

## Blackwell Introductions to Literature

This series sets out to provide concise and stimulating introductions to literary subjects. It offers books on major authors (from John Milton to James Joyce), as well as key periods and movements (from Old English literature to the contemporary). Coverage is also afforded to such specific topics as "Arthurian Romance." All are written by outstanding scholars as texts to inspire newcomers and others: non-specialists wishing to revisit a topic, or general readers. The prospective overall aim is to ground and prepare students and readers of whatever kind in their pursuit of wider reading.

### Published

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. John Milton                                   | <i>Roy Flannagan</i>                      |
| 2. Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales              | <i>John Hirsh</i>                         |
| 3. Arthurian Romance                             | <i>Derek Pearsall</i>                     |
| 4. James Joyce                                   | <i>Michael Seidel</i>                     |
| 5. Mark Twain                                    | <i>Stephen Railton</i>                    |
| 6. The Modern Novel                              | <i>Jesse Matz</i>                         |
| 7. Old Norse-Icelandic Literature                | <i>Heather O'Donoghue</i>                 |
| 8. Old English Literature                        | <i>Daniel Donoghue</i>                    |
| 9. Modernism                                     | <i>David Ayers</i>                        |
| 10. Latin American Fiction                       | <i>Philip Swanson</i>                     |
| 11. Re-Scripting Walt Whitman                    | <i>Ed Folsom and<br/>Kenneth M. Price</i> |
| 12. Renaissance and Reformations                 | <i>Michael Hattaway</i>                   |
| 13. The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry | <i>Charles Altieri</i>                    |
| 14. American Drama 1945–2000                     | <i>David Krasner</i>                      |
| 15. Reading Middle English Literature            | <i>Thorlac Turville-Petre</i>             |
| 16. American Literature and Culture 1900–1960    | <i>Gail McDonald</i>                      |

# American Literature and Culture 1900–1960

Gail McDonald

© 2007 by Gail McDonald

BLACKWELL PUBLISHING  
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK  
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

The right of Gail McDonald to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2007 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2007

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

McDonald, Gail.

American literature and culture, 1900-1960 / Gail McDonald.  
p. cm.—(Blackwell introductions to literature;15)  
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-0126-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-0126-1 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-0127-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-0127-X (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. American literature—20th century—History and criticism. 2. National characteristics, American, in literature. 3. Literature and society—United States—History—20th century. I. Title. II. Series.

P5221. M394 2006

810.9/358—dc22

2005034697

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Meridien  
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong  
Printed and bound in Singapore  
by COS Printers Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

For further information on  
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:  
[www.blackwellpublishing.com](http://www.blackwellpublishing.com)



PS  
221  
172

# Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Timeline	viii
Acknowledgments	xxii
Introduction	1
1 <b>Big</b>	6
Expansion and its Discontents	12
The City	19
Representing Nature	36
Apocalypse	43
The Sense of Place	48
2 <b>Rich</b>	60
Weber and Veblen: Reasons to Work and Reasons to Spend	66
USA	71
Work and Identity	79
Labor Reform	91
Consumption and Identity	99
3 <b>New</b>	110
Beginning Anew: Crevecoeur and Hawthorne	115
Young America	119
Making It New I: Literary Modernism	128
Making It New II: The Other Arts	149

<b>4</b>	<b>Free</b>	165
	The Multiple Meanings of Freedom	170
	War and the Affirmation of American Values	173
	Writing War	180
	Upstream Against the Mainstream	187
	"An Inescapable Network of Mutuality"	203
Notes		211
Websites for Further Study of American		
	Literature and Culture	215
Bibliography		217
Index		231

## List of Illustrations

1	Ansel Adams, <i>Clearing Winter Snow, Yosemite National Park, 1937</i>	6
2	Sanitarium photograph, Battle Creek, Michigan	14
3	George Luks, <i>Allen Street, 1905</i>	27
4	<i>Gold Diggers of 1933</i>	60
5	Interior of John Wanamaker Store, Philadelphia, 1979	106
6	Alfred Stieglitz, <i>Georgia O'Keefe's Hand and Wheel, 1933</i>	110
7	Charles Sheeler, <i>Fugue, 1940</i>	153
8	Roycroft tabouret	156
9	Eileen Gray end table	156
10	Isamu Noguchi's set for the ballet <i>Appalachian Spring</i>	158
11	Fort Dix 1918, human Statue of Liberty	165
12	<i>The Wild One, 1953</i>	192

# Timeline

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<p><b>1900</b> McKinley elected to second term as President</p> <p>Hurricane kills 6,000–7,000 in Galveston, Texas</p>	<p>Dreiser, <i>Sister Carrie</i></p> <p>Roosevelt, <i>The Strenuous Age</i></p> <p>American Arts and Crafts movement continues from 1890s</p> <p>Frank Lloyd Wright establishes architecture studio in Oak Park, Illinois</p>
<p><b>1901</b> President McKinley assassinated; Theodore Roosevelt becomes president</p> <p>J. P. Morgan founds US Steel Corporation</p> <p>First wireless communication between US and England</p> <p>Socialist Party of America formed</p>	<p>Washington, <i>Up From Slavery</i></p>
<p><b>1902</b> United Mine Workers' strike</p>	<p>James, <i>The Wings of the Dove</i></p>
<p><b>1903</b> Henry Ford founds Ford Motor Company</p> <p>Wright brothers fly motorized plane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina</p>	<p><i>Camera Work</i> begins publication (Stieglitz)</p> <p>Du Bois, <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i></p> <p>James, <i>The Ambassadors</i></p>

## TIMELINE

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
<p>New York City opens subway</p> <p>US Departments of Commerce and Labor created</p>	<p>11-minute narrative film, <i>The Great Train Robbery</i>, shown in theaters</p>
<p><b>1904</b> Work begins on Panama Canal (completed 1914)</p>	<p>James, <i>The Golden Bowl</i></p> <p>Tarbell, <i>The History of the Standard Oil Company</i> (published 1902 in McClure's magazine)</p> <p>Weber, <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i></p>
<p><b>1905</b> Industrial Workers of the World organized in Chicago, Illinois</p> <p>Stieglitz opens 291 Gallery, New York City</p>	<p>Hall, <i>Adolescence</i></p> <p>Wharton, <i>The House of Mirth</i></p>
<p><b>1906</b> Catastrophic earthquake and fire in San Francisco, California</p> <p>Pure Food and Drug Act passed</p> <p>Roosevelt first uses term "muckraker" to describe work of investigative journalists</p>	<p>Gilman, <i>Women and Economics</i></p> <p>Sinclair, <i>The Jungle</i></p>
<p><b>1907</b> Oklahoma admitted to Union</p> <p>J. P. Morgan averts financial panic with his own \$100 million in gold</p>	<p>Adams, <i>The Education of Henry Adams</i> (privately printed)</p> <p>James, <i>The American Scene</i></p> <p>New York Edition of Henry James (1907–9)</p> <p>First staging of the Ziegfeld Follies in New York City</p>
<p><b>1908</b> Taft succeeds Roosevelt</p>	<p>Zangwill, <i>The Melting Pot</i></p> <p>Ash Can school of painters exhibit</p> <p>Singer Building in New York City first US "skyscraper"</p>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
1909 Founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)	W.C. Handy writes down the "Memphis Blues"
First White House Conference on Children	Wright's "Robie" house
1910 Boy Scouts of America founded	Addams, <i>Twenty Years at Hull-House</i>
Mann Act prohibits transportation of women across state lines "for immoral purposes"	
First Ford Model T produced	
1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire	<i>The Masses</i> begins publication (until 1917)
	Taylor, <i>The Principles of Scientific Management</i> (efficiency in the workplace)
1912 <i>Titanic</i> sinks	<i>Poetry</i> magazine founded in Chicago, Illinois
Progressive Party established	Antin, <i>The Promised Land</i>
New Mexico and Arizona admitted to Union	Pound, <i>Patria Mia</i>
Wilson elected President	
Department of Labor and Federal Reserve Bank established	
1913 Thomas Edison demonstrates the Kinetophone (for talking motion pictures)	Bourne, <i>Youth and Life</i>
Ford begins assembly-line manufacturing	Pound, "A Few Don'ts by An Imagiste"
16th (income tax) and 17th (popular election of US Senators) Constitutional Amendments	New York Armory Show introduces American public to modern art

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
1914 First transcontinental telephone conversation (New York to San Francisco)	<i>Vanity Fair</i> , <i>The Little Review</i> , and <i>The New Republic</i> begin publication
World War I begins in Europe	Brooks, <i>America's Coming-of-Age</i>
	Frost, <i>A Boy's Will</i>
	Sandburg, <i>Chicago</i>
	Painting: Hartley, <i>Portrait of a German Officer</i>
1915 Taxi-cab business begins	Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"
Iron and steel workers strike	Frost, <i>North of Boston</i>
	Masters, <i>Spoon River Anthology</i>
	Provincetown Players founded
	<i>The Seven Arts</i> and <i>The Dial</i> begin publication
1916 Wilson re-elected	Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past" and "Young America"
Beginning of Great Migration of African Americans from South to North	Frost, "Out, Out -"
National Park Service established	H.D., <i>Sea Garden</i>
Margaret Sanger opens birth-control clinic in Brooklyn, New York	Painting: Weber, <i>Chinese Restaurant</i>
Eight-hour workday for railroad employees	
1917 US enters World War I	<i>Cambridge History of American Literature</i> (4 vols., 1917-21)
Immigration act excludes Asian workers (except Japanese)	Millay, <i>Renascent</i>
Pulitzer Prize established	
1918 Global influenza epidemic, kills between 20 and 40 million	Cather, <i>My Antonia</i>
Armistice signed, ending World War I	Williams, <i>Kora in Hell</i>

## TIMELINE

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
1919 Major race riots in Chicago and Washington, DC	Anderson, <i>Winesburg, Ohio</i> Frank, <i>Our America</i>
18th Constitutional Amendment makes sale of alcohol illegal (Prohibition)	
Treaty of Versailles; formation of League of Nations (rejected by American lawmakers)	
Chicago "White Sox" baseball team accused of gambling in the World Series	
Steel and mine workers strike; Boston police strike	
1920 Urban population exceeds rural population	<i>Contact</i> magazine begins publication
Transcontinental airmail available	Eliot, <i>Poems</i> and <i>The Sacred Wood</i>
Prohibition in effect	Fitzgerald, <i>Flappers and Philosophers</i>
19th Constitutional Amendment grants women the right to vote	Lewis, <i>Main Street</i>
"Red Scare" and Palmer raids	Millay, <i>A Few Figs from Thistles</i>
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) founded	Pound, <i>Hugh Selwyn Mauberley</i>
Arrest of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti	Santayana, <i>Character and Opinion in the United States</i>
Harding elected President	Turner, <i>The Frontier in American History</i>
1921 First regular radio broadcasts in US	Wharton, <i>The Age of Innocence</i>
Emergency Quota Act strictly limits immigration	Yeziarska, <i>Hungry Hearts</i>
	Painting: Sheeler, <i>Church St. El</i>
	Dos Passos <i>Three Soldiers</i>
	Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i> imported to US; all 500 copies burned by US Post Office

## TIMELINE

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
American Birth Control League organized	Moore, <i>Poems</i> Robinson, <i>Collected Poems</i>
	Music: Louis Armstrong with the Creole Jazz Band in Chicago; Blake and Sissle, <i>Shuffle Along</i> (first all-black musical)
1922	<i>The Fugitive</i> and <i>The Soil</i> begin publication
	cummings, <i>The Enormous Room</i>
	Eliot, <i>The Waste Land</i>
	Fitzgerald, <i>Tales of the Jazz Age</i>
	Hughes, "Mother to Son"
	Johnson, <i>The Book of American Negro Poetry</i>
	Lewis, <i>Babbitt</i>
	Stearns, <i>Civilization in the United States</i>
1923 US Steel institutes eight-hour workday	<i>Time</i> magazine begins publication
"Teapot Dome" scandal in President Harding's administration. Leasing of Wyoming Naval oil reserves to private companies	Frost, <i>New Hampshire</i>
Harding dies; Coolidge becomes President	Lawrence, <i>Studies in Classic American Literature</i>
Members of Osage tribe in Oklahoma targets of violence	Stevens, <i>Harmonium</i>
1924 Daily airmail service between East and West coasts of US	Toomer, <i>Cane</i>
Second strict curb on immigration	Williams, <i>Spring and All</i> , "The Red Wheelbarrow"
	Music: Bessie Smith's "Downhearted Blues" sells 780,000 copies
	<i>The American Mercury</i> founded (Mencken and Nathan)
	Ferber, <i>So Big</i>
	Hemingway, <i>in our time</i> (published in Paris)

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
First women governors elected in Wyoming and Texas	Moore, <i>Observations</i>
Coolidge elected President	Ransom, "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter"
	Seldes, <i>The Seven Lively Arts</i>
	Music: Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Blue"
	"Little Orphan Annie" comic strip debuts
1925 "Scopes" trial. Tennessee teacher found "guilty" of teaching theory of evolution	<i>The New Yorker</i> magazine founded
	Anderson, <i>Dark Laughter</i>
	Cather, <i>The Professor's House</i>
Ku Klux Klan's march on Washington	Cullen, "Incident"
Land boom in Florida	Dos Passos, <i>Manhattan Transfer</i>
Standard Oil adopts eight-hour workday	Dreiser, <i>An American Tragedy</i>
	Eliot, <i>Poems 1909-1925</i>
	Fitzgerald, <i>The Great Gatsby</i>
	Glasgow, <i>Barren Ground</i>
	H.D., <i>Collected Poems</i>
	Hemingway, <i>In Our Time</i> (revised and enlarged)
	Locke, <i>The New Negro</i>
	Pound, <i>A Draft of XVI Cantos</i>
	Stein, <i>The Making of Americans</i>
	Williams, <i>In the American Grain</i>
	Yeziarska, <i>The Bread Givers</i>
	Music: Copland, <i>Music for Theater</i> ; Charleston dance craze
1926 Ford introduces eight-hour, five-day working week	Book-of-the-Month Club initiated
	<i>New Masses</i> magazine begins publication
Transatlantic wireless telephone	Faulkner, <i>Soldier's Pay</i>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
	Ferber, <i>Show Boat</i>
	Hemingway, <i>The Sun Also Rises</i>
	Hughes, <i>The Weary Blues</i>
	Ransom, "Janet Waking"
	Music: Copland, <i>Piano Concerto</i> ; Josephine Baker stars in <i>Le Revue Nègre</i>
1927 Sacco and Vanzetti executed in Massachusetts	<i>transition</i> magazine begins publication
Charles Lindbergh completes first non-stop, transatlantic flight	Charles and Mary Beard, <i>The Rise of American Civilization</i> (4 vols., 1927-42)
First television transmission, New York to Washington	Cather, <i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i>
Amelia Earhart first woman to complete non-stop transatlantic flight	Cullen, <i>Caroling Dusk</i> and <i>Copper Sun</i>
	Mourning Dove, <i>Cogewea, the Half-Blood</i>
	Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants"
	Hughes, "Mulatto"
	Lewis, <i>Elmer Gantry</i>
	Parrington, <i>Main Currents in American Thought</i>
	Williams, "The Dead Baby"
	Film: Al Jolson sings in <i>The Jazz Singer</i> , the first successful "talkie"; Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences founded (first Academy Awards, 1929)
	Music: Antheil, <i>Ballet mécanique</i> ; musical <i>Showboat</i>
	Painting: Hopper <i>Automat</i> and <i>Light at Two Lights</i> ; Sheeler photographs of the Ford Motor Company plant

	<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
1928	Hoover elected President Kellogg-Briand treaty outlaws war (US approves, 1929) St. Francis Dam breaks in California, killing over 500	Frost, <i>West-Running Brook</i> , "Acquainted with the Night" Larsen, <i>Quicksand</i> Film: Mickey Mouse debuts in <i>Steamboat Willie</i>
1929	Gangster activity given national visibility by Chicago "St. Valentine's Day Massacre" Stock market crashes; Great Depression begins	Cullen, <i>Black Christ and Other Poems</i> Dewey, <i>Individualism Old and New</i> Faulkner, <i>The Sound and the Fury</i> Hemingway, <i>A Farewell to Arms</i> Larsen, <i>Passing</i> Helen and Robert Lynd, <i>Middletown - A Study in Contemporary American Culture</i> Founding of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)
1930		<i>Fortune</i> magazine begins publication Crane, <i>The Bridge</i> Dos Passos, <i>The 42nd Parallel</i> (first of USA trilogy, completed 1936) Faulkner, <i>As I Lay Dying</i> Hammett, <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> Twelve Southerners, <i>I'll Take My Stand</i> US Customs seizes copies of Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i> Sinclair Lewis becomes first American to receive Nobel Prize for literature "Golden Age" of radio begins Painting: Sheeler, <i>American Landscape</i>

	<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
1931	First Scottsboro trial (nine young African Americans accused of raping two white women) Empire State Building completed in New York City	Buck, <i>The Good Earth</i> Rourke, <i>American Humor</i> Whitney Museum of American Art opens
1932	"Bonus Army" (war veterans) march on Washington	Farrell, <i>Studs Lonigan</i> (trilogy completed 1935) Hughes, "Mother to Son"
1933	Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) elected President New Deal begins promotion of economic recovery 21st Constitutional Amendment repeals Prohibition	<i>Partisan Review</i> begins publication Cowley, <i>Exile's Return</i> Fitzgerald, <i>Tender Is the Night</i> West, <i>The Day of the Locust</i> Film: <i>42nd Street</i> ; <i>Gold Diggers of 1933</i> "L'il Abner" comic strip debuts
1934	"Dust Bowl" Creation of National Labor Relations Board Major strike by millworkers in the South	Painting: Douglas, <i>Aspects of Negro Life</i> mural; "Machine Art" exhibit at MOMA
1935	Second phase of New Deal; WPA established	Lewis, <i>It Can't Happen Here</i> Odets, <i>Waiting for Lefty</i> Rukeyser, "The Trial" <i>Cavalcade of America</i> radio program
1936	FDR re-elected Jesse Owens wins four gold medals in Berlin Olympics Spanish Civil War begins	<i>Life</i> magazine begins publication Faulkner, <i>Absalom! Absalom!</i> Frost, <i>A Further Range</i> , "Desert Places," "Design" Hughes, "Let America Be America Again" Mitchell, <i>Gone With the Wind</i>



<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
	Taggard, "Mill Town"
	Wright completes "Fallingwater"
1937 Golden Gate bridge opened	Barnes, <i>Nightwood</i>
<i>Hindenberg</i> explodes	Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum opens
1938	Brooks and Warren, <i>Understanding Poetry</i>
	Luce, "The American Century"
	Millay, "Say That We Saw Spain Die"
	Wilder, <i>Our Town</i>
	Music: Copland, <i>Billy the Kid</i>
	Radio: Broadcast of <i>War of the Worlds</i> causes national panic; series, <i>Americans All</i>
1939 New York World's Fair	Steinbeck, <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i>
World War II begins	Film: <i>Mr. Smith Goes to Washington</i>
1940 FDR re-elected	Hemingway, <i>For Whom the Bell Tolls</i>
	MacLeish, "The Irresponsibles"
	O'Neill, <i>Long Day's Journey Into Night</i>
	Wright, <i>Native Son</i>
	Film: <i>The Grapes of Wrath</i> ; <i>His Girl Friday</i>
	Painting: Lawrence, <i>The Migration of the Negro</i> series (completed 1941); Hopper, <i>Gas and Office at Night</i> ; MOMA adds photography department
1941 FDR's "Four Freedoms" speech	Evans and Agec, <i>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</i>
Bombing of Pearl Harbor; US enters World War II	Fitzgerald, <i>The Last Tycoon</i>
	Kazin, <i>On Native Grounds</i>
	Matthiessen, <i>American Renaissance</i>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
	Thurber, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"
	Film: <i>Citizen Kane</i>
1942	Faulkner, <i>Go Down, Moses</i>
	Rourke, <i>The Roots of American Culture</i>
	Film: <i>Sullivan's Travels</i> ; <i>Casablanca</i>
	Music: Copland, <i>Rodeo</i>
	Painting: Hopper, <i>Nighthawks</i>
1944 FDR re-elected	Moore, "In Distrust of Merits"
D-Day	Music: Copland, <i>Appalachian Spring</i>
G.I. Bill of Rights passed	
1945 Germany surrenders	Brooks, "kitchenette building"
Atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki	Williams, <i>The Glass Menagerie</i>
Japan surrenders	Film: <i>Mildred Pierce</i>
World War II ends	
FDR dies; Truman becomes President	
1946 1946-64 sees "baby boom"	<i>Literary History of the United States</i> completed
	Lowell, <i>Lord Weary's Castle</i>
	McCuller, <i>The Member of the Wedding</i>
	Petry, <i>The Street</i>
	Spock, <i>Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care</i>
	Williams, <i>Paterson</i> (completed 1958)
	Film: <i>The Best Years of Our Lives</i> ; <i>The Big Sleep</i> ; <i>It's A Wonderful Life</i>
1947 Freedom Train begins travels across US	Hughes, "Genius Child"
	Williams, <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
1948	Mailer, <i>The Naked and the Dead</i> Pound, <i>The Pisan Cantos</i>
1949	Miller, <i>Death of a Salesman</i>
1950 Korean war (ends 1953) "McCarthyism" begins	Riesman, <i>The Lonely Crowd</i> Gwendolyn Brooks first African American woman to receive Pulitzer Prize Abstract Expressionism dominates art scene throughout decade
1951	Jones, <i>From Here to Eternity</i> Lowell, <i>The Mills of the Kavanaughs</i> Salinger, <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>
1952 Eisenhower elected President	Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i>
1953 Department of Health, Education, and Welfare established Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency formed	Miller, <i>The Crucible</i> Film: <i>Shane; The Wild One</i>
1954 First restaurant in the McDonald's chain Supreme Court rules racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional McCarthy censored by Congress	Cheever, "The Country Husband" Williams, <i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i> Film: <i>On the Waterfront</i> Television: <i>Father Knows Best</i>
1955 Salk polio vaccine	Auden, "The Shield of Achilles" Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California" and "Howl" Film: <i>Blackboard Jungle; Rebel Without a Cause</i>

<i>Historical events</i>	<i>Cultural events (discussed in the text)</i>
1956 Bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama Khrushchev's remark: "We will bury you!" "In God We Trust" adopted as official motto of US	Whyte, <i>The Organization Man</i> Film: <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers; The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit</i> Television: Elvis Presley performs on the Ed Sullivan show
1957 Launching of Sputnik: space race between US and USSR President Eisenhower authorizes federal troops to impose order during school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas Establishment of the Civil Rights Commission	Chase, <i>The American Novel and its Tradition</i> Kerouac, <i>On the Road</i> Musicals: Bernstein, <i>West Side Story</i> ; Willson, <i>The Music Man</i>
1958 Alaska admitted to Union	Barth, <i>The End of the Road</i> Television: <i>77 Sunset Strip</i>
1959 "Kitchen Debate" between Nixon and Khrushchev Hawaii admitted to Union	Lowell, <i>Life Studies</i> O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died" Television: <i>Dobie Gillis</i>
1960 Kennedy elected President	Brooks, "We Real Cool" Fiedler, <i>Love and Death in the American Novel</i> Lee, <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>
1961 First manned US space flight	Heller, <i>Catch-22</i>
1962	Salinger, <i>Franny and Zooey</i> Harrington, <i>The Other America</i> Kesey, <i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i> Film: <i>The Manchurian Candidate</i>
1963 Assassination of Kennedy	Friedan, <i>The Feminine Mystique</i> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

# Acknowledgments

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, until recently my academic home, generously supported this project. I am especially grateful to Rosemary Wander, Denise Baker, and my colleagues in the English department for the gifts of time and money. At the University's Jackson Library, the British Library, and the Rothermere American Institute, the librarians and desk assistants made doing research a pleasure. Tony Aarts and Blythe Winslow performed even the dullest research assignments promptly and cheerfully. I am indebted to Ron Bush, Andrew Delbanco, Kevin Dettmar, Barbara Packer, and Patricia Tatspaugh for friendship and intellectual challenges. Although I cannot thank them individually, the members of the Modernist Studies Association have profoundly influenced my understanding of the twentieth century. I can thank Russ McDonald individually but never adequately for his generous criticism and advice.

Every member of the Blackwell Publishing enterprise has been enormously helpful: Emma Bennett, Kitty Bocking, Janet Moth, Leanda Shrimpton, Karen Wilson, and Astrid Wind were models of patience, efficiency, and good humor. Andrew McNeillie, whose energy is irresistible, set the project in motion and became a friend in the process, enriching my life.

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this book:

Gwendolyn Brooks, "Kitchenette Building" and "We Real Cool," from *Selected Poems*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963. Copyright © 1963 by Gwendolyn Brooks. Reprinted by permission of Brooks Permissions.

- Countee Cullen, "Incident," from *On These, I Stand*. New York: Harper & Row, 1947. Copyright © 1947 by Countee Cullen. Copyrights held by Amistad Research Center Tulane University administered by Thompson and Thompson, Brooklyn, NY.
- Frank O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died," from *Lunch Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1964. Copyright © 1964 by Frank O'Hara. Reprinted by permission of City Lights Publishers.
- Robert Frost, "Design," from Edward Connery Latham (ed.), *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1979. Copyright © 1923, 1969 by Henry Holt and Company; copyright © 1942, 1951 by Robert Frost; copyright © 1970 by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, LLC, and The Random House Group Ltd.
- Robert Frost, "Desert Places," from Edward Connery Latham (ed.), *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1979. Copyright © 1923, 1969 by Henry Holt and Company; copyright © 1942, 1951 by Robert Frost; copyright © 1970 by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, LLC and The Random House Group Ltd.
- Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California," from *Collected Poems: 1947-1980*. New York: HarperCollins, 1984. Copyright © Allen Ginsberg, 1955, 1984, 1995. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers and The Wylie Agency (UK) Ltd.
- William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow," from *Collected Poems: 1909-1939, Volume I*. New York: New Directions, 1963. Copyright © 1938 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp and Carcanet Press Limited.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologizes for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

# Introduction

Almost without exception companions and introductions to literature begin with questions of nomenclature. In the present instance, the difficulty of defining terms is inherent to the subject. What is "America"? What is "literature"? And what in the world do we mean by "culture"? Given the contested meaning of every term it undertakes to introduce, the title of this volume must seem an exercise in effrontery. Aware as I am that every example and every sentence in the book say as much about its author's tastes and predilections as about its titular subject, I make no pretense of comprehensive "coverage." Rather, the materials discussed and examples employed are ones that have proven useful to my students in understanding what are generally agreed to be some important aspects of twentieth-century American writing and its contexts. Because my objective is to be both clear and suggestive, I focus on a few big ideas about America and, by the marshaling of examples and counter-examples, show that these ideas are, and should be, subject to interpretation, revision, supplementation, and debate.

On the cover of this volume is a painting by Jasper Johns entitled *Target with Four Faces*. So large a "target" as the USA's literature and culture in the first six decades of the twentieth century cannot be fully explored via four of its "faces" but, then, four hundred faces would not exhaust the topic either. One must begin somewhere. The chapters are based on four significant perceptions of America: that it is big, rich, new, and free. Clearly, all these terms are relative and require further definition, and that is the main business of the book. It is intended for students and general readers who, knowing something about America, its literature, and its culture, are inclined to learn more.

"America," as it is used in these pages, refers to the United States of America and, as will quickly become clear, also to a set of ideas. I've

chosen "America" because of its rich connotations and because crucial ideas in circulation in the first decades of the twentieth century employ that term: for example, the American Way, the American Dream, and the American Century. Whether for its brevity or for its euphony, "America" seems to have been the preferred term among the historians, critics, and cultural commentators writing between 1900 and 1960. I have followed their lead.

"Literature," also a vexed and loaded term, is here used to refer to poetry, drama, novels, short fiction, and, occasionally, autobiography. Given the voluminous written materials from which to select examples, I have chosen to be literal about "literature" – that is, as defined by "the letter" – referring to written and published materials. Therefore, I do not consider oral traditions. The emphasis is primarily on the category of writing designated as imaginative or creative, what once was called *belles lettres*. Because this book is intended as an introduction to American literature, examples are largely confined to those that may be easily located in standard classroom anthologies and on college and university reading lists. Some readers and teachers will want more – a broader representation of ethnicities, for example. Because of the expansion of the canon over the last sixty years, a persuasive case can be made for this point of view. Limits of space have, in part, determined my concentration on frequently studied texts, but there is another reason, too. The explosion in writing that led to canon expansion is largely a phenomenon of the period just beyond the decades covered here. An introduction to post-1960 American writing would thus have a very different configuration from one focused on the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

Raymond Williams, in his seminal book *Keywords*, declares that "Culture" is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. In fact, Williams is one of the thinkers responsible for complicating the definition still further, influential as he was in defining culture as something "ordinary," as "a whole way of life." In its earliest uses, "culture" was a noun primarily associated with what is sometimes called "high," as opposed to "popular," culture – things like poetry, art museums, opera. One became "cultured" or "cultivated" by exposure to these categories of art, as a plant might be cultivated by exposure to light. Certainly, this book does not ignore so-called "high" culture, but neither does it limit examples to that category. To do so would be a serious distortion of American culture as a whole. In fact, many of its most influential modes of expression – movies and rock-and-roll, for example – are popular arts. In a sense, being in the

shadow of the much longer artistic traditions of Europe has meant that "culture" has always been a problematic word for Americans. As with high versus low culture, the separation between *literature* and *culture* in the title of this book should not be taken too seriously. The two are not separate, finally, for literature is a part of a whole way of life. Instead, the title signals that, unlike a purely literary history, this study is *also* interested in aspects of American life such as child-rearing and Broadway musicals. Further, it is interested in the relationships among these various manifestations of American life.

With the rise of social sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; with the introduction of an anthropological perspective examining culture as, for example, kinship structures and foodways; and, much more recently, with the perspectives generated by the theories of "cultural studies," the meaning of "culture" has become far more inclusive. Stephen Greenblatt, a Renaissance scholar who is a central figure of New Historicism, a branch of cultural studies, concedes that "like 'ideology' . . . 'culture' is a term that is repeatedly used without meaning much of anything at all."<sup>1</sup> In short, the inclusiveness may empty the word of any content.

One way of thinking about culture is to consider the ways in which one performs certain actions habitually and without much analysis. Why do I put milk on my breakfast cereal? or Why is that notion disgusting to me? Why do I wear matching shoes? Why do I cover my head? How do I know what behavior is expected of me at a funeral or wedding? Why do I say "hello" or "goodbye" with the intonations I do? Culture is embedded in behavior, and its significance must be brought to the surface by such questions. Thinking about culture requires many of the same skills employed in analyzing a text: paying close attention, noticing patterns, discriminating among nuances of tone and action. Greenblatt makes this connection:

The world is full of texts, most of which are virtually incomprehensible when they are removed from their immediate surroundings. To recover the meaning of such texts, to make any sense of them at all, we need to reconstruct the situation in which they were produced. Works of art by contrast contain directly or by implication much of this situation within themselves, and it is this sustained absorption that enables many literary works to survive the collapse of the conditions that led to their production.

Some understanding of those conditions is, however, retrievable: "if exploration of a particular culture will lead to a heightened

understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture, so too a careful reading of a work of literature will lead to a heightened understanding of the culture in which it was produced."<sup>1</sup>

To promote thinking about relationships among behaviors, beliefs, works of art, places, and other dimensions of "a whole way of life," the chapters that follow are organized less by strict chronology than by exemplary books, ideas, and memorable historical events. Thus, all four chapters range over the entire period. A strictly linear model of presentation, with each chapter dedicated to one decade, would not capture the recurrence of such subjects as racial strife, the persistent division between rich and poor, or the patterns of isolation and involvement that characterize the country's interactions with the world at large. Similarly, a strictly linear presentation almost inevitably suggests progress, that is, a line of development that implies an improvement over the past. Interrogation of what constitutes "progress," suspicion of a positivist view of the nation's growth, marks much of the fiction and cultural commentary of this period; to adopt a teleological, onward-and-upward sort of model undermines the claims of the vocal minority unconvinced that progress was always progress.

To prevent confusion, however, a timeline of the chief events, political, social, and artistic appears on pages viii-xxi. In addition, the chapter subheadings (listed in the table of contents) serve as guideposts. Chapter 1 contains material, for example, pertinent to the first decade of the twentieth century, such as immigration and assimilation. Chapter 2, because of its emphasis on wealth, also contains an overview of labor reform and the build-up to and consequences of the Great Depression. Chapter 3 will be of special interest to students of expatriation (the "Lost Generation") and the artistic experiments of modernism. For readers interested in the Cold War, chapter 4 will be of most use.

Each of the chapters is introduced by a series of quotations. These epigraphs are not meant to be decorative but to display a range of attitudes, expressed over time, toward the chapter's topic. A discussion of their implications begins each chapter. Readers will notice that some of the passages are taken from periods well before the twentieth century, and this retrospection is purposeful. Principal ideas about America and Americans, both of citizens and of those who observe from a distance, are inextricable from the emergence of the very concept of America, comprising its New World aura during a time of discovery and exploration, its Puritan beginnings, its colonial status, and so forth. Despite the rhetoric of newness that pervades writing

about the United States, the nation is not *sui generis* or freshly minted. It did not invent democracy or slavery. Its achievements in film and music, to name only two, are impressive, but it is important to remember how many of the achievers in those fields came from elsewhere. The evocation of earlier periods is one way of remembering that the USA, for all its powerful presence in the twentieth century, became so powerful not despite the Old World's human history but because of it.

Every book of this kind must navigate the turbulent waters between the Scylla and Charybdis of breadth and depth. Normally, an introductory text opts for a broad range of examples as best fitting a survey of several decades, and this book does, too. The survey or panorama, however, runs the risk of missing the exceptions that disturb the wide view. Insofar as permissions costs and space allow, I have included specific attention to individual poems, novels, and plays as a reminder of the value of the close-up. So large and various a country as the United States seems to demand sweeping, epic energies, audible and visible in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." But Whitman's contemporary Emily Dickinson took the equally persuasive position that the turn inward, the lyric impulse, expresses a particularity that stubbornly refuses to be swept up. Close reading yields the particulars that make a work distinctive, not only a demonstration of a "school" or "type" within a survey.

An effective way to use this book is to think of it as a flexible template. The writing discussed, the music mentioned, the films singled out for discussion – all the examples should be regarded as suggesting still other possibilities. To invoke a third figure from the nineteenth century, Emerson, in "The American Scholar," demands that his listeners practice "creative reading": "One must be an inventor to read well." By pursuing the four lines of investigation outlined in this text, a creative reader will see forty others and thus generate prospects for further study. As Adrienne Rich writes in "Diving into the Wreck," "The words are purposes. / The words are maps." Mapping the USA is an inexhaustible task.

# Big



FIGURE 1 Ansel Adams, *Clearing Winter Snow, Yosemite National Park, 1937*  
Photograph © Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust/CORBIS  
Adams was dedicated not only to the beauty of the national park but to its conservation.

*"for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a byword through the world."*

John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," ca. 1630

*And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925

*Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be.*

Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, 1918

*Let America be America again.*

*Let it be the dream it used to be.*

*Let it be the pioneer on the plain*

*Seeking a home, where he himself is free.*

Langston Hughes, "Let America

*Be America Again," 1936*

*Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination . . .*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," 1844

America's size matters. John Winthrop's image of the New World settlements as a city on a hill did not reflect a tangible reality: the shore may not even have been in his sight as he delivered his sermon. What mattered more was the size of the idea. Still, the vast continent lent itself to grand plans; the life to be undertaken would be exemplary, and to fail would make the pilgrims an infamous "story and a byword through the world." The purpose of this chapter is to consider how the size of the land mass that would become the continental United States contributes to an understanding of American literature and culture. For the imagined Dutch sailors of F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous closing to *The Great Gatsby*, the expanse of land – empty, unspoiled, still fresh and green and virginal – suggests limitless possibility.

awe, the thrill of the blank page awaiting the first word. This fantasy of the yet-to-be-named informs not only early exploration literature but the institutionalization of American literature as a discipline. The American male as namer (and thus claimer) generated, for example, the influential concept of "the American Adam," defined by R. W. B. Lewis as "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry . . . standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources."<sup>1</sup> Willa Cather's character Jim, however, exemplifies a more somber view. As a child newly orphaned and sent to relatives in the barely settled Midwest, he sees "nothing but land," its emptiness signifying a loss of family and identity. His parents, he is certain, do not look benevolently down from "the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it." The speaker of Langston Hughes's poem turns the mythology of "the endless plain" into an indictment. Emphasizing the disparity between dream and reality, the speaker declares that, for some, America is "the land that never has been yet." In their different ways, then, Winthrop, Fitzgerald, Cather, and Hughes affirm the American landscape as a space to be reckoned with – claimed, admired, feared, shaped.

The land of course was not empty, as the wretched history of Native Americans makes clear. Neither was the Big Sky Country of the West all sagebrush, purple mountains, and laconic cowboys as figured in the popular westerns of Zane Grey or Louis L'Amour. As the country grew skywards as well as westwards, the great urban centers were "alive and coarse and strong and cunning" as in Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago" (1916). The "City of the Big Shoulders," was, on the one hand, famous for its skyscrapers and, on the other, notorious for its organized crime. The size and rapid growth of the United States support several foundational myths allied with the idea of America: the city on a hill, the virgin land, the American Adam, the wide, wild West. Given the energetic dismantling of these myths over the last century, one is tempted to dismiss the big sky and the big dreams as big lies. But to do so mistakenly denies the power these imaginative constructions of America exercised, for both good and ill, in the twentieth century. The bigness of America, and all that is implied by its size, remains an issue of global magnitude.

What are the implications of immensity? The sometimes contradictory attitudes of Ralph Waldo Emerson toward the perception of landscape can be helpful in addressing this question. In "Nature," Emerson crosses a common at twilight and enjoys

a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am. . . . Standing on the bare common – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. . . . In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature. (chapter 1)

The exuberant tone of this passage suggests that to transcend boundaries is to experience a rare ecstasy. But Emerson's mood could be quite otherwise. Elsewhere, in his later essay "Experience," for example, he intimates the potential threat in these circulating currents.

We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. . . . Nature and literature are subjective phenomena; every evil and every good thing is a shadow that we cast. (paragraph 18)

If I am both nothing and everything, where do I begin? If all I see is subjective, then how may I trust my sight?

In Emerson's time and in our own, these questions apply not just to a task to be undertaken or a place to start, but quite literally to the body itself. The curves of the transparent eyeball are permeable – thus open and vulnerable. Mystical elation may be seen as the obverse of a terrifying drop into nothingness. The sheer size of America and the abundance of its natural resources have been, from the writings of the colonists onward, exceptionally tantalizing not only as metaphors but as motives of action. Vastness conjures adventure and the freedom to exploit nature – a sense that there is plenty to do and plenty to go around. Vastness conjures emptiness and isolation, too, as we may observe in the snowy New England landscapes of Robert Frost's poetry. The West to which the newspaper editor Horace Greeley urged young men to go at the beginning of the century and to which, some fifty years later, Jack Kerouac and his companions sped in *On the Road* has served as the Grail of both material and psychic quests; it has also served, in the Los Angeles of Raymond Chandler and the Hollywood of Nathanael West, as the site of profound alienation and apocalypse.

Humankind's relationship to landscape takes many forms. In an essay entitled "The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene," the landscape historian D. W. Meinig lists ten ways in which an observer



might "see" a landscape: nature, habitat, system, artifact, problem, wealth, ideology, history, place, and esthetic.<sup>2</sup> A person's relationship to landscape may also be seen as that of reader to text. As nature, the scene invites speculation about the relative insignificance of the observer; as habitat or system, it presents itself as usable terrain or as a delicately balanced ecology. Other constructions, like those of artifact, problem, or history, emphasize the dynamic relationship between what the landscape is or does and what humans have done or will do to change it. These potential meanings are inherent in every landscape, of course, not just that between the East and West coasts of the United States. But as Emerson noted in 1844, America's "ample geography dazzles the imagination" ("The Poet"). Its size and variety of terrain have had much to do with what many imagine America to be and have generated some of the most stimulating and influential work in the study of American literature and culture: the role of Puritan typology in imbuing landscape with symbolic meaning, as, for example, the equation of wilderness with sin and savagery; the effects of the gendered language of exploration, the land as discovered female, with its implications for the ethics of land use and the status of women; the ways in which borders and frontiers are also contact zones, with complex effects on indigenous and settler cultures; and, most recently, the growing field of ecocriticism.

Until the continental United States had stretched, as the anthem "America the Beautiful" has it, "from sea to shining sea," mainstream discourse about settling the land was optimistic and energetic. Two influential concepts that illustrate this phenomenon are Manifest Destiny and the Frontier Thesis. In 1845, writing in *The Democratic Review* on the question of territorial expansion, journalist John L. O'Sullivan declared:

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High – the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere – its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God's natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood – of "peace and good will amongst men."

This is the rhetoric of American exceptionalism – visionary people, answerable to none but God, granted boundless space and time to

achieve a moral zenith. It was deployed strategically and effectively over the next fifty years, despite the resistance of some who, for a variety of reasons, opposed such growth. The historical effects of the idea were substantial and measurable. Under the aegis of Manifest Destiny, cross-country railroads were built; a war with Mexico was fought; Native American tribes were destroyed or displaced, the "slave" and "free" territories became political pawns in the schism that would eventuate in the Civil War.

In 1890 the US Census Bureau declared that, because of the rapid settlement of the West, it was no longer possible to discern a line that could be called the "frontier." Destiny was now manifest. Three years later, in a speech before historians at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared, "American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Turner assumes that if there is land, it cries out to be settled and, further, that if there is no visible frontier at home, then frontiers must be found elsewhere so that the advancement of civilization can continue. The so-called "Turner thesis" or "frontier thesis," has, unsurprisingly, been debated and derided. Contemporary scholars of the "new West," such as Patricia Limerick, dispute the paradigm of values associated with earlier definitions of the frontier. Her now famous example of the heaps of tin cans at the doors of ranch dwellings undermines the image of the self-reliant pioneer; revisions of the history of the West's settlement have significantly altered the conception of the West as home to virtuous pioneers, lonesome cowboys, and wide-open spaces. But, as Limerick herself argues, Turner's thesis has had enormous staying power in American minds.<sup>3</sup> From the space program to cyberspace, from medical diagnostics to the travels of the Starship Enterprise on television's *Star Trek*, the phrase "new frontier" is alive in public discourse.

Sullivan's Manifest Destiny and Jackson's Frontier map an imaginary geography. In the country of this vision, rugged men dominate the landscape, physical energies are directed toward profitable progress, morale is high. Absent from this fantasy are not only women, slaves, scorned ethnicities, and immigrant groups, but also the depressed, the frightened, the hesitant, and the impoverished. The period 1900–1960 offers ample illustration of the darker side of spatial progress, these moves from East to West and, in the cities, from earth to sky. Even as it has celebrated the entrepreneurial spirit, American culture has

worried over the poignant, disturbing, and ludicrous characteristics of the go-getter. Consider Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, the salesman who has reached the end of his career but who maintains a habit of baseless optimism almost until the moment of his suicide (*Death of a Salesman*, 1949); he exits with plans to plant a garden, "to get something into the ground." William Faulkner's ruthless Southern empire-builder, Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936), Sinclair Lewis's eponymous Babbitt (1922) or his preacher Elmer Gantry (1927), James Thurber's sad and comical Walter Mitty (1941), whose daydreams give him the stature that commercial life cannot – all these characters subvert the myth of the self-made man. Today, listeners to National Public Radio relish the irony of radio humorist Garrison Keillor as he broadcasts weekly from fictional Lake Wobegon, where "The women are strong, the men are handsome, and all the kids are above average." If the breadth of the nation has served to expand its powers and wealth and motivate its citizenry, it has also served to bloat and satiate and disgust. Fitzgerald's passage about the Dutch sailors is in fact elegiac: in this novel of the 1920s, futility has already replaced wonder as "we beat on, boats against the current." Indeed, Turner's earlier assertion of the frontier's significance to American history was in part monitory: without a frontier to settle, what would become of the "go-ahead" American character? What vision would now be equal to the capacity for wonder?

This division between elation and despair puts the case too bluntly. Between thrill and terror, fresh starts and exhausted endings, lies a spectrum of attitudes; indeed, given the complexities of art forms, a given work likely comprises a range of contrary attitudes. The remainder of this chapter will examine five forms of response to the size and complex meanings of the American landscape: some psychological effects of expansionism; the delights and horrors of the urban landscape; the photographic and poetic treatment of nature in a post-Romantic landscape; the apocalyptic West; and the reinvention of rootedness in one regional literature.

### Expansion and its Discontents

When Henry David Thoreau quipped in *Walden* (1854) that "we do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us," he was counting the human costs of technological progress. By the opening years of the twentieth century, many of his compatriots believed the costs to have mounted to

punishing levels. Analysts of the modernization of the United States often date significant changes in American thought to the traumatic events of the Civil War. The case that Philip Fisher, Louis Menand, and others make for the significance of that struggle to the psychic health or illness of the nation and to the development of influential American thinkers is persuasive and deserving of attention.<sup>4</sup> But since that analysis takes us rather far from the beginning of the twentieth century, this book will consider more immediate anxieties.

We can begin with bodily discomfort. As the century turned and the country grew in both size and population, more and more people complained of nervous disorders. In the final chapter of *The Education of Henry Adams* (private printing, 1907; public, 1918), Adams recalls what America must have looked like to his father in 1868 – "a long caravan stretching out towards the plain." Disembarking at New York in 1905 after a trip abroad, Adams sees instead a "frantic" city, its air full of hysteria, anger, alarm:

Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid. All New York was demanding new men, and all the new forces, condensed into corporations, were demanding a new type of man – a man with ten times the endurance, energy, will and mind of the old type.

Even if we allow for Adams's customarily dark irony, the prospect he describes is daunting. Nor was he alone in believing himself unequal to the demands. Unease about noise, rush, crowding, and rampant materialism was in part a function of the comfort these developments disrupted; that is to say, the strongest objections and descriptions of mental suffering emanated largely from the rich, those not consumed by the daily effort to earn a living wage. In part, of course, we can attribute this impression to the written record. The "recoil from an 'over-civilized' modern existence" that historian Jackson Lears has, in *No Place of Grace*, labeled "anti-modernist" was articulated by people with the leisure to analyze their emotional responses, the education to write about them, and access to venues in which to publish them.<sup>5</sup> It is rare to read of a "factory girl" suffering from neurasthenia.

Neurasthenia was an umbrella diagnosis; the disease was commonly understood to be a reaction to the stimuli of modern life. The physician George M. Beard declared unequivocally in 1881 that neurasthenia was "a product of American civilization." Its symptoms were as numerous as they were vague, ranging from dyspepsia and insomnia to rashes

and premature baldness. The number of distinguished Americans diagnosed with the condition is striking: Jane Addams, Henry Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, Theodore Dreiser, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Owen Wister, Frank Norris – to name a very few.<sup>6</sup> There appears to have been a certain cachet associated with the disease. In Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, Mrs. Miller proudly declares her illness exceptional: Dr. Davis of Schenectady has said "he never saw anything like my dyspepsia, but he was bound to cure it. . . . At Schenectady he stands at the very top; and there's a great deal of sickness there, too." Translation: Americans of my class are martyrs to our highly developed and sensitive natures.

The *locus classicus* of neurasthenia and the "rest-cure" made famous by the physician S. Weir Mitchell is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). In her story, a new mother who suffers from an unnamed nervous illness is forced to do nothing but eat and sleep, expressly forbidden by her husband (he is also her physician)

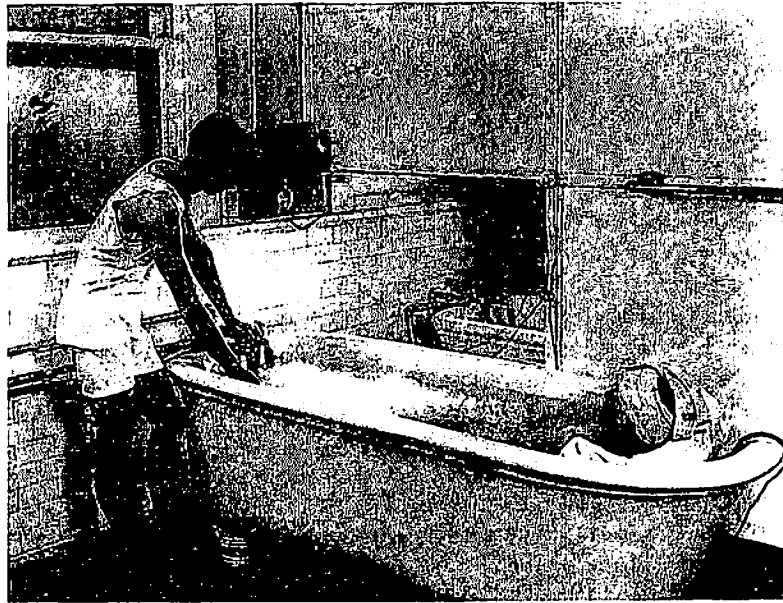


FIGURE 2 Sanitarium photograph, Battle Creek, Michigan  
 Photograph Willard Library for American Literature and Culture, Battle Creek, Michigan.  
 Wealthy Americans turned to sanitarium rest-cures to counter the pressures of modern life.

to write or engage in any sort of intellectually stimulating activity. In a period when the New Woman was in an embryonic stage in America, Gilman dramatizes the conflict between stasis and progress; as her character loses her former sense of herself, she increasingly identifies with the woman she perceives "trapped" inside the wallpaper. The story ends ambiguously: the wife has rebelled in a destructive way, ripping down the wallpaper, but she is also on her hands and knees, apparently reduced to madness. Kate Chopin's *Edna Pontellier in The Awakening* (1898) is also stymied and an object of concern to her husband and her physician. Having realized that she is not a "mother-woman" and having attempted to devise other roles for herself – householder, painter, lover – she, too, feels trapped and discontented. The novel's ending, in which Edna strips naked, walks into the sea, and drowns, has been much debated because it is ambiguous. Does Edna actively choose to die or does she, in her dejection, only allow death to come? Finally, in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Bart's downward spiral is mirrored in her spatial confinement. A public beauty, Lily has been formed for the marriage market but resists her own commodification and yet can support herself in no other way. Unable to forfeit either her desire for wealth or her desire for an independent "republic of the spirit," she resides in increasingly smaller spaces, insomniac, unable to eat, until, from an overdose of chloral (perhaps accidental, perhaps not), she dies alone in a boarding house.

Gilman, Chopin, and Wharton vividly imagine what their characters reject, but cannot or will not imagine a future for them. All these texts can fruitfully be read as manifestations of the status of women in this period. They can also, however, be studied as narratives that stage the struggle with modernity in spatial terms. Gilman's young mother is pictured in a room at the top of a house, a room in which the windows are barred and there are "rings and things" in the walls. The woman she tries to release from the wallpaper also appears to be behind bars. Attempts to escape her confinement in the yellow-wallpapered room and enter the larger world visible through her windows constitute the main action of her story. Similarly, *The Awakening* begins with the image of a parrot in a cage and ends with a broken-winged seagull flying over an endless ocean. The movement in both stories is from entrapment toward an ambivalently presented freedom; as we move from small space to large, liberation is difficult to distinguish from dissolution. *The House of Mirth* moves in the opposite direction: having established the corruption of her fictional houses of wealth, Wharton's placement of Lily in a narrow bed in a bare room signals a moral

victory - Lily's debts are paid. Again, however, it would be wrong to call the ending triumphant. Clearly these stories respond to the contemporary condition of women and may be read as protests against the confines of woman's traditional sphere of influence: home, family, and a highly controlled social circle. We may also, however, consider the movement toward madness and death in each narrative as symptomatic of the fear of transition from one state to another, a distress not confined to women in this period.

We come now to an apparent paradox: how can the conditions of crowding, noise, and hectic activity that seem to have debilitated both male and female neurosathenics, conditions that would appear to make personal space suffocatingly small, be cured by the preferred treatment for female sufferers, still greater confinement? Gilman's young mother is expected to stay not only in her room but in her bed, which in turn is bolted to the floor. The rest cure was designed to calm the nerves by, in effect, radical simplification of the patient's environment. And why, if simplification involved small spaces for women, did the treatment for men require the opposite? Those ministering to male sufferers routinely prescribed physical activity in the great outdoors as the antidote to the distresses of modernity. Teddy Roosevelt not only heeded this advice when he himself was ill but became, as it were, the poster-boy for "the strenuous life." In speeches and essays in the 1890s ("The Strenuous Life," "The American Boy," for example) Roosevelt codified a kind of clean-living manliness as the prescription for the health of both the country and its male citizens. The components of the regime were not original, having been in circulation as the principles of well-established organizations like the YMCA and the dicta of health monitors like John Harvey Kellogg, founder of the well-known sanatorium at Battle Creek, Michigan. Roosevelt's memorable contribution to the discourse was, instead, to link the healthy body-healthy mind paradigm to American expansionism and American superiority. In his speech before the Hamilton Club of Chicago in 1899 Roosevelt admonished his audience to meet the new century strenuously:

The twentieth century looms before us big with the fate of many nations. If we stand idly by, if we seek merely swollen, slothful ease and ignoble peace, if we shrink from the hard contests where men must win at hazard of their lives and at the risk of all they hold dear, then the bolder and stronger peoples will pass us by, and will win for themselves the domination of the world. Let us therefore boldly face the life of strife, resolute to do our duty well and manfully; resolute to

uphold righteousness by deed and by word; resolute to be both honest and brave, to serve high ideals, yet to use practical methods. Above all, let us shrink from no strife, moral or physical, within or without the nation... for it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness.

Expansion and domination are here packaged as energizing strategies. Physical exertion and resolute endeavor offer new purpose to citizens Roosevelt fears will become complacent, now that the frontier had closed, without a focus for their energies. Complacency, in the terms he has outlined, would be tantamount to effeminacy.

The obvious explanation for the opposing treatments of female and male neurosathenics lies in the definition of gender roles - the well-documented idea of "separate spheres." While this notion has significant explanatory power, it may cause us to mis-recognize the complementarity of the treatments. However different superficially, at bottom the treatments are the same: remove the patient from the modern world and thereby remove the modern world from the patient. For women, that meant shrinking the world by eliminating the confusion of possible choices beyond traditional roles; for men, it meant expanding the world by simplifying the nature of work. Both strategies sought to restore the neurosathenic to the condition of the "natural" woman or man: for women, mother-housekeeper and indoor domesticity; for men, provider and outdoor activity.

The sources of nervous anxiety, seen from this viewpoint, were related to and indeed a function of the closing of the frontier, when "frontier" is understood as more than a literal geographic line. It is a metaphor describing the space between *what once was* and *what is still to come*. Thus, Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart know what they do *not* want but cannot commit themselves to future plans because the alternatives are still only dimly outlined. Or, to consider a mythical male example, what is a lumberjack like Paul Bunyan to do when there are no more trees? In effect Roosevelt's imperialistic energy redefined the frontier, thus reinforcing a conception of virility that required new fields to conquer. The condition of neurasthenia may be seen as a manifestation of the difficulties of transition, a shift from one set of social customs and assigned roles to other roles still evolving and, in a related if not causal way, from one view of the nation to another. As long as America was defined as a country in the making, with urgent work to be done in establishing a new civilization, the sense of purpose was implicit. Without so clearly defined a purpose, hesitation, apathy,

paralysis, complacency set in. And this was the repeated complaint of the neurospheric, both male and female. Henry Adams ends his *Education* imagining a future America: "he was beyond measure curious to see whether the conflict of forces would produce the new man, since no other energies seemed left on earth to breed. The new man could be only a child born of contact between the new and the old energies." At the beginning of the twentieth century, the old energies were yielding to the new, in Adams's terms, the material power of the dynamo replacing the spiritual power of the Virgin Mary. To live in the world of new energy, he predicted, would require "a new social mind."

Returning from Europe to the United States in 1904, Henry James believed he glimpsed that new social mind in the realm of hotels and Pullman trains. In "The Refrain of the Hotel" in *The American Scene* (1907), the "restless analyst," as James styles himself, sees Americans as "perpetually provisional. . . . [T]he hotels and the Pullmans -- the Pullmans that are like rushing hotels and the hotels that are like stationary Pullmans -- represent the states and forms of your evolution and are not a bit, in themselves, more final than you are." For him, the "hotel spirit" is cause for dismay, for while the degree of comfort and luxury is notable, he finds that the world of the Waldorf-Astoria is a synecdoche for "the all-gregarious and generalized life [that] suffices to every need." Or is expected to suffice. For James it does not: he fears the "jealous cultivation of the common mean . . . the reduction of everything to an average of decent suitability" that cannot accommodate eccentricity. "Great creations of taste and faith," he reminds himself, "never express themselves *primarily* in terms of mere convenience and zeal." Is James being overly romantic about the sources of art and beauty? Or is he, in the face of a prosperous and complacent populace, taking the snob's view that such conditions are the enemy of art? Assumptions of that sort do appear to affect his view. But the final pages of *The American Scene* movingly project the costs of success, returning us to a version of the question Thoreau asked about the railroads. Were Americans creating the Waldorf-Astorias and Pullman cars -- or were these objects creating them? "Where was the charm of boundless immensity as overlooked from a car window?" The "general pretension" of the Pullman car seems to him to say repeatedly, "See what I am making of all this -- see what I'm making, what I'm making!" "I see," he replies, "what you are *not* making." Having "caused the face of the land to bleed," having "converted large and noble sanities to . . . crudities, to invalidities," "you so leave them to add to the number of myriad aspects you simply spoil."

For James, despite all that had been done in settling America, there is "a long list of the arrears of your undone."

### The City

If log cabins and Conestoga wagons connote expansion from the Atlantic to the Pacific, skyscrapers and traffic jams image another dimension of growth, one characterized by density and height. It is impossible to discuss modern America without reference to the cities -- Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles -- that became centers and symbols of the country's prodigious development. The city is by definition a complex phenomenon; hence, the bibliography of worthwhile books for study of the American city is dauntingly large and the approaches for study numerous and diverse. One way to define a city is by reference to its autonomy: normally, the city must have a population large enough to warrant a mayor or other managerial structure separate from and supplementary to those of state or federal governments. Thus, a city may be thought of as a set of management challenges. Implicit in that definition is that the city comprises problems requiring solutions. The idea of the city as a cesspool of crime, poverty, and filth is certainly not limited to American culture: numerous Victorian novelists depict London as rife with sickly, exploited child laborers, good-hearted prostitutes and thieves, vicious beatles, and black-hearted businessmen. The Paris of French naturalists like Émile Zola is similarly populated. Because the city is a phenomenon of modernity, and modernity a phenomenon of geographic scope, artistic depictions of the cityscape in many media often cut across national lines. What students of American literature and culture might want to examine, then, is not the exceptional nature of the American city, but the particularities of its depiction, the representations of urban spaces and their populace. In addition, it is useful to keep in view some of the organizing mythologies of America because the realities of city life often severely test those myths. This section describes certain major, if necessarily limited, characteristics of the big city in the first half of the twentieth century: the heterogeneity and distribution of populations; the city as a set of problems; the city as a set of opportunities; the city as a place to run to and a place to run from.

Between 1840 and 1920, 37 million people immigrated to the United States. The effects on cities were profound: Chicago in 1837 had a population of 4,000; by 1890, the number was 1 million. The Statue

of Liberty referred to in Emma Lazarus's well-known poem "The New Colossus" (1883) signifies one highly idealized aspect of this immigration history:

"Keep ancient lands your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."

For many people fleeing poverty and persecution elsewhere, the approach to New York's harbor seemed a gateway to freedom. "Exodus" is a frequent trope of autobiographical immigrant writing. Mary Antin entitled her autobiography describing her journey from Russia to the United States *The Promised Land* (1912). As a Jewish girl in the Russian Pale, she had felt herself an outcast because of her religion and her gender. Antin presents her assimilation to American culture in the Boston public schools as promising her a nearly unlimited sense of possibility. The image of the immigrant family breathless with expectation at the first sight of American shores may strike contemporary readers as over-simple and sentimental, but it is important not to minimize this moment of expectation, even as we recognize that hope was quickly chastened by the realities of resettlement. These, too, appear in Antin's book, but they do not cancel the general tone of praise and gratitude that, in the first half of the twentieth century, made excerpts from *The Promised Land* a popular selection for classroom anthologies.

Other episodes in immigration history are less inspiring. Legislation designed to halt immigration entirely, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, was periodically enacted; quotas or exclusions were set in 1917, 1918, 1921, 1924, and later; various societies, such as the "Know-Nothings," arose from time to time in an effort to smear Roman Catholics or other "undesirables"; in the Palmer raids of 1920, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was authorized to summarily deport "subversives." These measures attest to the mixture of racism, xenophobia, politics, suspicion, and plain ignorance that sometimes prompts such decisions. They are often also a measure of economic constraints, such as competition for jobs and housing or pressure on the nation's infrastructures and services.

Public policy for the first half of the twentieth century was largely directed at the goal of assimilation. Hence the popularity for many years of another foundational myth about America: the melting-pot. The phrase gained currency in 1908 thanks to *The Melting Pot*, a play by a Jewish immigrant named Israel Zangwill. Well before Leonard

Bernstein's *West Side Story*, the play depicted a contemporary Romeo and Juliet, but this time with a happy ending made possible by the melting away of differences:

America is God's crucible, the great melting pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming... Here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages, and your fifty blood hatreds... A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians -- into the crucible with you all! God is making the American.

Here the emphasis is not on what must be forfeited but on what will be gained; in terms of the metaphor -- one derived from alchemy -- the mixing of lesser metals yields gold.

Arthur Miller would introduce a quite different perspective on this metaphor in his play *The Crucible*, which captures the darker implications of alchemy, the ease with which melting becomes meltdown. For Miller, the demand for assimilation and conformity sickens the body politic. His drama about the Salem witch trials, produced on Broadway in 1953, was written as a rejoinder to the interrogations conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. In 1947 and again in 1951, HUAC especially focused on members of the film industry. To be perceived by the Committee as in any way "deviant" in those hearings -- whether in terms of one's political philosophy, artistic leanings, or selection of friends -- was to risk being labeled a communist or fellow-traveler and thus "blacklisted." At one point over 300 people who worked in the film industry were named on this list. Some of those people were or had been members of the Communist Party; some no doubt wished for the demise of capitalism. But the inquisitorial climate of the hearings permitted no fine distinctions between intellectual sympathy with a utopian ideal and conscious plans for treason. Careers were destroyed, and the force of this self-perpetuating system of accusation is mirrored in the hysteria that overtakes the citizens of Miller's Salem. The fierce interrogations of Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, the chief figure in the HUAC hearings, insisting that the witnesses "name names," were so destructive that his name has become a part of the American vocabulary: "McCarthyism" now denotes forms of persecution masquerading as investigation. Periodically, American history has been marked by clampdowns of this kind. Normally they arise in response to a perceived threat from an "outsider" or "other." America's status as a country composed of immigrants -- a country in

which a claim to native status rarely makes sense – would seem to make distinctions between who's in and who's out pointless, but it has not.

The heterogeneity and size of the population in a city like New York can also be studied from the perspective of how residents use urban spaces and resources. How are the big spaces to be apportioned? If we imagine human interaction on a green or the commons of a small New England village, what will probably come to mind is a central green space surrounded by shops, homes, a school, and a steepled church. As inhabitants go about their tasks, they can make certain assumptions: they will know the other pedestrians they encounter, will conduct leisurely conversation in a language comprehensible to all parties, will likely share with their acquaintances values such as religious faith. Not wholly fantastical, this portrait of village life is the standard against which city growth, and indeed national growth, was measured by the nostalgic. By comparison, a photograph of central Manhattan – whether taken in 1915 or 1955 – teems with bodies and conveyances. And yet these close quarters do not necessarily translate to intimacy or even recognition. Individuals in the crowd may share neither language nor assumptions. Money – earning it, spending it, dreaming about it – may be the only lingua franca.

How to organize this crowd of people, or how will they organize themselves? Where will they live? How will they enter the economy as producers and consumers? What means of transport do they require? Are green spaces like parks too frivolous an expenditure of space? These are the sorts of questions that the new city managers had to answer – and on a large scale. The scale indeed engenders a vocabulary: during the Progressive era, the word “public” was increasingly employed to name not just a political entity, but a mass of bodies to be accommodated in the delivery of spaces and services. This language inevitably served to amalgamate people into an aggregate entity, the behavior of which was often described in spatial terms. Like water, as crowds streamed into the city, their flow was channeled in certain directions, made to pool at certain landmarks, diverted to run-off. Often, too, the imagery of water implies pollution; hygienic measures are called for to eliminate the “dregs” of society.

Attention to the influx of bodies may be malign or benign, of course. Jane Addams, founder of Chicago's Hull House, one of a number of “settlement house” projects in the early twentieth century, had to think in general terms about practical matters of education, nutrition, and childcare in designing services for immigrant families in Chicago. To think of the common problems of life was for her not only a matter of

efficiently serving the community in which she had settled; rather, her decision to emphasize what was common was an ethical lens: “the things that make men alike,” she writes in chapter 5 of *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), “are finer and better than the things that keep them apart, and . . . these basic likenesses, if they are properly accentuated, easily transcend the less essential differences of race, language, creed, and tradition.”

Even when a philanthropist has unassailably good intentions, a project designed to encourage assimilation to a new culture will erode distinctive characteristics of the population it wishes to serve. Nutritionists in the decade from 1911 to 1921 devised healthful American eating plans, emphasizing vitamins (only recently discovered as a component of food) and borrowing largely from British cooking practices. Abundant spicing and garlic were frowned upon as interfering with healthful digestion. The smells of garlic on Mott Street in New York, the pungent sauerkrauts of Chicago, the chicken feet on display in Chinatown windows should be seen as mild forms of rebellion against the standardization and homogenization of foodways by experts. Similarly, projects to teach English and modify Old World practices in every decade have been vulnerable to accusations of cultural bullying. We may observe a similar tension in the development of public education in the US, a powerful tool for “Americanizing” the populace. The language used for instruction, the curriculum, and the standards for testing continue to be sites of contestation, where the values of the various communities that make up the nation are negotiated with the idea of the nation as a single entity.

Mary Antin felt that national identity, by taking her in, enlarged both herself and her chances; it takes little effort to envisage an opposite effect, a sense of being engulfed by the uncontrollable complexities of a modern city. Such culture shock was not limited to immigrants from other countries. The swelling of urban populations may also be attributed to migration. A significant movement of people already resident in the US, for example, was the Great Migration of black Americans from the South to Chicago and New York in the period following World War I. Between 1916 and 1919, 500,000 Southern blacks moved to the North, that figure doubled in the following decade. Some who relocated met with success and improved working conditions. Others, however, found their lives little improved by having fled to the city. In the first chapter of *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright describes the confined, even suffocating space in which Bigger Thomas resides with his family in Chicago. So small is the apartment that Bigger and his

brother must physically turn away from their sister and mother in order to afford the women privacy to dress. Having killed a rat and menaced his sister with it, Bigger begins his day, getting ready for an interview to be the driver for the wealthy Daltons – a job that leads to the series of events concluding in Bigger's jail cell on Death Row. By the novel's end, he has traded one form of imprisonment for another. From the start of the novel, Bigger is enraged by his stasis: "It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action." The "bigness" of the nation, the city, the range of opportunities, and the range of obstacles can work not to expand but to shrink the sense of self.

To counter the forces of homogenization, some people formed physical or virtual neighborhoods. This strategy has been employed by rich and poor; by races and ethnicities; within ethnicities; around country of origin; around US state of origin; around religious practices. Thus American cities, far from being homogeneous in the way that the "melting pot" implies, typically comprise Chinatowns, Little Italys, Gold Coasts, Strivers Rows, Bohemias, and so forth. At times, these neighborhoods can be demarcated with street names: here is the Polish quarter; here is where the nouveau riche have gathered to gentrify the old neighborhood; here are the cheaper digs where aspiring artists live; here are the buildings with doormen. The neighborhood can also be a matter not of geography but of affiliation. In Edith Wharton's day, the New York 400, those families constituting "high" society, asserted their territoriality not only through the magnificent piles they built to live in but also through a highly codified set of social practices, from card-leaving to at-home days to elaborate dinner parties to summers at Newport, Rhode Island. The same may be said of Harlem: a physical place in Manhattan, bordered by Lenox and Seventh Avenues, it fostered music and art and writing and provided a center for a critical mass of black artists and writers referred to as the Harlem Renaissance (roughly 1915–29). But it was something more. According to the noted scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Harlem was not so much a *place* as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself."<sup>8</sup>

Whether real or imaginary, the boundaries of city neighborhoods are not inflexible. Crossing over those lines has been a rich source for American storytelling, one fundamental both to the upward curve of rags-to-riches narratives and the downward spiral of American naturalist writing. Crossing from one class to another is an idea implicit in the familiar American notion of social mobility; in the "American Dream," the direction of passage is always up, but in the arts that

trajectory has been more frequently questioned than accepted. Horatio Alger's popular stories (from the late 1860s through the turn of the twentieth century) are a notable exception. In works such as *Ragged Dick*, a boy's earnest labors and good character are rewarded with material success. Alger's boys are icons of the self-made man. Mark Twain's parody "The Story of the Bad Little Boy" (1875) capitalizes on the moralistic and unrealistic aspects of Alger's stories:

And he grew up and married, and raised a large family, and brained them all with an axe one night, and got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and now he is the infernalst wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature.

The discourse of the success story persists throughout the twentieth century in the business world, in campaigns for public office, and in advertisements for many kinds of products and services – from body-building methods to military recruiting to college prospectuses. In the arts, however, whether music, movies, or fiction, the rising-star protagonist is likely to fall. Despite all the talk of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps or giving a better life to one's children, change is not consistently portrayed as progress.

"Passing" is a term normally used and probably best reserved for the practice of racial passing – usually a black person passing as white. It has been another mode of threshold-crossing in American literature and culture, quite often marked by the movement to a more prosperous neighborhood, though not without serious consequences to the psyche. Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* depicts the psychological and social confusion and damage that occur when one moves out of one's "assigned" place. Irene Redfield, who considers herself black, has at the outset of the narrative reluctantly renewed her acquaintance with Clare Kendry, a woman who has "passed" so successfully as to marry a wealthy white man. Previously satisfied with her life and rigidly set in her values, Irene finds that the presence of Clare disrupts every aspect of her life, from her sense of herself as a woman, to her marriage, to her circle of acquaintances. Throughout the text, Larsen emphasizes the "queer" feelings of Irene, a kind of vertigo that makes her irritated, restless, anxious, and finally desperate. The narrative of passing can be seen as a racially charged instance of a common narrative form: an individual forfeits some central aspect of identity – sexual orientation or family ties or cherished rituals of an ethnic culture – in order to



move into a "better neighborhood." Recent studies of "hybridity" in sociology and literature make the persuasive point that such narratives assume a binary where none need exist, that the categories of black/white or self/other don't begin to be adequate to the actual composition of a person or a society.<sup>9</sup> Selves and their categories multiply; this too is a much-discussed aspect of modernity and one that the anonymity of city life can be said to foster.

The meaning of the cityscape changes depending, sometimes quite literally, on the perspective of the viewer. The owner of the five-and-dime store that became an empire, F. W. Woolworth, built his company using the successful formula of observing pedestrians' movements and choosing sites for his stores accordingly. From such a perspective, the size and complexity of life in the city can be measured, codified, and to some extent controlled. Without that specialized information, however, the functioning of a large city can command awe comparable to that felt by Henry Adams as he gazed at the dynamos at the 1893 Exposition in Chicago: how does this enormous machine function and what is my relationship to it? This is the sort of question that can evoke a range of emotions – from despair to exhilaration, from pleasure at a city's beauty to revulsion at its refuse. Some see beauty even in the refuse.

The Ash Can school, a loosely affiliated group of New York City painters active in the early twentieth century, depicted shoppers, outdoor markets, tenements, saloons, boxing matches, and the like, focusing on realistic details of urban life. Observers responded to these paintings with about the same enthusiasm that greeted French naturalism: the paintings were *too* realistic, not elevating; why paint pictures of such sordid subjects? Representative painters of this urban realist style include Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Bellows, George Luks, and William Glackens. Interestingly, some of the painters associated with this group were chief organizers of the 1913 Armory Show, which introduced "modern" art to the American public. It could in fact be argued that these painters, like the realist and naturalist fiction writers, prepared the ground for modernist experimentation; by making ordinary life a fit subject for art, they helped extend the choice of subject matter and alter conventional notions of beauty and value.

The energy and exuberance in the brushstrokes of these painters seem appropriate to their subjects, as does the usually dark palette that records unapologetically the dirtier aspects of urban life. Representations of the city may also evoke busy-ness, variety, and vibrancy, as do the sinuous lines and deep colors of Archibald Motley's Harlem



FIGURE 3 George Luks, *Allen Street*, 1905

Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee, Gift of Miss Inez Hyder

Like other painters of the Ash Can school, Luks depicted American urban life without concern for loveliness.

scenes or the abstract, geometric, hot colors of Stuart Davis's Manhattan; or, by contrast, they can exhibit the cool and precise geometries of Charles Sheeler's paintings of buildings and machines; or they might suggest narratives of loneliness and disappointment, as do many of the canvases of Edward Hopper. An imaginary museum of paintings of the American city would no doubt exhibit a very wide range of styles and perspectives. What is notable is that, in the twentieth century, cities have proved a significant subject for painting, the cityscape as important as the bucolic landscape in other centuries.

Another crucial aspect of city living is the experience of human proximity. For the Brooklynite Walt Whitman, it was an almost unbearable pleasure:

I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,  
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.  
I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy.

To touch my person to some one else's is about as  
much as I can stand.

("Song of Myself." 1855)

But proximity also measures the lack of private space, as we have seen in the example from *Native Son*. Consider Gwendolyn Brooks's "kitchenette building" (1945): Its tenants are "grayed in, and gray," so intent upon feeding their families and raising the rent that they have no leisure for dreams. And in any case, the speaker wonders whether

a dream sent up through onion fumes  
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,  
Flutter or sing an aria down these rooms  
Even if we were willing to let it in.

Pervasive smells and sounds make walls irrelevant, and the most one can hope for is get by; the poem concludes with the modest satisfaction of a lukewarm bath. The creation of art – an aria, the poem itself – is an exhausting and perhaps finally a trivial enterprise: "Dream" makes a giddy sound." The dream ought to be handled as tenderly as one would an infant, should be kept clean and warm, but the cramped spaces and inadequate time prohibit such nurturing. In this environment, the Romantic notion of the solitary artist alone with his rich imagination is a cruel joke.

And yet it was precisely the proximity made possible by urban spaces that, according to modernists like the poet Ezra Pound, enabled the exchanges and confluences of modernism in the arts. In his essays about the possibility of an American equivalent of the Renaissance, a favorite early fantasy, he considers the urban center as crucial to the plan. The attractions of city life were surely one of the causes of the expatriation of American artists to cosmopolitan capitals like London and Paris. A metropolitan center with libraries, museums, galleries, and cafés provides the gathering place for the exchanges that fuel creativity. Students of modernism are used to associating Sylvia Beach's bookstore Shakespeare and Co. with James Joyce, the Paris bistro Closerie des Lilas with Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and Pablo Picasso. As Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast* (1965), his memoir of his early career in Paris, "The people that I liked and had not met went to the big cafes because they were lost in them and no one noticed them and they could be alone in them and be together." There is an

automatic association between the American expatriate and the city of Paris, but similar and equally important instances of artists being alone together have occurred in American urban spaces: bookstores like the Gotham in New York City and City Lights in San Francisco were unofficial headquarters for writers; Alfred Stieglitz's gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York provided a meeting place for painters and photographers; humorists like Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker exercised their wits at the Algonquin hotel bar; the Cedar Tavern was the favorite drinking spot of the American Expressionist painters; jazz is unthinkable without clubs like Roseland in New York's Times Square and Lincoln Gardens on East 31st Street in Chicago. In these instances, the spaces of a big city become intimate again, and the proximity of others stimulates productive *exchange*.

City venues make such good things possible. But scores of American texts expose the less salubrious effects of shared spaces in the city: dark pool halls, gaudy brothels, greasy diners, squalid flophouses. These are gathering places for the city's dispossessed, and social realist writing dwells on these settings. We see for example in James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932–5) how an aimless boy's hanging about in such places leads to violence, nihilism, and an early grave. The voluminous novels relentlessly present Chicago as destructive of ideals, ambitions, and hope. The pool hall is also the scene of Gwendolyn Brooks's devastating "We Real Cool" (1960):

The Pool Players.  
Seven at the Golden Shovel.  
  
We real cool. We  
Left school. We  
  
Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We  
  
Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We  
  
Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

The monosyllabic hopelessness of the poem's speakers makes the pool hall a synecdoche for the lives of city youths with no place else to go and no higher ambition than to "strike straight." By 1957, the pool hall as den of iniquity was so established, even clichéd, that the con-man in Meredith Willson's Broadway musical *The Music Man* is able,

in the number titled "Trouble," to convince the townspeople of the need for a marching band as a wholesome activity for youth who will otherwise be lost to cues and billiard balls. Interestingly, this hugely successful musical, which ran for 1,357 performances, was popular in part because it was self-consciously nostalgic. The setting of River City, Iowa, a half-century before the show's creation, is innocent. Thus the mostly white residents of River City can afford to worry about pool, juvenile cigarette-smoking, and vocabulary like "Swell" and "So's your old man." By contrast, Brooks's 1960 poem is dead serious, the stakes of the pool game ruinous.

Along with the temptations of city dives are the dangers of the street itself. Losing a boy to "the street" is a recurrent theme. Loitering youths near lampposts, teenagers cruising the streets in souped-up cars, Mafiosi gunned down as they exit their sedans, drugs surreptitiously peddled near a condemned building – these are standard scenes of American film, television, and fiction. In Ann Petry's 1946 novel *The Street*, Lutie is a mother raising her son alone, her energies consumed by the effort to keep him off the street. Having seen a girl bleeding on a stretcher in a hospital, she considers the predictable steps by which her son Bub could be lost to her. "Yes, she thought, she and Bub had to get out of 116th Street. It was a bad street. And then she thought about the other streets. It wasn't just this street that she was afraid of or that was bad. It was any street where people were packed together like sardines in a can" (chapter 8). Proximity resulting from the crowding of urban spaces, then, has context-specific effects. The same may be said of anonymity, another response to crowding, but with the paradoxical effect of isolation. A sampling of walkers in the city will indicate some of the emotions anonymity provokes. The poet Wallace Stevens found himself disgusted by the people he saw on city sidewalks, describing them in a letter to his father: "Everybody . . . looking at everybody else – a foolish crowd walking on mirrors."<sup>10</sup> No *flâneur* or man about town here, sauntering and taking in the view. Like the speaker of T. S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," for whom the streets are like "a tedious argument of insidious intent," the primary response is one of revulsion. For the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin (and for Charles Baudelaire before him), the *flâneur* is a central character of modernity. Representations of men walking the city streets depict commerce of many kinds, sexual, economic, and social. Frank O'Hara's 1959 "The Day Lady Died" shows how the act of shopping can be stopped cold by another dimension of the city, the artistry of the great jazz singer Billie Holiday:

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday  
three days after Bastille day, yes  
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine  
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton  
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner  
and I don't know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun  
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy  
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets  
in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank  
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)  
doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life  
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine  
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do  
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or  
Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Negres*  
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine  
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE  
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and  
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue  
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and  
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton  
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking  
of leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT  
while she whispered a song along the keyboard  
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

O'Hara's speaker registers the city as a dizzying mixture of the quotidian and the exotic. Errands – a shoeshine, a trip to the bank, a bookstore, a tobacconist – are ordinary features of city life. But in the course of his usual rounds, this person has commerce with the wider world's productions: art and literature and cigarettes, from places nowhere near his actual location. (We see in the poem a productive chaos of global commerce, abundance, the labels of places and advertising.) Most of all, we experience the kinetic quality of city life. (The only "still" thing is in the bank-teller's last name and even this suggestion of respite is coupled with a vehicle of transportation. The sense of motion is made more pointed, of course, by the elegiac final stanza, in which breathing stops, and the audience experiences another form of

transport. The "quandariness" of the earlier stanzas is replaced by silence and stasis: time appears to halt, thus placing the performance of Billie Holiday in a transcendent realm. But it would be wrong to see the kinesis and stasis as at odds here: the city is the source of both activities – shopping and art.

The imposed contact of city life suits the gregarious and can, as we heard in the quotation from Hemingway, even offer solitude in company. Crowds may also, of course, induce intense feelings of loneliness. As Holden Caulfield, the adolescent protagonist of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) puts it, "New York's terrible when somebody laughs on the street very late at night" (chapter 12). The knowledge that everywhere there are groups of which one is not a part makes singleness seem an oddity. Robert Frost's speakers are often alone, but in most instances they are on farms or in the woods, not in an urban setting. In "Acquainted with the Night" (1928), however, he evokes the solitude of a walker in the city:

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

Although the poem is set at night, we sense that this is a speaker whose loneliness does not dissipate at sunrise. The details of the poem – rain, the eyes evading contact, the unnamed things that the speaker is unwilling to explain, the attribution of sadness to city lanes, the faintly menacing sound of footsteps nearby and a cry far away, the circularity of the poem's form – all these suggest an inescapable sorrow. Moreover, Frost's use of *terza rima*, the stanzaic form of Dante's *Inferno*, intensifies the image of the city as private hell.

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) uses the antithetical effects of the city to chart the rise of his heroine against the fall of her older lover, Hurstwood. For Carrie, Chicago acts as a "magnet," focusing her desire to become someone she can admire: that is, visibly successful, beautifully dressed, a feast for the eyes, someone who counts in the great economic machine of the city. Through a combination of talent and accident, Carrie achieves her aim as an actress; with success after success, Dreiser's "little soldier" conquers all before her. As she rises, her lodgings become more spacious and opulent, until the end when she resides in splendor in a New York hotel, her presence providing the management with a form of animate publicity. She embodies Henry James's "hotel spirit." Hurstwood, by contrast, has taken money from

his employer's safe and is, again through a combination of forethought and accident, a disgraced man. Unable to find work when he and Carrie move to New York, he tramps the street looking for a job; becomes disconsolate, stops looking, and kills time reading the newspapers; tries to drive a streetcar when the regular workers are on strike; and dies in a room that rents for fifteen cents. Dreiser's novel is intentionally schematic; his aim is to illustrate both what the city can do for you and what the city can do to you. Carrie is made bigger, Hurstwood smaller.

Carrie is one of legions of young women and men who come to the city with the hope of "making it big," the spatial metaphor reinforcing the equation of size with success. The American musical theater, on stage and film, dramatizes story after story about the small-town boy or girl who makes good. An iconic example is Ruby Keeler's portrayal of Peggy Sawyer in Busby Berkeley's 1933 film *42nd Street*. She's the chorus girl who has to go on unexpectedly when the star is injured. The success of the production and the jobs of scores of people depend on her, and thus the director makes her mission clear: "Sawyer, you're going out a youngster, but you've got to come back a star." The film celebrates not only the rise of a sweet kid's talent but the city that made it possible, with Berkeley's stunning black and white geometries of images and bodies capturing the glamour and energy of "naughty, bawdy, gaudy, sporty Forty-Second St." This triumph of the talented innocent is of course balanced by the equally common narrative of the good girl who goes bad in the city – one who falls prey to a seducer or pimp, or who is forced by poverty to prostitute herself. The "fallen woman," a favorite character of the Victorian era in England, has also furnished material for twentieth-century American fiction and film: Stephen Crane's novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) metamorphoses in Hollywood films of the 1920s and 1930s into *Madame X* and *Sadie Thompson*.<sup>11</sup> In Crane's era, rising panic over the "white slave trade," that is, luring young women into prostitution, led to passage of the Mann Act in 1910, which forbade the transport of persons across state lines for immoral purposes. While the fear of prostitution was not without foundation, most historians now agree that the problems were sensationalized and that the fear was, as much as anything else, a fear of cities themselves. Here as elsewhere in American art and writing, corruption of the female body signals corruption of the nation.

Given such perils, the American small town would seem an appealing alternative. The world's perception of the United States in terms primarily of its cosmopolitan centers misses the historical importance

of the small town and the suburb to many Americans' sense of themselves. Sherwood Anderson's group of tales *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Thornton Wilder's drama *Our Town* (1938), and Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) all depict small towns as simpler than big cities but as nonetheless psychologically complex places. On the one hand the intimate size is a comfort. One knows and is known by one's neighbors; the rituals are familiar; the landscape changes less frequently and residents become attached to particular trees or storefronts or faces. The pace is slower, the manners gentler, and the ethos neighborly. The immense popularity of television shows depicting small towns and rural communities, *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Waltons*, *Mayberry, R.F.D.*, measures the degree to which these smaller living spaces function as a version of American pastoral. Just as the courtiers of Shakespeare's era were entranced by the *idea* of grazing sheep and kindly shepherds, so many Americans are attached to the idea that the small town is the real America, the source of some of its best values: kindness, helpfulness, friendliness.

Unlike the idealized television towns, however, the places created by Anderson, Wilder, and Lee are deceptive in their simplicity. While they offer moving, inspiring, and poignant portraits of small town life, they also present the ways that the smallness can turn in upon itself, making its residents grotesque, sexually perverse, miserable, and cruel. The paradox of the small town as a place in which, despite familiarity, one can feel especially lonely shapes Anderson's connected stories of *Winesburg's* inhabitants. And, while the stage narrator of Wilder's *Our Town* speaks with tenderness and humor of the lives of the townspeople, particularly the developing romance of George and Emily, the characters speak from their graves in a cemetery. What once was, is no longer; the mood is elegiac. In *Atticus Finch*, Lee imagines a widower who teaches his children to ignore class and race, a lawyer who heroically fights the town's racism, and a virile man who can shoot a rabid dog with deadly accuracy. He embodies Thomas Jefferson's agrarian aristocrat. But of course Finch is a hero precisely because he is unlike his neighbors, his virtues foiled by the small-mindedness of Maycomb, Alabama.

Another alternative to the big city is the area just outside the city, the place Kenneth Jackson has dubbed "the Crabgrass Frontier."<sup>12</sup> The so called "baby boom" of 76 million infants born between 1946 and 1964 fueled a significant move to the planned communities outside major cities - areas referred to loosely as the suburbs. Suburbs of course existed well before this period, some haphazardly growing up

around the edges of cities and some carefully planned and luxurious. They offered an alternative to the less salubrious aspects of city life, but permitted easy access to the commerce of the big city. Places like Levittown, New Jersey, perhaps the most famous of American suburbs, were built specifically with the returning soldiers of World War II in mind. Modest houses, based on a limited number of styles, such as the Cape Cod or ranch, and built of components manufactured on the assembly line, offered an affordable choice to young families who did not want to rear children in the city. In addition, the curvilinear street plans and the careful placement of "village" centers created a nearly instant sense of community. For many Americans, the suburb embodies the comfort and security of middle-class American life.

The fictions of the suburbs, however, are often bleak. The suburbanites of John Cheever's stories live in leafy preserves away from the noise and dirt of the city. The men who commute by train to the city for work return to comfortable homes, attractive wives, country-club golf courses, and dry martinis. Inevitably, the stories reveal that the polished veneer conceals misery. The characters are racked by infidelity, alcoholism, and a sense that their lives are meaningless. Having survived a plane crash in the opening pages, Francis Weed, the protagonist of "The Country Husband" (1954), finds himself suddenly discontented with the rituals of suburban life. "He wanted to sport in the green woods, scratch where he itched, and drink from the same cup." The routines of his family and neighbors deaden him. He wishes to be more like Jupiter, the Labrador retriever who wanders at will over the suburban lawns of Shady Hill: "he broke up garden parties and tennis matches, and got mixed up in the processional at Christ Church on Sunday, barking at the men in red dresses." Francis channels his own anarchic impulses into kissing the babysitter. Cheever writes as a white male observer whose own life resembled that of his characters. Ann Petry's observations of the same sort of neighborhood from the point of view of a black female servant yield similar conclusions. In *The Street*, the contrast between Lutie's family and that of her employers, the Chandlers, is telling: their children are neglected, the mother shallow, and the mostly absent father takes comfort in drink. In a horrific scene, the father's brother shoots himself in front of the whole family, including the children, on Christmas morning. Lutie, who has lived with violence all her life, is not thereby convinced that money isn't everything; on the contrary, "she was interested in the way in which money transformed a suicide . . . into 'an accident with a gun'" (chapter 2). The smaller, more manageable town or suburb is,

outside of TV-land, rarely depicted as utopian, despite the careful designs of the planners. Though the poverty and crime may be reduced, or at least less visible, the existential difficulties remain.

### Representing Nature

Although the twentieth century can be characterized as an era of cities, the national imaginary continues to include the vast natural spaces of the country as well: the redwood forests of California, the Everglades of Florida, the Great Plains of the Midwest, the Grand Canyon and the Painted Desert of the West. Even in the more densely settled states, painters, photographers, film-makers, and writers find ample material for the representation of nature; here too, some of the most memorable images are those that suggest the wide sweep of the continental United States. The earliest significant movement of American landscape painting – the Hudson River school – depicts natural spaces that appear almost entirely uninhabited. In the work of Thomas Cole (1801–48) and Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) and, later (mid- to late nineteenth century), Frederic Church, Alfred Bierstadt, George Innes, and others, the forces of nature literally dwarf the human figure who, if present at all, is merely a small shape in a corner of the foreground and whose main function appears to be contrast in scale. Nature, majestic and luminous, inspires awe; the spaciousness invites expanse of spirit, in keeping with the Romantic vision of Nature seen earlier in Emerson.

Vigorous conservation efforts have occurred sporadically in the United States, with the result that the system of national parks covers 84 million acres of territory. On the whole, however, the period 1900–45 was not an era of environmental awareness, but rather was marked by the harvesting and exploitation of resources. Forests, mountains, rivers, and oceans remained places of solace and recreation, but widespread concern about the effects of human uses of nature would wait until the 1950s and 1960s. The career of Ansel Adams (1902–84), one of the foremost photographers of the American landscape, suggests some of the ways in which nature was meaningful to Americans during the first half of the twentieth century. A serious student of the piano, Adams expected to make a career in music. His family lived in San Francisco, and as a teenager Adams began hiking in Yosemite; he took his first photograph in 1916. Influenced by the intensity of his experiences in the mountains and by the writings of conservationists like John Muir, Adams had by 1920 begun his lifelong association

with the Sierra Club, the oldest and largest of US conservation groups. By 1927 he had published his first portfolio of photographs, *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras*. His rise was rapid. Respected and admired by his peers, who included most of the important photographers of the period – Alfred Stieglitz, Dorothea Lange, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham – Adams was also a teacher and writer who assisted in the founding of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in 1940. His career was marked by multiple passions: technical perfection through knowledge and control of the processes of photography, environmental conservation, and the spiritual nourishment found in his favored subject, the Western landscape. These interests were not always in harmony. Work he did as a commercial photographer during the Great Depression, for example, conflicted with his desire to keep Yosemite free of the more destructive aspects of the tourist trade. His employer, the Curry Company, the result of a merger of the Yosemite National Park Company and the Curry Camping Company, built hotels, skating rinks, ski lifts, and golf courses. “So it goes, nibble by nibble,” said Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr., a landscape architect who had followed the profession of his father, the designer of Central Park in New York City. The preservation of the wilderness Adams loved was at odds with the commercial possibilities of the camera. The 1920s were a boom period for advertising and for recreation, and Adams’s photographs were used to tout amusements quite unlike the hikes of his adolescence. In the 1950s and 1960s Adams would reverse the promotional potential of the photographic image to further the mission of the Sierra Club. His career required a near-constant negotiation between purist aesthetics and the marketplace, between public and private uses of the landscape.

Commercial interests can make capital even out of the idea of the pristine wilderness, the beauty of which decorates many a travel brochure. To calculate the monetary possibilities inherent in a beautiful landscape seems somehow more grasping than to consider the landscape as a possible source of ore or wheat. That is, the spiritual refreshment of nature would seem to exist, if anything can, outside the realm of getting and spending. Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* (1925) is a meditation on the marketability of nature, intellectual property, and America’s history, all of which are intertwined in the structure of her novel. The book is in three sections: *The Family*, *Tom Outland’s Story*, and *The Professor*. The protagonist is Professor Godfrey St. Peters, a historian who has built his reputation writing about Spanish explorers. The central conflict of the novel, and the subject

of its first section, arises from the decision of his family to leave their long-time home for another deemed superior by St. Peters's wife. St. Peters will not move. Indeed his main action in the novel is refusal: he does not want to move from the study where he has done his writing; he does not wish to travel with his wife, daughter, and son-in-law; he does not want, essentially, to embrace the future.

The focus of the second section is Tom Outland who, killed in World War I, is dead when the story begins. Symbolizing aspects of the past that St. Peters cannot easily surrender, Outland appears throughout the novel as a subject of discussion. He had invented a vacuum and given the plans for it to his fiancée Rosamond St. Peters. After Outland's death, Rosamond marries another man, and she and her husband have grown wealthy from the manufacture of the invention. Tom's abilities as a student had so captivated St. Peters that the professor has neglected his wife and family; his youthful idealism is a standard against which St. Peters measures his own life. For Professor St. Peters, Tom's worth cannot be valued in monetary terms: "my friendship with Tom is the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue." The central section of the novel is based on Tom's diaries about his life in New Mexico and his archaeological find in the Blue Mesa: evidence of a lost tribe that left behind a sophisticated city carved into the rock. Tom attempts to interest the federal government in the preservation of the city, grows disillusioned in Washington, DC, and finally recognizes that scrutiny derives not from the physical remains of the tribe but from his imaginative possession of the mesa:

That was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. . . . It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to coordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession. The excitement of my first discovery was a very pale feeling compared to this one. For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poet, and I knew that what I felt for this place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives, but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed.

Tom's death preserves him, in St. Peters's mind, from the success that results from his invention. In this regard, Tom is St. Peters's Blue Mesa, representative of unalloyed motives, disinterested intellectual curiosity, idealism, and filial piety. He keeps Tom's otherworldly

innocence alive in memory. By the novel's end, St. Peters has been rescued by his housekeeper from accidental death by asphyxiation, and has decided that he can live without the "something very precious that he could not consciously have relinquished." Despite St. Peters's accident, the novel's close is muted and undramatic — just as the professor's remaining life will be.

This brief synopsis of the story should indicate that history — private and national — is Cather's central theme. The age difference between St. Peters and Tom not only suggests a father-son and teacher-student relationship but also allows Cather to present a generational shift. Tom's active existence, first as an explorer and then as a scientist, contrasts with the essentially sedentary scholarly work of St. Peters. But both men prize the imaginative possession of the past and the ideal of intellectual exploration as an end in itself. Tom, St. Peters thinks, "had made something new in the world — and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others." This praise of unremunerative creativity occurs in the context of St. Peters's university experience, where political and economic interests commercialize intellectual life, where the mandate to "show results" endangers pure scholarship. Without fully endorsing St. Peters's judgment that the world of the future will be one in which he will have to live "without joy, without passionate griefs," Cather's novel movingly registers personal and cultural loss. Developers, politicians, "fittle black-coated men pouring out of white buildings," as Tom describes them, will clearly dominate the future. The natural landscape of the Blue Mesa is not in fact wholly natural, a key point. It has been the home of a previous civilization. Its existence suggests that there are multiple ways in which humans can live in their landscape. Some ways are superior to others: the Blue Mesa and Tom's life in it suggest that the relationship between humanity and nature can be other than adversarial, other than exploitative.

If any twentieth-century American poet can be said to "own" nature poetry, at least in the popular mind, it is Robert Frost. The association with New England farms and cracker-barrel wisdom is one Frost cultivated. As a result, certain poems of his, such as "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," are read (and misread) at graduation ceremonies, funerals, and other occasions when something poetic seems called for. He is perceived as a nature-poet because of the birds, woodpiles, birches, snow, and wooded paths that make up his usual landscape. Unlike the canvases of the Hudson River painters or Ansel Adams's photographs of Yosemite, however,

Frost's natural settings show evidence of man's engagement with them, as a woodsman or farmer or even only as a walker, rather like the Frost of "Acquainted with the Night." While the outside views in these poems are often tranquil, the speaker rarely is. Indeed the challenges to serenity discerned by Frost's best readers – among them the poet Randall Jarrell – are an effect created by the disparity between what Frost called "inner and outer weather."

In "To the Laodiceans" in the essay collection *Poetry and the Age*, Jarrell describes Frost's poem "Design" (1936) in photographic terms: "it is the terrible negative from which the . . . Kodak picture (with its *Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here* on the margin) had to be printed." The poem reverses the logic of the Argument from Design, the proof of God's power that made colonial writers like Jonathan Edwards exult over sunlight and fear thunder. In Edwards's work, as in most Puritan writing on the subject, it is possible to know the Designer by close inspection of the Design. Frost's observation of mutations in a flower, a spider, and a butterfly lead him to a chilling conclusion:

#### Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,  
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth  
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth –  
Assorted characters of death and blight  
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,  
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth –  
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,  
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,  
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
What but design of darkness to appall? –  
If design govern in a thing so small.

This "albino catastrophe," as Jarrell precisely describes it, seems too patterned to be accidental. The Designer must have a wicked sense of humor, as does the poet. The catechretic combinations of words ("dimpled" and "spider"; "death and blight" and "morning right"; "dead wings" and "paper kite"; "darkness" and "appall") disrupt predictable syntax; the tone oscillates between knowingness and

innocence; the "moral" is poised on an "if." It is a disquieting view of the natural world and its supposed Maker.

The Frostian landscape is by and large snowbound and vaguely terrifying, proving that Nature does not necessarily exalt the spirit in the ways that the sunnier poems of Romanticism claim. Frost's take on mankind's relationship to the natural landscape is modern, skeptical, wry. Consider "Desert Places", from *A Further Range* (1936):

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
In a field I looked into going past,  
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,  
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it – it is theirs.  
All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
I am too absent-spirited to count;  
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness  
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –  
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

The spaces of nature are both wide and deep. The sleep of the animals is profound and the field blank. The poem does not ask us to fling ourselves across the continent in the panoramic manner of Whitman or his modern inheritor Hart Crane; rather, it is a poem that tunnels into the depths of the speaker's mind. In this poem too, Frost offers a retort to design, this time the literary pattern known as the pathetic fallacy: while employing the usual devices typical of the poem of sympathetic nature – the blankness of snow, the smothered animals, the vacancies between the stars – he explodes the expectations of this pattern. The concept of Nature as sympathetic requires that the poet maintain the fiction that it is Nature that weeps, Nature that sighs, Nature that suffers with the poet. But the lonely speaker of Frost's poem treats Nature not as a comforter but as a rival: he cannot be scared, or soothed, by the vacancy he sees outside, however bleak; it cannot compete with the emptiness inside.



The turn inward is typical of much modernist writing. After all, much of it spoke to a culture in which Freudian vocabulary and psycho-analysis were becoming commonplace. Well before that, of course, William Wordsworth recognized that the scene he observed at Tintern Abbey was a symbiosis of physical and mental landscape: "of all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear, – both what they half create / And what perceive." Frost and other modern American poets increasingly emphasized the "half-created," that is, the subjective nature of perception. A high degree of self-consciousness is characteristic of modern poetry, which, whatever else the topic, seems always to explore the slippery relationship between reality and language. The relevance of these explorations to Nature we have observed already in the disparity between the Emerson of "Nature" and the Emerson of "Experience." Once having recognized the degree to which the subject/observer may alter the object/observed, it becomes impossible not to be self-conscious, and this self-consciousness constantly threatens to overwhelm all other aspects of the scene. William Carlos Williams, who saw his poetry as an antidote to this malady, worried about the status of the thing-ness of things and offered a counter-strategy: "no ideas but in things." This assertion that things count in themselves and not only in what they reflect about the perceiver is one way of making sense of his cryptic poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923):

so much depends  
upon  
  
a red wheel  
barrow  
  
glazed with rain  
water  
  
beside the white  
chickens

Our attention is directed to the things – the chickens, the wheelbarrow, the rain – because the "so much" that depends on them is undefined, intangible. The poem allows us to recognize perception as a human and thus subjective act, but does not make the things observed merely servants of that act. Marianne Moore's use of animals and natural scenes in her poetry operates according to similar principles. Her poems are a menagerie of pangolins, pelicans, monkeys, plumed basilisks, dock rats, and fish; these are often made to serve a moral turn, as in

the fables of La Fontaine. However, Moore's goals of "Humility, Concentration, and Gusto," as she titled one of her critical essays, could not be met by treating creatures only as emblems. As the critic Bonnie Costello expresses it:

The poems enact and figure a play . . . between the world observed and the observing of it. . . . While other modernists made the major claim of achieving the genuine in form, closing the gap between human constructions and the order of nature, Moore admits the elusiveness of truth, connecting the genuine with the acknowledgement of limits. The poem does not reveal the thing in all its realness, but puts us on the scent with lively images of pursuit.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in "Poetry," Moore calls for the impossible: "imaginary gardens with real toads in them." Surely this is one of the mental feats that her contemporary Wallace Stevens is exploring in such poems as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Anecdote of the Jar," and "The Snowman."

Nature's manifold meanings register its immense significance. In the United States, as we have seen throughout this chapter, Nature has been construed as a sign of God's beneficent or malevolent design; as a refuge, a place of Edenic simplicity and youthful innocence; as an occasion for introspection, as a source of wealth, as a metaphor for human emotion. So loaded with connotation is any American scene of Nature, indeed so unlikely is the scene to be natural in the sense of being untouched, that no one ever comes to it without dragging most of Western civilization along.

## Apocalypse

The Frontier Thesis and Manifest Destiny, terms discussed at the beginning of this chapter, imply endings. Ideas of the ever-receding frontier and the special mission of Americans to settle the continent were designed to spur development and keep the American Dream of continual progress and improvement alive. If there were to be a temporal or spatial end, according to these concepts, it would be merely a brief pause or way-station between the termination of one mission and the commencement of another. That is, until the end of history. Progress, a key word for both America and the twentieth century, presupposes a certain kind of narrative, wherein the situation at the beginning is inferior to that at the end. *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), John

Bunyan's allegory that was a staple of American home libraries, follows the character Christian from the City of Destiny through a series of obstacles to the Celestial City. Any believer in Christianity, of whatever nationality, would find herein a familiar eschatology. Christian's travails, the journey of the faithful toward heavenly reward, while in no way a new literary form, must nevertheless have seemed peculiarly appropriate to settlers of a New World who were pushing westward. The habit of "reading" the land as evidence of a divine plan encourages a view of life in which progression and progress bring one closer to a promised end; movement implies teleology.

In *The American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch argues that the relationship between Christian narrative and the New World became literal in the minds of the Puritan settlers: "What for others was an ideational structure – the *New World* of regeneration, the *promised land* of heaven, the *wilderness* of temptation, the *garden* of the spirit was . . . a political reality, the civic, religious, and economic structures of a covenanted New World society."<sup>14</sup> This fusing of worldly and otherworldly makes for Bercovitch all the difference in the meaning of the form called "the jeremiad." Whereas the formidable historian Perry Miller had seen the "fire and brimstone" sermon as indicative of the failure of the spiritual errand and its eventual replacement by a secular one, Bercovitch argues that the jeremiad was designed to underscore the inseparability of secular and spiritual and to hearten those committed to that conception of life's purpose.<sup>15</sup> Threatened punishment signals, according to this view, not damnation but love and belief that the sinner can turn away from the sin.

The possibility of reward nevertheless implies the possibility of punishment: the possibility of success, failure. Arrival, as anyone who has ever anticipated it knows, may evoke joy, sorrow, or even exhausted indifference. The epic narrative of a traveler's adventures is nearly always more compelling during the mid-story crises and temptations than it is at the end – hence Turner's insistence that Americans must seek new frontiers to replace the old, continually moving the goal. But the edge of the continent is a physical reality that has had a powerful grip on American imaginings of the end of something. Travel westward functions as a trope for leaving behind one's troubles, for seeking adventure or fame or wealth. Sunshine spills gold on the landscape. The power of this image, precisely because it beckons and seduces, has also provided rich material for visions of apocalypse.

The land of milk and honey in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is California, the US equivalent of the Celestial City. The Joad

family are forced to give up tenant farming in Oklahoma; agricultural corporations with tractors can do the job more efficiently and turn a profit. Their impoverished state is also a result of the 1930s "Dust Bowl," a period of drought and dust storms so relentless that it forced thousands of families to leave their homesteads. Most of them headed West. In his innocence, Grampa Joad anticipates the pleasures that await him out there: "Just let me get out to California where I can pick me an orange when I want it. Or grapes. There's a thing I ain't never had enough of. Gonna get me a whole big bunch of grapes off a bush, or whatever, an' I'm gonna squash 'em on my face an' let 'em run offen my chin" (chapter 8). Once the Joad family reaches this promised land, however, they face a near-biblical level of famine and flood, along with conditions for work different from, but no less brutal than, the arid fields they had left behind in Oklahoma. There are many more workers to do the picking of crops than there are jobs to go around, and owners can thus give work to the lowest bidder. The wages are not even at subsistence level. The Joad son, Tom, recently returned from prison, kills a man in self-defense and must go into hiding; the pregnant daughter Rose of Sharon is abandoned by her husband and her child is stillborn. Ma Joad is an icon of endurance amid the troubles.

Were it not for the final Pietà-like image of Rose of Sharon nursing a starving old man, the story of the Joad family's pilgrimage would be devastating: after so much suffering, no reward, no improvement, no change at all. But spiritual change is forecast, and Steinbeck strains credibility to embody that change in Rose of Sharon's selfless act. There is a modicum of hope on offer, if only humanity can change itself. "I got to figure," a tenant farmer says at the beginning of the novel, "'We've all got to figure. There's some way to stop this. It's not like lightning or earthquakes. We've got a bad thing made by men, and by God that's something we can change'" (chapter 5). The heavy use of Christian iconography and other religious allusions in the novel along with a number of moving scenes of effective communal activity suggest that the change must include a radical shift away from individualistic, capitalistic practices. In an especially famous speech in the novel – a kind of set-piece later made indelible by the actor Henry Fonda in director John Ford's 1940 film version – Tom tries to explain to his mother, who fears he will be killed for standing up to the bosses, that his single life is inconsequential: "'a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one.'" Thus, even if he dies, he will still be present:

"Then I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where, wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there. . . . I'll be in the way guys yell when they're angry an' - I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build - why I'll be there." (chapter 27)

Tom's belief in the "big" soul - an Emersonian Oversoul - gives him purpose, a long view of history, and belief in the power of concerted action. Steinbeck prepares the reader for this movement from "I" to "we" from the beginning of the novel, where chapters focused on the particular struggles of the Joads alternate with interchapters that narrate the trials of all those who migrated in search of work. In these sections, the pronouns are plural, the dialogue unpunctuated with quotation marks, and the quotations unattributed, all stylistic choices dictated by the decision to make the novel a representation of something larger than a single family. Every act of kindness and self-sacrifice in the novel builds toward a vision of a renewed nation capable of reform: what mankind has ruined, mankind can salvage - but a change of heart must first occur. The novel is a form of jeremiad and a view of the end times: Steinbeck describes the moral decline of a nation that has permitted the drive for profit and efficiency to displace all other values. Like the turtle that plods along the highway for the entirety of chapter 3, the "people" as a collective are slow and unprepossessing, but unstoppable. They embody a life-force with a will to survive. In that will, Steinbeck discerns a collective strength - a big soul - that can reshape the country's direction. The horrors of the novel, human cruelty and natural disasters, suggest that, without that change, the nation will become hell on earth.

It must be said, however, that Steinbeck's view of the people as a force for good, though it may still have vitality in political rhetoric, is not ubiquitous in American fiction. Just as often, "the people" are portrayed as an unthinking and therefore dangerous mob. In the darker view of such novels as Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1933), the state of California, and specifically the city of Hollywood, is a repository of failures. Sunshine and movie stars lure people to Hollywood; the "dream machine," as the film industry has often been called, creates but cannot satisfy the desire for lives that, like the images on the "silver screen," are larger than life. Because Hollywood is the source of most American movies, and because, especially in the early days of film, most filming was done on constructed sets, rather than

on "location," West's setting exposes the tawdry artificiality of at least some American dreams.

The Hollywood novel, both pulp and high-toned, is a significant sub-genre in American writing. The stories nearly always take a dark turn. Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, a massive bestseller in 1966 and still one of the three bestselling novels written by a female author, traces lives destroyed by alcohol, pills, and sex. More recently, the British writer Jackie Collins has offered a Hollywood title every few years: *Hollywood Wives*, *Hollywood Husbands*, *Hollywood Kids*. It is a premise of these formulaic novels that the rich, beautiful, and successful are, if we but wipe away the Vaseline from the camera lens, miserable, ordinary, and corrupt; these books detail the outrages of Hollywood lives with the same ferocity that jeremiads enumerate the pains of hell. Hollywood corruption has appealed to a variety of writers over the years: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (published posthumously, 1941), Bud Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1971). And, as happens in any art that has become highly self-conscious, the Hollywood movie about Hollywood is a standard offering as well. Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1942) follows the journey of a Hollywood producer who wants to get in touch with "real" people and tell real stories, only to discover that people don't want reality from the movies. The producer has a falsely elevated sense of his mission. The money side of the movie business is a favorite target of Hollywood satire, and the approach is evident in some recent titles: Robert Altman's *The Player* and George Huang's *Swimming with Sharks*. Perhaps because the film industry deals in fantasy, perhaps because publicity always carries a whiff of untruth, perhaps even because movies are accessible to all classes of people, Hollywood symbolizes fraudulence, greed, hedonism, and meretriciousness - the seamier side of American optimism and prosperity.

The Hollywood hack writer symbolizes "selling out" artistic talent to mere entertainment. In *The Catcher in the Rye* one cause of Holden Caulfield's *contemptus mundi* is his belief that his writer brother is wasting his gifts. "Now he's out in Hollywood, D. B., being a prostitute" (chapter 1). D. B.'s career is a synecdoche for the "phoniness" Holden sees everywhere in America. Todd Hackett, the artist-figure in *The Day of the Locust*, is named like a character in an allegory, combining two kinds of death, the German *Tod* with the spiritual death of hackwork. West's novel makes explicit what is always implicit in the horrors of Hollywood fiction: those who worship false idols (fame, money, glamour) will be spectacularly punished. Here is the meeting

ground of jeremiad and apocalypse. The final scene of the novel is set at a Hollywood movie première, where a large crowd has gathered to see the stars go into Kahn's Persian Palace Theater (alluding both to the real Graumann's Chinese Theater and to Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*). Following a series of small incidents, none the true cause of the riot, the mob becomes violent; people are trampled; Todd is carried away screaming, laughing, imitating the wail of an ambulance. The painting he has worked on throughout the novel, *The Burning of Los Angeles*, has come to life.

More awful than the actual crush of the mob is West's explanation of the cause: boredom. Having worked in dull jobs to save money and move on to something better, the people have high expectations: "Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?" But these natural pleasures prove insufficient: "Once there they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit."

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war . . . Nothing can be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (chapter 27)

Who or what is to blame? Some of West's rhetoric suggests that the people themselves are to blame (they have "slack minds and bodies"), but what or who has cheated and betrayed them? The corruption is so pervasive that the responsibility for it cannot be traced to immediate sources even in the syntax of his sentences. Rather, and this is the suggestion of apocalyptic fiction more generally, it is the society as a whole that is wayward. Material successes feed an insatiable desire for more; novelty is a perpetual-motion machine that destroys its own products even as it spits out new ones; violence begets violence. A nihilist novel like *The Day of the Locust* is predicated on unfulfilled promises: we imagine luscious oranges and then we imagine ourselves unsatisfied by them.

### The Sense of Place

Most of this chapter has addressed possible ways of comprehending the sheer size of America. Attention to the continent as a land mass,

however, tends to emphasize the idea of the US as a nation and global power. In the daily lives of people of any country, attention is more likely to be directed to immediate spaces – the home, the neighborhood, the state, the region. Although the particularities of a region can be – often have been – eclipsed by corporations and conglomerates, attachment to the food, speech patterns, habits, landscape, and history of specific places continues to matter. The American Way of Life has not entirely replaced specific American ways of life. In 1962 Flannery O'Connor, a writer who spent most of her life in rural Georgia, offered a way of thinking about region:

The best American fiction has always been regional. The ascendancy passed roughly from New England to the Midwest to the South; it has passed to and stayed longest wherever there has been a shared past, a sense of alikeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light. In these things the South still has a degree of advantage. It is a slight degree and getting slighter, but it is a degree of kind as well as of intensity, and it is enough to feed great literature if our people – whether they be newcomers or have roots here – are enough aware of it to foster its growth in themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Two words from this passage, "feed" and "roots," point to the relationship between the rural and the regional. As in France, where the word "terroir" means "soil" but also refers broadly to the products of a region (as, for example, Provence or Normandy), so in O'Connor's definition of regional writing, there is a lingering association with the land itself.

The surge of interest in reading and writing about specific locations, known as the "local color" movement, occurred just after the Civil War, a period marked by the proliferation and increased circulation of magazines. Writing about the West was popular; Bret Harte's often humorous short stories were typical of the fare. Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) was at first perceived as a local colorist because of his tales of life on the Mississippi River, though his reputation soon exceeded its regional beginnings. Regional writing functioned as virtual travel, a way of experiencing other parts of the United States. And the more specific the dialect, customs, and peculiarities of behavior, the better. Thus readers of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* would have been interested not only in the progress of Edna Pontellier, but also in the manners of Creole life, the setting of New Orleans, and the smatterings of French in the characters' dialogue. Dialects signaled authenticity, an insider's view of the observed community.

In the witty preface to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Twain connects the transcription of dialect to the representation of the diversity of speakers even within a circumscribed region.

## EXPLANATORY

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding.

## THE AUTHOR.

Published post-war, the novel's events take place in the pre-war South. Twain is elegiac about Huck's and America's childhood even as he excoriates the South's dependence on the "peculiar institution" of slavery. The suggestion is of a time and place that will soon pass away. The insistence on specificity may be read, at least in part, as evading a national definition of Americanness. Huck announces he will "light out for the Territory" as the novel concludes, an area still not "sivilized" and thus not yet eroded of its distinctiveness. Desiring to feel free and easy, as he did on the river, Huck resists homogenization.

Readers in the North had a special interest in works set in the South, and both Southerners and Northerners preferred fictions depicting the ante-bellum South, works that often romanticized life on the plantation. An example of the genre called the plantation novel is Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* (1887), its title signaling the good old days before the war disrupted what Page depicts as a harmonious way of life. Most of these books are now merely curiosities, but they formed a significant part of the popular taste for sentimental historical fiction after the war. Some form of nostalgia about the ante-bellum US helped create the market for dialect poetry, as well. Following is a brief excerpt from Paul Laurence Dunbar's "When Malindy Sings":

Easy 'nough fu' folks to hollah,  
Lookin' at de lines an' dots,

When dey ain't no one kin sence it,  
An' de chune comes in, in spots;  
But fu' real malojous music,  
Dat jes' strikes yo' hea't and clings,  
Jes' you stan' an' listen wif me  
When Malindy sings.

Ain't you nevah hyeahd Malindy?  
Blessed soul, tek up de cross!  
Look hyeah, ain't you jokin', honey?  
Well, you don't know whut you los'.  
Y' ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa'blin',  
Robins, la'ks, an' all dem things,  
Heish dey moufs an' hides dey face.  
When Malindy sings.

(Lyrics of *Lowly Life*, 1896)

Dunbar had, in fact, never visited the South when he wrote this poem, but he had heard stories from his parents, both of whom had been slaves. This poem, thought to be a tribute to his mother, is gently ironic, proposing as it does that no amount of training in music theory can create the sound that Malindy's natural ability and life experience make possible. That experience, we learn from the poem, has been hard, the singer has suffered, and she has been sustained by religious faith. Dunbar's dialect poetry far exceeded in popularity his other, more conventional poetry, which was mostly ignored; further, Dunbar himself was uncomfortably aware that his voice bore comparison with that of white writers like Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris, who had written the "Br'er Rabbit" tales. Dialect alone was not enough to distinguish the voice of Dunbar's speakers from those of writers who were not of the race they depicted. Dialect alone could not suggest the deep divide between the races.

Southern dialect, because of its soft sounds, coheres nicely with the "moonlight and magnolias" picture of the South, which emphasizes the gentility of plantation owners, the beauty of Southern belles, the ethos of Southern hospitality, and the contentment of slaves singing at their work. Implicit in this view, too, is the concept of the Lost Cause, the notion that the men of the South fought nobly to protect a way of life that ran counter to the forces of modernization. The Lost Cause undergirds Margaret Mitchell's bestselling novel *Gone With the Wind* (1936) and the Oscar-winning film based on it (1939). If we may judge by sales figures and the frequent airing of the film, this Civil

War novel retains its hold on the American imagination. Although written decades after the conflict, it draws heavily on the distinction between nostalgia and practicality in characterizing the two male protagonists, Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler. Scarlett O'Hara's inability to relinquish her attachment to the genteel but ineffectual Ashley in favor of the newly rich and rakishly cynical Rhett is an allegory of the South's reluctance to leave behind the ideal of the agrarian aristocrat.

The South has not, of course, furnished the only regional literature of consequence. Looked at in one way, the work of Transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau, or Margaret Fuller could be categorized as New England regional literature. Each of the nation's areas – the Northwest, the Southwest, the far West, and so on – has at one time or another amassed a body of writing. Southern literature has, however, received by far the most scholarly attention of any regional American literature. The University of North Carolina Press had by the 1950s already published 200 studies of the South. Southern universities routinely offer courses in Southern literature, and there are several journals of note that specifically focus on the South. Fred Hobson, a distinguished scholar of Southern literature, has labeled this phenomenon "The Rage to Explain." A work like *The Mind of the South* (1941) by the journalist W. J. Cash assumes that there is a particularly Southern mind and that its genesis needs explaining. In Cash's argument, frontier individualism, Protestantism, the climate, and a confluence of other conditions created the combination of romanticism and hedonism that eventuated in violence and racism. He was not sanguine about the ability of the South to transcend this heritage. The reasons for the compulsion to analyze the South are numerous, but a partial list would include the South's defeat in the war, its association with slavery, its resistance to incursions of commerce and other modernizing forces during the period called Reconstruction, its reputation for pockets of poverty and ignorance, its designation as a "Bible Belt," its insularity, its odd or charming speech (the *y'all* drawl), and its foodways (hush puppies, GooGoo Clusters, Moon Pies, gumbos). Asked to define what makes Southern literature distinctive, Southerners themselves name the sense of place, the uses of oral tradition, the prominence of stories of families, the emphasis on talk in general – in short, various means of maintaining a sense of community.

One way to approach a regional literature is, as indicated earlier, via the landscape, an approach especially important for the South, which made a difficult transition from a largely agrarian landscape to one of highways, suburban tracts of houses, strip malls, and sizeable cities.

The attachment to the land is the defining principle of Agrarianism, a term that refers broadly to the virtues of the farming life. Pastoral panegyric has ancient roots and so there is nothing inherently new about the basic tenets of Agrarian thought. Briefly, the principles are outlined in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* as follows:

cultivation of the soil is an occupation blessed by God; an economic system should be judged not by the prosperity it produces but by the degree to which it encourages independence and morality; the life of the farmer is harmonious, orderly, and whole, and it counteracts the tendencies toward abstraction, alienation and fragmentation; since nature is the primary source of inspiration, all the arts are better fostered in agrarian society; cities destroy independence, encourage crimes and corruption; farm communities encourage cooperation and neighborliness.<sup>17</sup>

What makes these ideas significant is not their novelty but their use in particular places at particular times. Adopted by groups like the Fugitives in the early 1920s, these ideas already seemed to mainstream intellectuals retrogressive, aggressively anti-modern. The Fugitives included a number of important writers, all loosely connected to Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, among them Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren. The manifesto of the group, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), is a collection of a dozen essays by these four and others who argue for values they view as imperiled by the ruinous "progress" of modern life. As such, the manifesto is by definition conservative about social mores and, implicitly, about politics. In general, however, the Fugitives were most interested in writing and reading poetry and in fostering a culture in which they believed those activities would matter.

The Fugitives, named after their short-lived journal (1922–5), are also strongly associated with New Criticism. Robert Penn Warren co-authored with Cleanth Brooks (another Southerner and a student of Ransom), the influential and widely used textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938). The book is perhaps now best known for what it says not to do. In the prefatory "Letter to Teachers," the following practices were discouraged:

1. Paraphrase of logical and narrative content;
2. Study of biographical and historical materials;
3. Inspirational and didactic interpretation.

Instead the student was to concentrate entirely upon the words on the page and poetry as poetry, i.e. not as a story accompanied by a moral and not merely as evidence of a writer's life and times. The joke used to be that New Criticism originated in the South because, lacking libraries, its residents were lucky even to have copies of poems. This witicism is in keeping with H. L. Mencken's remark in 1917 that the South was "the Sahara of the Bozart." (The pun is on *beaux arts*, but with a suggestion of Ozark and Bozo – both derogatory terms for deep ignorance and foolishness.) The view of the South as benighted has a long history that includes events from the ante-bellum period to the present time. The Fugitives, fully aware of this stereotype, were motivated, at least in part, by the desire to demonstrate that Southerners were intellectually able. Ransom claimed in a letter to Randall Jarrell that the professors of American universities were confused and directionless; he believed that his group could provide the necessary guidance. And, indeed, until at least the mid-1960s (and in some places well beyond), New Criticism was the dominant approach in the American classroom. Ransom and company made their mark.

Apart from the alleged absence of libraries, what drew these Southerners to New Criticism? Turning to Cleanth Brooks's *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), a highly influential book of criticism, one finds even in the title the beginnings of an explanation. Brooks concludes his essay on "The Language of Paradox" with a comparison of poems to urns:

there is a sense in which all such well-wrought urns contain the ashes of a phoenix. The phoenix rises from its ashes; or ought to rise; but it will not arise from all our mere sifting and measuring of ashes, or testing them for their chemical content. We must be prepared to accept the paradox of the imagination itself.

The wholeness of the poem will not be reduced to its component parts, nor subjected to mathematical or scientific analysis – vital components of modern industrialization and technology. Furthermore, as Brooks points out, poetic language is like religious language; it depends upon paradoxical statements (for example, "the last shall be first") and in this regard encompasses what is not logical but is nevertheless meaningful. The organic structure of the poem – holding in tension all its conflicting energies, paradoxical, but finally harmonious and whole – resembles the imaginary society of the Agrarian philosopher. The attachment of the Fugitives to an idea of the agrarian South should not, however, be taken too literally: not expecting the return of the

Old South, they expressed instead misgivings about the direction of the nation as a whole toward progress for progress's sake, toward a shallow materialism, and toward the anomie that arises from rootlessness and impersonality. The Southern porch, which enables people to sit at home and still converse with neighbors, is one of the icons of Southern writing because the idea of the simple life in a neighborly neighborhood has not lost its appeal.

This is not to say that Southern writers assume a stable or peaceable land. On the contrary, much of the most memorable Southern writing derives its material from those contrary people and things that will not blend nicely into the landscape. The works of Flannery O'Connor are crowded with misfits, not only the man who calls himself *The Misfit* in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," but one-legged Hulga in "Good Country People," acne-ridden, Wellesley-educated Mary Grace in "Revelation," and deaf Lucynell in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." For O'Connor, the woman who is well-dressed, respectable, church-going, and fiscally responsible is the favored symbol of moral depravity. Writing from a specifically Roman Catholic point of view, O'Connor upsets the comfort and complacency of a woman like Mrs. Turpin who seems justified in her pride: she takes care of herself and those around her; she is, by her own lights, a good Christian. "Revelation," the story in which she appears, ends with Mrs. Turpin's mystical vision of souls on their way to heaven:

[A] vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right . . . They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

Stunned, Mrs. Turpin sees that the hierarchy she had taken for granted – and indeed assumed as a birthright – has been upended. Her vision of just deserts has been fundamentally altered. The other world beyond, or as O'Connor elsewhere names it, the "true country," must always be spoken of metaphorically: like the metaphysical poets of

the seventeenth century. O'Connor draws her metaphors from nature and ordinary life: fires, rivers, bulls, peacocks. But the exultation of an "elsewhere" these images mean to capture is comprehensible largely because of O'Connor's precise depiction of the rural South where "place" refers as much to one's status as one's location.

Writing about "Place in Fiction," Eudora Welty praised fellow-Mississippian William Faulkner for his creation of Yoknapatawpha County, the setting of many of his stories and novels. "I am not sure . . . how widely it is realized and appreciated that these works of such marvelous imaginative power can also stand as works of the carefulest and purest representation. Heightened, of course: their specialty is that they are twice as true as life." Of the story "Spotted Horses," she writes, "it could happen today or tomorrow at any little crossroads hamlet in Mississippi; the whole combination of irresistibility is there." Welty, who herself had one of the most acute ears for local speech among the Southern writers, is praising more than Faulkner's accuracy; "irresistibility" arises from the confluence of physical detail and feeling: "Location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction that charge out from the story in its course."<sup>18</sup>

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County is so thoroughly imagined that the Vintage paperback edition includes a map based on the fiction. Acknowledged as one of the great American novelists, Faulkner offers perhaps the best evidence that "regional" should not be confused with "provincial." His fictional county resembles the real Lafayette County; the terrain is recognizably like that of north-central Mississippi, and yet there is no attempt at documentary realism. The speech of his characters manages to sound at once like the speech of the types he depicts and yet like Faulkner himself. The stories he tells are saturated with the history of the South but entirely contemporary in the style of their telling, employing the whole repertoire of modernist tricks, from multiple points of view to stream of consciousness to unpunctuated prose. Like Quentin Compson, who appears in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom! Absalom!*, Faulkner can be a romantic idealist about the South, but he articulates with equal persuasion the exhausted cynicism of Quentin's alcoholic father. The divisions observable in Faulkner's work mirror the contradictions the South faced as it gave up one way of life for another.

"Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all." Quentin has heard those questions since he arrived at Harvard. Shreve, a Canadian who is Quentin's roommate at Harvard, spends a night listening to Quentin

try to reconstruct Southern history from the ante-bellum period up to the present moment. In *Absalom! Absalom!* the story that emerges is a collage: Quentin pieces together letters from home, conversations with his father, conversations his father had with his grandfather, conversations with the elderly woman who is the only articulate survivor of the Sutpen legacy. This tale of "garrulous outraged baffled ghosts" is so lurid and compelling that Shreve himself gets caught up in the telling: "'No,' Shreve said; 'you wait. Let me play a while now.'" The two young men merge as narrators: "it might have been either of them and was in a sense both" (chapter 8).

As is customary for Faulkner, he draws plot elements from both popular genres (detective fiction's red herrings, bits of initially inscrutable evidence, questions that stay unresolved until the narrative concludes), from Gothic romance, from the Bible, and from Greek tragedy. *Absalom! Absalom!* is the Fall of the House of Sutpen, just as *The Sound and the Fury* is the Fall of the House of Compson. Like an audience member listening to a Greek tragedy, the reader is encouraged to see the fate of a family as a synecdoche for the fate of a country. In recounting the saga of Thomas Sutpen, Faulkner is also "telling about" the South, as Quentin's classmates had requested. Further, he is telling about the national history, not only in the sense that the biblical story to which he alludes involves inter-family conflict (the story of Absalom, Amnon, and Tamar), but also in the more indirect way that the novel refers to Matthew 12: 25 and thus to Abraham Lincoln's famous statement in 1858 that "a house divided against itself cannot stand."<sup>19</sup>

The references to the Civil War, textual and intertextual, enable Faulkner to present the relationship between two half-brothers, Henry and Bon, and their sister/half-sister Judith, as pointedly analogous to the relationship between the North and the South; this sibling relationship is, in turn, echoed by that of the Canadian and the Mississippian, Shreve and Quentin, in the novel's present time, 1910. In addition, the bodies of female characters as mothers and potential mothers express the novel's central themes of land and dynasty: Bon's West Indian mother, Sutpen's wife Ellen and her sister Rosa, Judith, the octoroon mother of Charles Bon's son, that son's black wife, Millie Jones, and her unnamed daughter, and finally the half-sister of Judith and Henry, Clytie. Here it is useful to recall that the land is often figured as a woman's body and has been so since the earliest colonial writings. Through the representation of these bodies, two forms of ownership converge: the land and the people on it. Thomas Sutpen's "design," as he calls it, must have both elements in order to



be complete: he must own the acreage and he must be able to pass it on to a son, if his name is to be continued. The suggestions of miscegenation in the genealogy sketched above point to Sutpen's desire to control the bloodline by controlling the bodies of women and men: it points also to his failure to accomplish his design. He ruthlessly discards every person who is not "adjunctive to the forwarding of the design." But what is repressed returns in other forms: human beings refuse to fit in to the pattern. Sutpen first imagines his design when, as a boy, he is turned away from a plantation home's front door by a black servant. The concept of ownership is at this time foreign to him:

Because where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say "This is mine" was crazy. . . . So he didn't even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own. (chapter 7)

Sutpen's plan, then, is to avenge himself for the humiliation he has experienced; he decides that "to combat them you have to have what they have." Eventually, he is able to buy 100 square miles of land from the Chickasaws. Sutpen's Hundred is the canvas for his design. Racism is unquestionably an essential element of the South's history, and Faulkner makes the legacy of slavery and bigotry central to his novel. But it is not only the black slaves Sutpen seeks to oppress. *Absalom! Absalom!* makes a more comprehensive argument: attempts to own and control people, whether blacks, "white-trash" young girls, spinster aunts, or one's own daughters and sons, infect both the owner and the owned. The devastated land of Sutpen's plantation registers his personal corruption and the more inclusive corruption of the South's commitment to slavery. That corruption, it must be remembered, is linked to land ownership itself.

Faulkner's entire corpus examines the relationship between a people and their land. The Compsons of *The Sound and the Fury* have sold land to golf-course developers so that Quentin may attend Harvard. The Bundrens of *As I Lay Dying* (1930) embark on their mad journey because Addie, the mother, wishes to be buried in a particular graveyard in Jefferson. The stories of *Go Down, Moses* (1942) chronicle the growth of a child to manhood through his indoctrination in wilderness ways: the respect for wildness that Sam Fathers inculcates in Ike McCaslin is the literal and figurative ground upon which Ike erects

his ascetic stance. He will not accept a patrimony knowing that one whole line of his family (the Beauchamps) has been excluded from inheritance because it descends from a black mother. Faulkner's works repeatedly pose the question: what does it cost us to own the land?

Faulkner's repeated references to the symbolic and real uses of land in his works mark them as Southern, insofar as Agrarian principles do appear to have special resonance in the South. The principle of the sacredness of private property is, however, fundamental not only to the South but to the United States as a whole: it is perhaps the one belief that Americans of all classes and kinds can agree on. Faulkner's work challenges a number of the assumptions that make that belief viable. A topography "all divided and fixed and neat" charts property lines, color lines, class lines, battle lines, bloodlines. Both stylistically and thematically, Faulkner refuses the straight line. His prose is marked by recursion and entanglement. Scenes are repeated with variations, speakers shift in mid-sentence, characters obsessively review and reconstruct the past; readers come to the end of a sentence and find they must reread, but it is difficult to know how far back to go. Where did that sentence begin? Faulkner's style is a heuristic. The notorious difficulties of his modernist prose, akin to what we see in James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* or Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, enact the impossibility of straight lines on maps or family trees.

Emerson was right in observing that America's "ample geography dazzles the imagination." On the whole, however, its inhabitants have not been so dazzled as to be paralyzed by its breadth. Builders, farmers, painters, poets, miners, film-makers, photographers, city planners – all its citizens have exploited its resources, been inspired by its beauties, and fashioned identities from association with the particulars of its topography. At John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1964, Robert Frost recited from memory a poem written two decades earlier. "The Gift Outright," in which he explores the paradox of owning and being owned, possessing and being possessed by the land: "The land was ours before we were the land's." The people, he claims, had to "surrender" to the country "vaguely realizing westward / . . . Such as she was, such as she would become." It is this continual becoming that prohibits final statements about the meanings of America's physical and symbolic out-sized identity. Each avenue suggested in this chapter curves beyond sight.

---

## CHAPTER 2

---

# Rich



FIGURE 4 *Gold Diggers of 1933*  
Photograph Warner Bros / The Kobal Collection  
Ginger Rogers is literally "in the money" as she defies "Old Man  
Depression."

---

## Rich

---

*The love of wealth is therefore to be traced, as either a principal or accessory motive, at the bottom of all that the Americans do.*

*Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America. II, 17, 1840*

*We might as well urge the destruction of the highest existing type of man because he failed to reach our ideal as to favor the destruction of Individualism: Private Property, the Law of Accumulation of Wealth, and the Law of Competition: for these are the highest result of human experience, the soil in which society, so far, has produced the best fruit.*

*Andrew Carnegie, "The Gospel of Wealth," 1889*

*We're in the money, we're in the money;*

*We've got a lot of what it takes to get along!*

*We're in the money, that sky is sunny,*

*Old Man Depression you are through, you done us wrong.*

*We never see a headline about breadlines today,*

*And when we see the landlord, we can look that guy right in the eye.*

*We're in the money, come on, my honey,*

*Let's lend it, spend it, send it rolling along!*

*Gold Diggers of 1933 (lyrics by Al Dubin)*

*You know, Mr. Bernstein, if I hadn't been very rich, I might have been a really great man.*

*Charles Foster Kane in Citizen Kane, 1941*

*Goddam money. It always ends up making you blue as hell.*

*J. D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye, 1951*

*all right we are two nations*

*John Dos Passos: The Big Money, 1936*

America's prodigious size is of a piece with America's prodigality. For European explorers and settlers there appeared to be an abundance of everything in the "New World" – timber, water, soil for farming, grazing lands – and the native peoples seemed, despite their often fierce resistance to the colonist presence, to hold no conception of private property, or, more precisely, to hold no deeds or other written contracts while settlers felt obligated to honor. So, as Milton said of Adam and Eve, "the world was all before them." Unlike Adam and Eve, however, the first of these settlers, the Puritans, saw themselves not as leaving Eden but as setting about to build a new Eden. Other settlers, less spiritually driven, came for the money to be made from exploitation

of the rich natural resources. There can be no question that for some settlers the religious motive remained all-consuming, but with the passage of time, those striving for earthly success would outnumber those motivated by a view of the world to come. The two threads of religious quest and profit motive quickly intertwined. In *Of Plymouth Plantation*, William Bradford mournfully predicts that the "pilgrim" community he governed for most of the period 1621 to 1657 will disband, as it has already begun to do, in the pursuit of material goods: "no man now thought he could live except he had cattle and a great deal of ground to keep them" (book II, chapter 23). Material considerations will, he concludes, lead to a different sort of poverty: "And thus was this poor church left, like an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children. . . . Thus, she that had made many rich became herself poor" (book II, chapter 34).

By 1839 Tocqueville could confidently declare the "love of wealth" as foundational to all American behavior. His assessment has had wide acceptance now for well over a century: the overfed, overdressed, overloud American with a big wad of cash is a staple of satire. It is a commonplace that America's wealth accounts in great part for its powerful presence in the world, a power sometimes welcomed and sometimes resented. America both produces and consumes more than any other country in the world, though its people represent only 5 percent of the world's population. A startling comparison gives some sense of the scale of difference between the United States and the rest of the world, both in size and wealth: in 1963, a year just beyond the decades discussed in this book, American adolescents spent \$22 million — double the GNP (gross national product) of Austria. Comparison with a less productive, more impoverished nation would be more startling still.

The usual quality-of-life indicators — home ownership, education, wages, leisure spending, employment levels, life expectancy, literacy, and others — tell, *in the main*, a story of improvement and progress. By 1960, 60 percent of working men and women owned their own homes. The number of university graduates rose steadily. Real wages, more or less constant in the period 1890–1915, increased 40 percent from the beginning of World War I to the stock market crash in 1929. They rose again by the same amount between 1945 and 1960. Unemployment, except during the Great Depression, normally stayed in the single digits. The average length of life in 1900 was 47.8 years; by 1960, 69.7 years. Literacy was nearly universal. *Prima facie* and in comparison to global conditions, twentieth-century life in the United States was good.

These quality indicators, however, mask a persistent and serious gap between rich and poor, a division linked to the multi-racial, multi-ethnic composition of the nation. Consideration of American riches, therefore, must reckon not only with total wealth but with the distribution of wealth. The titles of two influential books whose dates of publication are just outside the opening and closing years of the period considered here, Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), suggest how easily American poverty drops out of the narrative of American wealth, how persistently it is the overlooked subplot of the "other." Nor has literature always managed to tell the story of these others without condescension. From turn-of-the-century fiction like Stephen Crane's "An Experiment in Misery" or Theodore Dreiser's "Curious Shifts of the Poor" to Walker Evans and James Agee's photographic essay *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), attention to the plight of the "have nots" runs the risk, whatever the authorial intentions may be, of framing and categorizing poverty as an aesthetic or sociological exhibit. Of the three titles just cited, Evans and Agee's ironizes the word "famous" by its focus on women, men, and children living in squalor and yet exhibiting a calm dignity to the camera's eye; Crane's "Experiment" depicts a narrator who, like an undercover agent, purposely "stums" it in order to see derelict men in their native habitats; and Dreiser's story, while written in sympathetic tones, expresses a narratorial recognition that, for the reader, this vignette will be a matter of curiosity, both in the sense of "interest" and in the sense of "oddy."

By contrast, the dominant narrative of mainstream success is founded upon premises more relevant to and more readily accepted by the "haves" than the "have nots." These principles may be derived from the Puritan inheritance, the biographies of eminent entrepreneurs, advertising, and political rhetoric, to name only a few rich sources. The tenets, broadly speaking, are those associated with liberal individualism: people who work hard deserve material success. Competition fosters effort, improvement, and invention. The person who is most able and who exerts the most effort wins the competition. Parents may reasonably expect that their children's lives will be more comfortable than their own. Some people do have more money than others, but America does not have "classes" or castes as other countries do; in any case, social mobility is common and people do improve their economic position. Consumption is good for the economy. Strikes are sometimes necessary but should be kept to a minimum. Inequalities are often the effect of a natural distribution of talent. Over time, democracy and

capitalism will help to correct inequalities; the political and economic system is fundamentally sound. In the "gospel" according to Andrew Carnegie, cited at the beginning of this chapter, property, wealth, and competition are components of a system that is the best yet evolved.

Expressed so baldly, these principles seem astonishingly naive. For every citizen who believes his or her position in life is a function of individual effort, there is surely another who can prove that just rewards have been withheld. Thus there is a corollary set of propositions also fundamental to American conceptions of wealth: barring a crash or other catastrophe, rich people get richer. Although the rich apparently have everything anyone could want, they are never happy. E. A. Robinson's Richard Cory, envied by all for his wealth and position, "went home and put a bullet through his head." Jay Gatsby stands alone and lonely on his blue lawn in West Egg. Charles Foster ("Citizen") Kane, Orson Welles's thinly disguised (1941) film portrait of the newspaper magnate Charles Randolph Hearst, surrounds himself with priceless possessions but yearns at the end of his life only for Rosebud, the sled he had loved as a child. Indeed there may be an inverse relationship between wealth and contentment, a consoling equation for those who have little. True wealth is a function not of money but of romantic or familial love. Look to the working classes for virtue: people at the top of corporations and government are self-serving and overpaid, not to be trusted; furthermore, they often got where they are not by merit but by advances based on croneyism or chicanery. Ida Tarbell's muckraking *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), indeed the work of all those journalists with a mission at the start of the last century, assumed and often demonstrated that the most fertile ground for the cultivation of wealth was that polluted by corruption.<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in this line of thought is the belief that, having achieved economic superiority, people at the top of the heap want to keep the rest of the population down: this assumption was crucial to the labor movements discussed later in this chapter. Rich people can "work the system" in ways that poor people cannot. Rich people don't go to jail; the cells are full of the poor. Because money corrupts, wealth makes it hard to be a person of integrity. Money lures people away from their true calling or vocation. In *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles tracks the inverse relationship between idealism and wealth. The father James Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1940) is miserly and terrified of poverty despite his financial security. He describes to his son Edmund the abjection of his immigrant Irish family: evictions from their "miserable hovel," a childhood spent working ten-hour days,

"never . . . clothes enough to wear, nor enough food to eat." Having known the indignities of want, he turns away from roles in Shakespeare and opts instead, in the name of financial security, to play repeatedly a melodramatic and crowd-pleasing role. (O'Neill's own father had made his living acting the Count of Monte Cristo and almost nothing else). "The God damned play I bought for a song and made such a great success in – a great money success – it ruined me with its promise of an easy fortune," Tyrone declares in Act IV. "Yes, maybe life overdid the lesson for me, and made a dollar worth too much. . . . What the hell was it I wanted to buy, I wonder, that was worth – Well, no matter. It's a late day for regrets." Artists and inventors, indeed people of talent generally, these examples suggest, must guard themselves against such corruption if they are to be original and disinterested. As Holden Caulfield complains in *The Catcher in the Rye*, money "always ends up making you blue."

The divided view of material wealth is not a simple matter of either the rich or the poor cheering themselves up with bromides. Ambivalence about riches has existed since before the nation constituted itself as a nation. If the inviolability of private property is a point on which Americans largely agree, the moral value of possessions is not so clear-cut. On the one hand, is not wealth a sign that one's efforts are smiled upon by God? On the other, is not wealth the surest temptation away from God? Polls routinely confirm that Americans are a nation of believers in God, and therefore such questions are central. However, even if religious considerations are put entirely aside, ethical and psychological issues remain. Is it right for one nation to have such abundance? Should Americans not feel guilty that they have so much when others have so little? And so on. The exuberant joy of "We're in the money," quoted from the *Gold Diggers* film, verges on hysteria – a wild sense of release and relief in imagining a day when the Great Depression and its privations will end. Tap-dancing women dressed as coins, women who are "through" with Old Man Depression, while potent symbols of wealth, are not without irony. Fabulous wealth in American literature and the other arts is rarely untainted by suspicion, disapproval – even tragedy. The title of William Dean Howells's novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) captures the double sense of "hazard" – as both a gamble and a danger.

Two theoretical views will provide scaffolding for this discussion of wealth: Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5) and Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Both books have been influential, both are controversial, and both

have provided a vocabulary that readers of American literature and students of American culture will find familiar – phrases like “work ethic” and “conspicuous consumption.” Having considered the premises of these two studies, we will turn to a trilogy of novels that dramatizes the quest for “big money,” John Dos Passos’s *USA* (1930–6). Dos Passos’s panoramic view of the American terrain of wealth, power, poverty, and failure will organize a discussion of the changing relationship between work and self, efforts at labor reform, and attitudes toward consumerism (including both enthusiasm and rejection) as they appear in a range of examples from twentieth-century American texts. The desire for or the envy of wealth is hardly limited to Americans, but views of the United States have historically, as in Tocqueville’s assessment, seen material goods as central to national identity, one of the foundational myths about America.

### Weber and Veblen: Reasons to Work and Reasons to Spend

Work has not always been viewed as elevating. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, part of Adam’s punishment when he is expelled from the Garden of Eden is that he must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. Hellenic tradition saw labor as inimical to self-cultivation: leisure was the *summum bonum*, and work only the means to that desired end. A Christian idea of stewardship (seen, for example, in St. Thomas Aquinas) provides a moral rationale for work: one is duty bound to make the most of one’s abilities. Alongside the more somber view of work as punishment, sacrifice, and duty, exists another tradition, the idea of work as pleasure, a vehicle for exercising and taking delight in one’s abilities. For an exuberant Renaissance figure like Leonardo da Vinci, or indeed a polymath like Benjamin Franklin, work and play were inseparable. But it is fair to say that, in the main, work has been viewed not as an end in itself but as a means to an end, whether subsistence, power, comfort, security, status, or salvation.

Given Benjamin Franklin’s “Poor Richard” persona and his identification with numerous aphorisms on the subject of money – making it, saving it, and increasing it – the German sociologist Max Weber aptly begins his exploration of “the spirit of capitalism” with an analysis of a dozen of Franklin’s admonitions about time, credit, character, and wealth. Weber argues that Franklin’s advice amounts not just to a “how to” for aspiring capitalists, but to an ethical system. Franklin’s

views were based on utility (for example, that it is good to look busy if you expect people to bring you their business), but Weber believes that “something more is involved here than simply an embellishing of purely self-interested egocentric maxims.” Franklin’s ethic, he argues, is that “the acquisition of money, and more and more money, takes place . . . simultaneously with the strictest avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of it.” In Franklin’s *Autobiography* (part 4), he reports coming in to breakfast one morning to find “a China bowl, with a spoon of silver!” Although he is staggered by the cost, he is flattered that his wife has made this purchase because she believes “her husband deserv’d a silver spoon and China bowl as well as any of his neighbors!” With his typical mixture of pride and self-deprecation Franklin himself explains his success by quoting the biblical passage cited repeatedly by his Calvinist father: “See thou a man vigorous in his vocational calling? He shall stand before kings” (Proverbs 22: 29). Upon this premise of vocation, Weber builds his story of the relationship between Calvinism and the spirit of modern capitalism: work is not merely a means of acquiring the necessities for survival; work is a calling to which a believer is duty bound. Thus sanctified, one’s labors acquire spiritual meaning.

For the Calvinist, continual introspection and effort accompanied the doctrine of election: God having foreordained who was saved and who not, the devout looked for signs that they were among the happy elect. While the Calvinist could not save herself, she could create the circumstances of salvation: leading a systematically controlled and productive life in service to the glory of God was understood as a sign of election. How? Unstinting dedication to the work to which one is called requires firm belief and a suppression of human weaknesses; such belief could come only from God. Thus one’s dedication to and ability to perform one’s work became itself a sign of God’s blessing.

If this dedication to work leads to profit and if profit is re-dedicated to increasing still more the fruits of one’s work, the next step in this circular logic is that wealth itself becomes a sign of salvation. Weber cites the Presbyterian minister Richard Baxter (1615–91), who insisted that competition and profit were requirements of stewardship: “If God show you a way in which you may, in accord with His laws, acquire *more profit* than in another way . . . choosing the less profitable course, *you then cross one of the purposes of your calling. You are refusing to be God’s steward and to accept his gifts*” (emphasis in original). Puritan asceticism, however, required that wealth be re-dedicated in some fashion to God; thus, the acquisition of possessions for their own

sake, beyond a reasonable level of comfort, was not the goal. To live lavishly would be to undermine the very motive of work, which, in Weber's view, was the psychological relief attendant upon the proposition that one's labors are evidence of election.

If Weber's analysis is right, it would be hard to imagine a more perfect blueprint for building a capitalist workforce: people who are hard-working, reliable, productive, frugal, and committed to reinvestment. If, however, the self-abnegating impulse is removed from this "Puritan ethic," then the spiritual motive for work dissipates as well. Set aside the notion that one is working for God (and thus for the kingdom, earthly or heavenly) and for the redemption of one's soul, and the question naturally arises: assuming one's subsistence needs are met, why work so hard? For whom or what am I working? And what do I forfeit in devoting most of my time to work? As Henry David Thoreau calculated his economies in *Walden*, he judged that "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." Here Thoreau indicates a respect for the Greek view alluded to earlier: self-cultivation is the superior employment. Further, he believes that objects too easily master their users. Bradford's seventeenth-century concern about the direction of his flock points to one way in which work pushes other considerations aside. Work breeds more work: material success fosters acquisition; more cows require more land. We work to retain what we have, or to extend what we have, or to have what others have. Or we work for the future: we work so that we can work differently or elsewhere or so that someone else does not have to. Whatever the motive, work remains fundamental to American life: at this writing, Americans work longer hours and take fewer holidays than workers in any of the developed nations of the West.

Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) formulates another answer to the question, why work?<sup>2</sup> An eccentric and influential American social scientist of the Progressive era, Veblen offered a scathing assessment of many aspects of the nation's life, from its system of higher education to its preferences in consumer goods. In his judgment, the "instinct of workmanship" had been eclipsed by "a straining to excel others in pecuniary achievement" (p. 40). For Veblen, "Man is an agent . . . seeking in every act the accomplishment of some concrete, objective, impersonal end. By force of his being such an agent he is possessed of a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort" (p. 29). This taste for effective work, that is, work that produces a usable object or provides a useful service, he labels "teleological." It

is work, in other words, with a clear end in view. His indictment of the leisure class is based upon this fairly narrow conception of the nature of work. In his reading, "the archaic differentiation into noble and ignoble classes is based on an invidious distinction between employments as honorific or debasing." Some forms of labor, those that in the United States are referred to as "manual" or "blue-collar," are on this basis deemed inferior to "white-collar" work. The less one is seen to perform physical labor, the more one is understood to be of a higher economic class. Visible forms of labor are thus devalued, even derided as odious and undignified, associated as they are with women, slaves, and "lower" orders of men.

In his imaginative (and imaginary) rendition of the transition from primitive to modern societies, Veblen seeks to account for the way in which waste has become a sign of wealth. In the transition from the subsistence labor of "peaceable savagery" to "predation," he theorizes, booty taken in battle becomes a sign of a man's potency. Predation leads in turn to what he takes to be the present age of "pecuniary emulation" wherein "the incentive to accumulation" is driven not by the urgencies of subsistence but by desire for status. The instinct for workmanship Veblen finds praiseworthy is thus transmuted into competition to make the most money and "the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit" (p. 40). Conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure, even "vicarious leisure" experienced through a wife whose days are entirely leisurely, measure the degree to which one has succeeded in the race. In his discussion of "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture," for example, he argues that elegant bonnets, French heels, skirt drapery and excessively long hair are prized because they "hamper the wearer at every turn and incapacitate her for all useful exertion" (p. 171).

Evidence of *waste* conveys high status. Defining "waste" is difficult, even for Veblen himself, who finds it "unfortunate" that the term is normally taken in "an odious sense" (p. 78). He plows on, however, describing "waste" as that which does not conduce to the "enhancement and well-being" of human life as a whole. Slippery as his definition is, Veblen recognizes that one person's waste is another's necessity. But what he has in mind is the sort of life pictured in the endless social calls among the women of Edith Wharton's *New York* or in the piles of shirts in Jay Gatsby's dressing room, that is, "make-believe accomplishments" (p. 76) and acquisition for the sake of what acquisition symbolizes. A bumper sticker popular in the 1980s read, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Having the most toys is a

simple definition of Veblen's most famous formulation – "conspicuous consumption." It is not enough to have more than one needs, one must *be seen* to have more than one needs. The religious dimension of labor as a sign of election is absent, replaced by signs of status demonstrating one need not work at all. Veblen's work has long since been revised and complicated by economists and social scientists. It is generally agreed that his definition of what constitutes work in an industrialized society is over-simplified. But his conception of American wealth has had enormous staying power in the United States and elsewhere.

Henry James's tale of American innocence abroad, *Daisy Miller: A Study*, offers, to humorous effect, an especially conspicuous example of wealth as a badge of American honor. Daisy's little brother Randolph opens his conversation with the protagonist Winterbourne by making invidious comparisons between Europe and America, much to Europe's disadvantage. The chief exhibit in his brief is money:

"My father's name is Ezra B. Miller," he announced. "My father ain't in Europe; my father's in a better place than Europe."

Winterbourne assumes the child euphemistically refers to his father's removal to "celestial rewards." But no:

"My father's in Schenectady. He's got a big business. My father's rich, you bet."

The Miller family is, in effect, a traveling advertisement for Mr. Miller's success. His absence, because he must attend to business, is entirely in keeping with his self-representation through his family. Too busy with the real work of the world to tour, he nevertheless foots the bill for what are clearly extravagant (and largely pointless) travels through Europe. His spoiled boy's constant ingestion of candy, his expensively dressed daughter's flounces, even his wife's dyspepsia proclaim his success, and in precisely the terms that Veblen saw as the fruits of "pecuniary emulation."

The imagery of highly visible forms of wastefulness pervades American writing in the first half of the twentieth century. The books of the so-called Lost Generation of the 1920s (Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and others) are especially littered with the evidence of squandered time, talent, and money. Consider, for example, the number of hours lost to aimless drinking in works like *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Hemingway's depiction of gifted, monied, and aimless people wandering around Europe in the aftermath of World War I; the desperate

and unsatisfying night-time sexual adventures of Robin Vote and Dr. Matthew Grain-o-Salt Dante O'Connor in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1937); the easy wealth that corrodes Dick and Nicole Diver's marriage in Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* (1933).

In Dos Passos's *USA*, the topic of the next section, Veblen is likened to Socrates; he drank "the bitter drink" and "suffered from a constitutional inability to say yes." A "masterless man," the eccentric sociologist has identified the dark heart of wealth and consumption. His status as "truth-teller" makes him for Dos Passos an exemplary man in the novelist's rendition of modern America.

## USA

Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy, published under a single title in 1937, first appeared as separate novels between 1930 and 1936: *The 42nd Parallel*, 1919, and *The Big Money*. The novels comprise multiple kinds of storytelling: conventional narration, "Camera Eye," "Newsreels," and biographies. The most conventionally novelistic component is a series of intersecting plots that follow the lives of eleven characters from just before World War I to the Great Depression. The trilogy's most experimental writing appears in the numbered sections Dos Passos designates as the "Camera Eye." These "stream-of-consciousness" passages employ various techniques of modernist writing: absence of punctuation and capitalization, juxtaposition of incomplete sentences, and an intense and sometimes impenetrable subjectivity. "Newsreels" are another component, a verbal equivalent of what an inattentive viewer might gather from the short news presentations that usually preceded a movie in that era. These montages of contemporary culture – snatches of popular song lyrics, paragraphs and phrases from books and speeches, headlines – contribute to both the sense of history and the complex tonal texture. The last component is biography. These are brief lives of famous and notorious Americans, including scientists, politicians, businessmen, and artists. The first novel of the trilogy, for example, includes portraits of politicians Eugene Debs, William Jennings Bryan, and Robert La Follette, botanist Luther Burbank, inventors Charles Proteus Steinmetz and Thomas Edison, labor organizer Bill Haywood, and capitalists Minor Keith and Andrew Carnegie. These portraits function as exempla, lives to admire and lives to despise. While the biographies are for the most part factual, there is no attempt to be "objective." The narrative judge is always on the bench, expressing

approval or disapproval. The variety of narrative means in the novels effectively signals the breadth and multiplicity of the nation and the ambition of the novelist to survey a panorama of American lives.

Dos Passos's portrait of Thorstein Veblen, "The Bitter Drink," is the third biography in the third novel of the trilogy, *The Big Money*. As is his custom in most of these portraits, Dos Passos selects personal details that capture essential facts of upbringing, education, achievement, and character; his placement of the biographies within the novel's structure comments obliquely on the action the biography interrupts. Thus, in an unusually direct connection, Veblen's biography appears shortly before we see the character Mary French reading *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and deciding that she will quit college and go directly to work at Hull House, one of the settlement houses discussed in chapter 1. Often the connections between the biographical portraits and plot points are much more generalized – for example, the lives of actual labor leaders juxtaposed with the story of Mac, a young man involved with the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW or Wobblies), or the dovetailing of inventors' biographies with the story of Charley Anderson, a handy mechanic whose wealth eventually ruins him.

The trajectory of Charley Anderson's rise and fall charts the boom-and-bust economy of the period between the end of World War I and the Great Depression, and exposes the tension between Veblen's teleological and pecuniary cultures. Introduced at the end of the first novel, *The 42nd Parallel*, as a teenager in Fargo, North Dakota, Charley grows up along with the technology of transportation, as the surrey and horse are replaced by the automobile and the airplane. Bored by his work as a car mechanic in a "hick town," he daydreams over copies of *Popular Mechanics* and *The Scientific American*, planning to build a boat and travel down the Mississippi, "shooting ducks and fishing for catfish." His dream would make him, in Veblen's terms, a "peaceable savage." This Huckleberry Finn fantasy of self-sufficiency does not materialize. Instead, after a mishap in a car he shouldn't have been driving – an image that will recur throughout the narrative – Charley moves to Minneapolis, goes to night school, becomes involved with a young woman, travels, works as a mechanic, considers the merits of organized labor, and generally spins his wheels until the US enters World War I. He joins the ambulance corps and, at the conclusion of the first novel, is on his way to European front. He returns to the United States at the beginning of *The Big Money*, having invented an airplane starter with a friend named Joe Askew. The two take their

idea to investor Andy Merritt, who sets up the Askew-Merritt company, furnishes capital, and handles financial and legal arrangements. So baffled is Charley by all but the mechanical side of his invention that he wonders, "Say, for crissake, Joe, are we rooking those guys or are they rookin' us?" Some version of this question will continue to trouble him – and to provide a theme – throughout the novel.

The starter is an enormous success, and Charley becomes extremely rich, but he squanders his wealth pursuing unsatisfactory sexual and business ventures and persistently acting against his own most deeply felt principles. Charley sees himself as what Americans call "a regular guy": good with his hands and clever, he thinks of himself as a member of the laboring class and sympathizes with ordinary workers. His fall results from his betrayal of that simpler self. In Veblen's terms, his career dramatizes the shift from teleology (useful work) to pecuniary emulation, and Charley enters the predatory phase. When an opportunity arises to make still more money by speeding up production – regardless of the effect on his employees or quality control – Charley grabs it. His recklessness causes the death of his friend and business partner, and his life spirals into chaos and self-destruction. Throughout the novel, he is unable to resist the corrupting forces of his culture: he cannot defend himself against big business; he fraternizes with but is often outfoxed by corrupt politicians; he cannot discipline himself to do without readily available drink and sex. He meets a predictably undignified end. And yet Dos Passos has created in Charley Anderson a likeable character for whom the reader can retain sympathy even as his life unravels. The novel suggests that had it not been for the power of a culture that valued only "the big money," Charley would have lived a simpler and happier life.

The biographies interspersed with Charley's narrative document a shift from the self-made and self-reliant man to the corporate man, a shift for which Charley is unprepared. Dos Passos presents the lives of Veblen, the efficiency expert Frederick Winslow Taylor, and the inventors Henry Ford and the Wright brothers as commentary on Charley's development and, simultaneously, on modern America. Veblen, as we have seen, is described in admiring prose that styles eccentric independence as a virtue. The Taylor biography does the opposite. F. W. Taylor's efficiency studies set standards for the assembly line and his name was eventually adopted for any process that had been standardized for efficiency (Taylorization). The biographer admires his ingenuity, but the emphasis of the portrait is on the way that Taylor's good ideas produce bad results. What begins as a



labor-saving process evolves into the mechanization of human beings. The laborer who repeats the deadening tasks of the assembly line ("reachunderadjustscrewdownreachunderadjust," we read in the Ford biography) is little different from the machine he builds. Even on his deathbed, Taylor winds a watch.

Biographies of Henry Ford and the Wright brothers highlight two of the most important inventions of modern life, the automobile and the airplane, both of which play significant roles in Charley's story. Once again the juxtaposed biographies emphasize innocent curiosity and the pleasures of discovery and hands-on invention. This ethos may be likened to the idea of work as pleasure discussed above. Like Charley, Henry Ford is fascinated by engines and works as a mechanic; like Taylor and Charley, he favors efficient output, economical production, quick turnover, and cheap, interchangeable parts. He introduces the assembly line into his plant in 1913. "The American Plan: automotive prosperity seeping down from above; it turned out there were strings to it," the narrator comments. Ford pays well but seeks to control the lives of his employees, forbidding drinking and smoking. With success comes overreaching. Henry Ford, the biographer reports wryly, "was full of ideas." He buys a newspaper to spread the ideas. So great is his self-regard that he hires a ship to convey pacifists to Europe to end the war "and get the boys out of the trenches by Christmas." In his declining years, an ardent anti-Semite and a man fearful of change, Ford becomes a reclusive "passionate antiquarian." In Dos Passos's America, self-reliance easily declines into self-regard, self-delusion, and selfishness. The biography of Wilbur and Orville Wright follows a similar pattern, but with a saving difference. Bright, hard-working, clean-living, and curious, the brothers clearly relish their efforts to become airborne. They, too, are tantalized by worldly pleasures after their success, but unlike the prideful Ford they forsake neither their independence nor their commitment to their project as an end in itself. The conclusion of the biography appropriately soars. It is a measure of Dos Passos's idealism that the flight at Kitty Hawk is presented as a moment that cannot be sullied by the interests of big money:

but not even the headlines or the bitter smear of newsprint or the choke of smokescreen and gas or chatter of brokers on the stockmarket or barking of phantom millions or oratory of brasshats laying wreaths on new monuments  
can blur the memory  
of the chilly December day

two shivering bicycle mechanics from Dayton, Ohio,  
first felt their homemade contraption . . .  
soar into the air  
above the dunes and the wide beach  
at Kitty Hawk.

Every fictional character of the *USA* trilogy begins in the spirit of this passage, with elevated hopes and ideals, and each is pictured in the final scenes as having compromised, abandoned, or destroyed those ideals. J. Ward Morehouse, by some measures the most successful man in the novel, not only wealthy but famous and well respected, is not who he wants to be. "I'm a lonely man," he admits to Richard Savage. "And to think that once upon a time I was planning to be a songwriter." Savage responds, "Shake hands, J. W. . . with the ruins of a minor poet." The poet has become a public relations man. Eveline Hutchins and Eleanor Stoddard build their youthful friendship upon shared love for the paintings in the Chicago Art Institute but find their artistic aspirations revised downwards to interior decorating and party-giving. Mac, the Wobbly who wants to assist a workers' revolution, is drawn from his aspirations by the pull of family life. Mary French, the social worker, though badly mistreated by her communist co-workers, resists the comforts of home and family, but we see her grow increasingly weary and unwell, battling forces she cannot defeat and doing work that is usually futile. The corrupt figures, like G. H. Barrow the labor organizer, Senator Planet, and E. R. Bingham the patent medicine con man, all thrive.

Summarized so briefly, the novels may appear simple and schematic – good guys versus bad – but reading them is a more complicated experience, often evoking admiration and disdain simultaneously. Dos Passos is devoted to a romantic conception of America that is at odds with the unlovely reality he depicts in detail. The novels are long, dense, teeming with elements of popular culture – movies, slang, nightclubs, cocktails – and the close observation often associated with the French naturalist tradition of Émile Zola. The characters typify a carefully chosen variety of occupations, geographical locations, educational histories, sexual inclinations, and class. (Race is the novel's blind spot: African Americans, for example, appear only as porters or denizens of Harlem nightclubs.) Dos Passos documents representative American lives at the point when the energies of individualism are being redirected to corporate conformity. The pervasive irony of the book's structures, the sadness of its tone, arise from Dos Passos's nostalgia for a

nation once devoted to higher aims than getting and spending. USA is an elegy for individualism.

The last two biographies of the trilogy dramatize the uneven applicability of the so-called American Dream, whereby a person can, through hard work, discipline, and clean living, not only pursue happiness and wealth but actually get them. The first depicts energy magnate Samuel L. Insull ("Power Superpower"), the second an unnamed transient or vagabond ("Vag"). The latter was added when Dos Passos consolidated the three novels into a trilogy, thus creating an ending that balances the first novel's focus on Mac. The Insull biography records the rags-to-riches narrative that has been fundamental to the American Dream or, in Dos Passos's terms, the American Plan. Starting as a secretary to Thomas Edison, Insull works his way to the presidency of the Chicago Edison Company. Devising monopolies on both electricity and gas, "With the delicate lever of a voting trust controlling the stock of the two top holding companies he controlled a twelfth of the power output of America." Eventually put on trial for corrupt management of his stockholders' funds, a \$10 million accounting "error," he tearfully recounts his rise from "officeboy to powermagnate" and is found not guilty. Insull's trade is "Power Superpower" both as material energy – in the form of electricity, gas, and coal – and as power over the lives of stockholders, businessmen, bankers, and the public who sympathize with him at trial.

The portrait of Vag, the last in the novel, is in dramatic contrast to Insull's success story. A hitch-hiker, Vag sees a plane in the sky. The narrator imagines the airplane's transcontinental flight and the wealthy passenger who thinks about "contracts, profits, vacationtrips." Hungry and exhausted, the hitch-hiker thinks of unkept promises: "went to school, books said opportunity, ads promised speed, own your home, shine bigger than your neighbor." Meanwhile his hands are idle, his head swimming, his belly aching with hunger.

Just before "Power Superpower" comes one of the stream-of-consciousness sections called "Camera Eye." Camera Eye 51 ends with the phrase, "we have only words against." This is an ambiguous statement, depending on whether or not one believes words are sufficiently powerful to change people or institutions. Elsewhere in the novels, Dos Passos writes, "But mostly USA is the speech of the people." How powerful is speech against the big money? The novel offers contradictory responses. The chief evidence of the novelist's investment in the power of language is of course the existence of the trilogy itself. And yet most of the novel's wordsmiths, Moorehouse

and Savage, for example, are hirelings whose success is a function of their ability to manipulate words for suspect ends.

One of the most eloquent sections of *The Big Money* is Camera Eye 50. It begins, "they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich." The immediate setting is the aftermath of the famous case of Sacco and Vanzetti. Tried and found guilty of having murdered a paymaster and his guard during the robbery of a truck carrying a factory payroll, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were immigrant Italian anarchists who, it was believed by many, had been falsely accused. They were electrocuted in August 1927; the form of their execution is perhaps another reason that Dos Passos focuses next on the power magnate, Insull. Theirs was a *cause célèbre*, particularly among artists and intellectuals. The trial and its outcome were significant motivations for Dos Passos's writing of USA.

The tone of Camera Eye 50 is largely despairing. But not wholly. Admitting that "all right we are two nations" the speaker of this section indicts those who "have turned our language inside out who have taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul." But he predicts that these injustices will be the spur to renewal of the language: "the old words of the immigrants are being renewed in blood and agony tonight." The preponderance of the evidence presented in USA is that the ideals of America – including self-determination and justice – have been trampled and are unlikely to rise again. Nevertheless, the strength of the novelist's respect and admiration for these ideals cannot, even on the most cynical reading, be dismissed. One source of the emotional power of USA is the sense of loss, the sense of a falling off from laudable principles.

For Dos Passos, the energies of the nation have been misdirected, aimed toward amassing wealth for its own sake – Veblen's predatory phase writ large. The purposes of work have been divorced from either survival or service. Except in a few cases singled out for praise, characters do not work for the love of what they are doing. Rather, the fruits of work become less and less tangible: a palpable product is exchanged for abstract stocks, public relations subsume public service, status outranks achievement, workers are as interchangeable as the parts they assemble. Dos Passos represents the inevitable rise of interdependent networks of business and personal relations in a large and complex capitalist economy. The intermeshing of plot lines in the novels is one means of conveying the characters' reliance on one another. Indeed, reliance on others, whether in the form of sexual liaisons, business partnerships, corporations, or labor unions, dominates the

personal arrangements of the novel. Characters rarely escape their entanglements. The American Adam discussed in the last chapter is an increasingly obsolete model. The newsreels, too, record sights and sounds that impinge on privacy: the media's message here is that one is connected, like it or not, to a larger world. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of humankind, however, Dos Passos finds that what might have been the formidable energies of concerted effort have been wasted on venal aims.

The diminished meaning of self-reliance informs another memorable depiction of American aspiration, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. James Gatz has become the rich and somehow larger-than-life Jay Gatsby. As a boy, Gatz modeled himself on Benjamin Franklin by scheduling his self-improvements. We learn near the end of the novel that young James had written on the fly-leaf of *Hopalong Cassidy*, a Western, his "SCHEDULE: Rise from bed . . . 6.00 a.m.; Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling . . . 6.15-6.30; Study electricity . . . 7.15-8.15 . . ." Gatsby is "self-made" in the sense that he has discarded his birth identity and created another. He has been willing to do whatever it takes to succeed: the rumors of bootlegging, baseball game-fixing, and other unsavory activities that taint his reputation also mark him as a man of his time, that heady period that included the speakeasy, a fixed 1919 World Series, a boom economy, and a lucrative climate for racketeers. His quest for success has found an object in Daisy Buchanan, a Southern girl whose "voice is full of money."

Fitzgerald thus traces a decline in the quality of dreams. Unlike earlier Americans, he suggests, the hero dreams not of a republic but of a woman who represents what is meretricious in American values. Gatsby's ideal woman is corrupt, his ideals perishable. Often mentioned as a contender for the Great American Novel, Fitzgerald's book owes its esteem partly to its having captured so memorably the contradictory nature of American aspiration – both the most idealistic and the most debased quests of the nation. Like his contemporary Dos Passos, he decries America's failure to meet its own highest expectations. For Nick Carraway, the narrator, Gatsby is "great" because he alone is capable of passionate devotion to an ideal, a devotion Nick sees nowhere else in a society where objects and people are used, damaged, and discarded with insouciance. Because Fitzgerald presents Gatsby as a man apart – a self-made man, a near-heroic figure, but finally a failure – his novel concedes the implausibility of Gatsby himself: how can this throwback to a more idealistic time find a home in Jazz Age America? Both *USA* and *The Great Gatsby* interrogate the meaning of

self-reliant manhood, and both find it an obsolescent model for the world of twentieth-century work.

### Work and Identity

The tenets of liberal individualism have been crucial to the shaping of American attitudes toward work, wealth, and property. The term "individualism" did not come into frequent use in the language until the 1820s, though the foundations for the political and economic significance of the single person were laid by the early modern period. As a democratic and capitalist nation, the US is an important exhibit in the history of this idea. In *Democracy in America*, a work cited at the start of this chapter, the French commentator Tocqueville predicted that the country's emphasis on the significance of the individual would eventually lead to an egocentric disregard for the good of the community. As we have seen, Dos Passos and Fitzgerald recognize a potential for monstrous selfishness as inherent to the autonomy of the self-made man.

Nevertheless, one of the favored figures of American culture over many decades has been the loner whose solitude is a sign of moral stature. This particular form of heroism is clearly on display in Hollywood movies of the 1930s and 1940s. Typical "heroes" include the man or woman who defies convention in favor of conscience, who is willing to go it alone: Jimmy Stewart's tireless filibustering against political chicanery in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) or Rosalind Russell's crusading journalist and sole woman in the newsroom in *His Girl Friday* (1940). Alan Ladd as *Shane* (1953) and Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* (1946) are the cowboy and private detective who prefer solitude to the entanglements of civilization; Joan Crawford is *Mildred Pierce*, the tough, successful woman who can be touched by no one but her ungrateful daughter. Despite the appeal of independence, however, the Hollywood plot usually traces the loner's gradual recognition of the necessity and even the joy of connection to others. A fixture of the Christmas season on American television is the showing of Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), in which a suicidal man (Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey) is awakened to the value of community. George is led round his town by an avuncular angel who shows him how his absence would affect his family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. When a greedy lender tries to close a bank and deny depositors their cash, George discovers that he and other

decent folk can "fight the system" through cooperative effort. The film is a kind of fairy tale or Dickensian fable about the essential goodness of humankind and the force of communal effort in the defeat of corruption. For all that American movie heroes are, in the public mind, built along the lines of laconic men like Humphrey Bogart or John Wayne and feisty women like Rosalind Russell, Joan Crawford, or Katharine Hepburn, a happy and shapely ending to a narrative often dictates that the loner be reincorporated into society. Thus the erst-while suicide is tearfully reunited with his family and friends around a Christmas tree; the tough-talking dame is finally able to admit her vulnerability and marry a man who is even tougher. The classic expression of this view is the final moments of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942). In a thrilling act of self-denial, Rick Blaine (Bogart) sends the woman he loves off with her husband, who does important work resisting the Nazis. He consoles himself and her with this speech, known to movie-goers everywhere: "Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble. But it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world." At the film's close, Rick prepares to emerge from his retreat, a smoky bar in an exotic land, and will join the French resistance.

The expression of tension between individual and community values is of course hardly limited to American works; this fundamental conflict shapes plots from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Tolstoy. It is not therefore an inherently American plot. But when one thinks of the American hero, he is far more likely to be a cowboy than a co-worker. Yet the real world of work in the twentieth century far more often required an ability to fit in than to stand out. Most forms of labor are done in groups – why then this special praise of and pressure on the individual in American culture? Some answers come readily to mind, of course. The first public expression of nationhood was a Declaration of Independence; thus a break with traditional society is fundamental to the nation's history and image. The size of the country, as discussed in the last chapter, invites free movement. Democracy is defined by its valuing of the single voice as equal to every other single voice. And capitalism is fundamentally connected to free enterprise, competition, and private property – all of which assume the rights of individuals to better their lot, make what they can, and keep what they make.

A major document in the definition of the proper relationship between the self and the world is Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1841 essay "Self-Reliance," with its famous sentences known even to people who

have never read the essay. "Imitation is suicide." "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist." "No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature." "But do your work and I shall know you." The ease with which aphorisms and greeting-card sentiments may be extracted from Emerson's essays has led to an over-simplification of his multiple views of the self. His essays are in fact densely argued, ambivalent, self-contradictory, and subject to multiple readings. But it is the brave "isolator" that has been labeled "Emersonian" by all but specialists. The appeal of the aphoristic Emerson is that he seems to prize (and does praise) nonconformity as an expression of courage, virility, and self-respect. Gaining a reputation as a homegrown sage, Emerson was adopted as a kind of household god in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his portrait hanging in American classrooms as inspiration to follow one's conscience, to hear and heed, as his contemporary Henry David Thoreau expressed it, "the beat of a different drummer."

But Emerson recognized, more than this reduced rendition captures, that the powers urging conformity were potent and definable in economic terms:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. ("Self-Reliance")

Emerson's views were shaped by his own experiences, as he had been lambasted for opinions expressed in an earlier essay (the "Divinity School Address") and had suffered under the criticism. Beyond this personal dimension, he is reacting to the economic structures of an increasingly corporate culture and its implications for the concept of selfhood. A joint-stock company is an apt metaphor for the interdependence that arises when a society moves from an agricultural to an industrial model, from a system in which the necessities of life are mostly produced in the family unit to one in which the provenance of goods is often unknown. Imagine the difference between eating the pig you raised and slaughtered and eating the plastic-encased, processed bacon purchased at a Safeway. It is, then, not hard to see how the definitions of work and self connect.

How, then, to reconcile the solitary entrepreneur with the corporate system? In *The Work Ethic and Industrial America*, Daniel Rodgers argues that, in the United States, the ideal of self-sufficiency and the ideal of cooperative work existed simultaneously (if illogically) into the early twentieth century:

As the self-sufficient worker disappeared in fact, nineteenth-century ideals of self-sufficiency slowly gave way to ideals of teamwork more suited to an industrial and bureaucratic society. By the same token, success writing grew more involuted in the face of narrower opportunities, retreating from the domain of work and habits to the less pregnable citadels of mental attitude and self-confidence.<sup>3</sup>

Thus social Darwinism, with its praise for unfettered economic enterprise, coexisted with cooperative ventures like the Knights of Labor. Even as the labor movement gained strength in the early decades of the century, the fascination with "captains of industry" was undiminished. Theodore Dreiser presented a series of interviews with business tycoons. In 1906, the magazine *Success* had as high a circulation as the popular muckraking magazine *McClure's*. Hugely successful businessmen like Andrew Carnegie and Cornelius Vanderbilt were held up as models of the rewards of diligence, discipline, and thriftiness even as they were maligned as "robber barons." With titles like "Work and Win," the dime novels and cheap weeklies of the Progressive era promulgated the view that good things happen to the deserving; at the same time, Dreiser, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris, writers of naturalist and realist fiction, exposed such a narrative as a cruel myth. In *Individualism Old and New* (1930), John Dewey noted "the tendency to combination in all phases of life,"<sup>4</sup> and sought ways to educate children to enter a world of work in which a "combination" rather than a competition of individual wills would be the expectation. Meanwhile adventure stories encouraged boys to be self-sufficient. The Boy Scouts taught survival skills and self-reliance even as it inculcated loyalty to the "troop." To point out these apparent contradictions is not to fault them; it is impossible to think of a complex modern society without contradictory values, especially given the enormous changes in social and economic patterns. As Rodgers expresses it, "the striking phenomenon of the age was not change but persistence amid change" (p. 136).

The odd coupling of individualism with corporate culture illustrates the staying power and appeal of the solitary achiever. One particularly long-running example of this link was E. I. du Pont de Nemours

and Company's sponsorship of *The Cavalcade of America*; first introduced as a radio program in 1935, this ran for nearly two decades and then became a television program that aired from 1952 to 1957. *Cavalcade* was the company's means of aligning itself with the attributes of American heroes (and a few heroines). Begun in the early nineteenth century as a manufacturer of gunpowder and, later, dynamite, DuPont went on to create in its chemical laboratories such products as celluloid shirt collars, artificial leather, nylon, rayon, Teflon, and other widely marketed and successful products. During World War I, DuPont was heavily involved in the manufacture of munitions. A series of plant explosions in January 1916 and consequent rough handling by the press made clear to the president, Pierre S. du Pont, that the firm needed better control of information reaching the public: he established an advertising division. By the 1930s, sentiment against big business having gathered force throughout the Great Depression, DuPont came under investigation by the US Senate as one of the manufacturers labeled "Merchants of Death."

Clearly, DuPont had an image problem beyond what could be handled in-house. The public relations firm Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborne devised the radio program *Cavalcade* to shift the public perception of DuPont from that of death merchant to provider of life-enhancing consumables for a peacetime economy and, hence, contributor to the American way of life. Functioning in much the same way as the biographies of *USA*, *Cavalcade* presented exemplary lives. As was to be expected, the lives chosen for dramatization were those illustrating the virtues of the work ethic: initiative, drive, tenacity, self-reliance, and inventiveness. First-season telecasts included dramas about Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Morse (inventor of the telegraph), and Eli Whitney (inventor of the cotton gin). Even when the programs became more various, focusing on such contemporary figures as Olympic medalists, the traits celebrated remained identifiable with free enterprise. Those enlisted to help with the project in the 1950s were also achievers: among the scriptwriters was the playwright Arthur Miller; among the historians, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Thus icons of individual achievement were enlisted in projecting a corporate image: the great American corporation, the public was given to understand, was simply a magnified version of the individual achiever. The DuPont slogan to reassure America's consumers of its good intentions was "Better Things for Better Living - Through Chemistry." The phrase would be ironically adopted by the drug culture of the 1960s, signaling disdain for what was by then known as the "military-industrial complex," but

the success of *Cavalcade of America* suggests that for over two decades many accepted an equation of personal with corporate success.

However, despite the ritual praise of individual initiative, rugged individualism, nonconformist behavior, and other forms of self-making, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries people recognized that freedom of action was not simply there for the having. Certainly the Civil War contributed to the sense of a complexity beyond individual control. And as the country became increasingly industrialized and urbanized, the sensation of being merely one of a mass of individuals was bound to intensify. The Great Depression that lasted from 1929 through the 1930s would also have made self-sufficiency seem more and more impracticable. Dos Passos, as we have seen, ends *USA* with the rise of the corporate man. By the period after World War II, this new breed of person became a familiar figure in public discourse: the cavalcade of heroes was replaced by corporate man, the man on the street, Gregory Peck as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956).

The American sociologist David Riesman saw this "other-directed" figure as the man appropriate to the consumer and service economy of postwar America, a type that had been in development throughout the first half of the century. Riesman's study *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) argues that changes in Western society over time have caused a shift in the locus of selfhood; in particular, he sees a new "type" emerging in the upper-middle-class urban population. He contrasts this type with an earlier one:

If we wanted to cast our social character types into social class molds, we could say that inner-direction is the typical character of the "old" middle class – the banker, the tradesman, the small entrepreneur, the technically oriented engineer, etc. – while other-direction is becoming the typical character of the "new" middle class – the bureaucrat, the salaried employee in business, etc. Many of the economic factors associated with the recent growth of the "new" middle class are well known. . . . There is a decline in the numbers and in the proportion of the working population engaged in production and extraction – agriculture, heavy industry, heavy transport – and an increase in the numbers and the proportion engaged in white-collar work and the service trades.<sup>3</sup>

The inner-directed worker, according to Riesman, is at home in a society "characterized by increased personal mobility, by a rapid accumulation of capital . . . and by an almost constant expansion: intensive expansion in the production of goods and people, and extensive expansion in exploration, colonization, and imperialism" (p. 15).

These characteristics answer the requirements of a young and expanding nation. In a later phase, however, this self-starting and adventurous spirit is no longer needed: instead, "the frontiers for the other-directed man are people" (p. 131); "their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual – either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media" (p. 22, emphasis in original). In short, the other-directed person must be attuned to the responses of others and able to gain their approval. Similarly, William Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) observes a shift away from the Puritan work ethic toward what he terms a "social ethic," in which the community's claims take precedence over those of any individual. Whyte sees a "tyranny of the majority," necessitating a drive to be "normal," acquiescent, adaptable, a team player.<sup>6</sup> The apotheosis of this ethos is the conformity of appearance and behavior in the American middle-class suburb. In 1956, for the first time in American history, white-collar workers outnumbered blue. Rising wages meant that home ownership was increasingly a reasonable expectation.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* gives dramatic life to Riesman's and Whyte's abstractions. In the play, the aptly named Willy Loman is in crisis: his company no longer needs his skills as a salesman and, in any case, he is no longer able to do the job well. His son Biff, a high school football star, has returned home after another failed attempt to make a life for himself; his son Happy is a low-level clerk who womanizes and drinks excessively; his long-suffering wife Linda anxiously watches his moods and tries to keep the peace between her husband and her sons. Having spent his working life "riding on a smile and a shoeshine," Willy dimly realizes that he has almost nothing to show for his labors. He cannot get ahead; he cannot even catch up. Miller's aim, at least in part, is to chronicle an unchronicled life, one that will not appear in a cavalcade of American heroes. As Linda expresses it to her sons in Act I, "A small man can be just as exhausted as a great man." While the playwright clearly sympathizes with Willy and his family (and invites his audience to do so), he wants also to investigate why and how Willy "had the wrong dreams." The values of good salesmanship – contacts, charm, an ability to project self-confidence or to tell a good joke, in short to be not only "liked, but well liked" – have proved unsatisfactory both emotionally and financially.

Miller's stage directions prescribe imaginary wall lines that enable scenes to change seamlessly from present to past and from reality to dream. This fluidity of presentation generates contrasts that, in turn,

help to explain the family's inability to be truthful to one another. Further, the easy shifts in time and space contribute to the play's rhythms, in which disputes begin slowly, increase in pace, rise to the level of crisis, and then "melt" into earlier dreams. Against the "wrong dreams" Miller offers some sturdier alternatives in the representation of his neighbor Charley and his son Bernard. Not a popular high school hero, Bernard was an excellent, diligent student and is now a lawyer about to make an argument before the Supreme Court. Unwilling to exaggerate or brag, both of which the Loman men do, Bernard does not report this information but leaves it to his father. Although Willy hasn't done so consciously, he has inculcated in his sons the notion that the only thing they need to "make" is an impression. This selling of the self is a form of Riesman's "other-directedness." The alternative is embodied in the character of Willy's brother Ben, a fantastical adventurer who claims to have "walked into a jungle" and come out a rich man. Clearly Ben is meant to symbolize the entrepreneurial, adventurous (and of course imperialist) conqueror. He asks Willy, "What are you building? Lay your hands on it. Where is it?" The exoticism of Ben's adventures suggests that this mode of achievement is not readily available to men of Willy's generation. Willy, we learn from other characters, is good with his hands, can put up a ceiling, "was a happy man with a batch of concrete"; we are here reminded of Veblen's instinct of craftsmanship. Similarly, Biff has sought to find himself in manual labor, working on a ranch in the West. Miller implies that these forms of labor are substantial, valuable, and a fit occupation for manly men. Charm and gab, white lies and incidents of petty theft and cheating, exemplified by the younger son Happy, are the lot of the man in the service economy, which apparently has little need of virility. The undermining of masculinity that Miller puts into the foreground also matches Riesman's description of other-directedness. Stereotypically, conventionally, and historically, it is women who have found it necessary to please, to be sensitive to small nuances of behavior, to assess their self-worth in terms of their impression on others. Miller's characters dramatize nostalgia for a time in which the products of male labor were tangible. In his final appearance, Willy is plotting out a garden, expressing a desire to "get something into the ground." Biff, in his final confrontation with his father, cries, "Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be?" His complaint resembles Emerson's: "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."

The plight of the white male has been examined at great length in American writing, literary, historical, and critical. However, as the critic Nina Baym asserts, such "melodramas of beset manhood" have a way of obscuring and even deforming the histories of other groups.<sup>7</sup> Her concern is primarily with the way that attention to men in American literary criticism has pushed aside stories of women's lives, thus distorting the conception of American authorship. A similar argument can be made about a number of other groups, those who, usually because of color or ethnic background, have been poorly paid, neglected, and exploited. The discussion of immigration in the last chapter offers evidence that Carnegie's "Gospel of Wealth" is a satisfying set of tenets for the powerful and successful but not one that describes the world as it appears to those living a hand-to-mouth existence. For these groups neither the work ethic nor other-directedness adequately accounts for the necessity motivating their working lives.

Feminist analyses of women's work would not enter the mainstream of American thought until after 1960, a period beyond the scope of this text. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) marks a dramatic shift in the American perception of women and their work. This is not to say that women were not working throughout the early to mid twentieth century, particularly in the lower economic strata. Paid domestic work, factory work, secretarial work, sales, teaching, nursing, and other labor was regularly performed by women, particularly unmarried women. And, during World War II, some 35 percent of the female population entered work outside the home. With this exception, however, the tendency throughout the period was for a woman to leave work in favor of child-rearing and home-making when it was financially possible for her to do so. And the view that women belonged in the home was rarely contested. Even among the most radical women calling for suffrage before the granting of the vote in 1920, employment outside the home was not a high priority in the revision of women's rights. There were, of course, notable exceptions. In New England, Emerson's contemporary Margaret Fuller, in both her life and her publication of such works as *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) provided a corollary to his view of self-determination. The Woman Question, discussed as such throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, included concerns about the dependence of women on their "providers." One of the most articulate of these inquiries was *Women and Economics* (1906) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who argued that the next important step

in "social evolution" must be to separate the "sex relation" from the "economic relation." "The girl must marry: else how live? The prospective husband prefers the girl to know nothing. He is the market, the demand. She is the supply."<sup>8</sup> The result, Gilman concluded, was an unhealthy emphasis on the personal to the detriment of the larger society, an imbalance that harmed both men and women. "Only as we live, think, feel, and work outside the home do we become humanly developed, civilized, socialized" (p. 222). Generally speaking, Gilman's aims were of a piece with utopian fiction. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a bestseller in 1899, also envisaged a society in which space outside the home was most valued, and social commitment the highest throughout the next five decades. Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetic expressions of the free spirit, Emma Goldman's campaign for free love, Dorothy Parker's wry view of feminine dependence, Margaret Sanger's efforts to make methods of birth control accessible — all these alternative views of women's place in the society found an audience. But the role of women as workers comparable to men and the recognition of domestic work as real (though unpaid) labor would not gain currency until the social and political events of the 1960s — and in some parts of the country even later.

For African Americans, the momentous events occurring between 1865 and 1919 also necessitated a revision of the relationship between work and identity. The abolition of slavery as a result of the Civil War, the participation of African Americans in World War I, and mass migration to northern cities following the war all altered the position of the African American, but in ways not yet clearly defined. The terms of the debate emerge in the different views of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, two spokesmen for the advancement of what came to be called "the New Negro." Washington favored small increments of progress. His strategy was to make the black worker useful to the economy through agricultural and mechanical skills; his vision found expression in his direction of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where students were instructed in practical employments and urged to lead disciplined lives patterned after the Puritan work ethic. Washington's speech at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, which came to be known as the Atlanta Compromise, expressed the Tuskegee philosophy on a national scale: not asking too much too soon, the rhetoric is humble and diplomatic. If allowed to go about its business peacefully, he promises, the race will become educated in useful work that will be an economic asset to the nation. He assures white Americans that

they will then be surrounded by "the most patient, faithful, law-abiding, and unresentful people that the world has ever seen." The chief "compromise" of his address is the often-cited metaphor of the hand: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." This image of simultaneous separation and unity would be adopted to justify "separate but equal" practices that in fact were separate and unequal: separate and inferior schools, separate and inferior jobs, and separate and inferior status under the law. But the historical context of Washington's conciliatory remarks is necessary to understanding the address's seemingly excessive humility. Between 1885 and 1910, some 3,500 lynchings occurred in the United States. Washington's first goal is cessation of violence, a soothing of white America's fears. Without a truce, education and productive labor on non-servile terms could not go forward.

The "compromise" inevitably seemed to some African Americans to give too much away. Notable among the dissenters was W. E. B. Du Bois, who passionately criticized Washington's strategy in a 1902 essay "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" (in *The Souls of Black Folk*). Du Bois argues that Washington's willingness to set aside principles of enfranchisement, civil rights, and higher (that is, liberal, non-vocational) education concedes rights and privileges fundamental to equality. He revises Washington's hand metaphor:

His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs.

Du Bois, in contrast to Washington, frames his demands as fundamental to the national interest not on the basis of progress but on the basis of fidelity to its own founding principles. He ends the essay by quoting from the Declaration of Independence, reminding the country of its professed commitment to the self-evident truth: "That all men are created equal." Working as a writer, editor, organizer, and reformer over the next half-century, and increasingly focused not just on the nation but on racial inequality world-wide, Du Bois was ultimately disappointed by his country's response to the challenge.

This brief episode in the debate over the meaning and value of labor in one racial group typifies the ways in which self-reliance, self-



determination, self-making, and self-respect – all principles related to the national work ethic and the achievement of American dreams – resonate differently to different Americans. Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* explores several avenues of self-making as it traces the growth and development of one African American from youth to self-realized man. He develops in symbolic stages. First, as a student at the college of the Founder (clearly modeled on Tuskegee) he practices the disciplined and humble behavior recommended by Washington. Later, he accommodates himself to the more radical approaches of the Communist Party and Black Nationalism movements, exemplified in his involvement with the characters Brother Jack and Ras the Destroyer. An idealistic striver, the Invisible Man repeatedly does what he is told, whether it is driving a college benefactor to view abject poverty as if it were scenery or making a rousing speech to a huge gathering on behalf of the Brotherhood. Able and intelligent, he finds that, despite his gifts, he is continually made a pawn in someone else's game. Throughout the novel, the Invisible Man follows rather than leads. He cannot choose because the choices offered are equally negative, though in diametrically opposed ways. Dominating every institution or organization with which he has to deal are traitors, self-servers, and megalomaniacs. He learns through repeated disillusionment that the Founder had had an insufficiently sophisticated view, that "free" enterprise is not free to all. By the novel's end, the Invisible Man has fallen through a manhole and decided to stay underground, making a fact of the metaphor of invisibility.

The novel opens in a vague underground space, with a prologue and the announcement: "I am an invisible man." The prologue is in part devoted to defining the nature of this invisibility. Neither an Edgar Allan Poe "spook" nor a "Hollywood-movie ectoplasm," he is invisible because "people refuse to see me." The narrator makes literal the sensation of not being seen, that is, not recognized for what one is, and he has come to accept invisibility as an asset. He has, for example, managed to tap into the Monopolated Light and Power for the energy to light 1,369 light bulbs in his subterranean home. The novel bears comparison to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* in that both offer the sur- or perhaps *sub*-realistic perspective of the dispossessed and disempowered. Here, as Dos Passos does with his portrait of "Power Superpower" in *The Big Money*, Ellison employs power and light both as tangible utilities and as symbols. Indeed this emblem-heavy novel, with its Sambo dolls, yams, and shackles, invites readers to think analogically about the visible and invisible forms of

slavery for black Americans. *Invisible Man* is an inversion of *Pilgrim's Progress*. The protagonist regresses to a womb-like environment to become reborn, but can offer no certainty about what the new identity will be nor imitate Christian's faith in ultimate salvation, the goal of *Pilgrim's Progress*. He is in the dark but in the light, free and yet confined, certain that he is uncertain. The paradoxes that shape the novel are potent reminders that, for some, the route to self-determination is circuitous, hazardous, or blocked.

### Labor Reform

A substantial portion of Dos Passos's *USA*, as we have seen, centers on the activities of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) and the work of labor organizers, both sincere and corrupt; the novel evokes compassion for the workers much more often than for the owners and managers. However, in 1934, after a socialist rally in New York's Madison Square Garden was broken up by members of the Communist Party, Dos Passos became increasingly convinced that group effort was not the most effective way to create a just society. Inevitably, he believed, corruption led to suppression of individual rights. His support and subsequent rejection of collective action tell a typically American story of conflicting allegiances. On the one hand, a sense of justice or fair play has motivated, and continues to motivate, Americans to support reasonable efforts to improve the worker's life. On the other hand, the culture's preference for explanations that look to individual responsibility rather than to systems or groups has meant that, on the whole, Americans have often been wary of labor unions and political philosophies favoring the group over the individual. While there have been periods of intense and often bloody disputes aimed at resisting overweening or greedy management, it is notable that the United States has never experienced a national general strike like that of Great Britain in 1926. America's writers, intellectuals, and artists have been more sympathetic to labor reform and left-leaning political thought than have the majority of their compatriots.

A text of this kind cannot undertake a detailed history of labor reform. Readers who wish to know more about the US labor movement may turn to the bibliography at the end of the book for more information.<sup>9</sup> Because the American Dream, the work ethic, and other dominant cultural ideals are firmly linked to the world of work and the cycles of prosperity and poverty in the first half of the twentieth century, it

may be helpful to extract some general principles from labor history, particularly as they may apply to the literary representation of work. The chief incentives for strike actions and other organized activity are, first, the belief that owners and managers, driven by the profit motive, will not make concessions to workers unless pressed, and, second, that it is harder to ignore a group than an individual. Yet even the massed forces of workers could not always gain their objectives. As names of strikes, such as the "Ludlow Massacre," indicate, confrontations between workers and management were often violent and fatal. Lost lives were not only an outcome but also a cause of strike actions, unionization, and legislation. The 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York's garment district is a particularly horrific instance of working conditions that galvanized labor reform.<sup>10</sup> Exits in the factory were kept locked so as to prevent workers from stealing; when fire erupted, 146 workers, the majority female immigrants, were burned to death or died attempting to jump from the building. Fire ladders did not reach to the ninth floor, where the exit was locked. The scale and drama of the incident directed public attention to the unsafe and squalid conditions in the so-called sweatshops. Unions like the International Ladies Garment Workers (ILGWU) assisted in the relief of the survivors. The governor of New York formed the Factory Investigation Commission, which affirmed findings long known to labor organizers: the sweatshops were dangerous places and the working conditions execrable. As a result of their findings, new legislation made it considerably more difficult for owners and managers to ignore minimum standards. Versions of this episode — conditions exposed and legislation mandated — occurred throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

During this period, labor leaders sought wage increases, safer working conditions, shorter working hours, holidays, medical insurance, and other improvements directly affecting the quality of workers' daily lives. By the 1960s, federal statutes outlawed discrimination in employment on the basis of gender or race. The perilous working conditions that had caused the illness and even death of workers in the first decades of the century had been improved dramatically. Child labor had been prohibited. A minimum wage had been established. The eight-hour workday and two-week vacation had become standard. Taking the long view, then, it appears that many of the goals sought by labor reformers in the period 1900–1960 have, in principle if not always in practice, been met.

The eddies of power between labor and management have followed fairly predictable patterns. When the supply of workers outstrips the demand for them, wages fall; scarcity of workers raises wages. At the turn of the century, waves of immigrants made labor plentiful and permitted owners to offer very low pay. In periods of war, workers not in the military, including groups that normally do not work, are fully employed and their value is higher because of need. War is good for business generally. The years immediately following large-scale wars usually see a significant upsurge in labor activity, as was the case in 1919 and in 1946. Grievances held in abeyance during wartime demand attention. In recessions and depressions, when jobs are scarce, labor initiates strikes with some regularity, often as a means of protecting jobs as employers try to reduce expenses. Consider these numbers for the Ford Motor Company: in March 1929, 128,000 people were on the company payroll; in August 1931, 37,000. During and just after the Great Depression, between 1929 and 1939, the number of union members tripled nationwide.

The USA celebrates "Labor Day" on the first Monday of September. And yet it would not be accurate to say that Americans manifest a strongly developed working-class consciousness, even in the lowest economic brackets. Given the accomplishments of organized labor, the weak attachment to or identification with collective effort is surprising. Why is there no greater sense of unity? General prosperity and low rates of joblessness may in part account for the lack of fervor. Furthermore, group affiliation in the US is complex: the ethnic and racial diversity of the country means that many people identify more readily with their language group or race, country of origin, or even geographical region than with others in their socio-economic stratum. Sometimes, as has historically been the case for recently arrived immigrants and African Americans, ethnic and racial definition overlaps substantially with economic level to create a particularly strong sense of solidarity. Racial and ethnic prejudice has also been economically divisive. Established male workers throughout the century resented the "intrusion" of immigrants who might undermine work practices and wages, an exclusionary attitude that worked against combining forces for economic ends. The labor movement itself has been torn by competition among the various organizations, not only on the basis of occupation (whether miners, teamsters, or steelworkers) but also because of differences in skilled and unskilled labor, degrees of conservatism or radicalism in politics, size and clout, willingness to compromise,

and so forth. And of course, as in any organization, differences of principle and practice arise within particular unions. In the twentieth century the labor movement usually shared basic goals, but often not much else.

Union members have not always trusted their leaders, and leaders have not always warranted their trust. In a 1941 poll conducted by the Gallup organization, 74 percent of respondents expressed the view that "many" union leaders were racketeers. The taint of gangsterism and violence once made unions a source of fear not only to employers but to the general population. Another counterweight to the unions' effectiveness throughout the century was near-constant suspicion of conspiracy with the communists: labor unions became a significant target in the "Red Scare" of 1919 and the subsequent Palmer raids in 1920, when an entire division of the US Justice Department was given extraordinarily wide powers to roust out suspected radicals and communists. The "witch hunts" of the McCarthy era discussed in the previous chapter were another instance in which the fear of "Reds" made radical thinking suspect. A number of unions were eventually ousted from the largest of US labor unions, the AFL-CIO, on the grounds of their demonstrated sympathies with communism.

In fictional representations of the conflict of labor and management, it is rarely the "rank and file" or ordinary workers who are demonized. Rather, accusations of corruption and "un-American" beliefs are more frequently directed at the organizers and leaders of unions, who are presented as lining their own pockets by being in the pay of the owners. The 1954 film *On the Waterfront* portrays this moral division between the workers and their union representatives. The screenplay by Budd Schulberg was based on a series of news articles about long-shoremen published in the *New York Sun* newspaper that won the Pulitzer prize for local reporting in 1949. The articles described the forms of criminality that had festered among the officials whose purported job was to protect the dockworkers. In the pay of gangsters, racketeers, and an unseen high-level owner (referred to as "Mr. Upstairs"), the leaders make no pretense of looking out for worker interests but manage the apportionment of work and wages to increase their own kickbacks and bribes. There is little to choose between the perfidy of the owners and that of the labor "bosses." In an atmosphere of physical violence and psychological intimidation, the workers have settled upon "D and D" as their mode of operation: it is best to be "Deaf and Dumb." To be a "cheese-eater" (rat) or "stool pigeon" (whistleblower) is not only disloyal to the system but potentially fatal. Better to be silent

and keep one's head down. No one is inclined to talk to the Waterfront Crime Commission investigating dockside practices.

The film's protagonist, Terry Malloy (played by Marlon Brando), is a failed boxer who has become an errand boy for the biggest of the union bosses. Indeed, he has purposely failed as a boxer, allowing himself to lose so that the boss and his friends could profit from betting against him. He is, at best, a pawn – not heroic, not articulate, and not a natural leader. Schulberg underscores Malloy's low status and threatened manhood by making his primary associates a priest and a woman. They appeal repeatedly to his sense of fairness. Having himself played the victim in unfairly determined competition, he finds his conscience awakened, first by the courage of the priest who attempts to rouse the workers and then by the tenderness of the woman who teaches him compassion. Father Barry preaches to the men about their apathy:

Every time the mob puts the crusher on a good man – tries to stop him from doing his duty as a citizen – it's a crucifixion. Anybody who sits around and lets it happen – keeps silent about something he knows has happened – shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of Our Lord to see if He was dead.

This way of looking at the world is not what experience has taught Terry. In his philosophy, "it's every man for himself. It's keeping alive." It's "do it to him before he does it to you." He calls the woman Edie "a fruitcake" when she asks, "Isn't everybody a part of everybody else?" Circumstances work to change Terry's view and he chooses to speak to the Commission. He not only testifies but fights the union boss hand-to-hand. The men refuse to go back to work unless Terry works, too, and the boss, thrown into the water, screams empty threats as the workers follow Terry in triumph.

The optimism of the ending is darkened by the film's acknowledgment that Terry's victory is primarily a personal one. While the current boss is vanquished, the real power (Mr. Upstairs) is still in place, lying low until the Commission finishes its work. The solidarity of the racketeers may prove more powerful than that of the dockworkers. The film is dark and gritty in appearance, the acting highly naturalistic; though the plot offers a romantic vision of the hero who defies the power-structure, these other elements suggest a darker reality. Terry's own brother has been a willing participant in the corruption, even at the expense of Terry's self-respect. It is he who has engineered Terry's "throwing" of boxing matches. This distortion of biological

brotherhood undermines the likely success of a brotherhood of workers. Terry Malloy has set an example that will be difficult to emulate once the temporary enthusiasm for his actions abates.<sup>11</sup>

The drama of fraternal betrayal also animates the 1935 Clifford Odets play *Waiting for Lefty*. Odets was a member of New York's Group Theatre, a project begun by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg (the revered teacher of Method acting, of which Brando was a star student). Their objective was to reduce the artifice of theatrical presentation and to make the stage relevant to, even formative of, current affairs onstage. Odets wrote *Waiting for Lefty* as an incitement to worker rebellion, drawing material from a 1934 strike of "hacks" or taxi drivers. Presented as a series of vignettes or "episodes," the frame of the piece is a union meeting at which the leaders attempt to talk the rank and file out of striking. But the union members are "waiting for Lefty," whom they trust. The scenes that follow work backward in time. Edna berates her husband Joe for not being manly enough to fight for his rights. A lab assistant refuses to assist a manufacturer of poison gas by spying on a co-worker, despite the temptation of a big raise in pay. A young hack and his girlfriend realize that "the cards are stacked" against them, and they lack the money to marry. In the play's central episode, which returns to the setting of the meeting, brother turns against brother. Tom Clayton argues that the time isn't right for a strike, but his brother, shouting from the crowd, calls Tom an imposter. Tom Clayton is, in fact, Tom Clancy, the mouthpiece of the bosses. Following this climax of betrayal, two more episodes about a young actor and a medical intern dramatize their growing recognition that their virility and integrity are compromised when they placidly take things as they find them. In the concluding scene, a union member, Agate Keller (played by Elia Kazan, who would go on to direct *On the Waterfront*), attempts to rouse his co-workers, noting that his union button is so ashamed that "it has blushed itself to death." A man rushes in to say that Lefty has been found murdered, and the men, led by Agate, begin to chant: "Working class, unite and fight! Strike! Strike! Strike!" They are enacting the advice of Edna in the earlier scene. When Joe argues that "one man can't—" Edna cries, "I don't say one man! I say a hundred, a thousand, a whole million, I say." The audience on the first night took up the chant and headed into the streets. "Agit-prop" drama — plays designed to create this kind of political fervor — has usually been short-lived in the American theater, and idealistic enterprises like the Group Theatre have struggled to survive. So the play may be less significant for its artistry than

for the ways in which it offers scenic summaries of many of the issues we can trace from Emerson forward: the relationship between self-respecting male identity and work; the ways in which greed, corruption, and capitalism obstruct the formation of a group ethos, even turning brother against brother; the deleterious effect of poverty on families; disillusionment about the possibility of true self-reliance; tension between the dream of success and the desire for a clear conscience; and in general an emerging sense that the game is fixed, the deck stacked against the weaker players.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, a general disinclination to stifle individual enterprise and competition often undermined the urge to organize. Attachment to private property and the exercise of self-interest have usually trumped the ideal of worker unity. This tendency cannot be blamed on a lack of idealism but rather on the preference for one set of ideals over another. Communities organized along socialist lines, those in actual practice and those existing only as thought-experiments, have always been marginal in the United States. The ideal attractive to the mainstream is that individuals, left free to make the most of their abilities and to avail themselves of opportunity, are the source of national strength and progress toward equality for all. Even people who would seem least likely to have those opportunities and least likely to have the chance to develop and employ their abilities subscribe to this principle, as we have seen in the example of Booker T. Washington.

On the questions of self-determination and equal opportunity, American writers, artists, and intellectuals have often been contrarians, asking hard questions, posing alternatives, and actively pursuing unpopular social and political ends. Naturalist writers — Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris — of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused on the poorest and least powerful city dwellers, and muckraking journalists exposed ugly truths about corruption in high places. Realist and regionalist writers (Samuel Clemens, Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry James, Edith Wharton, and others) took pains to document status details in their fiction: clothing, furnishings, etiquette, regional foods, and speech patterns. They thereby kept wealth, poverty, and the overt and subtle signifiers of class at the center of American fiction. High modernist writers, on whom we will focus in the next chapter, energetically sought to *épater les bourgeois*, to disturb smugness and complacency, to create new ways of looking and thinking. Writers of the late 1920s and the 1930s were especially sensitive to the economic devastation of the Great Depression: many

of them called for radical change and involved themselves directly in political and legal events such as the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. Some, like Hemingway, went to Europe to fight in the Spanish Civil War. They edited and wrote for radical journals, signed petitions, raised money. Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, discussed in the last chapter, represent much of the fiction of this period in expressing a clear political aim. And we can look to the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay ("Say That We Saw Spain Die"), Genevieve Taggard ("Mill Town"), and Muriel Rukeyser ("The Trial") for direct commentary on specific events like wars, strikes, and trials.

The 1930s also saw a reconsideration of the role art could play in society: what were the political obligations of the artist? was political art always bad art? was the notion of art for art's sake merely an excuse for maintaining the status quo? Throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, writers and artists were susceptible to accusations of sympathy with and overt support of communism. Indeed mainstream journals and newspapers played up a simplistic equation of the "bohemianism" of artists with anti-American sentiments. Especially in the minds of Americans who lived outside urban centers like New York, enclaves of artists in places like Greenwich Village were understood to be morally dubious territory. While there was a truce of sorts in these cultural skirmishes during World War II, the postwar period again saw writers and other artists chafing at the restrictions of convention and celebrating heroes of nonconformity. The Beat poets' diatribes against materialism and hypocrisy typify this resistance to homogenization. By the 1960s, this resistance was both louder and more widespread, even fashionable. The 1960s in general saw a kind of saturnalia, in which hierarchies were reversed and home truths exploded. Satirical novels like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1963) dismantled, through grotesque humor, the structures of military authority, patriotism, and rationality. The phenomenon of "confessional" poetry, for example that of Anne Sexton, made even the most intimate details of the poet's life public, thus erasing the line between the private and the public and revising the standards of poetic decorum.

This sketch of the political climate over several decades is drawn with very broad strokes and is subject to corrections and exceptions. During these same decades some writers and artists were accused of supporting fascism. Others, disillusioned by the dictatorial behavior of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, turned away from the promises of a communal society. And, of course, neither the writers on the left nor those who held opposite views were motivated solely by considerations

of wealth and poverty. Nevertheless, these broad strokes – major events, trends, dominant ideas – create a backdrop against which the details of American literature and culture become visible.

### Consumption and Identity

In 1666 the Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet saw her house burn down. The "Lines upon the Burning of Our House" register her horror and then her acceptance, "Farewell my Pelf, farewell my Store":

And when I could no longer look,  
I blest his name that gave and took,  
That layd my goods now in the dust:  
Yea so it was, and so 'twas just.  
It was his own: it was not mine;  
Far be it that I should repine.

For Bradstreet, the acceptance that her "store" is not "mine," but "his," that is, a loan from God, is consistent with the religious commitments that enabled her to follow her husband to the New World. Her mission is never hers alone.

In 1956 the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg published a fantasy about grocery shopping with Walt Whitman, "A Supermarket in California."

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking  
among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the boys . . .

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following  
you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary  
fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy,  
and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in  
an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the  
supermarket and feel absurd.) . . .

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue  
automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher  
what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry  
and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the  
boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

Three centuries of change and cultural difference separate Bradstreet and Ginsberg: ostensibly the poems seem to have little in common besides the word "store." But both these poets have written meditations on the meaning of possessions, both poets experience loss, and both poets perceive spiritual significance in their experiences. Further, Ginsberg (overtly) and Bradstreet (implicitly) see their encounter with commodities as meaning something about America. Bradstreet considers herself a caretaker but not an owner, in keeping with the Puritan ethos of stewardship. For Ginsberg the abundance of choice – the frozen arctic hokes and the blue automobiles – are evidence that "the America of love" is lost. His invocation of Whitman calls to mind the Transcendentalist conception of objects as symbols of something larger – an ideal, a belief, a god of love. With the demystification of goods, supermarket shopping, as he is reminded by touching Whitman's book, is "absurd."

The preceding discussions of work and identity and of labor reform outline a narrative that historians, sociologists, politicians, artists, and indeed all who lived through it have perceived as epoch-making. One way to define twentieth-century modernity is to connect the simultaneous emergence of new forms of work (industrialization, assembly-line work) to new conceptions of self and other. As we have seen, in the first fifty years of the century, the model of self-sufficiency – the self-made man – became if not obsolete then at least questionable. Further, the equation of work and morality, outlined by Weber as fundamental to the Puritan work ethic, gave way to other formulas. The professionalization of many forms of work would supply new codes of conduct and a sense of affiliation with one's peers. For many, corporate culture came to substitute for other forms of belonging. Owners could of course remain invested in what they did since they owned the products of their labor. For workers, Veblen's instinct of craftsmanship diminished. Suppose you had to explain to yourself why you should go each day to a job that is routine and tedious but that pays a living wage. You no longer believe that idleness is a sin. You know that you are easily replaceable since your work involves no special skill. You don't own the company or have a profit-sharing arrangement, nor is there likelihood of advancement. Apart from the admittedly powerful argument for avoiding starvation, how do you find the motivation to work?

Daniel Rodgers offers four early twentieth-century responses to the realization that work is not always fulfilling: handicraft, vocational education, industrial psychology, and less work. Handicraft as an

antidote to mechanization has surfaced repeatedly since the Industrial Revolution. Whether as a hobby or as a profession, handicraft functions not only to provide the satisfaction of full engagement in the making of an object but also to mount a critique of mass manufacturing. Similar values motivated the various artisans of America's Arts and Crafts movement, visible in such structures as California's Gamble House, designed by Greene and Greene, who supervised the making of not only every structural element but every light switch, or in the simple and sturdy "Mission" furniture designed by Gustav Stickley, or in pottery made by the Roycroft colony. We may also look to modernist experiments in painting, sculpture, decorative arts, and architecture for projects that attempt to revise the meaning of modern media like concrete and modern techniques like the use of interchangeable parts. These experiments will be discussed in the next chapter.

A second antidote to worker alienation might be education: vocational education, championed by Progressives like Jane Addams, was designed to help workers understand their jobs as part of a much larger project. In Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, each worker is considered a member of an "industrial army," contributing to a large cooperative venture. Understood as promoting the collective good, any job, whatever its form, should be a source of pride, or so the reasoning went. But as Rodgers explains, there was a "fragile" line "between education to help workers see the full dimension of their work and education to adapt them, unthinkingly, to it" (p. 87). In other words, "knowing one's place" can be understood either as integration or as oppression by other means.

A third strategy to counter tedious work is to address the worker's mental and emotional health. Industrial psychology emerged as an effort to understand workplace dynamics and the effect of personality on job performance. Its aims were to match the mind to a suitable form of work or, alternatively, to find means of distracting laborers from monotony in the interest of workplace harmony. If the job itself could not be made pleasant, then perhaps the environment could be made so. Fourth, and most practically, the solution to tedium was to work fewer hours. The eight-hour day, vacations, days off – all these helped to ease the problem of worker discontent.

Once the worker has free time, how is it to be spent? Veblen was admonishing the nation about conspicuous leisure as early as the turn of the century. By the 1920s leisure had emerged as a centerpiece of American life: dancing, listening to music, going to movies and amusement parks, participating in roller derbies, competing in football and

baseball, beauty pageants, stunts, and so forth were pleasures readily available to all strata of society. Hours of leisure became something to be managed, and thus a leisure industry emerged to direct the use of spare time. For all but the poorest of Americans there was also the perennial favorite: buying things.

Between 1860 and 1920, the population of the nation a little more than tripled, while the volume of manufactured goods increased somewhere between twelve- and fourteen fold. Once the products of manufacturing outstripped need, once the economy moved from one of scarcity to one of abundance, the national emphasis shifted from production to consumption. The United States became and remains the largest consumer in the world. It is a long way from the principles underlying Anne Bradstreet's "Lines on the Burning of My House" to those of the dissatisfied housewife drifting down the aisles of a supermarket in Randall Jarrell's poem "Next Day." She moves "from Cheer to Joy to All" as she surveys the labels on laundry detergents. Veblen's theory of "pecuniary emulation" seems an inadequate explanation for this seismic change. Self-expression and self-realization may be signified through the loss or gain of worldly goods, and it is in this signification that we may detect a link between the self-abnegation that fulfills the Puritan poet and the self-furnishing that fulfills the modern shopper. Profound differences shape the nature of those desires. For Bradstreet, desires should be subject to discipline, acknowledged but held in check. But in the modern world, consumer desire, abetted by the messages of advertising, is by definition insatiable. We want something. We work for it. We buy it. We use it and use it up. We want something to replace it. Or we want something not for its usability, but for its beauty or for what it signifies. Tastes change, and so do standards of what is beautiful or meaningful. Thus new desire is created and fulfilled and the cycle begins again. Producers must not only fulfill existing needs but produce new ones.

Three aspects of getting and spending will reveal the contours of commodity culture and prepare for an analysis of its representation in fiction: the marketing of one product as an example of the relationship between advertising and consumerism; the psychological effects of department store shopping, and the implications of "shopping" for conceptions of selfhood.

But first, to borrow a phrase from American radio and television, a word from our sponsor. First appearing in 1911, Crisco was – and still is – an unglamorous but useful product with a price low enough to be within most Americans' reach. A shortening used in cooking, the

product has been a mainstay of the company Procter & Gamble. The story of its marketing illustrates the ways in which advertising creates a "relationship" between a product and a consumer, one based not just on the utility of a product but on its appeal to the personal. William Procter and James Gamble first formed their partnership in 1837; a candlemaker and a soapmaker respectively, they were led to collaborate on the basis of shared ingredients – tallow, lard stearin, and cottonseed oil. By 1870 Procter & Gamble included "Refined Family Lard" in its product list. "Crisco" was the company's improvement on lard. Hydrogenation catalysts were first patented in 1902, and the process of hydrogenation allowed P&G to solidify vegetable oil and keep it stable on shelves regardless of temperature. Money, not health, was the selling point: vegetable oil was an inexpensive alternative to lard for both producer and consumer. Here, then, scientific progress, profit motives, and market demand met.

The Procter & Gamble company spent \$3 million in a carefully planned, step-by-step introduction and promotion of Crisco. Over the first half of the twentieth century, P&G employed every new medium with alacrity: producing a free cookbook to accompany the product in 1912; airing its first radio advertisement in 1923; producing its first television commercial in 1949. It stayed current with sociological and historical developments, shifting from vegetable oil to corn oil to canola oil as the most recent medical advice dictated, substituting glass containers for metal cans during wartime, repackaging the product as butter-like sticks for convenient use. American middle-class consumption patterns are reflected in the evolution of its marketing: fat phobia, cleanliness, and efficiency. P&G's practices exemplify clearly certain modes of product presentation designed to create a bond between maker and user:

*Branding.* It is the unsurprising philosophy of P&G's marketing division that consumers buy brands, not just products. Establishing the trustworthiness of the product and the company from which it comes, the logo, packaging, color, and slogan become over time the symbol of both the product and the buyer's relationship to it. A brand may even become the generic name for a product of which it is a single specimen: Kleenex, Coca-Cola, Jello. In many parts of the United States, Crisco is a household name. The initial challenge for Crisco advertising was to dissociate the product from lard and to emphasize the purity of its contents. The first cans were wrapped in white paper and carried the product name in simple blue letters, employing an oversized "C" for the first letter. The color blue and the enlarged C

have remained constant even as packaging has changed. As the producers succeeded over time in distancing Crisco from the unpleasant connotations of animal processing associated with lard, purity became a less urgent selling point and the white packaging gave way to blue, a more vivid color for supermarket shelves. The solid shortening itself has remained glacially white. The insistence on purity and wholesomeness makes sense for a food product of this period. In the first decades of the twentieth century fears about the adulteration of food were widespread in the United States. Not coincidentally, publication of Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel about meat-processing (*The Jungle*) and the founding of the Food and Drug Administration occurred in the same year, 1906.

*Education.* Among the most effective strategies for selling Crisco was the introduction of the cookbook, available free by mail once the product was purchased, and the enlisting of home economists, a then new profession espousing the "science" of cooking and home-making. The second edition of the cookbook ran to 615 recipes, all of which incorporated Crisco. Traveling home economists acted as missionaries to the cooking-impaired, offering instruction in how to be a modern cook and, by extension, a modern woman. As with other food products of the early twentieth century, the instruction was frequently teamed with an explanation of how the product represented progress. The aura of science and professionalism in home economics, and of course the introduction of the subject in schools, did a great deal to spread the message of modern convenience. Similar patterns held for canned foods (as opposed to home preserves), for pressure-cooking and for frozen foods. As new products and techniques became available, a "need" was created, often emphasizing time- and labor-saving techniques. The thrust of the message was that the product was better for health, more economical, and, especially, more convenient. In all cases, the presentation sought to make the product "user-friendly." The product is unsullied, dependable, accessible — the virtues of a good friend.

*Service.* Business also signals its relationship to a community by "giving back": building arts centers, sponsoring educational programs, the creating foundations. Since tax laws often drive these donations, the motives are not entirely philanthropic. Charitable donations may be profitable, if only in "symbolic capital," as a product acquires patina by association with a prestigious or admirable endeavor: a conglomerate like PG&G is expected to do a certain amount of good works. Through-out its history Crisco's marketing persistently conveys the message

that the company wishes to be of service to its customers: as a friend concerned for their health, as a teacher who helps one to use the product, as a neighbor who cares about the community. These representations attempt to give the corporation a human face. Even in a thoroughly commercialized culture, attention is paid to values that are not pecuniary, even if this is done for pecuniary purposes.

Advertising existed much earlier than the twentieth century, of course, but advertising as an industry in the United States dates from about 1920. The career of the publicist J. Ward Moorehouse in *USA* flourishes between the two world wars. Chiding, reminding, seducing, enticing, promising — the advertising industry has played a major role in creating willing buyers. And, as the story of Crisco illustrates, that advertising also responds to market research. Buyers, in this sense, can affect product development. But advertising, for all its appeals to the personal — "Because I'm worth it," "You deserve a break today," and so forth — is directed not at individuals but at aggregates of buyers. Thus its effectiveness depends upon its ability to spread the message widely and to target the right groups of potential customers. The key word here is "group." Until about 1880, the conception of the American public was primarily a political construction. As urban centers grew in the early twentieth century, civic leaders increasingly viewed the public as a physical mass whose movements and behaviors required management. This same way of thinking informs advertising, which, like politics, is often thought of in terms of campaigns.

At roughly the same point in history that urban planning charted and studied the movements of crowds, the department store emerged as a major commercial center, a machine designed to manage the movement of customers and merchandise. Paris's Au Bon Marché, completed in 1876, furnished a model for the major emporiums of Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, grand edifices Émile Zola described as "cathédrale[s] de commerce moderne." These temples of consumer goods were arranged in such a way as to stimulate and manage feelings of attraction and desire, invite spectatorship, and induce fluidity of movement. The great stores — Wanamaker's of Philadelphia, Marshall Field's of Chicago — were fashioned as palaces in which the customer was a special guest. The shopper is drawn in by attractive window displays and then eased through a revolving door. Strategically placed at the corners of busy intersections, the doors pull in pedestrian traffic from two directions. Inside the scale and decoration are magnificent: the floor plan is open, the galleries are visible overhead, the stairs and escalators aim heavenward. On the upper floors are dining rooms,



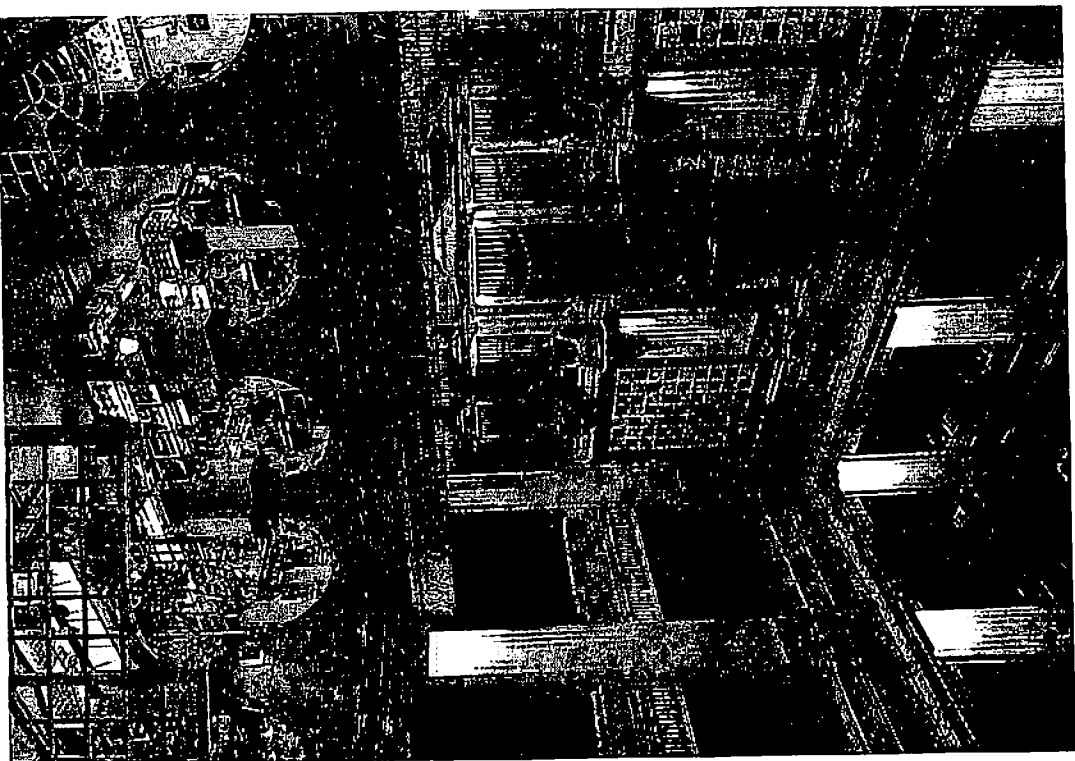


FIGURE 5 Interior of John Wanamaker Store, Philadelphia, 1979  
 Photograph by Walter Smalling Jr., Library of Congress. Prints and  
 Photographs Division, Washington, DC  
 The soaring spaces of Wanamaker's recall Zola's description of department  
 stores as "cathedrals of commerce."

writing rooms, luxurious toilets. At its most ambitious, the department store could act as a club or restaurant in which to meet friends, a school in which to learn good taste, a pleasant spot in which to idle.

Similar principles informed the design of large public spaces like New York's Grand Central Station, where design facilitated the rail transport of masses of people in and out of the city and, at the same time, catered to the desire for privacy and comfort by providing hair-dressing parlors, kissing galleries, restaurants, and post offices. The success of spaces like the department store and Grand Central required a fundamental shift in the conception of the individual: the design appears to increase a person's sense of importance; the logic underpinning the design, however, depends upon a standardization of humanity that undermines individuality. Clerks in department stores must be interchangeable, capable of serving in a variety of store areas; a store's buyers must be able to think of consumers as an aggregate if to fit most bodies. Thus both sellers and buyers are, as it were, cogs in a large machine of getting and spending even though the semiotics of the grand building promise special treatment and attention to the personal.

The department store invites drift and malleability of purpose. The solid walls of smaller shops have been replaced by columns; the divisions between one department and the next are vague; wide aisles, like generous avenues, encourage movement along the lines of horizontal display cases and arouse *flâneur*-like observation of other shoppers; mirrored columns induce self-scrutiny and, at the same time, multiply one's focus and desire. Beyond the reflection of oneself in a hat appears an image of the next department and the next, promising her heart on the "peculiar little tan jacket with large mother-of-pearl buttons," she is delighted not just with the jacket but with the charm she possesses in it, with her beauty measured against that of other shoppers. She also relishes the imagination of her future, which that beauty betokens. All shopping is, in this sense, shopping for possible selves.

A striking fictional expression of the polymorphous self is Madame Merle in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880): "There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman: we're each of us made up of some cluster of appearances. What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again" (chapter 19). This self, she

asserts, is "one's expression of one's self" through, among other things, "one's house, one's furniture," that is, the things one has elected to buy. The drama of self-assertion is made problematic by this skeptical view of personhood. If Isabel Archer, the American heiress, is merely a cluster of appurtenances, what is the self she jealously protects from suitors, what is the self that wills to choose for itself? What has happened to the stability of the self-reliant man? A succinct answer may be expressed in terms provided by social historian Warren I. Susman: the difference between character and personality.<sup>12</sup> Whereas "character" deploys the language of morality – the unified self responsible for its own moral maintenance in accord with established, often religiously based principles – "personality" connotes a series of modalities, emphasizing self-expression, situational adjustment, reinvention, and adaptability. "Character" emphasizes stability; "personality," change, and commodity culture, the many behaviors and languages involved in producing, distributing, and consuming commodities, caters to and depends upon the malleability and continual transformation of "personality."

The temporary selves of "personality" coexist in American literature with the stable self of "character" as a tension between the "self" and the "made." The standard view of the self-made man (for it is usually a man) is of an individual who takes himself in hand, making a self that, husbanding its own abilities, becomes a better and more successful self, the self waiting to be discovered. The end product of this undertaking is a stable, self-reliant entity. What begins as an exercise of "personality" – reimagining and reshaping the self – ends as an expression of "character," that is, the uncovering of a true self, one that had been temporarily masked by accidents of birth or circumstance. Jay Gatsby becomes, in Fitzgerald's phrase, "a Platonic conception of himself," and for him this image, not the poor boy from North Dakota, is his true self. The question that haunts American literature is whether such a true, inviolate self exists or whether Madame Merle is right in believing we are what we buy or, at least, what we want to buy. A cascade of fictional people faces this question: is there a "republic of the spirit," as Lily Bart wishes to believe in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, or is she a "product" of her dressmakers, milliners, and hairdressers – those "dull and ugly people" who, Lawrence Selden observes, "must . . . have been sacrificed to produce her." In Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), Clyde Griffith seems especially American and especially tragic because he pursues a life that almost everything in his surroundings has taught him to desire.

Materialism received several boosts in the twentieth century: at various points, Americans were told by economists and government leaders that it was acceptable, even patriotic, to be in debt; that waste could be "creative" insofar as what is discarded makes space for innovation; that physical, social, and spiritual ills are curable by generous application of the salve of more things; that deficit spending by government leads to economic growth; that the purpose of life is pleasure; that acquisition assists progress and progress is good for democracy. "The American Way of Life," a phrase popularized in the 1930s and employed as a rallying cry during World War II, signified material success and the freedom to pursue it. Between 1900 and 1960 those criticizing the growth of acquisitive behavior were a worried few. But these few were vocal: the criticism of materialism, smugness, and greed among Americans was vigorously articulated in sermons, in thoughtful journals like *Partisan Review*, and in novels and plays. Projects like the federally funded Works Progress Administration in the 1930s fostered an interest in the "simple" folk still living a rural and impoverished existence. In the 1940s, the Fugitives praised the agrarian life as an antidote to the corruptions and shallowness of modern urbanity. Youthful rebellion in the 1950s and 1960s was often directed at America's wealth. Commodity culture was, however, sufficiently flexible to absorb the protests and turn the signs of resistance, whether leather jackets or peace signs, into more things to buy. Some American commentators, influenced by European theorists, declared the culture of consumption an instrument of social control. What are we if not the products we consume? "In a sense," begins John Barth's novel *The End of the Road* (1958), "I am Jacob Horner." Jacob Horner is, in a sense, the advertising that echoes in his head: "Pepsi Cola hits the spot; 10 full ounces, that's a lot."

America's abundant wealth can be compared in useful ways to the abundant space discussed in the previous chapter. Both inspire a sense of possibility: "the sky's the limit." But just as endless space can be terrifying, so can endless wealth. Boundaries and limits can be comforting as well as oppressive; their absence can be dizzying. What do you give the man or woman who has everything? The question is still open.