career in literary cultural pluralism, from the Jewish American writers who emerged in force in the early postwar period, such as Saul Bellow and Roth; to the Native American renaissance that began with N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and continues through the novels of Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, and many others; to the appearance of a growing number of celebrated Asian American writ-

ers from Kingston to Chang-Rae Lee; to the distinctly theory-inflected field of Chicana/o literature most prominently represented by Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo; to—and all along—the African American experience as it has been represented by writers working in the modernist tradition, from Ralph Ellison to Ishmael Reed to Morrison. All of these writers are widely taught, and all were or remain significantly connected to universities.

Describing his own initiation into the modernist tradition at a largely Protestant liberal arts college in the early 1950s, Roth notes how at first it “did not dawn on” him that the “anecdotes and observations” of his boyhood in lower-middle-class Newark with which he entertained his high-brow friends “might be made into literature.” Instead, the “stories I wrote, set absolutely nowhere, were mournful little things about sensitive children, sensitive adolescents, and sensitive young men crushed by the coarse life. . . . The Jew was nowhere to be seen; there were no Jews in the stories, no Newark, and not a sign of comedy.”<sup>94</sup> This would soon change. Like so many other writers of the postwar period, Roth would learn to join the modernist literary sophistication of his higher educational training with the ethnic experiential specificity of his upbringing—the late modernist version of writing what you know.

Occurring in the broader context of the rise of mass higher education in the U.S., high cultural pluralism is the product of a certain institutional history, the most important feature of which has been the partially overlapping institutionalizations of elitist high modernism and cultural pluralism in university English departments of the postwar period. The result could be described either as a partially democratized modernism, which would emphasize the conditioning effect of a liberal-progressive (at least as compared to other American institutions) institutional context on an elitist aesthetic discourse, or, because universities are still a long way from offering unrestricted social access to the masses, as an elitist pluralism in which the lucky ones, among their other privileges, are taught to savor their own open-mindedness. Declining to choose between these two understandings, for now I will simply observe that, associating the *individ-*

*ual* writer with a *group* from which she draws a claim to personal literary distinction, high cultural pluralism becomes one model, in the university environment, for the productive mediation of “group-think” and “individual genius.”

While the privileged marker of difference here is a racial or ethnic one, it would be a serious mistake to think that writers with no strong ethnic associations have been shut out of the high cultural pluralist enterprise; they are merely (and ironically) minoritized to a small degree, even as the category of “difference” easily includes them and motivates the interest of publishers and readers in their work. Most writers of literary fiction have “their subject,” which is to say, a signature set of preoccupations stemming (typically) from one or another aspect of their biography. Not that all identities are equally claimable; an identification with female experience alone, to take the most important example, will not typically succeed in finding a place for a given writer in the high cultural pluralist system, and this is perhaps because, as detailed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “woman writer” was precisely the category against which modernist authorship had originally defined itself.<sup>95</sup> Without the affective intensities of race and ethnicity, or the prestige associated with aggressive experimentalism as we see it in *Patchwork Girl*, women’s writing is a majority, not a minority, phenomenon and is apt to be perceived in terms of the middlebrow sentimentality of “daytime” culture. Categories that more obviously split the national culture into smaller units are an easier sell for high cultural prestige leading to inclusion in the syllabus of postwar literature.

Indeed, as has been suggested by Werner Sollors, it may be that the original version of cultural pluralism was regionalism.<sup>96</sup> And though it is a typically less fraught form of identity in the postwar period than an ethnic or racial one, a regional identity still enables a form of alignment by analogy with the dominant form of the aesthetic appreciation of difference. Regionalist fiction has always been cultural pluralist in the sense that it is a form of appreciation of diversity within a larger national whole, and as we shall see, regionalism was crucial to the emergence of the Iowa Writers’

Workshop. Certainly the most important form of literary regionalism in the twentieth century has been the Southern variant; a white Southerner like Flannery O'Connor, for instance, returning from the workshop in Iowa to her home in Milledgeville, Georgia, associates her fiction with a cultural entity understood to be significantly different from American culture as such. In doing so, she achieves the logical equivalent of an ethnic difference within the system. In one of her essays, echoing Roth's assessment of his own earliest collegiate fiction, she notes disapprovingly how she "read some stories at one of the colleges not long ago . . . [and] with the exception of one story, they might all have originated in some synthetic place that could have been anywhere or nowhere."<sup>97</sup> In another essay she establishes the importance of Southern cultural difference for her fiction in strong, if negative, terms, noting how Southern writers "are all known to be anguished. [And some editorialists] suggest that our anguish is a result of our isolation from the rest of the country. I feel that this would be news to most Southern writers. The anguish that most of us [feel] has not been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out, not only of our many sins but of our few virtues."<sup>98</sup> Written during the civil rights era, when the South was beginning to be pressed into conformity with federal law, O'Connor's anguished appeal to and for the maintenance of difference would reinstall Southern culture as one of the terms in the developing cultural pluralist aesthetic program of the 1960s, promoting Southern writing as, in effect, a white minority discourse that resists assimilation into the American mainstream.<sup>99</sup>

Equally important to the emergence of the writing program, although somewhat harder to conceive as a minority "culture," is the difference made by a personal experience of war. Sitting in the Quonset huts erected in Iowa City where her classes were held, Flannery O'Connor was on hand to observe the literary after-effects of war at close range. When the first graduate writing programs were being assembled in the 1940s,

the first several cohorts of students were made up of recently returned veterans studying on the G.I. Bill. For these men, Hemingway's conversion of war trauma into graceful literary understatement would prove a powerful example, even as his avoidance of the university was being reversed. The process they underwent on campus was one of "softening," a subtle transition from the silent suffering of trauma into the controlled pathos of literary recollection. In a 1996 article on the mysteries of creative writing instruction, Elizabeth Tallent asks us to imagine the situation of one of her predecessors as head of Stanford's creative writing program, its founder Wallace Stegner: "Imagine a classroom crowded with clean-shaven young soldiers newly returned from a war. Imagine these young men unable to slouch or sprawl . . . but sitting in straight, starchily attentive ranks because military discipline has owned them for so long, and is reluctant to let go. Moreover, they don't know who they will be when it does let go. Imagine reading their eyes for proof of damage. . . . You know they have *seen things* . . . each young man has *stories to tell* as surely as he has a heartbeat. . . . You look away, out the window, you have to confront another new fact of your life: California. You've come to Stanford fresh from Harvard. In a profound sense, you're not sure what you've done. This is the fall of 1945."<sup>100</sup>

Like his fellow Iowa graduate O'Connor, Stegner's own claim to cultural difference in the literary field would be regional: having grown up on the Great Northern Plains, he would circle back to that experiential datum to become the dean of a conservation-minded Western literary regionalism that would include writers such as Larry McMurtry and Edward Abbey, both of whom were his students. What Stegner witnessed in his first classes at Stanford was something else: the emergence of a virtual cultural identity emanating from an authoritative experience of war. It is thus that we can speak of Tim O'Brien, author of *Going after Cacciato* (1978), *The Things They Carried* (1990), and several other Vietnam-themed works, as a *Veteran-American* writer, in the sense that the psychic wounds inflicted on him in his year of combat have become foundational to a career in the same way that Roth's Jewishness has. The "Things" carried by the soldiers



in the title story of O'Brien's 1990 collection are what we might also call "burdens," and they are both quite literal (C rations, ammo, socks) and spiritual. But as the self-reflexive story "Spin" makes clear, their weight is also the weightiness of a certain quantity of experiential capital. Making our terminology of the "autopoietic process" seem especially apt, the writer-narrator notes that "You take your material where you find it, which is in your life, at the intersection of past and present. The memory-traffic feeds into a rotary up in your head, where it goes in circles for a while, then pretty soon imagination flows in and the traffic merges and shoots off down a thousand different streets."<sup>101</sup>

At the very limits of the high cultural pluralist enterprise, where the space it inhabits begins to curve, one encounters technomodernism, its unmarked dialectical reversal. Whereas high cultural pluralism represses the technologies that contribute to its performance of authenticity, technomodernism identifies with the "emptiness" of pure formality—that is, with the systematicity of the system itself, drawing the machine to itself in a form of ontological prosthesis. One sometimes hears of a postwar literary field divided cleanly into postmodernist and ethnic realist traditions. Apart from the descriptive weakness of this notion—as though there could be either a more "postmodernist" or a more "black" writer than Ishmael Reed—this way of conceiving things misses the profound complementarity of high cultural pluralism and technomodernism, each of which contains, in latent form, the other's primary term.<sup>102</sup> If we apply interpretive pressure to overtly pluralist fiction to make visible the machinery involved in its production of difference, with overtly machinic technomodernism we can apply it in the opposite direction. Doing so, we see how even the "whitest" technomodernism can function as a discourse of difference, producing a symbolic placeholder for a paradoxically non-ethnic ethnicity that might as well be called (with apologies to John Guillory) "technicity."<sup>103</sup> Put baldly, what Roth knows about the Jewish experience, and Morrison knows about the African American experience, writers like Powers, DeLillo, and Pynchon know about the second law of thermodynamics, cybernetic causality, communications and media theory, and the like, and

it is on the basis of this portfolio of technical-cultural capital that they, too, are put on the syllabus.

That technicity, no less than ethnicity, might be imagined to be prosthetically lodged in the body is suggested by Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), where it is the distinction of the character Tyrone Slothrop, who imagines inscribing his name on a missile, to become sexually aroused at the sites of future rocket blasts. In Don DeLillo's campus novel, *White Noise* (1985), as suggested by recent readings emphasizing the double signification of the titular term "white," the ethnic specificity of the technosaturated Midwestern family of Professor Jack Gladney is secured by the presence of the "outsider," Murray Siskind, a visiting professor from New York City: asked what "type" of person he represents among the others at his boarding house in town, Siskind answers, "I'm the Jew."<sup>104</sup> Similarly, when Gladney struggles with the obscurely racialized drug-dealer antagonist, Mink, at the novel's conclusion, he pointedly calls Gladney "white man," and then, though he could simply be observing Gladney's sickly pallor, seems to convert the question of whiteness into an existential-epistemological quandary: "You are very white, you know that?"<sup>105</sup> The "white noise" in *White Noise* can thus be understood either as the "static" pumped into the lives of the U.S. middle class by the mass media, obliterating cultural differences in favor of national brands, or as technicity, the displaced representation of a paradoxically ethnic non-ethnicity.

#### LOWER-MIDDLE-CLASS MODERNISM

Sitting at the keyboard to produce fiction, aspiring writers in greater and greater numbers in the postwar period have done so under the auspices of creative writing instruction. But in an even more basic sense, where does the individual's recognition of the value of literary experience come from? Where for that matter do readers—in particular, readers of the kinds of writing that ask to be called "literature"—come from? They come from many places, no doubt, not least from an upbringing in an identifiably "bourgeois" or upper fraction of the middle class that has long oriented its

children toward the appreciation of high culture. This group had formed the social substrate of interwar literary modernism, the source both of the conventionalities it sought to outrage and of most of the personnel—the T. S. Eliots and Gertrude Steins and James Joyces—who did the outraging, and it still exists. By far the largest number of serious readers in the postwar period, however, have been produced through the agency of the school, where millions of students were first introduced to the refined pleasures of the literary and convinced, to some degree, of its worth as a mode of experience and body of specialized knowledge. These students were as likely as not to come, as Gordon Lish described the scene of his own upbringing on Long Island, from a “home that was empty of books.”<sup>106</sup>

The information economy calls forth a great number of highly skilled professionals and experts whose domain of experience is reflected in the work of writers like Barth and Pynchon and Powers—the kind of writers whose work circles within or gravitates toward the aesthetic formation I am calling “technomodernism.” But that economy also calls forth a vast body of workers to fill jobs in the lower and middling orders of the corporate and public sector workforce, college graduates all, who comprise the bulk of Mills’s “white collar masses.” A more familiar term for this group is the “middle class,” but a more accurate one might be the “lower middle class,” since that would emphasize the degree to which the independent bourgeois of yore has been downgraded to a condition of insecurity and dependency akin to proletarians of the past. Indeed, while many members of this class would not readily recognize themselves in the images of mass-produced respectability or encroaching seediness evoked by the term “lower middle class,” Rita Felski is surely right to claim that this “widespread yet indeterminate, important yet under-analyzed class stratum” has grown tremendously in the postwar period, when “the lives of ever more individuals in the industrialized West are defined by occupations, lifestyles, and attitudes traditionally associated with the lower middle class.”<sup>107</sup> She is also right to note that this domain of experience has been the least susceptible to any kind of simple conversion into literary

or cultural capital, since nobody is proud to be associated with the lower middle class. It is the class designation, above all others, that tends to be taken simply as an insult. The social entity designated by the term “lower middle class” is, for this reason, bereft of class consciousness in the sense of communal solidarity, but constitutively possessed of and by “class awareness”—the measurement of oneself and one’s social surround in terms of various markers of status.<sup>108</sup>

It would not be true, however, to say that lower-middle-class experience has been unimportant to postwar U.S. literary production, and any account of the Program Era that failed to find it on the map would have fallen prey to a kind of blindness. Consider the case of Raymond Carver, about whom his first wife observed: “Nobody in Ray’s family had ever gone to college, so there was no tradition for it. . . . But [then he realized that] it was important that he get started in school as soon as possible, and he did,” enrolling in classes at Yakima Community College in 1957, transferring from there to Chico State, where he studied creative writing with John Gardner, and from there to Humboldt State, where he published his first stories in the college literary magazine. After years of struggle, holding down various low-status jobs, he broke through with a collection of short stories, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), and became the very emblem, for some critics, of a “program writer.” And then there is Jayne Anne Phillips, who grew up in modest circumstances in West Virginia but found her way to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she met Carver, and from there to a series of teaching jobs at universities. Her breakthrough collection *Black Tickets* (1979) is structured like Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1923), with short stories interspersed with somewhat inscrutable vignettes.

It would be hard to overestimate the influence of Hemingway on postwar writers, and, though he himself would have nothing to do with college, too easy to forget that the medium of his influence has been the school. Easier still, because they are not themselves typically included on a syllabus of postwar American fiction dominated by the likes of Pynchon and Morrison, would be to forget the empirical centrality of the more

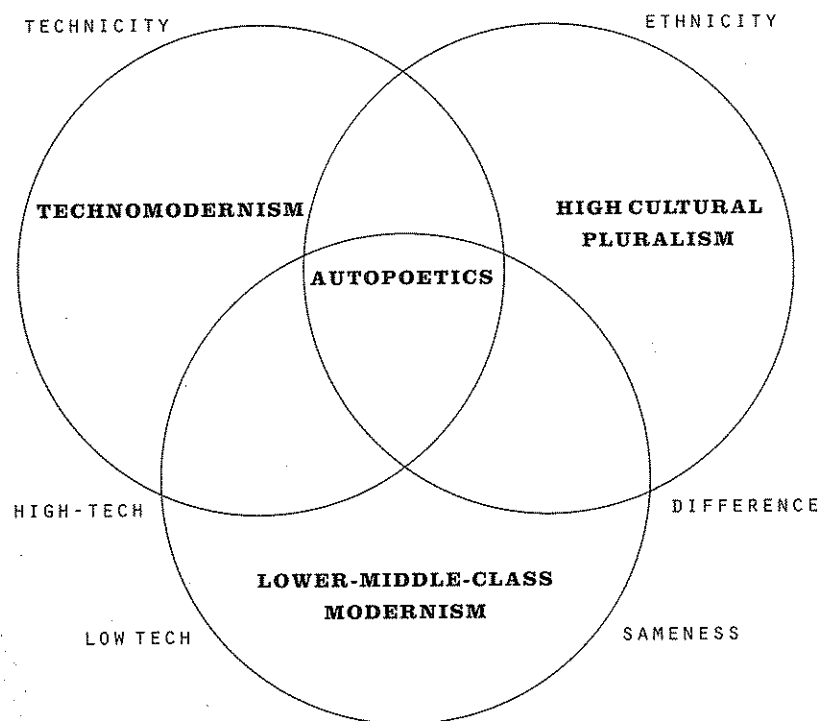
or less “nondescript” white followers of Hemingway in the institutional structures of the Program Era. Their medium of greatest achievement has been the minimalist short story—itsself, because of its brevity, the key genre of creative writing instruction—and the most common way of insulting these writers has been to associate them with creative writing programs. In a generally admiring review of *Black Tickets*, Phillips’s fellow Iowa graduate John Irving spoke of how his pleasure in reading it was interrupted occasionally by reminders of “what total praise she must have received in any creative writing class,” “little oddities too precious to the author—or perhaps to her memory of [that] praise—to be thrown away.”<sup>109</sup> A later reader would note that “many of the stories, especially the shorter ones . . . could almost be the product of assigned tasks at a creative writing course.”<sup>110</sup>

The careers of Carver and Phillips and a great many other postwar writers would have been unthinkable except through the agency of the system of higher education, which in the postwar U.S. expanded to include a larger segment of the population, approaching 50 percent, than ever before seen in human history. Part of the reason the lower middle class has been so hard to account for in cultural historical terms is that college attendance, established as a social norm across a broad swath of the population in the postwar period, was understood to release the individual from any particular class designation into the amorphous potentiality and mobility of the American middle class. To say that the pointedly low-rent world of Carver (sometimes anachronistically described as a “proletarian” or “working class” writer) is emblematic of the middle class as such is therefore a strategic generalization on my part of the condition of dependency, economic insecurity, and anomie his stories so often represent.

Interwar modernism had shuttled between the extremes of high and low, between the values of “aristocracy” on the one hand and “primitivism” on the other, in its delineation of the anti-bourgeois bourgeois aesthetic we call modernism. In the social class imaginary of the postwar period, the social distance traversed by the modernist dialectic is substantially narrowed: the crucial distinction here is between an upper middle

class, for whom economic security is a given and higher education is understood as a virtual birthright, and the ethnic or post-ethnic traditional working class, which instead of individual advancement through education offers its members the benefits of belonging and communal solidarity. The version of modernism that shuttles between these class positions, unable to come to rest in either of them, is what I am calling a lower-middle-class modernism. As such, it can be seen either as a lower technomodernism, where high-tech knowledge is downgraded to a “craft” skill, or as a marginal—because largely post-ethnic (in Carver’s case, post-Irish)—high cultural pluralism. While the heights of postwar literary prestige are reached elsewhere, in the precincts of technomodernism and high cultural pluralism, lower-middle-class modernism can claim a kind of centrality to the enterprise of creative writing in that it is probably the most characteristic, or numerically “normal,” product thereof.

Just as bourgeois modernism was an anti-bourgeois enterprise, lower-middle-class modernism defines itself largely against the cultural forms actually consumed by the lower middle class from whom it struggles to separate itself—sentimental literature, genre fiction, and television—even as it positions itself against the flagrantly intellectualist experimentalism of technomodernism. Among myriad other effects, this has meant that the heavy existential drag of an unliterary upbringing, the shame associated with lower forms of cultural consumption, would often become the *content* of lower-middle-class modernist forms. We see this when the narrator of Phillips’s story “Home,” returning to her mother’s house after years away, takes deadpan, sardonic note of the preferred reading material of the woman who “sent me to college . . . paid for my safe escape,” as Phillips’s own mother had done when she sent her daughter to West Virginia University: “My mother gets *Reader’s Digest*. I come home from work, have a cup of coffee, and read it. I keep it beside my bed. I read it when I am too tired to read anything else. I read about Joe’s kidney and Humor in Uniform. Always, there are human interest stories in which someone survives an ordeal of primal terror. Tonight it is Grizzly! Two



Aesthetic formations of postwar American fiction. These categories correspond roughly to what is more casually called "postmodernism" (technomodernism); "ethnic literature" (high cultural pluralism); and "minimalism" (lower-middle-class modernism); in each case the new term is intended both to draw the three fields into conceptual relation and to draw attention to an important feature of each one that otherwise tends to be missed, whether that is a relation to media technology, to the elevated discourse of modernism, or to the question of socioeconomic class. At the core of all three is the ordinary literary reflexivity called autopoetics, while some of the rough distinctions between them occur around the periphery. But note the high degree of overlap in all three.

teenagers camping in the mountains are attacked by a bear."<sup>11</sup> Hence the cruel irony of the fact that it is these writers, more than any others, who have been stigmatized by their association with the writing program, made into poster children of what Aldridge called the "small, sleek clonal fabrications of writers" coming off the program "assembly-line."

To describe these writers in this way, or to apply to their work the insulting term "Kmart realism," is to negate the exquisite "ordinariness" of lower-middle-class modernist writing and to find it *merely* ordinary, the product of a system. The truth in these obnoxious observations, which it is fair to see as conducting a kind of low-level class warfare, is in their apprehension of the iterable and modular nature of the minimalist mode, which can be, and was, reconfigured along various axes to accommodate the expression of various kinds of experiential injuries, not all of them the injuries of class. Phillips, Ann Beattie, and, perhaps the purest instance, Amy Hempel are three prominent minimalists who pointedly reverse the seeming affinity of minimalism with silent masculinity, making it work to record and manage the trauma of female experience. In Andrea Lee's *Sara Phillips* (1984), this becomes the refined, ironic voice of the bourgeois African American, unable to make a "proper" identification with African American oppression on the maximalist model of writers like Toni Morrison. In Susan Minot's *Monkeys*, from the same year, minimalism seems to come full circle, wielded here as the appropriate idiom in which to represent the experience of wealthy, but emotionally repressed and alcoholic, New England WASPs. It is, in other words, not wrong to see in the aesthetic formation I call lower-middle-class modernism the workings of a system, but it may be wrong to assume that this systematicity is something to be ashamed of.

### I, ROBOT—OR SYSTEMATIC CREATIVITY

We love to blame the system, and so does the system. And so do postwar institutions blame themselves for their "institutionality" and attempt to correct it. Consecrated to the value of freedom, and disturbed by the idea

that they might be occasioning the conformism of their inmates, American universities began in the 1950s to set their course by the polestar of "creativity," softening the rigid boundaries of educational tradition to make way for the new. The great irony in what Hoberek describes as "postwar intellectuals' shared dislike for the institutions . . . of intellectual life"<sup>112</sup> is that these institutions, often enough run by these same intellectuals, shared this dislike. As the dean of the New York University School of Education, George Stoddard, put it in 1959: "Inside the school, many teachers and textbooks (refrigerated versions of teachers stamped and sealed) pay homage to the same god of conformity. It used to be thought that this made little difference in mathematics, physical science, and grammar, but we were wrong even there. Three hundred years of standard instruction in these disciplines have produced populations whose chief reliance is on the conditioned response, the repetitive act, the voice of authority."<sup>113</sup> Striking a blow against conformity on behalf of the creativity of art and science alike, Stoddard hits a note that had already been sounded by the National Science Foundation, which in the mid-1950s began to fund large-scale studies of creativity and the "creative process." They hoped by these means to identify the unusually creative students in a given scientific field and to provide the right conditions for their work. It was, after all, only by staying "creative" that American scientists could outdo the group-thinking communist enemy in the ingenious design of weapons technology—"creative destruction" of a rather literal kind. And it was only by staying creative that the United States could pride itself, unlike its relentlessly drab ideological competitor, in satisfying desires that consumers might not even have realized they had. The critique of the communist war on originality and individuality in a novel like Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* is not subtle, showing us, among its other horrors, how thugish adherents to the pseudo-communist ideology of "Ekwilism" use a mechanical device that replicates an individual's handwriting, thus proving "the fact that a mechanical device can reproduce personality, and that Quality is merely the distribution aspect of Quantity."<sup>114</sup> This was the context of Stoddard's hope that, "counteract[ing] the drab effects of genera-

tions of mass conformity in the arts," universities might finally be transforming themselves into places where "creative art, music, and writing are no longer alien." In turn, with any luck, "the campus will eventually reproduce itself in the American community," turning this nation of crass materialists and Bible-thumping religionists into a more cultured bunch. "Slowly we are becoming a nation of college alumni," Stoddard observes optimistically, "as we are already one of high school graduates."<sup>115</sup>

But could colleges really be counted on to champion freedom from the conformities of Cold War life? For Clark Kerr these suddenly swollen, sprawling public spaces were veritable temples to the worship of creativity, ceaselessly whirring engines of the new, but student radicals of the sixties saw them otherwise. Weren't the universities really just one more agent of social conformity, a bureaucratic stand-in—in *loco parentis*—for their hopelessly square parents? Weren't they more or less reinforcing and reproducing the hierarchical social structure from which they emerged? Even more troublingly, weren't they, too, heavily invested in the dirty business of destruction in Vietnam and elsewhere? Weren't they doing everything they could to grease the war machine?

They were. And the fact that they were, and still are, might well inspire some ambivalence on our part toward all of their products, including their human products, ourselves. Almost the first decision I made when beginning to research this book several years ago was to resist the strong pull of opinion that hangs around the program—what I referred to earlier as the "pro and con" of it—which seemed anathema to the scholarly disposition I wanted to adopt. Not only would the platitudes of pro and con impede the fascinatingly complex history I wanted to relate, but they could not begin to address what seemed to me the true and deepest irony of the creative writing program, one that would reassert itself again and again in various forms throughout the writing of this book. The version most obviously germane to an inquiry into creative writing is the one that saw a discipline concocted as a progressive *antidote* to conformism instead charged with being an *agent* of that conformism on the literary aesthetic plane. A more abstract version, however, is condensed in the very idea of

*systematic creativity* which the proximity of “creative” and “program” in the term “creative writing program” brings to mind. Is such a thing possible? Or is it, rather, perfectly normal? Is it an ideological delusion, a way to make us feel better about our captivity, or is it simply a description of what is? To have an opinion on the creative writing program before having an answer to this question seemed premature, and so I determined to replace the platitudes of pro and con with a studious neutrality.

Once upon a time “systematic creativity” would have seemed a contradiction in terms, and wherever an unreconstructed romanticism holds sway it still does. The mythology of scientific creativity is one of inexplicable “Eureka” moments and, in the arts, of the mysteriously pleasing effluence of unpredictable personalities. Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) is perhaps the most brilliantly counterintuitive rebuke to these notions, observing that, historically, most scientific progress has been made in times when there is a near-total commitment to a consensus “paradigm” in a given subfield. Rather than wasting time debating first principles, Kuhn explained, scientists engage in these periods in the continuous or “normal” production of new knowledge. At the same time, because their research inevitably discovers inexplicable anomalies in the paradigm under which they faithfully work, they set the stage for the paradigm-shift of scientific revolution. For Kuhn, in other words, conformism is the shortest path to creativity on *both* an incremental and a fundamental scale.<sup>116</sup> But this in essence absolves institutions of the charge of conformism from the outset. Most developments of the idea of systematic creativity in the postwar period have paid more heed to the problem of conformism than Kuhn did, seeking ways to systematically combat it.

An example is the heady intertwining of romantic and programmatic themes in a work like Edward de Bono’s best-selling *Lateral Thinking: Creativity Step by Step* (1970), which reads as though it were written by a New Age robot. As his “step by step” implies, de Bono argues for the conscious adoption of “formal techniques” for generating new ideas, even recommending that problem solvers engaged in a task establish a “quota” or “fixed number of alternative ways of looking at a situation,” rather

than leaping immediately to an obvious solution. Since the spatial orientation suggested by the term “lateral thinking” turns out to be beside the point, this process might less confusingly have been called *non-linear* thinking: in contrast to the linearity of the “vertical thinking” to which it is opposed, where each step of a proof must be valid in sequence for the conclusion to be valid, lateral thinking permits intuitive leaps. The lateral thinker is allowed to be wrong, silly, irrelevant, and even “deliberately perverse,” all in the interest of a pure intellectual fecundity that might end up fundamentally “restructuring” a problem rather than merely solving it. Of course, eliminating the deceptive spatiality of de Bono’s terminology would eliminate the populism it subtly wants to communicate. Very much in the spirit of its time, lateral thinking would counteract the “arrogance” of vertical thinking, which “involves being right all the time,” with the playful humility of the horizontal multitude. It is finally the multitude, the aggregate of inhabitants of the social system, that is systematically creative.

The research psychologist Harold H. Anderson championed an even stronger version of this progressive creativist populism. Indeed, “naturalism” might be the better term for it. In his introduction to a collection of essays called *Creativity and Its Cultivation* (1959), Anderson assured his readers that “creativity, the emergence of originals and of individuality, is found in every living cell. . . . We are just beginning to think of individual differences in a moving, changing, progressing, interacting way, a way we are beginning to call *dynamic*. This *flow* and interweaving of individual differences is, by definition as well as by discovery the process of emerging individuals, creativity. Creativity is in each one of us.”<sup>117</sup> This is to align creativity with the fundamental principle of biological evolution and sociology alike, *differentiation*. The law of differentiation holds that the diversity of life as we know it evolved from a simpler state, and that modernity is characterized by an ever-increasing complexity of social organization. To argue for the “creativity” of the cell is to align human creativity with the life force, with the restlessness of need and the will to thrive. It is to reclaim the artwork as an instance, however remarkable, of the general

creativity of humanity, which is creative not only because it must reproduce itself, but because it must try to adapt itself to an ever-changing environment. That this collective struggle is so often experienced as beautiful is obviously to our benefit as a species.

I confess I find this idea appealing, and much more interesting than the therapy of enchantment, or the aura of rarity, or even the supposed benefits of sympathy-training, that have clung to and justified literature for so long. To the degree that creative writing embodies this concept, to the extent that it attempts to realize a diverse aesthetic democracy, I find it appealing, too. That is why the appreciation of postwar American fiction conducted in this book, even against my aspirations toward scholarly neutrality, is less an appreciation of individual writers and works than of the aesthetic-institutional totality they comprise. I admit that my examples are chosen as much for their evidentiary and entertainment value as for their not-infrequent excellence and occasional awesomeness. But that is also why, to the degree that the usual insults hurled at the creative writing program stem from the rejection of the value, even the possibility, of a general human creativity, I find these insults unpersuasive and finally boring. If literature as we know it does not survive the Program Era, it will not be the fault of the program, which is doing what it can to make literary experience relevant to a world that has many other things to attend to. In the meantime, it has bequeathed to us more interesting reading than one person could do in a lifetime. By the same token, to the extent that creative writing represents a further incursion of consumerism into the academy, a ballooning enterprise of mass vanity and anti-intellectualism, it needs to be described as such, and will be, though we can be sure it is no worse in this regard than many human endeavors.

## PART ONE

**"Write What You Know"/"Show Don't Tell"**  
**(1890-1960)**

tavia Butler might see: the restlessly seething diversifications of desire. Perhaps the true *subject of creative writing*, the person who can figuratively be said to speak to us from the million acts of self-expression of which the Program Era is the simultaneous product and occasion, is simply this *life force*, this maximal urge to live and create and differentiate.

If so, it will have to answer for the self-evidently disciplinary dimensions of the phenomenon that would seem to run contrary to any vision of unfettered fecundity. Creative writing might after all be a rebellious exercise of Eros, but it is also one that takes pleasure in the limitations of institutionalization. Can't we, if we squint hard enough in the direction of a writing *workshop*, see the afterimage (or rather the prevision) of the *workplace* meeting in which the nervous student, like the office worker he is statistically destined to become, makes a presentation? One of the rituals of reflexive modernity, this presentation is always also a presentation of individual excellence, and it is a presentation as much to the presenter himself as to others, a plumbing of personal resources: Have I outstripped the rest? Am I a writer yet?

But it might finally be even simpler than that. To perform in the world is to say "I am," and to say "I am" is the most essential motive of every human performance, no matter how mundane. As an exercise of the imagination, creative writing supplies a special effect of personal agency in that performance, a way of saying not only "I am" but "I am whoever I want to be," which unfortunately I am not.

## Afterword: Systematic Excellence

There are worse places for a phoenix to perform its fiery rite.

HUGH KENNER, "Classroom Accuracies"

Having figured out long ago that the point of view from which a story is told is crucially important to its meaning, scholars of literature have naturally been receptive to the insights of modern philosophical perspectivism—to the idea, put simply, that the truth of anything is relative to the position of its observer. And while that association may have been as dubious (since the point of view in fiction is a primarily aesthetic, and not rigorously philosophical, consideration) as it has been irresistible and overdetermined, it has helped to make literary studies an unusually reflexive enterprise, quick to turn on itself and question its own premises. No sooner have we generated a convincing reading of a text than we admit



that its truth, its meaning, might look different from a different point of view, and contemplate a wholesale renovation of our methodologies. Perhaps the worst consequence of this elective affinity with perspectivism has been to instill in many literary scholars an aversion to the confident statement of fact, as though these statements could aspire to the authority of an iron law rather than being what they are: an invitation to correction, the *sine qua non* of lively and instructive debate. Its best consequence has been the unique restlessness with which literary scholars have searched for a rapport with other disciplines—history, linguistics, philosophy, sociology, and on and on—appropriating their insights (or what is taken to be their insights) and bringing them to bear on literature and other forms of cultural representation. Literary studies may be rather fragile at its foundations, but it is for this reason a remarkably agile vehicle for the interdisciplinary satisfaction of curiosity.

Given this constitutive open-mindedness, it is surprising that literary scholars have been so blind to the question of scale. What is the proper scale of literary analysis? As a question in essence of *quantity* and not simply *perspective*, perhaps it sounds too much like an incipient math test for them to care. The nearest we usually come to a direct consideration of the question of scale is in debates about close reading: is that practice, as one of the few competencies proper to literary studies, to be defended against the inattentive abstractions of the sociologists and historians? Or is it rather the outmoded vestige of a gentlemanly reverence for the literary text as an auratic object seeded with deep hidden meanings that only reveal themselves upon close—which is also to say, slow—inspection? Might it profitably be traded for what Franco Moretti has called “distant reading,” by which he means, among other things, the subjection of many, many texts (databases) to various kinds of analytical counting, sorting, and explanation?<sup>1</sup> Is this approach too fundamentally at odds with literary experience, with the intimate commerce between reader and book, to really matter? Or is that alienation from literary experience exactly the point?

Questions of scale are also silently at issue in debates about the

proper geographical frame of contextualization. As we saw in Chapter 6, since the rise of poststructuralist theory, literary scholars have generally been on the side of excess—not fewer meanings for the literary text but more, always more!—and this has found another expression in the recent rise to glory of the discourse of the “transnational.” With its adjacent terminologies of transatlanticism, cosmopolitanism, diaspora, and the like, it offers itself as a critical response to the rhetoric (but also the facts) of capitalist globalization, and is founded on a recognition of the limits of the category that has always been the organizing force of the modern literature curriculum—the nation. Is there something necessary about just *this* frame of analysis of culture? Doesn’t it impede our ability to trace the global flow of persons, ideas, and images, and institutionalize a certain narrow-mindedness on our part? Perhaps, but it is characteristic of the cognitive expansionism of literary studies—a panic response, it may be, to anxieties about its irrelevance in the world at large—that most of its energy has been invested in extending outward from the nation rather than inward to the regions and localities, not to mention the institutions, that are equally corrective to the thoughtless assumptions of disciplinary nationalism. The campus or classroom is after all a kind of geographical space, however small, and to contextualize a literary work in relation to one can be as telling as connecting it to the global cultural flow.

But whether it is as traditional as something like close reading, or as fashionable as something like transnationalism, the commitment to one scale of analysis over another on the part of any given literary critic is usually intense enough that the question of scale *as such* never even arises. Perhaps, if it did, it would seem absurd to want to grant one scale of analysis priority over another, as absurd as it would be to grant priority to microbiology over astrophysics, or vice versa. There is, in other words, no one proper scale of literary analysis. It’s a fairly basic point, but one worth underlining: not only do different perspectives yield different appearances of truth, but different scales of analysis can be differently insightful. Here, too, just as with the question of narrative perspective, this is not something that literary studies needs to import wholly from without, but some-

thing already waiting to be discovered in literary texts themselves. Scale can first of all be considered as a spatio-temporal feature of aesthetic objects. The latter, as we have seen at various points throughout this book, may simply be a question of material form: what does it matter that short stories are relatively small while novels are relatively big? Or it may be a question of linguistic-representational mode: can we speak of the distribution of twentieth-century fiction along a scalar continuum from minimalism (understatement) to miniaturism (condensation) to maximalism (elaboration)? What links, if any, can be drawn between literary form and the work's presumed scale of address? Is the question of aesthetic scale attached in some meaningful way to the question of cultural minorities and majorities? Although none of them have been conclusively answered, these and other questions of scale have been worth asking.

Alongside and in addition to a consideration of these relatively "objective" quantities of culture, we might take them as an inspiration to meditate upon the question of scale as a matter of critical perspective. "Everything said is said by an observer," says systems theory.<sup>2</sup> If that observer is human, we know that he or she falls somewhere within a corporeal span of roughly one to seven feet, but we also know that this body is the seat of an extraordinarily elastic temporal and spatial *attention span*. If that observer is an institution—a corporate body larger and longer-lived than any one of its human members—that span can be even greater. Be it microcosmic or cosmic, a millisecond or a light year, a scene from distant childhood or a faculty meeting the day after tomorrow, the sheer variability of scales of attention in human life has been given short shrift in recent criticism, which errs when it thinks that one or another can claim an a priori privilege in the multi-scalar project of literary and cultural analysis. We can close-read or contextualize at various geographical scales; we can consider one text or many; we can track cultural developments in a certain "historical moment" or across the centuries: given that the attention span of criticism is highly variable, what might a self-consciousness of the question of scale bring to our critical practice?<sup>3</sup>

My approach to the question of scalar variability in the analysis of

culture has been made abundantly evident in the preceding chapters, but it is also prefigured in the work of one of the premier minimalist writers of the second generation, George Saunders. Like Raymond Carver before him, Saunders teaches creative writing at Syracuse University, and his output of short stories, most of them published in the *New Yorker*, can be thought of as the crossing of Carver's lower-middle-class "loser" aesthetic with some of the surreal craziness and violent public-sphericity (if I may) of Donald Barthelme. Saunders's curious novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005) tells of the rise to power of a murderous, mediocre dictator in the nation of Outer Horner.<sup>4</sup> Nothing is surprising about that rise—his persecution of the neighboring people of Inner Horner, his demagogic manipulation of the national pride of the Outer Hornerites, his gradual descent into ungrammatical megalomania are all too familiar—except that the world in which it occurs is very, very small. Indeed it is absurdly small, as though something quite strange has been done to our usual conceptions of geographical scale. In fact, only one Inner Hornerite can stand in the nation of Inner Horner at a time, forcing the other handful of citizens of this country to stand in the Short Term Residency Zone in Outer Horner. Outer Horner itself, though larger, is not that all that large, fielding a militia that consists only of Freeda, Melvin, and Larry. No wonder, then, that the reign of the awful Phil will be a brief one: spatially and temporally, everything here has been compressed.

Part of Saunders's point in imagining this risibly small "geopolitical" arena is of course to produce an effect of simplifying estrangement, a Petri dish parable in which we can view the sinister spores of nationalist chauvinism beginning to grow. But it also radicalizes and thematizes the question of scale that had always attached to the project of literary minimalism in the Carver tradition, with its general preference for short-short stories about ordinary people and their strictly personal concerns. In doing so, Saunders is able to apply critical force in two opposing directions. On the one hand, he allows us to see in retrospect how each Carver character had in a troubling sense been a citizen in a nation of one, and how program fiction might expand its domain of concern and reclaim a prop-

erly political, or at least cultural-critical, consciousness. On the other hand, he engages the minimalist aesthetic with some of the absurd expansiveness of contemporary discourses of the global and the transnational, cutting these discourses, as we say, down to size. Indeed, as two huge hands descend from above at the conclusion of the novella to reshuffle the world and reshape its mechanical toy inhabitants, who awake in the soon-to-be-troubled land of New Horner, their world seems to be about the size of a desktop—the scene, that is, of the manual-intellectual labor of writing or typing. At this scale, revolution looks more like revision, and the limited purview of the observer (in this case the writer or the reader) becomes perfectly clear. So what is on the one hand an exercise in silly political surrealism is, on the other hand, a way of “getting real” by getting small.

Something of the same double motive has been at work in my attempt to locate postwar fiction in the university, where it cannot help engaging with the larger economies and histories that institution inhabits, but where it also cannot help being limited in that engagement. That limitation, in the form of the writer’s protection from market forces, is part of the point, and it would be a given in any case. The assemblage of literary methodologies that have been brought together in this book to describe and explain this constitutive inside-outness, from the close reading of literary texts to the imposition of the transplanetary frame, from the more or less subtle registration of biographical individuality to the insulting simplicity of the diagram, has likewise been designed to avoid the literary critical version of what Bruno Latour identifies as the common mistake that social scientists make when they “use scale as one of the many variables they need to set up *before* doing the study.” In doing so, they deprive themselves of the ability to range alongside the human behavior they wish to explain, which leaps in its domain of reference from “the whole of humanity, France, capitalism, and reason while, a minute later, [settling] for a local compromise.”<sup>5</sup> It is thus with a keen sense of the arbitrariness of the question, the particularity of its scale, that I ask what, finally, does the discipline of creative writing mean to the university? I might just as easily have asked what it means to humanity, or to the state of California, or to certain kinds of writers, or to readers like you.

Inheritor of the New Critical positioning of aesthetic value as something that might be produced, as well as appreciated, in an academic environment, the discipline of creative writing is an odd but, to all appearances, healthy duck. With its penchant for specialized vocabularies and familiarity with the less-traveled regions of the library, literary scholarship is at least partly in sync with the scientism of its wider institutional environment, the research university. Creative writing, by contrast, might seem to have no ties at all to the pursuit of positive knowledge. It is, rather, an experiment—but more accurately, an exercise—in subjectivity. The very genre that would seem to bind the arts and sciences at the level of theme, science fiction, is only minimally represented in the creative writing program establishment. Privileging ideas and adventures over disciplined elevations of literary form, this genre is often brainy but is only rarely considered literary. Furthermore, commercially successful writers have little financial incentive to seek the patronage (that is, don the shackles) of the university. What role, then, is the creative writer playing there?

One way to answer this question is, first, to ask another question: If the sprawling modern university is an assemblage of centrifugal pluralisms—of splintered knowledges, divergent research agendas, and multiplying bureaucratic expressions of cultural and other forms of difference—how does the system hold together? Once it was supposed to be the domain of culture, the quasi-sacred Arts, which offered the secular institution an avenue back to the Unity of specialized knowledges in God, but no longer. Nor has a unity founded in national purpose, expressed in the intellectual exploration of a national culture, been the prize possession of the American university, even during the Cold War, when American Studies was at its strongest. The typically strong regional and state affiliations of American higher educational institutions—the U.S. does not even have a national university—and the tendency to oppositional liberal intellectualism confirmed in the rise of the “transnational” as a positive critical value have meant that their most impressive contributions to the nation *qua* nation have taken the form of technical assistance. (That assistance has of course been massive, and very well paid.) In his compellingly bleak

and extremist analysis of the situation, *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings suggests that the new God of the university is "excellence":

Generally, we hear a lot of talk from University administrators about excellence, because it has become the unifying principle of the contemporary University. C. P. Snow's "Two Cultures" have become "Two Excellences," the humanistic and the scientific. As an integrating principle, excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or to put it more precisely, non-referential. [...]

Today, all departments of the University can be urged to strive for excellence, since the general applicability of the notion is in direct relation to its emptiness.<sup>6</sup>

The University that Readings describes is one that has begun instead to behave like a corporation, integrating new management techniques and market valuations into its wholly self-referential, self-reproducing practices.<sup>7</sup> In this scheme, excellence is the "integrating principle that allows 'diversity' (the other watchword of the University prospectus) to be tolerated without threatening the unity of the system."<sup>8</sup> A "unit of value entirely internal" to that system, marking "nothing more than the moment of technology's self-reflection," it is a sign, above all, of bureaucratic efficiency, the smooth running of the pluralist machine.

Readings is right to see excellence as the new God of the university, and as a marker of institutional self-reflection, but he is crucially wrong, I think, in seeing it as a measure of bureaucratic efficiency alone. For one thing, as his own documentation shows, the rhetoric of excellence in the university tends to appear in contexts where what is at issue is competition—say, between one funding application and another—or reputation, as in the hierarchically arranged schools in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. If this is not yet "referential" to something wholly outside the educational system itself, it is nonetheless profoundly and importantly *relational*, a measure of relative "distinction" which, among other effects, cashes out in the workplace as the relative value of a degree from a given

institution. In the early twentieth century Thorstein Veblen had a lot to say about the orientation of higher education toward business interests that resonates even now in Readings's account of the university in ruins; but Veblen, even more importantly, drew our attention to the excessive symbolic activity (that is, showing off) entailed in the creation and maintenance of such invidious distinctions. Knowing this, we should be on guard against assuming that appeals to excellence are, as Readings claims, a matter only of technocratic efficiency.<sup>9</sup>

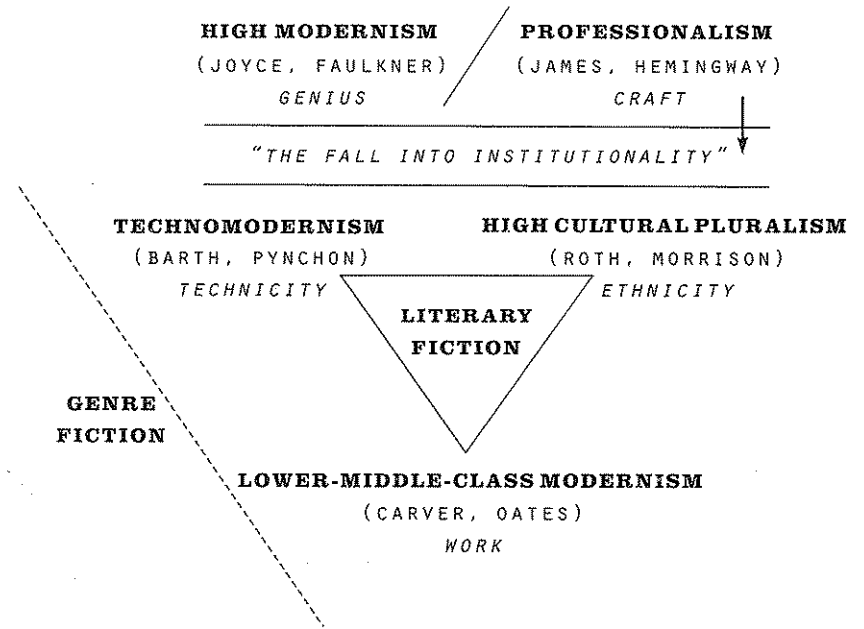
On the contrary, taking off from his observation that the university increasingly functions as an "autonomous system" with little direct involvement in extracurricular agendas, we might say that the "excellence" of the university is an index not of its functional efficiency but of its more or less impressive capacity to waste. Excellence in this view is a primarily aesthetic term, the guise in which judgments of beauty-as-superiority reappear in an otherwise efficiency-oriented university environment. Readings is wrong, therefore, to say that the disappearance of a referential appeal to national culture has occasioned the "ruin" of the traditional university in our time, at least in the United States. Indeed, insofar as American culture has become a corporate culture, the rhetoric of excellence could be understood as a deep expression of that national culture, and seems for now to be holding educational institutions together fairly well.

It is safe to say, then, that creative writing in the university will exist as long as it seems simply too excellent to resist. The ideologues of science can make no effective arguments against this excellence, a form of beauty they worship every bit as fervently and irrationally as do the arts. Still less can academic administrators afford to be insensitive to the beauty of excellence; they often must judge the value of highly specialized research at second hand, by measuring the evidence of its relative prestige. Not only this, but an impressive creative writing program can be had for what amounts, as against particle accelerators and the like, to chump change, much of which is returned (as with Master's programs in general) in the form of healthy tuition payments. Thus, while creative writers in the university have often perceived themselves as outsiders to the institution that

houses them, it is not hard to enumerate, as I have done throughout this book, their uses beyond the obvious one of teaching students something about writing. Inwardly, their job as teachers is to stand as inspiring exemplars of the unalienated laborer. In this sense, every artist on campus is half a performance artist: making his name, doing his job, owning the product of his labor of "self-expression," the artist or writer-in-residence is in a sense the purest version of the kind of worker, the white-collar professional, that so many college students are preparing to be.<sup>10</sup> Alternatively, but relatedly, they can be seen as offering a form of therapy to some of these students, the "creative types," in advance of their lifelong capture by the usual cubicle. Outwardly, the task of the academic creative writer is to produce, in her writings, unconscious allegories of institutional quality, aesthetically pure because luxuriously useless. More simply, these writers contribute a certain form of prestige to the university's overall portfolio of cultural capital, adding their bit to the market value of the degrees it confers. In this role they are somewhat like varsity athletes, but whereas varsity athletics typically symbolizes the excellence of competitive teamwork, creative writing and the other arts testify to the institution's systematic hospitality to the excellence of individual self-expression.

And isn't postwar American fiction, after all, unprecedented in its excellence? If I could, I would ask this concluding question with two voices in counterpoint, and only one of them sarcastic. The conservative modernism of T. S. Eliot and his ilk has ingrained in us the notion that art never improves; and judgments of postwar American literature, including critiques of the writing program, habitually see it in sad decline from the heroic heights of the as-yet-unprogrammed interwar modernist era.

But perhaps, in the interest of dislodging some tedious prejudices, and for love of the educational system that has made most of us what we are, or maybe just for the fun of it, it's time to resist this notion. One way to do so would be to crudely convert historical materialism into a mode of aesthetic judgment, putting literary production in line with other human enterprises, such as technology and sports, where few would deny that systematic investments of capital over time have produced a continual el-



Modernism declines into the Program Era through the conduit of craft—but is this "fall" into institutionalism really so unfortunate?

evation of performance. Granted, there is no way for a literary scholar, these days, to engage in strenuous aesthetic appreciation without sounding goofily anachronistic, so call the effort what you will. Call it a strategic triumphalism. Because of the tremendous expansion of the literary talent pool coincident to the advent of mass higher education, and the wide distribution, therein, of elevated literary ambitions, and the cultivation in these newly vocal, vainglorious masses of the habits of self-conscious attention to craft through which these ambitions might plausibly be realized, is it not true that owing to the organized efforts of the program—to the simple fact of our trying harder than ever before—there has been a system-wide rise in the excellence of American literature in the postwar period?

Of course, we can only measure literary excellence on our own terms, and the task of elevating individual authors high above their numerous accomplished peers has become increasingly difficult. This may have produced, as with the disappearance of the .400 hitter in professional baseball, a kind of optical illusion of encroaching mediocrity: being the dominant figure in Shakespeare's or even Pound's time was, by comparison to today, easy as pie.<sup>11</sup> But laying aside our anachronistic prejudices for the One over the Many Ones, moving our minds from the Pound Era into the Program Era, do we not bear daily witness to a surfeit of literary excellence, an embarrassment of riches? Is there not more excellent fiction being produced now than anyone has time to read?

What kind of traitor to the mission of mass higher education would you have to be to think otherwise?

## Notes

### Introduction: Halls of Mirror

1. Simon Karlinsky, ed., *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, revised and expanded ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 300. Quoted in Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 211. The novel was of course *Lolita* (1955). Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991).
2. Karlinsky, ed., *Dear Bunny*, 293.
3. Nomi Tamir Ghez has shown how carefully Humbert's author ironizes his rhetoric "from behind." See Ghez, "The Art of Persuasion in Nabokov's *Lolita*," in Ellen Pifer, ed., *Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17-37.
4. D. G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1996).
5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 114. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.
6. The example set by the Federal Writers' Project and other New Deal initiatives along that line was no doubt instrumental in establishing the legitimacy of its own form of institutional support for artistic production. On the latter see, for instance, Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
7. Jakobson's apocryphal quip provides the epigraph (and title) to Myers's *The Elephants Teach*. A differently worded version is quoted in Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 303.
8. See Robie Macauley, *The Disguises of Love* (New York: Curtis Books, 1952); Philip Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Michael Chabon, *Wonder Boys* (New York: Villard, 1995); John L'Heureux, *The Handmaid of Desire* (New York: Soho Press, 1996); Francine Prose, *Blue Angel: A Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001). One could also include Nabokov's own *Pale Fire* (1962) in this list, since the scholarly activities of Kinbote are constantly shown to be compromised by his homosexual de-

sires, which Nabokov clearly wants us to see as further evidence of Kinbote's fundamental narcissism. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Berkeley, 1968).

9. Rick Moody, "Writers and Mentors," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Fiction Issue (Summer 2005) <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200508/moody>.

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* (San Diego: Harvest, 1982), 3. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

11. His efforts to get his students to see what the text imagines—often by use of diagrams—should be placed against the backdrop of the increasingly bright glare of the mass visual culture so seductive to *Lolita's* little girl.

12. The same caution guided Nabokov's most sustained scholarly project, an English translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* so literal as to make the poem all but unreadable. His aim, it seems, was not so much to translate the poem as to protect it from translation, that is, from the potentially competing artistry of the translator.

13. Nabokov operated on just such an assumption of the lucid self-knowledge of geniuses and famously despised psychoanalysis, the theoretical domain in which the idea and analysis of unconscious intentionality is most highly elaborated.

14. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1953).

15. Appel, Introduction to Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, xxvi.

16. See, for instance, Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991); Donald Barthelme, "Not-Knowing," in Barthelme, *Not-Knowing: The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme* (New York: Random House, 1997), 11–26.

17. Quoted in Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 218.

18. "Every man a king" was the slogan of Louisiana's populist governor, Huey P. Long.

19. Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

20. *Ibid.*, 114.

21. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* ([1951]; New York: Oxford, 2002), 76; Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business in the Making of the American University, 1880–1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 12.

22. See Andrew Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class: Post-World War II American Fiction and White-Collar Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

23. William R. Paulson, *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in an Age of Information* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

24. Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); see also Luc Boltan-

ski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007).

25. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

26. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1989), 23.

27. Anna Leahy, "Creativity, Caring, and the Easy 'A': Rethinking the Role of Self-Esteem in Creative Writing Pedagogy," in Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice, eds., *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 2007), 56.

28. The complexities of Humbert's unreliability are laid out in James Phelan, "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*," *Narrative* 15:2 (May 2007), 222–238.

29. David Fenza, "About AWP: The Growth of Creative Writing Programs" (AWP, 2007), 2. [www.awpwriter.org/aboutawp/index.htm](http://www.awpwriter.org/aboutawp/index.htm).

30. Appel, *The Annotated Lolita*, lix.

31. John Irving, *The World According to Garp* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), 457. One of the more interesting differences between John Irving and T. S. Garp is that the latter didn't attend, as Irving did, the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and never holds, as Irving briefly did, a professorship in English. To deprive his character of his own schooling is, we can surmise, to make him more interesting, less a product of the kind of institutions and more a product of "life itself."

32. Charles Caramello's way of putting this is to say that, while postmodern fiction sometimes questions the integrity of the book and the authorial self in a way that parallels the skeptical assertions of poststructuralism, it simultaneously "resists" that skepticism; as does, the literary historian needs to add, every other institutional agency in any way connected with literature. Charles Caramello, *Silverless Mirrors: Book, Self and Postmodern American Fiction* (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1983).

33. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, and How It Is Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). See also John Howkins, *The Creative Economy: How People Make Money from Ideas* (London: Penguin Global, 2002).

34. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 19.

35. Alfred Kazin, *The Inmost Leaf: A Selection of Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), 244.

36. Jay McInerney, "Raymond Carver: A Still, Small Voice," *New York Times*, August 6, 1989.

37. Fenza, "About AWP," 1.

38. The professional difficulties encountered by the Fugitive-Agrarians, who in fact harbored an intense bitterness toward the institution to which they are famously joined in literary history, is recounted in Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

39. David Fenza, "A Letter from the AWP's Director," in *AWP Director's Handbook: A Compendium of Guidelines and Information for Directors of Creative Writing Programs* (AWP, 2006), 1. [www.awpwriter.org/membership/dh\\_2.htm](http://www.awpwriter.org/membership/dh_2.htm).

40. As Myers notes, the formation of the AWP in 1967, coming some 80 years after the formation of the Modern Language Association, marks an important moment of professional consolidation in the history of creative writing programs. Founded in 1883, the MLA by contrast claims "over 30,000 members in 100 countries." See [www.mla.org/about](http://www.mla.org/about). By way of comparison to AWP's 305 graduate programs: in 2003–04 there was a total of 591 U.S. institutions offering either an M.A. (428) or a Ph.D. (143) in English literature. In 1991–92 that number had been 549. This represents an increase of 7 percent, as compared to a 39 percent increase in the number of creative writing programs over the same period. This picture of rapid numerical convergence looks much different on the undergraduate level. As of 2004 there were some 86 institutions that offered a B.A. in creative writing, while there were 1,222 offering a B.A. in English. These figures are made available by the National Center for Education Statistics: [nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05\\_255.asp?referrer=report](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05_255.asp?referrer=report).

41. Mainly focused on the six decades leading up to World War II, Myers's *The Elephants Teach* is to my knowledge the best account of the historical emergence of the ideas and institutions of creative writing instruction in the U.S., and has been of great help in establishing the background of my project here. Some initial steps toward an analysis of the postwar writer's relation to the university are taken in Ben Siegel, ed., *The American Writer and the University* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989). A theoretically assertive account of the workshop is available in Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarasadeh, "The Cultural Politics of the Fiction Workshop," *Cultural Critique* (Winter 1988–89), 155–173, which argues that the writing program's commitment to realism betrays its efforts to "keep intact the legitimacy of bourgeois values" (159). The weakness in this left-formalist argument is not in the claim that the writing program is a bourgeois enterprise, which it most certainly is, but in the assumption that anti-realist fiction (hardly absent from the writing program establishment in any case) would necessarily be a "non-bourgeois" enterprise.

42. Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1989, 49.

43. John W. Aldridge, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction* (New York: Scribner's, 1992), 28.

44. [www.uiowa.edu/~iww/bro-intr.htm](http://www.uiowa.edu/~iww/bro-intr.htm).

45. See for instance M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

46. Another limitation is methodological: although I have benefited from talking informally to individuals with direct experiences of the authors and programs of which I write, I decided early on to restrict at least this phase of my research to available documentary evidence, leaving a potentially very rich (and no doubt in many cases corrective) oral history dimension of this project for the future.

47. In recent years McCarthy has been affiliated with the quasi-academic Santa Fe Institute for the study of complex systems.

48. Langdon Hammer, "Plath's Lives," *Representations* 75 (2001): 61–88.

49. Kathy Walton, ed., *AWP Catalogue of Writing Programs*, 3rd ed. (Norfolk, Va.: Associated Writing Programs), 2.

50. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 182.

51. This may have been true since the founding of creative writing in Iowa in the 1930s, but one can measure in a more concentrated way the deflation of the spirit of 1960s and 70s experimentalism in the 1987 appearance of the second edition of Janet Burroway's popular textbook, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (Boston: Little, Brown; first ed. 1982), in which she explains that she has "replaced about half the stories, generally in the direction of modern realism. Teachers and students alike consistently felt that the most useful stories for the purpose of this text were in that range, and that those which presented major problems of interpretation distracted from the concentration on technique. For that reason I have expunged some of the quirkiness and experimentalism that I admire" (ix).

52. T. Coraghessan Boyle, "This Monkey, My Back," in Frank Conroy, ed., *The Eleventh Draft: Craft and the Writing Life from the Iowa Writers' Workshop* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1999), 9.

53. Quoted in Wendy Bishop and David Starkey, *Keywords in Creative Writing* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 60.

54. Some of the exceptions are: Joseph M. Moxley, ed., *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1989); Wendy Bishop, *Released Into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1990); Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom, eds., *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1994); Anna Leahy, ed., *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project* (Clevedon, U.K.: Multilingual Matters, 2005).

55. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition and Culture* 3:2 (2003), 159. But see David Morley's recently published *Cambridge Introduc-*



tion to *Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): if one book could justify the international spread of an academic discipline, this richly rewarding insider's account of what it all means, and how it should be done, might be it.

56. Eileen Pollack, "Flannery O'Connor and the New Criticism: A Response to Mark McGurl," *American Literary History* 19:2 (Summer 2007), 546–556.

57. Karl Shapiro, *Edsel* (New York: Bernard Geis, 1971), 116.

58. See Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice, "Introduction: Creative Writing and the Persistence of 'Lore,'" in Ritter and Vanderslice, eds., *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*, xii.

59. John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy; or, The Revised New Syllabus* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1966), xxii.

60. Ibid., xxii. Note also how the plot of Barth's arguably most important novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) [London: Flamingo, 1993], is launched upon the proto-progressive education of its protagonist, who, falling under the influence of Master Burlingame, learns to disregard the "pernicious distinction between learning and other sorts of natural human behavior" (17).

61. Daniel Bell is quoted in Harold Perkin, "History of Universities," in *The History of Higher Education*, 2nd ed., ed. Lester F. Goodchild and Harold S. Wechsler (Boston: Pearson, 1997), 30.

62. John H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and Secular University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 75–122.

63. John Barth, *Further Fridays: Essays, Lectures, and Other Nonfiction, 1984–1994* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), 269.

64. Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* [1963], with a Postscript—1972 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 136.

65. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

66. Barth, *Further Fridays*, 269.

67. Hughes Mearns, *Creative Youth: How a School Environment Can Set Free the Creative Spirit* (New York: Doubleday, 1928).

68. Kerr, *Uses of the University*, 113; emphasis added.

69. Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy*, 731.

70. A less extreme version of this idea is condensed in the title of Barth's later novel, *Sabbatical: A Romance* (1982).

71. Neal Stephenson, *The Diamond Age; or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

72. N. Katherine Hayles, "Flickering Connectivities in Shelley Jackson's Patchwork Girl: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis," *Postmodern Culture* 10:2 (2000).

73. Shelley Jackson, "Stitch Bitch: The Patchwork Girl," *Paradoxa* 4 (1998), 528.

74. For Kenneth Womack, the satirical campus novel, in bringing together the ques-

tion of judgment and community, becomes an occasion for a post-poststructuralist ethical criticism. Kenneth Womack, *Postwar Academic Fiction: Satire, Ethics, Community* (London: Palgrave, 2002). As evidenced by the detective novels of Amanda Cross or the academic horror stories (literal ones) of James Hynes, the campus novel would also appear to be a genre well paired with other popular genre forms.

75. Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 225.

76. Saul Bellow, *The Dean's December* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982). What makes a work like Don DeLillo's *White Noise* particularly interesting in this regard—and what no doubt helps to bait so many college teachers into including it in the post-war novel survey—is the way it simultaneously instantiates and transcends this virtually "pre-modern" generic enclosure, representing the advent on the campus of exactly those outside forces—mass media, pollution, history as such—that make the campus novel seem too quaint a form to be taken seriously. While they have not to my knowledge received much attention from students, one could say the same for works like Ishmael Reed's *Japanese By Spring* (1993), Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), and Richard Russo's *Straight Man* (1997)—even, at a stretch, David Foster Wallace's "Westward the Course of Empire Makes Its Way" (1990): a fundamental component of each of their comic plots is the intrusion of wider economic realities into the formerly self-contained life of the university.

77. This term was coined by the neuro-physiologist Humberto Maturana to describe the self-making activities of the biological organism, which in his account lives in the solipsistic domain of its own structures of sense perception. See, for instance, Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, rev. ed. (Boston: Shambala, 1992). Sociological systems theory borrows the term to describe the self-referential closure of all systems, biological, social, or otherwise.

78. See Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 149.

79. See Mark Seltzer, "The Crime System," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring 2004), 557–583. Notice how, in Stephen King, an obvious desire to be thought "literary" coincides with the obsessive reflexivity of his best-selling horror oeuvre, where novelists are tortured in various ways by their popularity.

80. The utility of this coinage, which I first suggested in "The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction," *Critical Inquiry* (Fall 2005), has since been independently confirmed by Ira Livingston's engaging *Between Science and Literature: An Introduction to Autopoetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

81. Franco Moretti, "Serious Century," in Moretti, ed., *The Novel, Vol. 1: History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 364–400.

82. James Moffett and Kenneth R. McElheny, *Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories*, rev. ed. (New York: Mentor, 1995).
83. Philip Roth, *The Anatomy Lesson* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 159. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.
84. Ross Posnock, *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 21.
85. The reflexivity of Roth's enterprise is broached in S. Lillian Kramer, "Philip Roth's Self-Reflexive Fiction," *Modern Language Studies* 28:3,4 (Fall 1998), 57–72.
86. Other examples include the orthopedist in *The Anatomy Lesson*; Jimmy Herf in *The Counterlife*; and, most elaborately, the Roth-impersonating character Pipik in *Operation Shylock*.
87. Philip Roth, *Zuckerman Unbound* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 159.
88. Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist* (New York: Vintage, 1999).
89. Ronald Sukenick, *Up: A Novel* (New York: Dial, 1968); Joyce Carol Oates, *The Tattooed Girl: A Novel* (New York: Ecco, 2003).
90. The heterogeneous cluster of theoretical endeavors grouped under the term "systems theory" appears to encompass two opposed orientations toward the idea of the system: one emphasizes its self-referential closure and fundamental inability to communicate meaningfully with an environment that merely irritates it; the other emphasizes the fundamental interconnectedness of subsystems in the larger systems that are their shared environment, as popularized in the discourses of globalization and ecology. Since they stem from the same irresolvable paradox, it would be hard to take a principled stance in favor of one of these orientations over the other, though they do seem to lend themselves to distinct descriptive tasks depending on whether the observer, in a given case, sees a need to articulate a difference that makes a difference, or rather to recognize a necessary relation between putatively autonomous entities. Only an approach that oscillates between these two goals, I think, can do justice to the deep collusion of individuality (a form of difference) and institutionality (a structure of relation) in the discipline of creative writing.
91. Esther B. Fein, "Philip Roth Sees Double. And Maybe Triple, Too," *New York Times*, March 9, 1993.
92. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 2004); Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2007).
93. The complex logic of this testimony is astutely analyzed in James Buzard's "On Auto-Ethnographic Authority," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 16:1 (2003), 61–91.
94. Philip Roth, *The Facts* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 59–60.
95. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988–1994).

96. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 174–207.
97. Flannery O'Connor, "The Regional Writer," in O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 56.
98. Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, 28–29.
99. See my fuller discussion of this issue in Mark McGurl, "Faulkner's Ambit: Modernism, Regionalism, and the Location of Cultural Capital," *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 135–157. See also Andrew Hoberek, "Flannery O'Connor and the Southern Origins of Identity Politics," in Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class*, 95–112.
100. Elizabeth Tallent, "The Big X: Unraveling Mysteries in a Workshop for Fine Writing," *Stanford Today*, March/April 1996. [www.stanford.edu/dept/news/stanfordtoday/ed/9603/9603bigx.html](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/stanfordtoday/ed/9603/9603bigx.html).
101. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 38.
102. For a sustained critique of the assumed separateness of postmodernism and multiculturalism in the broader theoretical senses of these terms, see Rafael Perez-Torres, "Nomads and Migrants: Negotiating a Multicultural Postmodernism," *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter 1993–1994), 161–189, which is especially helpful in locating this negotiation in a specific social institution, the university. See also Phillip Brian Harper, *Framing the Margins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), which argues for a convergence of postmodern and minority fiction in the idea of "fragmented subjectivity."
103. For Guillory, "technicity" is a linguistic phenomenon arising from intellectual specialization. See John Guillory, "The Memo and Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Autumn 2004), 130. The term is also used by Martin Heidegger (or rather, his translator) in the essay "The Age of the World Picture," in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 115–154. The conjoining of universality and particularity in whiteness is brilliantly elaborated in Robyn Wiegman, "Whiteness Studies and the Paradox of Particularity," *Boundary 2* 26:3 (1999), 115–150.
104. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 10. On racial whiteness in the novel see Tim Engles, "'Who Are You Literally?': Fantasies of the White Self in *White Noise*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 45:3 (1999), 755–787. Turning to the scene of the author's upbringing in an ethnically specified, Italian-American neighborhood in the Bronx, and narrating its relation at once to the unmarked collectivity of the crowd and to avant-garde art, DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) is ironically a more "mainstream" example of the high cultural pluralist aesthetic.
105. DeLillo, *White Noise*, 310.

106. Gordon Lish is quoted in Hal May, ed., *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 117 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 262. This continued a trend begun earlier in the century, when the emergence of middlebrow institutions like the Book-of-the-Month Club signaled the expansion of a class of persons eager to acquire the habits of high cultural consumption not instilled in childhood.
107. Rita Felski, "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class," *PMLA* 115; 1 (January 2000), 33.45.
108. Arno J. Mayer, "The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem," *Journal of Modern History* (1975), 409–436.
109. John Irving, "Stories with Voiceprints," *New York Times*, September 30, 1979. [nytimes.com/books/00/05/28/specials/phillips-black.html](http://nytimes.com/books/00/05/28/specials/phillips-black.html).
110. Laurie Clancy, "Jayne Anne Phillips," *Jrank Biographies*. [biography.jrank.org/pages/4660/Phillips-Jayne-Anne.html](http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4660/Phillips-Jayne-Anne.html).
111. See Jayne Anne Phillips, *Black Tickets* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 21; 11.
112. Hoberek, *The Twilight of the Middle Class*, 21.
113. George D. Stoddard, "Creativity in Education," in Harold H. Anderson, ed., *Creativity and Its Cultivation* (New York: Harper, 1959), 181–182.
114. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 70.
115. Stoddard, "Creativity in Education," 188.
116. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
117. Anderson, *Creativity and Its Cultivation*, xii.

### 1. Autobardolatry

1. Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 486. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.
2. Indeed, in an advance upon the merely cocksure self-nomination to the status of genius that we find in, say, Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), well-born Eugene wonders in the end if that category isn't becoming a little too crowded for comfort. Muttering "over the names of 21 geniuses who wrote poetry, and 37 more who devoted themselves to the drama and the novel," he asks himself what "can I be, besides a genius? I've been one long enough. There must be better things to do" (494).
3. David Herbert Donald, *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 228.
4. The equal claims of the "bookish" and the free-form "experiential" in Wolfe's

educational formation as a novelist combine to produce the contradiction, first noticed by Wright Morris, that while his fiction would ground itself in the fundamental originality of personal experience, it records an experience that "in substance, was essentially vicarious. He got it from books. He gives it back to us in books." In this sense, one could say that Wolfe's writing is never so deeply, realistically autobiographical as when it is painfully, artificially rhetorical, the very form of his writing serving to redouble its thematic *Bildung* content. See Wright Morris, "The Function of Appetite," in Louis D. Rubin, ed., *Thomas Wolfe: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 91–96.

5. Harold Rugg, Foreword to Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, *The Child-Centered School: An Appraisal of the New Education* (New York: World Book Co., 1928), v.

6. Werner Sollors has argued that concerns for ethnic cultural difference are prefigured in American history by concerns for regional cultural difference. See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 174–207.

7. Younghill Kang, *The Grass Roof* (New York: Knopf, 1931), 3.

8. This project—the claiming of an experientially authenticated voice—has recently received a strong critical endorsement and theorization in Paula Moya's recognizably late-progressive (if nominally post-positivist realist), *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

9. Hughes Mearns, *Creative Power: The Education of Youth in the Creative Arts* [1929] (New York: Dover, 1958), 5; 24.

10. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* [1916] (New York: Free Press, 1997), 139, 351.

11. Obviously much of the substance of progressive educational theory has intellectual roots going farther back into the nineteenth century, both in Europe (e.g., Froebel) and the United States (e.g., Bronson Alcott). I refer here to the assembly and systematization of these ideas under the banner of "progressivism."

12. John Dewey, *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum* (New York: Dover, 2001), 7. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

13. Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Progressive Education: From Arcady to Academe, a History of the Progressive Education Association, 1919–1955* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1967), 9.

14. The potential for a large-scale reversal of the progressive commitment to assimilation in favor of cultural diversity can be located as early as 1916 in the work of Randolph Bourne, whose book-length account of the Gary schools celebrated William Wirt's reconception of classrooms as "workshops where children do interesting things