

INTRODUCTION TO UNIT 8

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I. AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II

When in 1942 a young critic named Alfred Kazin published his first book, *On Native Grounds*, a survey of American writing from the late nineteenth-century realism up through the literature of the 1930s, he judged "the greatest single fact about our modern American writing" to be "our writers' absorption in every last detail of their American world together with their deep and subtle alienation from it". Three years later, on August 6, 1945, the explosion of an atomic bomb over Hiroshima in Japan brought about a hasty (precipitate, rash) conclusion to World War II and also introduced into human life a new reality so unimaginable as to make terms like "crisis" and "alienation" seem understatement (suggestion, subtleness), scarcely adequate to the nature of the postwar era.

More than three decades later we can look back upon a number of cataclysmic upheavals (extreme agitation) which followed the ones at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A short list might include the cold war between America and Russia which, though never breaking into open violence, reached dangerous proportions in the 1950s; the attendant (accompanying) fears of nuclear annihilation culminating in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962; the civil rights movement of the 1960s with its stark message that there were races in this country who lived neither on equal nor on amicable terms; the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963, and the assassination of his brother Robert and of Martin Luther King, chief spokesman for civil rights

and the leader of black Americans; the extended, seemingly endless war of attrition (agotamiento; friction) and folly (evil, wickedness) in Vietnam; violence in the urban ghettos; the killing of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University in 1970, bringing violence in the universities to a head; the resignation in 1974, under intense pressure, of President Richard Nixon.

I.1. SOUTHERN WRITERS

Taking the years 1945-60 as a unit, we can identify two main groupings of literary energies and principles in the postwar period. The "southern" writers are much less to be thought of as a group than as a number of individually talented novelists and short-story writers, notable for its predominance of women and generally touched by the large shadow of William Faulkner. (Faulkner remained busily at work completing the Snopes trilogy he had begun with *The Hamlet* in 1940, while visiting universities and producing other work until his death in 1962). The older writers of this group, Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty, remained active -the former occupied with the writing of a lengthy novel *Ship of Fools* (1962), the latter providing a host of distinguished short fiction and novels of which *The Golden Apples* (1947) is perhaps the finest. The younger and, at the time, highly acclaimed writers were Carson McCullers -whose first novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) was a critical success and whose short novel *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) is her best work- and Truman Capote, whose *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was published to much fanfare (showy display) in

1948 when he was twenty-four (Carson McCullers was twenty-three when her first novel appeared).

The absorption of these younger writers in the grotesque, their fascination with extreme and perverse incongruities of character and scene, and their cultivation of verbal effects can be understood as a commitment to "art" -to a use of the creative imagination and language unchecked(not cracked/broken) by any presumed realities of life as it was lived in America in 1948 or 1960. On the other hand, such features of their writing may be defended as the only true and adequate response the artist can make to that bizarre(weird, strange) life. Or so Flannery O'Connor, the most talented and humorous of younger southern writers, implied when she remarked wryly(ironically humorous), "Of course I have found that any fiction that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader - unless it is grotesque, in which case it's going to be called realistic". In any case these artists (to whom one should add the gifted short-story writer Peter Taylor and the novelist Walker Percy) absorbed -often brilliantly created- American speech, manners, habits of eating or praying or loving, while holding back from any topical engagement with the public and social happenings around them.

I.2. NEW YORK WRITERS

With proper consciousness of the umbrella like nature of the label, we can distinguish another main group of writers and the critics who wrote about and published them, as "New York". Here the milieu is urban-Jewish, the concerns recognizably more public and political -although less overtly so in

the novelists than in the essayist-intellectuals who criticized them. The major periodical for these writers was *Partisan Review* (for a time *Commentary* shared some of the same interests and personnel), a magazine published monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly throughout the 1940s and 1950s and still extant(existing, present). *Partisan* was remarkable for the way it managed, despite its inception(commencement, origin) in highly political circumstances and controversies in the 1930s, to maintain an extremely wide range of interests in poetry, fiction, drama, fine arts; and in Continental literature, politics, and sociological thought. Its favorite fiction writers during the postwar years were Bellow (parts of *The Adventures of Augie March* and all of *Seize the Day* appeared there), Bernard Malamud, Mailer (occasionally), and Delmore Schwartz. But *Partisan* also looked beyond urban-Jewish writing, publishing stories by Flannery O'Connor and James Baldwin and the prologue to Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Among the distinguished critics who contributed steadily to the magazine over these years one variety of literary and political subjects, one should mention Lionel Trilling -whose *The Liberal Imagination* (1948) was perhaps the most widely read and influential of "New York" critical works- as well as Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Diana Trilling. Mary McCarthy reviewed plays and published some of her fiction there, and Hannah Arendt's political writing and Clement Greenberg's art criticism were regular features of the journal.

By 1960 regional and ethnic senses of identity became diluted as the various parts of America began more and more to resemble each other. This cultural dilution can be observed at work in some of the "assimilated" Jews depicted in Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) or in the southerners who inhabit Walker Percy's novels generally. To be a southern novelist in 1960 was no more exotic than to be a Jewish novelist. At about that time *Partisan*

Review began to lose its distinctiveness, especially after 1963, when during a New York City newspaper strike a new magazine was formed, *The New York Review of Books*. This organ, while making use of many of the *Partisan* writers, appeared biweekly rather than quarterly and was able to give essayists and reviewers as much room as they desired. Its striking success has continued to the present day.

II. THE "TRANQUILLIZED FIFTIES"

For all the abuse the 1950s have received as a success-oriented, socially and ecologically irresponsible, fearfully smug(tidy, self-satisfied) decade, they look in retrospect (though they were surely not felt as such at the time) to have been a good time for serious American writers; and not the less so for the individual writer's assurance that he could not possibly be appreciated nor understood by a philistine(disdainful of intellectual/artistic values) and materialistic nation run by businessmen, generals, and golfers. So the "deep and subtle alienation" Kazin spoke of was also seen as a necessary, sometimes even attractive, condition, which furnished a rich vein for fictional exploration. Bellow expressed the mood most masterfully in his short novel *Seize the Day* (1956) through his portrayal of a disastrous day in the life of Tommy Wilhelm, a young man surrounded by prophets, optimists, yea-sayers to family, commerce, and life, who himself cannot operate, cannot make it in, eventually cannot breathe in, this world.

But the most publicized literary expression of disaffection with "official" American life was made by the "Beat" writers of whom Jack Kerouac was the prose laureate. Advertised as "The Beat Generation" and

known also, more accurately, as the San Francisco school, the group included most notably the poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. Its influence radiated from the City Lights Bookstore run by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who was himself a poet. Beat poets sometimes read their works to a jazz accompaniment; among their objects of veneration were Whitman, Buddha and Eastern religions generally, and (in Kerouac's case at least) large quantities of Western beer. Their experiments with drugs anticipated the more drastic and often disastrous use of them in the 1960s. The Beats were in favor of "spontaneity" and against constricting forms, poetic or political; indeed, Kerouac proved it was possible to let oneself go and write a novel (*The Subterraneans*, 1958) in three nights. Briefly, the Beat writers constituted a challenge to the many carefully worked-over lyrics or ingeniously worked-out novels which had been characteristic products of the 1950s. They were also good at clowning, and the comic touches that dot their work are probably the parts which will prove most enduring.

III. THE HECTIC(febriles) 1960S

The first years of the Sixties decade seemed truly a time when new possibilities and opportunities presented themselves on both public and private levels. The election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency brought to Washington a glamorous and humorous leader who was thought to be committed both to social justice and to culture -perhaps even bringing in the "new Augustan age of poetry and power" Robert Frost wrote about in his inaugural poem. The agreement with Russia to cease nuclear testing in the atmosphere, the increasing concern for changes in the relationship between

whites and blacks; the loosening up of sexual codes and of official censorship, coincident with the marketing of an effective new oral contraceptive -these and other events seemed in the minds of some to promise a more life-affirming, less restrictive era than the preceding one. With particular regard to the matter of censorship, it may be noted that for many years Americans who wished to read Henry Miller's novels had to smuggle (secretly introduce) in from Paris their copies of *Tropic of Cancer* or *Tropic of Capricorn*, while in the mid-1950s Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* had to be obtained in a similar way. When in 1956, however, *Lolita* was first published in this country, there was no legal prosecution; and in 1959 the successful publication by Grove Press of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* cleared the way for novels of more explicit sexual reference. When Mailer published *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948, a well-known four-letter word had to be spelled "fug", evidently to spare (forbear to destroy/harm) the delicate sensibilities of its readers. By 1959, when he published his comic tour de force *The Time of Her Time*, about a sexual warrior's candidly explicit adventures with women in his Greenwich Village loft, hardly anyone raised an eyebrow.

The 1960s were also to see a corresponding "liberation" from official standards of correctness in the realm of the journalistic essay, or -as everyone who wrote in that mode called it- a "piece". Norman Podhoretz noted that everyone he knew was engaged in writing lively essays instead of laboring over novels and poems, and there were many collections of such pieces on subjects ranging from the Beat Generation phenomenon to the trial of Adolph Eichmann. Mailer's *Advertisement for Myself* (1959), the father of the mode, had shown how unconventional and various a book of essays -which also included stories, newspaper columns, interviews- might be, and he produced two more such books in the first half of the new decade. In the hands of Tom

Wolfe, style became something to cultivate and exaggerate; the subject of his "New Journalism" might be the doings of a racing-car star or a New York disco celebrity, but it didn't matter since it was merely there for the style to perform upon. A young critic, Susan Sontag, entitled a group of her essays *Against Interpretation* (1966) and made the case for more playful, aesthetically oriented responses to both life and art. That the title essay was originally published in *Partisan Review*, a serious "high culture" periodical, suggested that times were changing; as did the fact that literary critics like Richard Poirier or Benjamin DeMott were to be observed writing full-dress(detailed) "pieces" on listening to the Beatles or on the morals of *Playboy* magazine.

III.1. SATIRIC PERFORMANCES

The relation of such expansive and experimental writing to the major public disaster of this time -the assassination of John Kennedy in November 1963- we are not in a position to determine; nor can we determine the effect on literary modes of such events as the following: the increasingly desperate adventure in Vietnam; the riots in the black ghettos of our decaying cities; the turmoil in the universities consequent on the war; the murder of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King; the omnipresence of drugs, hard and soft; the rise of pornography as a feature of the sexual "revolution"; the decline of "the family" and the exacerbations in the relations between men and women pointed up at the decade's end by the women's movement and documented in the divorce statistics. Taken together or singly, these severe dislocations(disruptions) proved to be unavailable for writers to deal with in

the representational and realistic modes of portrayal handed down to them by novelists such as Howells, Dreiser, or Dos Passos.

Although satire has been a traditional way of dealing with disasters or upheavals, what sort of "satire" could possibly be adequate to matter which seemed beyond the reach of even a gifted writer's words? The middle and late 1960s saw the term "black humor" employed as a tent(dwelling, shelter) to cover any literary creation which played fast and loose(recklessly, irresponsibly) with ordinary values and standards, frequently employing elements of cruelty and shock to make us see the awful, the ugly, the "sick" in a new way, for what it was. The great humorist in this line -he was a moralist as well- may turn out to have been not a novelist at all but a stand-up(upright) comedian, Lenny Bruce, whose violent and obscene rehearsals(trials) of clichés in language and in American life gave novelists something to live up to(act/be in accordance). His was an art of solo performance, dependent (as Frost once said all poetic performance must be) on the prowess(bravery) and feats(achievements) of association Bruce's verbal and auditory powers were capable of.

Similar displays by the writer as satiric performer may be viewed in the works of major novelists and prose entertainers from the later 1960s and early '70s: in Mailer's speech to Lyndon Johnson (in 1965) urging him, with as much obscenity and crude familiarity as the lecturer could display, to get us out of Vietnam immediately; in the eloquent pleadings(allegiances) and threatening lashing(violent move) of James Baldwin's attempts to make whites see and accept blacks, in the daffy(crazy, foolish) brilliance of Pynchon's language throughout *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966); or in the forceful(effective) charm with which Roth as comedian came up with one amusing routine after another in *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). The major performer of them all was

undoubtedly Vladimir Nabokov, who in a series of startling novels projected his comic fantasies in a style by turns antic, icy, and weird. When at the end of the decade two of our best, but more conservative, novelists tried to render critically, in vivid detail but in a more traditional narrative, their reservations about American life in the late 1960s, they offended some readers by acting as if such a rendering by an individual imagination could still be made. Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) and John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971) remain interestingly combative and tendentious(biased) views of the "liberations" of a just-ended decade.