

1960s COUNTERCULTURAL FICTION

Jack Kerouac had soul, as well as love of God and country. His *On the Road* (1958)—in the bohemian tradition of Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" (1855)—became a model of countercultural rebellion to later generations. By 1961, however, Postmodernists were rejecting God and country. *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, a satire of WWII military bureaucracy, introduced the Postmodernist pose of ironic distance and themes of Atheism, alienation, absurdity and angst. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) by Vonnegut uses the allied bombing of Dresden, where he was a prisoner of war, as a basis for pacifism even though he later acknowledged in interviews that the bombing might have been necessary. Vonnegut embodies the self-righteous liberal hypocrisy that led to Political Correctness. *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) by Pynchon, the epic of a penis exalted as a great novel by Postmodernists with bad taste, likewise blames America for defending itself. *Going After Cacciato* (1979) by O'Brien gives the impression that America fought the Vietnam War not to help an ally resist totalitarian Communism, but to murder peasants and machinegun their water buffaloes. All these countercultural war novels are escapist. All the protagonists run away from reality and from America—to Sweden, France, Nazi Germany, and outer space.

Pynchon saw himself as the literary bridge between the Beatniks of the 1950s and the hippies of the 1960s, which he accomplished with both *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966): "When the hippie resurgence came along... Beat prophets were resurrected"; "Kerouac and the Beat writers." After the 1960s Pynchon became the primary model for younger writers such as DeLillo and Wallace and *Lot 49* became the usual novel used in courses to illustrate elite intellectual Postmodernism. More representative of the 1960s counterculture as a whole is *Trout Fishing in America* (1967): (1) youthful rejection of all authority and convention; (2) following the anarchistic example of Thoreau in withdrawing from conformist society and in becoming more spontaneous and natural; (3) freewheeling, impulsive and unpredictable in form and style; (4) continuing the elegiac *Gatsby* theme of the supposed end of the American Dream; (5) nostalgic for a pastoral innocent young America uncorrupted by adult modern society--on the cover Brautigan is dressed like a frontiersman; and (6) clinging to a utopian dream of combining personal anarchism with communalism in society as a whole—a contradiction. The book is a collection of fragments, as Brautigan himself rejects the ideal of harmonious unity, or is incapable of it. Brautigan shot himself in the head at the age of 49 and Wallace hung himself at the age of 46.

Trout Fishing also has aesthetic characteristics of Academic Expressionism such as rejection of literary traditions and conventions, disconnection, fragmentation, unpredictability, playfulness, unreal characters, lack of closure. Another novel that displays attitudes popular in the 1960s counterculture is *Another Roadside Attraction* (1968) by Tom Robbins, as simple as a comic book. Other countercultural novelists including Pynchon and Ken Kesey stated that adolescent comic books were a major influence on their writing. Like Brautigan, this *Roadside* dreamer craves "the luxury of being simultaneously involved and detached"—both communal and independent. He thinks "The governments of the U.S. and [Communist] Russia are practically the same." One character in the novel is named Marx, but readers should not expect this book to mean anything: "To look for meaning—or the lack of it—in things is a game played by beings of limited consciousness." Nevertheless, Jesus is portrayed as "betrayed" by his religion and is not in Heaven but is a mummy hidden in the Vatican, wrapped in linens "as if the Messiah were an immense overcooked weenie in a tattered bun." Christianity is a lie. "There is no limit to the nonsense some people expect you to swallow." Instead of God, Robbins believes in Tarzan. But this was before the onset of feminist Political Correctness when Jane got really mad.

The countercultural novel most likely to endure is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) by Ken Kesey, because it dramatizes the archetypal conflict between freedom and control, the individual and the State, with the simplicity of a comic book and the power of a nightmare. *Lot 49* is complex, obscure, and undramatic. There are no characters in it, only ideas. *Going After Cacciato* has a more significant structure and chapters of brilliant writing, but the vision is wimpy. Kesey easily pins O'Brien to the mat. Kesey is a Libertarian, not a hippie. He fights restrictions on freedom, in this case represented by Big Nurse, who is essentially a Feminist with an animus against men under her control. The mental hospital that performs lobotomies on men who offend the women in control is a metaphor of American society as a whole. The Feminist movement of the late 20th century made *Cuckoo's Nest* more pertinent. The indoctrination of students to be Politically Correct is a form of psychological lobotomy.

Nostalgic liberals still portray the 1960s counterculture as upbeat about peace and love and brotherhood. But the writers they liked most were not flower children. Carlos Castaneda became their guru for a succession of 5 paranormal fiction books about a sorcerer's apprentice that pretended to be science. Liberals believed his hoax of course. Liberal professors at UCLA awarded him a Ph.D. in Anthropology. Young people experimenting with drugs felt validated by Castaneda's view that civilized people *need* to take drugs to liberate themselves from convention and rational consciousness. This guru preaches total disengagement from society, escape from all responsibility, contempt for ordinary people, anarchistic individualism, cynicism, solipsism, hedonism, deception, Atheism, and being a warrior in relation to other people: "It's better to get something worthwhile done using deception than to fail to get something worthwhile done using truth." The end justifies the means as Hitler said. "What determines the way one does anything is personal power"; "A warrior doesn't know remorse for anything he has done"; "All paths are the same: they lead nowhere"; "A warrior acts as if he knows what he is doing, when in effect he knows nothing."

Kurt Vonnegut was even more popular with the counterculture: "If adultery is wickedness then so is food"; "There aren't any [women in my books]. No real women, no love"; "What makes you think a writer isn't a drug salesman?"; "Being alive is a crock of shit"; "There is not a chance in hell of America becoming humane and reasonable"; "You realize, of course, that everything I say is horseshit." Pynchon: "You can't win, things are going to get worse before they get better, who says they're going to get better"; "A pose I found congenial in those days...was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline"; "Might as well trust somebody evil once in awhile"; "I was hugely tickled by all forms of marijuana humor"; "It is difficult to perceive just what the fuck is happening here."

The best literary critiques of the counterculture and its literature are: "Squeal" (1957) by Louis Simpson, parody of the poem "Howl" (1955) by Allen Ginsberg; "On the Sidewalk" (1959) by John Updike, parody of *On the Road* by Kerouac; *All the Little Live Things* (1967), the complex novel by Wallace Stegner in rebuttal to Thoreau and the likes of Ken Kesey; *Slouching toward Bethlehem* (1968), essays by Joan Didion; *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* (1968), the satire of Kesey and his Merry Pranksters on their hip-critical bus trip by Tom Wolfe in a dazzling prose style; *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), the somber novel by Saul Bellow. "The Sixties produced no enduring innovation in aesthetics." (Charles Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura*, Northwestern U 1985: 6

POSTMODERNIST AESTHETICS

"Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama." (Flannery O'Connor)

"The time for Beauty is over." (Newman, *The Post-Modern Aura*, 24)

Modernists with few exceptions studied the classics. The most influential Postmodernists, though very academic, were poorly educated in the art of fiction: "I rarely read fiction and generally don't enjoy it." (William Gass, professor of philosophy) "I have trouble reading... I would rather drink, talk, or listen to music." (Donald Barthelme, graphic designer) The most elite theorist of Postmodernist aesthetics John Barth dismisses all fiction that differs from his: "It's dismaying to see so many of our writers following Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy or Flaubert or Balzac" [instead of me]. Barth belonged in the fashion industry. Thomas Pynchon was the most influential Postmodernist novelist: "I had grown up reading a lot of spy fiction... Against the undeniable power of tradition, we were attracted by such centrifugal lures as Norman Mailer's 'The White Negro,' the wide availability of recorded jazz, and a book I still believe is one of the great American novels, *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac." The countercultural novelists were even less educated than the academics. Ken Kesey actually opposed studying the classics, read *On the Road* three times and little else. Tom Robbins read *Tarzan* comic books. The most popular countercultural novelist, Kurt Vonnegut said, "I couldn't play games with my literary ancestors, since I had never studied them systematically"; "I wrote without having made a systematic study of great literature." And Don DeLillo: "I didn't study much of anything"; "I was too much of a Bronx kid to read Emerson or Hawthorne."

"All modern [Postmodern] art is unpopular.... It is antipopular... When we analyze the new style we find that it contains certain closely connected tendencies. It tends (1) to dehumanize art, (2) to avoid living

forms, (3) to see to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art, (4) to consider art as play and nothing else, (5) to be essentially ironical, (6) to beware of sham and hence to aspire to a scrupulous realization, (7) to regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence.... To stylize means to deform reality, to derealize; style involves dehumanization.... There is no other means of stylizing except by dehumanization. Whereas Realism, exhorting the artist faithfully to follow reality, exhorts him to abandon style.... It may be said that the new art has so far produced nothing worth while, and I am inclined to think the same.” (Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art*, Doubleday/Anchor 1956: 4-5, 13, 50)

“The aesthetic concept of literature, the very concept of literature as an art, has been under attack most insistently in recent decades.... The political attack, which makes literature a reactionary force though it obviously can be and has been the opposite; the linguistic attack, which despairs of the very possibility of speech; and the anti-aesthetic attack, which revolts against quality and form in favor of sub-literature or the impersonal permutations of the computer.... The dissolution of the concept of literature proceeds thus in two opposite directions: toward impersonal technology or toward subliterature, toward kitsch....

The artist has become too big for art: he regards anything he makes or does as art.... We can't distinguish between a masterpiece and junk.... The inclusion in art of the ugly, the formless, the disorderly, the outrageous and obscene... Even the hospital urinal submitted by Marcel Duchamp or the grocery boxes of Andy Warhol are, somehow, works of art... A ‘sculptor,’ Christo, wrapped a million square feet of Australian coastline in plastic.... The new barbarism, the know-nothingism, the mindless repudiation of the past in favor of so-called ‘relevance’—one trusts that these are only a passing mood dominating in the United States at this moment. We may reflect that this crisis of the concept of literature is confined to small, largely academic circles in France and the United States.” (Rene Wellek, *The Attack on Literature*, U North Carolina 1982: 9-11, 17-18)

ACADEMIC EXPRESSIONISM

Academic Expressionism is academic in that it is written mostly by academics for other academics, is unpopular outside the academic bubble, and requires reading academic criticism to understand.

The Postmodernist inversion of Modernist aesthetics manifest in Academic Expressionism may be seen in the following polarities: Generally, elite Postmodernist writers—Pynchon, Barth, Hawkes, Barthelme--replaced (1) organic with artificial; (2) form with anti-form; (3) design with chance; (4) determinacy with indeterminacy; (5) purpose with play; (6) aesthetic distance with participation; (7) semantics with rhetoric; (8) narrative with anti-narrative; (9) depth with surface; (10) metaphysics with irony; (11) centering with dispersal; (12) creation/totalization/synthesis with deconstruction and antithesis; (13) finished work/art object with process/performance/happening. Some of these and other polarities are listed by Ihab Hassan in “The Culture of Postmodernism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 2 (1985): 119-32.

“Literature is constitutionally reactionary.” (Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques*, Paris, 1964: 254) “The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was”; “Why should things be easy to understand?” (Pynchon) “We have passed the point in civilization where we can ever look at anything as an art work.” (Mailer) “I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting and theme, and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained.... For me, everything depends on language.” (Hawkes) “The principle of collage is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century in all media.” (Donald Barthelme) “I always felt that it was a bad idea...to write a more or less realistic fiction”; “The very idea of the controlling artist has been condemned as politically reactionary, even fascist”; “The possibility of constructing a fantastically baroque plot appealed to me most”; “[I] tell complicated stories simply for the aesthetic pleasure of complexity.” (Barth) “Just fuck it, it doesn't really matter what their names are.” (Vonnegut)

“The relation between the literary world and the academic world was closer than ever [1970], so close, in fact, that it was affecting the history of American literature. Signs of inbreeding had begun to appear. Among the productive novelists attached to faculties were John Barth, Saul Bellow, Vance Bourjaily, Kay Boyle, George P. Elliott, John Gardner, Mark Harris, John Hawkes, and Hortense Calisher, to mention only

a few, and I shan't even try to list the poets, critics, and biographers who were tenured professors." (Malcolm Cowley, *Portable*, 561n.)

Other writers in academe have included Morrison, Stegner, Robinson, Roth, Robert Stone, Tobias Wolfe, T. C. Boyle, Russell Banks, Albert Guerard, John L'Heureux, Gilbert Sorrentino, Tim O'Brien, James B. Hall, Joyce Carol Oates, Robert Coover, Walker Percy, Reynolds Price, Ann Beattie, Richard Ford, Speer Morgan, Donald Barthelme, Frederick Barthelme, A. B. Paulson, Thomas Doulis, John Edgar Wideman, David Bradley, Jayne Anne Phillips, Jay Parini, Barry Hannah, Stuart Dybeck, Joy Williams, Richard Bausch, Mary Gaitskill, Ron Hansen, Jamaica Kincaid, Edward P. Jones, Mona Simpson, Amy Bloom, Peter Ho Davies, Aimee Bender, Gary Lutz, Mary Caponegro. And many more. These writers are very diverse of course, ranging along a wide spectrum from Realism to Academic Expressionism, from Stegner to Barth. Writers who strike it rich can avoid the classroom—Roth, Updike, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Irving, Larry McMurtry.

Gertrude Stein initiated the tradition of experimental writing. In "Picasso" (1909) she excludes all concrete words in a pure example of Abstract Expressionism, the opposite of Imagism. This was called "art for art's sake" and was the credo of Vladimir Nabokov, the refined Russian exile whose sensational *Lolita*, about an amoral pedophile, shocked the country in 1955. Academics and later writers such as T. C. Boyle remain in awe: "Nabokov's playfulness and the ravishing beauty of his prose are ongoing influences." Also influential was the example he set that a writer could achieve critical stature and even get rich by combining sex and style. Nabokov is a Postmodernist also in his elitist sense of superiority. Most readers care about sex but not style.

Realists tend to avoid calling attention to style in order not to break the illusion of reality, whereas Postmodernists give the highest priority to their stylistic performance, as epitomized by William Gass, who published an analysis of Gertrude Stein's style. Gass is likewise an artist for the sake of art, lavishing all his attention on writing pretty sentences and evoking atmospheres without plot. As a professor of philosophy Gass believes that philosophy is the exclusive province of ideas and he excludes ideas from his stories with even more rigor than Nabokov, making his fiction vacuous. The opposite of Nabokov and Gass, Norman Mailer burdens his turgid novels with ideas so adolescent that his flamboyant prose style is all he has to offer—Hipster Expressionism. Thomas McGuane is among the few novelists worth reading for style alone. "University Life" (1997) by A. B. Paulson is Academic Expressionism at its best—allegorical, economical, ironic, satirical, humorous, transcendental, and richly informed by literary history.

One of the novels most admired by Postmodernists is *How German Is It?* (1980) by Walter Abish, who deliberately flattens his prose, eliminating feelings and moral perspective so totally that his narration evokes the consciousness of a sociopath commanding a death camp during WWII: "In my writing I try to strip language of its power to create verisimilitude that in turn shields the reader from the printed words on the page that are deployed as signifiers." The term *signifiers* is current in literary theory, as is the shift in focus from the real world to academic abstractions—"signifiers." As Wallace Stegner put it, "The moment you begin to conceptualize you have lost touch with reality, and...literary theory is all about conceptualizing." The novel is about how Germany has tried to efface its Nazi past and uses Postmodernist techniques including irony, rapid cutting from one scene to another, disruption of sequence, disconnection, and fragmentation. Postmodernists in general are like the Germans in trying to escape the past (and themselves), with pathological results. Abish's short stories have been compared to abstract paintings. In this novel his Postmodernist aesthetics, in particular the cold flat emotionless tone of narration, identifies him with the coldhearted radicals who are bombing and destroying everything built in the New Germany. The radicals are nihilistic in attacking materialism and the style of Abish himself is materialistic--without spirituality, heart or soul.

Likewise without heart or soul is the fiction of John Barth, the leading theorist of Postmodernist fiction. In his story "Lost in the Funhouse" (1968), far from being a poet, the fiction writer is an engineer operating the machinery of a funhouse, Barth's metaphor for a work of fiction--merely "fun." The creative process is entirely rational, mechanical, calculated, and manipulative. The operator controls all the moving figures in his funhouse like puppets. They have no life of their own as characters do in Realism. As revealed in their fiction liberals are disposed to totalitarian control in literature as well as in politics. Liberals incline to

Academic Expressionism as an escape from reality—freedom without accountability (anarchism). But because he does not believe in the soul, Barth is not inspired, he has no access to the imaginative resources of the unconscious mind. Nor can he find any sanction for writing in social history, nor in his own limited life experience. The best he can do is belittle traditions with parodies and subvert the conventions of the art. He turns “Lost in the Funhouse” into a mock fiction writing course, making all the conventions trite by explaining them as he goes along like a magician explaining how he does his tricks while he performs them—a display of decadence intended to illustrate Barth’s contention that literature is “exhausted.” He applies his metaphor to himself with disappointment: “He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has.... He will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed.”

Barth’s major work is *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), his Atheist alternative to the Bible. At the end, after 750 pages of complicated narrative, Barth adds an end note that questions the authenticity of his own text. Ha, ha, ha. He was just fooling around in his funhouse. His story is a farcical fantasy and his tone of parody throughout the book makes it impossible to take it any more seriously than he does. He tries to escape responsibility for his nonsense by denying that he meant anything by it. Barth is responding to the chaotic social upheavals of the 1960s, especially on campuses. He makes the University a metaphor not just of society but of the universe, reflecting the sense of liberal professors that they are the center of the universe. The universe is controlled not by God but by a computer. This begs the question, Who built the computer? Barth conceives of the natural world as a machine like the Deists of the 18th century, but they believed in a God who created it. The programmer of Barth’s universe is a confidence man named Harold Bray, a conservative of course. Called the Grand Tutor, he brays a lot and does bad things that hurt people. Since the university is the universe/world/ society, it must contain both the United States (West Campus) and the Soviet Union (East Campus) under the same administration, implying that they are compatible systems—and compatible also with all the other governments throughout the universe. In the universe of a pacifist liberal professor there are no real wars, only student demonstrations.

Barth replaces God with a computer that can be manipulated by men, the New Testament with the “New Syllabus,” and Jesus Christ with a Goat-Boy. His new messiah was fathered by a computer and raised as a goat, a sort of mechanical Pan. What is lost here most obviously is humanity—heart and soul. Barth thinks human beings should become both more programmed (Socialism) and more animalistic (anarchism)—a contradiction. Like a horny adolescent who has just read some Freud, he thinks the salvation of humankind is free sex—not loving sex, but down and dirty “barnyard sex.” To the Atheist without a heart, the only purpose in life is the gratification of lusts. Giles the goat-boy tries to save the world for hedonists by fornicating in the big computer to reprogram the universe into the wet dream of John Barth. *Giles Goat-Boy* is a pointed rejection of Christ, since the goat is traditionally identified with Satan.

Likewise without heart or soul is the fiction of Pynchon, who became the only Academic Expressionist since Nabokov to gain a wide popular audience. All of Pynchon’s first three novels depend on the quest and other myths, yet mock and subvert them. He also relies on the conventions of detective fiction and science fiction, yet parodies them. With respect to structure, Pynchon is a parasite. His first novel *V.* (1963) attracted young readers with its mysterious paperback cover—like in outer space. Like, *far out*. “Every weirdo in the world is on my wavelength,” Pynchon said. *V.* manifests a vertical consciousness dissociated from the unconscious, displaying why Pynchon does not know whether to believe in his own metaphors and is out of touch with spirituality. His protagonist Stencil spends the whole novel searching not for a white whale or anything alive but for an abstraction—anything beginning with the letter V. This is the letter V, children. Can you think of things that begin with V? Only a Postmodernist would so devote himself to pursuing a “signifier.” *V.* is a succession of disconnected episodes that vary from hunting alligators in the sewers under New York to whites slaughtering blacks in South Africa, all without moral perspective, but with exotic locales, bizarre situations, and haunting atmospheres.

The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) is much shorter, linear, economical, vivid, and funny—animated by cartoon characters with funny names. Most impressive to critics, *it contains metaphors from science!* The plot parallels the countercultural Trystero quest for social justice to the religious quest for salvation, pretending to be noncommittal but implying by the cynical tone, consistent irony and an obscene joke at the end that both quests are futile. *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) makes a penis the hero, turns the WWII ruins of Nazi

Germany into a set for musical comedy, laughs over the death camp ovens, and gleefully drops a Rocket on the head of President Nixon. This is war in the funhouse of Postmodernist fiction.

“Except for *The Recognitions*, the Mega-Novel is a 60s and after development...immensely long novels...written mainly (not solely) by white Protestant males.... Its aim posits disorder, messiness, the chaos of our existence.... The Mega-Novel approximates in verbal patterns what line and color provided earlier in abstract painting.... The clear line of Mega-Novel as a literary genre runs from Gaddis’s *The Recognitions* and his *J R* through John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* and, of course, his *Letters*, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Joseph McElroy’s *Lookout Cartridge* and his more recent *Women and Men*, to...Brodkey’s *The Runaway Soul*, Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, and...Helprin’s *A Soldier of the Great War* and Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost*, perhaps even Alexander Theroux’s *Darconville’s Cat* and David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident*....

Characters are caricatures.... Content is atomic, not coherent.... Confusion and uncertainty accrue; they do not resolve.... It evades closure. It is all middles, often with little or no beginning, and...no resolution.... Without any inside, there is no ending, only process, a continuum...incomplete... The Mega-Novel has forsaken inclusivity for indeterminacy...randomness...self-oriented...elliptical...opaque.” (Frederick Karl, *American Fictions 1980-2000*, 2001: 155-62) The artificiality of this fiction is acknowledged by Pynchon when he makes plastics a model for the “cellular structure” of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Such works are often compared to *Ulysses* (1922) by Joyce, but as a Modernist Joyce believed in God, Truth, beauty, epiphanies, spirituality, archetypal symbolism, enduring myths, classic literature, Neoclassical values, Nature, coherent organic form, and definite endings. That is why *Ulysses* is great and Mega-Novels are trivial. Liberals think Big is Good, in literature as well as in government.

Consider the irony of Barth calling Joyce out of date: “Works like *Finnegans Wake* strike some of us as being, after all, the monumental last cry of a certain variety of modernism and not terribly *consequential*, though impressive in themselves.” (Barth) “The indulgent 800-page books that were written a hundred years ago are just not going to be written anymore and people need to get used to that. If you think you’re going to write something like *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Moby-Dick*, go ahead. Nobody will read it. I don’t care how good it is, or how smart the readers are. Their intentions, their brains are different.” (Cormac McCarthy) The audience for Postmodernist Mega-Novels will shrink with the graduate schools.

CRITICISM OF ACADEMIC EXPRESSIONISM

“‘The new fiction is interested in language and in f-f-form, I guess,’ Tinch said. ‘But I don’t understand what it’s really about. Sometimes it’s about it-it-itself, I think... It’s sort of fiction about fi-fi-fiction.’” (John Irving, *The World According to Garp*, 1978: 181-82)

“A literary generation that appears to specialize in despair, hostility, hypersexuality, and disgust.... Our novelists are the declared enemies of their society.... The principles of restraint, proportion, and a wide representation of all kinds of life—the principles I have tried to live and write by—have all been overtaken and overwhelmed.... I don’t really aspire to write a novel which can be read backwards as well as forward, which turns chronology on its head and has no continuity and no narrative, which, in effect, tries to create a novel by throwing all the pieces in the bag and shaking the bag. It doesn’t seem to me worth doing.... I would deny that technical innovation or experimentation amounts to originality.... There is something ultimately self-pitying in a lot of the inward novels... It’s kind of a disease: attempting to be clever, sexy, or violent. It’s a way of showing off.” (Wallace Stegner)

“The fact that there are so many weak, poor and boring stories and novels written and published in America has been ascribed by our rebels to the horrible squareness of our institutions...and the failure of writers to be alienated enough.... Their radicalism... is contentless.... Some of our most respected novels have a purely mental inspiration.... The ideas in them generally have more substance than the characters who hold them.” (Bellow) “Story as such as been neglected by today’s introverted writers.” (Styron) “This technique for the sake of technique—Catatonic Expressionism. Or parodies of what someone else had already done.... This sort of arranging and rearranging was Decadence.” (Pynchon) “Anyone who’s really tried to write strenuously knows that it’s *much* more difficult to be clear than it is to be hard to understand;

anybody can be hard to understand”; “Think of the reduction in the pleasures that the novel can give us if we have to say that Barth and Gass and Barthelme are the only people who are doing it right, and everybody else should get off the ship.” (John Irving)

“In novels lately the only real love, the unconditional love I ever come across is what people feel for animals.... Before pop art, there was such a thing as bad taste....This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock.” (DeLillo) “What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul?” (Cormac McCarthy) “I did not want my books to be one more tributary to the sea of nonsense that really is what most conventional wisdom amounts to.” (Marilynne Robinson) “Perhaps we should accept the fact that writing and reading are essentially linear activities and devote our attention as writers to those aspects of experience that can best be rendered linearly...instead of trying to force the medium into things that are not congenial to it. I say this with all sorts of reservations, because I *am* interested in formal experimentation.” (Barth) “In post-modern fiction there seems to be a return to the idea of control as an end in itself. In the post-modern novel, control is often a question of individual cunning against conspiracy, of learning from the clues which will permit the stalemate, the survival which must stand for victory (Murdoch, Barth, Pynchon). What of feminist writers? Transcendence in a traditional sense is no more possible for them than for other contemporary writers.” (Donna Gerstenberger, “Women Writers,” *Novel*, Winter 1976: 149)

“Writers like Faulkner and Hemingway proclaimed themselves truth seekers; how do post-modernists differ?... Some contemporary writers--the hardest ones to read and thus the easiest to teach—claim to be not very interested in ‘truth.’ ‘Aha!’ the critic cries. ‘Post modern!’” (53-4) “Fiction as pure language (texture over structure) is *in*. It is one common manifestation of what is being called ‘post-modernism.’” (69) “The term ‘post-modernism’ not only isolates a few writers and praises them, beyond their due, depressing the stock of others or willfully misreading them; it judges cynical or nihilistic writers as characteristic of the age, and therefore significant, and thus supports even celebrates ideas no father would wittingly teach his children. Some critics deny this...but the writers they then talk about are invariably the ‘postmodern’ ones--the writers the new term was invented to explain; moreover, in a world which values progress, ‘post-modern’ in fact means *New! Improved!* When a contemporary writer, however young, and vigorous, however wildly experimental, is identified because of his stodgy Faulknerian values as ‘modern’ --that is, ‘old-fashioned’--not only that writer but the morality he defends is removed from serious consideration.” (55-6) (John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction*, 1978: 53-56, 69)

“‘Solipsism binds us together’; ‘It’s like a fugue of evaded responsibility’; ‘Metafiction is...the act of a lonely solipsist’s self-love’; ‘Robbe-Grillet and McElroy and Barthelme can fuck themselves awfully well’; ‘It’s increasingly hard to find valid art that is about stuff that is real’; ‘It doesn’t engage anybody’; ‘Postmodern irony and cynicism’s become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy’; ‘Most likely, I think, today’s irony ends up saying, ‘How totally banal of you to ask what I really mean’; ‘If what’s always distinguished bad writing—flat characters, a narrative world that’s cliched and not recognizably human, etc.—is also a description of today’s world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world’; ‘Look man, we’d probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid it is?’ (David Foster Wallace, hanged himself in 2008)