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THE AGE OF  
THE CRISIS  
OF MAN

THOUGHT AND  
FICTION IN AMERICA,  
1933-1973

MARK GREIF

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OF MAN

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

*The “Crisis of Man” as Obscurity and Re-enlightenment*

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, American intellectuals of manifold types, from disparate and even hostile groups, converged on a perception of danger. The world had entered a new crisis by 1933, the implications of which would echo for nearly three decades to follow: not just the crisis of the liberal state, or capitalist economy generally, and not only the imminent paroxysm of the political world system in world war. The threat was now to “man.” “Man” was in “crisis.” This jeopardy transformed the tone and content of intellectual, political, and literary enterprise, from the late thirties forward, in ways that—because they are so intertwined with panic, piety, and the permanent philosophical questions of human nature—have still not been given an adequate accounting.

To its adherents, the crisis of man specified the danger of the end or barbarization of Western civilization. New conditions seemed destined to snap the long tradition of humanism, the filament of learning, humane confidence, and respect for human capacities that had made intellect modern and progressive since the Renaissance. Thinkers mourned the “end of history” as a forward-moving, progressive stream; it seemed a lonesome terminus in their eyes, and not a fulfillment as in our contemporary “end of history.” Their fear, above all, was that human nature was being changed, either in its permanent essence or in its lineaments for the eyes of other men. The change would have the same result in either form: the demolition of those certainties about human nature, which had been pillars for optimistic thinkers for two centuries.

The Rights of Man had been the foundation upon which modern democracies were built. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men . . . are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” the Declaration of Independence asserted in 1776. “[T]he only causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of Governments,” allowed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, are the “ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt of the . . . natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man.”<sup>1</sup> After 1939, the unalienable rights of man could not be taken for granted in Europe, as “man” was being alienated and eradicated, altered and undone. These erasures largely occurred at gunpoint, of Nazi, Soviet, or fascist

arms, though intellectuals took the threat to be much more general. Perhaps men had been better off in ignorance and naive hopefulness, except that, the intellectuals warned, it was this blindness that had prepared the field for the disasters of Nazism and totalitarianism.

Meditations on fundamental anthropology are as continuous a stream of introspection as one can find in the history of philosophy, alongside questions of the substance of the world and the nature of the heavens; you can reach down and pull up a dipperful of speculations on the human in any year. The distinct return of man as a center of intellectual inquiry, apart from his scientific, practical, or religious nature, marks more definite occurrences within the long philosophical trajectory of the history of the West, and the period of the interwar years and World War II constitutes one such landmark. In this moment, the modern progress of expanded rights and protections for oppressed human groups and ignored subjects—the nonwhite, nonmale, and the nonelite—gave way to a renewed inquiry into the majoritarian, unmarked human subject itself, to change and reground the rationale for human moral status and inviolability.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, intellectuals debated a fundamental abstraction. “Whatever be the line of inquiry, the thread leads back to man. Man is the problem,” the Jewish sociologist of religion Will Herberg wrote in 1951, speaking for a perception of the uniqueness of his time.<sup>2</sup> His mentor, the Protestant neoorthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, had stated the discourse’s difficulty, however, along with its necessity, a decade earlier, near its inception: “Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? Every affirmation which he may make about his stature, virtue, or place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analysed.”<sup>3</sup> Interminable analysis itself also became the intellectuals’ form of action, a means to pull others into the framework of affirmation and contradiction that their thought created.

#### “CRISIS” AND “MAN”

“Crisis,” in the context of 1939, had been a thundercloud continually forming new shapes since World War I. Eric Hobsbawm has stressed the thirty-one years of continuous war that define the early twentieth century, one year more than the Reformation’s bloody thirty-year realignment of Europe from 1618–48.<sup>4</sup> It was a single movement, in a way, of changed political, technological, and philosophical norms for Europe. Hobsbawm observes that those shielded from intervening events, as in England and America, could see it as two discrete wars separated by a bad but recognizable peace; this is how Americans do tend to see it today. In fact, at the

time, intellectuals attuned to Continental events could also see it as continuous, from whichever country they looked. From the vantage of England, E. H. Carr, the Cambridge historian, had it as the “Twenty Years’ Crisis” in 1939, a continuity of instability from Versailles to the invasion of Poland.<sup>5</sup> Safely in America, the German émigré Hannah Arendt in 1951 described it in this way: “Two World Wars in one generation, separated by an uninterrupted chain of local wars and revolutions, followed by no peace treaty for the vanquished and no respite for the victor,” ending “in the anticipation of a third World War between the two remaining world powers.”<sup>6</sup> In any country, those with eyes open to the affairs of the world, or ready to listen to such authorities, could sense they were living in a unique and uniquely bad time.

American intellectuals who identified themselves with world politics could recite a continuous list of crises leading up to World War II. They had learned the litany from their newspapers or from networks of political comradeship: 1928, Stalin’s expulsion of Trotsky and the old revolutionaries to concentrate his power; 1929, the stock market crash and global depression; 1931, the Japanese militarists’ occupation of Manchuria; 1933, Hitler’s electoral takeover; 1935, Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia, raining bombs and poison gas on lightly armed Ethiopian soldiers; 1936, Franco’s revolt against the Spanish Republic and the rumbling bloodshed of the first fully ideologized, internationalist war in the midst of Europe; 1939, Hitler’s capture of Czechoslovakia, secret nonaggression pact with Stalin, and invasion of Poland to launch World War II. By 1940, France had capitulated, and that signified, in essence, the end of Europe. It was done. From Portugal to Spain to Russia at the furthest meridian of the Continent, democratic forms had expired, either by murder or acquiescent suicide. England stood alone against the ruined Continent, its shapeless island not more than twenty miles separated at Dover from the Normandy coast through which Hitler seemed likely to invade. This meant that those in the United States, who suffered none of these disasters, still knew that the political philosophy of fascism, and its means of controlling populations through terror, complicity, and mobilization (the potent trinity that was very early on called “totalitarianism”), spelled something terrible for the liberal-democratic West and the European tradition with which Americans identified.<sup>7</sup> Serious arguments were proffered that the world was becoming totalitarian because the totalitarian model of the rule of men was more efficient and effective than the liberal state’s manner of leaving men on their own, proposals that reinforced the 1930s intellectuals’ habitual mistrust of liberalism or fears on its behalf. In the press, too, the world conflict reflected rival models of man. *Time*, in its year in review for 1941, pronounced in its books section, a few years late for the intellectuals, that “The greatest



challenge of all” that year “was the triumphant emergence of a new human type, totalitarian man—superbly armed, deliberately destructive and dominant—at the very heart of what had been Europe’s cultural sanctuaries.”<sup>8</sup>

Visions of the “new man” preceded National Socialism in avant-garde artistic and political utopias of the early century.<sup>9</sup> Yet Hitler’s revolution made the rhetoric distinctively its own. Contemporaries could cite Hitler’s boast to Hermann Rauschning: “Those who see in National Socialism nothing more than a political movement know scarcely anything of it. It is more even than a religion: it is the will to create mankind anew.”<sup>10</sup> Historians of fascism validate the seriousness with which observers in the thirties viewed promises that today seem outlandish, as research has confirmed the centrality of new man theory to propaganda and practice.<sup>11</sup> Joachim Fest has emphasized how “[i]n countless speeches and proclamations Hitler again and again conjured up the image of the ‘new man,’ and the many people who acclaimed the regime, who applauded every step it made and every point in its programme, celebrated the development of this man as the dawn of ‘the truly golden age.’”<sup>12</sup> The cynicism and idealism of the people-shaping program of the Nazi leadership was familiar to Americans who had read the regime’s chief scriptures.<sup>13</sup> In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler warned “that by the clever and continuous use of propaganda a people can even be made to mistake heaven for hell, and vice versa, the most miserable life for Paradise.”<sup>14</sup> In the other official best seller of Nazi Germany, the Aryan race theory diatribe titled *The Myth of the 20th Century*, Alfred Rosenberg specified that the “measures taken on all social planes to mould a new human type” would define a complementary “task of the twentieth century.”<sup>15</sup>

Humanity was divided, said new man theory. The divisions must be accelerated and completed. National Socialists must be taught to identify declining specimens, a subhuman within humanity. This was *Der Untermensch*, eponymous subject of an SS tract from 1935. “For all is not equal which bears a human face! Woe to him who forget[s] this!”<sup>16</sup> Against an Aryan ideal stood the degenerate image specified in the Nazi book *The Counter-Type (Der Gegentyp)*, 1938), which “stated clearly what was involved in the sharp distinction.”<sup>17</sup> Italian fascism advertised comparable ambitions to divide and transform man. Mussolini’s famous 1932 article in *Enciclopedia Italiana*, ghostwritten by Giovanni Gentile, extolled a new “fascist man,” while at the “totalitarian leap” (*svolta totalitaria*) later in the decade, “[a]nother activist party secretary, Achille Starace . . . led a campaign to shape the Fascist ‘new man’ by instituting ‘Fascist customs,’ ‘Fascist language,’ and racial legislation.”<sup>18</sup>

But Hitler excelled all other totalitarian visionaries in his institutions for reshaping the clay of human life and firing it through violence and

crime. “In my great educative work,” Hitler said, “I am beginning with the young. . . . In my *Ordensburgen* [the Nazi academies] a youth will grow up before which the world will shrink back. A violently active, dominating, intrepid, brutal youth—that is what I am after. . . . In this way I will eradicate the thousands of years of human domestication. Then I shall have in front of me the pure and noble natural material. With that I can create the new order.”<sup>19</sup>

With the US entry into the war after Pearl Harbor, government and mass-market magazines began to take up the language of the new crisis, adding the values of man to those fundamentals that democratic armies defended. *Fortune* magazine produced a major unsigned statement by the editors: “The Heart of the Problem: Without Vision of Deep Purpose We Shall Perish,” and turned to professors of philosophy and theologians for “a general meaning.”<sup>20</sup> Professor William Ernest Hocking of Harvard, in an article on “What Man Can Make of Man,” warned that “In all our doings, and by way of these doings, something is happening to human nature.”<sup>21</sup> The French neo-Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain proposed that “the only way of regeneration for the human community is a rediscovery of the true image of man”—in his case, a Catholic image.<sup>22</sup> As a new School of the Humanities was launched at Stanford in 1942, its dean posed, against the outer crisis of the Axis onslaught, the “internal crisis” of the new sense of man, both for evil and good: “Today we see [man] turning the weapons of his brain against himself—groping, amid the noise of a tottering civilization, for some faith in man to which he can cling.”<sup>23</sup>

One can detect much in the early discourse of the crisis of man that is desperate and hortatory. But philosophical intellectuals and practical commentators of the true crisis of man discourse alike tried to understand why Europe had gone under and how England and America might not. They asked what man was, in what part of himself he should have a steady faith, and how he had come to this pass. A confusion and difficulty of the philosophical intellectuals’ enterprise is that they were claiming to ask anew a question that we know they had always asked. Philosophers had contemplated man’s nature for three thousand years. “What is man?” as a discrete phrase is a cliché twice over, and belongs to two different points of origin. One is the Bible: “What is man?” is heard in both Job and Psalms.<sup>24</sup> But “What is man?” held a hallowed place, too, in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It is remembered from the handbook to Kant’s *Logic*, where he says that there are only four true questions of philosophy in its universal sense: “What can I know?,” “What ought I to do?,” “What may I hope?,” and “What is man?”<sup>25</sup>

When the intellectuals took up man in the recognizable language and concepts of midcentury, they created a historically specific configuration.

These intellectuals attempted to wrench the question free of the context of homiletics, invest it with the utmost urgency, and answer it inductively in a single book, sometimes of 300, 600, or 700 pages. Their seriousness was not a hoax. The inquiry was taken up by major thinkers not dealing in clichés or trafficking in old religion. Yet there is always something odd, unnerving, in this tenacious grasping of a question that really might have deserved its neglect as a sermon title or a lecture-room chalkboard scribble. And one is struck by how many significant secular books in the period begin, in their first line, with the cliché, making no attempt to evade the echo. “What is man?” the German émigré philosopher Ernst Cassirer labels his first section of a short summary book of 1944 written for Americans to cover the body of his own thought and the fundamental questions of philosophical anthropology.<sup>26</sup> “What is man?” the native-born historian and urban theorist Lewis Mumford begins another major book of 1944 within his series of researches on civilization and technology.<sup>27</sup> It is in the dissident theologians’ work as well, renewed: Martin Buber, for example, used the phrase in a mixed philosophical-theological register (as “Was ist der mensch?”) in his inaugural 1938 course of lectures as an émigré to Jerusalem, after years of being monitored and harassed by the Gestapo.<sup>28</sup>

Man became at midcentury the figure everyone insisted must be addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the center, the measure, the “root,” and released for “what was in” him. But the thinkers who encouraged this were not, themselves, naive. Paragons of erudition, most knew the shape of other answers, the profusion of historical shrubs and undergrowth on this plot of ground that might tempt one to call the query an unanswerable. The more skeptical among them acknowledged that every effort to specify what the quiddity was that defined man seemed doomed. They had to admit to many previous definitions, as the Oxford philosopher R. G. Collingwood noted:

We know, or at least we have been told, a great deal about Man; that God made him a little lower than the angels; that Nature made him the offspring of apes; that he has an erect posture, to which his circulatory system is ill adapted, and four incisors in each jaw, which are less liable to decay than the rest of his teeth, but more liable to be knocked out; that he is a rational animal, a risible animal, a tool-using animal, an animal uniquely ferocious and malevolent towards his kind; that he is assured of God, freedom, and immortality, and endowed with means of grace, which he prefers to neglect, and the hope of glory, which he prefers to exchange for the fear of hell-fire; and that all his weal and all his woe is a by-product of his Oedipus complex or, alternatively, of his ductless glands.<sup>29</sup>

Still, Collingwood sat down to write his *New Leviathan: Or, Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism* in 1942, in the midst of the bombardment of London, as the only way he knew to contribute to the war effort. Knowing already the difficulty or even absurdity of the project, he began his book, too, with those three words that open other books of the period: “What is Man?”<sup>30</sup> And he intended—like the others—to answer.

#### ANSWERS AND NON-ANSWERS

In one sense, the intense early thinkers of the discourse of man did answer their questions. They said what man was and what he must do. What he must do was, generally, to stay, or become, whatever they said he was already, or to avoid becoming, or not surrender to, whatever he was tempted to be but should not be. The shape of the answers becomes clearer through comparison. They enjoy a limited range of variety.

For Reinhold Niebuhr, man was a being made by God, yet one who sinned in hubristic efforts at self-transcendence (an orthodox theological answer). For Ernst Cassirer, man was naturally made to transcend himself through intellect, his only “essence” his functional ability to frame concepts as symbols and thereby extend his humanity (a neo-Kantian philosophical answer). For Martin Buber, humanity was that which emerged in the semimystical relation between man and man, having reality neither in the individual nor in the collective (a mystical theological answer). For Julian Huxley, man must be measured scientifically by his “welfare, development, and active participation in social processes” and would be defined by a less personal social standard in the new “Age of Social Man” (a utopian technocratic answer). For Collingwood, man would persist only in a civil community, which meant one in which all human relations were purged of the use of force (a liberal philosophical answer). For Erich Fromm, man would indeed be *known* ever more deeply by psychological science, but in his “physico-spiritual” nature, which existed primarily for the better, peaceful realization of a permanent happiness (a humanistic psychological answer). For C. S. Lewis, all men must learn the *tao*, the unity of religious-moral knowledge that underlies all human nature (a conservative amateur-apologetical answer). While for Sartre, “[m]an is nothing else but what he makes of himself” in responsibility and anxiety, inescapably modeling an idea of man for others (an existentialist answer).<sup>31</sup>

In a different sense, these weren’t answers at all. They were, rather, elevations or promotions of one value or position to the status of an ultimacy. Or they were stakes, in the sense of commitments, “antes” in a hand at cards—starting points in the guise of endings. Their challenge seems to lie in the status of any single claim within the context of a multiplicity of an-

swers—a multiplicity sure to be expanded, not convergently diminished, by the repetition of the insistence that one must answer. It would be wrong to be disappointed by the closeness of the thinkers' answers to their previous positions, but it might be equally wrong to judge the significance of this particular claim as comparable to other of their claims to truth and argument.

Besides the puzzling status of the underlying discourse and its mode of answers, however—and although in summary of individual positions it can seem as if the thinkers talked past one another entirely—we can in fact notice that constellations of positions emerge in four areas of great importance. Here were the subquestions of that overwhelming question or imperative: What is man and how shall we rediscover him? These areas were passed on, too, to later iterations of the discourse among debaters and writers of the late 1940s, the 1950s, and early 1960s.

The first area of concern was with what man was himself, and whether there existed anything fundamental beneath his facade, a human nature, determinate and accessible, when all else was social and unreliable. I will call this level of concern by its traditional name of philosophical anthropology, the “philosophy of man,” or simply the “question” of man and human nature. Was there even such a thing as an abstract, universal man? Was there an individual, freestanding nature that could exist beyond all demands of collectives of men? Should there be such individuality, or was community (of the right kind) a necessary part of human nature?

The second area of preoccupation was with the shape of history. The history question included fears that the twentieth-century cataclysms had shown that the chronology of civilized development was not as people had previously imagined it, that events perhaps had no good order, or that previous fantasies of historical destiny and inevitability had actually led to these violent disasters and therefore needed to be reconceived. Was it possible or desirable to rehabilitate any sense of direction in history?

Third was a concern with faith—a vague word—as a worry about both religion and ideology. What sort of beliefs could and should be maintained in the midst of a world turned upside down? Thinkers wondered whether it was possible or wise to believe in anything abstract, lest it lead to the further abuse of concrete human life, after dogmatic belief—in Germany, Italy, and Russia—had led to the worst disasters. Yet how would they go on without a faith in progress, in God, or simply in a natural supremacy of good rather than evil in the world? It had a concrete political reference, too, in concerns over a “crisis of liberalism,” meaning both economy and democracy, and the fear that even if one felt no temptation to totalitarianism, one possessed no reliable historical model for political order under new global conditions.

The fourth area, finally, was a fear about technology, in the sense that human technologies might be outstripping or perverting humane thought and goals. Technology in this debate included material artifacts like machines and bombs, and factory systems to make them, and also human techniques, especially the forms of technique that would organize men and women (whether in collective “planning,” usually counted as good by the political left and center, and questioned by voices on the laissez-faire right, or in machine control and the de-individualizing propensity of technical efficiency, which was universally accounted bad).

If the human nature and faith questions seem abstract while the history and technology questions are specific, this mismatch very much belonged to the intellectual texture of the age, in an effort to attach the empirical to the spiritual, to hold together evanescent beliefs with hard facts of destruction, which were much too present. Human nature, in this particular discourse, is not really about physiology or evolution. “History” means the philosophy of history’s shape and cycles. “Faith” is less about specific doctrines than the socially binding or undermining function of belief itself. Even technology turns into “technics,” an autonomous, world-reordering force.

#### THE USES OF EMPTINESS

One of the striking features of the discourse of man to modern eyes, in a sense the most striking, is how unreadable it is, how tedious, how unhelpful. The puzzle is why it is unreadable. I don’t believe that it’s only because the context, or our assumptions, have changed, or because the discourse of man was finished off by different claims—though all of that is true. Rather, the discourse of man was somewhat empty in its own time, even where it was at its best; empty for a reason, or, one could say, meaningful because it was empty.

Because “empty” belongs to an everyday, nontechnical language, it may be misunderstood. I draw a distinction between two very different forms of cultural conversation: empty discourse and cant discourse. The crisis of man had both, usually but not always among different sets of intellectuals and spokesmen. A cant discourse is one in which the words deliberately do not mean anything that can be questioned, argued about, or refined by disagreement. In such a case, the words themselves, as symbols of mystery or profundity, credential the speaker’s other utterances without adding discriminable content. Cant represents a default of thought, and likely bad faith. It may originate as shorthand for an original debate that no longer exists in the consciousness of its hearers, or it may be floated in order to evade a discussion that the user was never capable of sustaining. It becomes a counterfeit that drives out the good.

The utility of the discourse of man for cant was something that troubled its intellectuals, especially in the later years. Perhaps “the dignity of man” suffered this collapse at midcentury more than any other formulation.<sup>32</sup> In this strain, the “dignity of man” could be made a name for whatever was good about American democracy and bad about the USSR, since one system (democracy) knew what people were “really like” and the other (authoritarian socialism) betrayed human dignity. Or the “crisis of man” itself could become a name for the existence of people without religion or values, or individuals made lonely by the individualism and anonymity of cities in alienation; in short, a new name for solvent features of the modern, which had been better diagnosed by Durkheim, Weber, or many a sociologist from the turn of the century to its middle.

However, there *was* a useful empty discourse of man, something quite distinct, coherent, and credible, if not necessarily always lovable or redeemable seventy-five years after the fact. The midcentury discourse that, in the face of the massive degradation of the rights of man, tried to rediscover a foundation for man’s protection simply said: there must be something that must be protected. The human agency to protect this unknown quantity was absent. And so there was a strong temptation to imagine this protection as self-authorizing, auto-guaranteed. Man must carry his warrant within himself, like his heart or lungs. Any person should have it—whatever it should be, from wherever it came.

The gesture in the best part of the crisis of man that substitutes for grounding, and does the real work of the discourse, was the gesture itself of saying “we must protect.” Also: “there must be something to protect.” Finally, “there must be something that protects itself.” What makes it empty, however, is the consequence when participants successively phrase, answer, rephrase, and reanswer their questions in the service of these imperatives. An empty discourse is one that behaves as if it wishes to be filled with a single inductive or deductive answer—a definitive argument meant to persuade all hearers and end inquiry through complete satisfaction—but in fact generates the continuation of attempts, or tacitly admits to unanswerability.

The value of acknowledging this kind of discourse *as* knowledge might be brought out by a familiar analogy to the therapy of ordinary language philosophy on linguistic analysis. Classic linguistic analysis in philosophy thinks of language most often for its function of description of true or false states of affairs: “Socrates is a man.” “The cat is on the mat.” Ordinary language philosophy pointed out the significant presence of multiple classes of meaningful statements that do not describe states of affairs. Best remembered are “performatives” (in J. L. Austin’s long-ago coinage),

including such statements as “I thee wed,” “I dub thee knight,” “I christen thee *Britannia*,” in which the utterance of each of these statements in certain conditions performed an act.<sup>33</sup> Such a speech-act changed a state of affairs in the world through its utterance as a statement, not by itself offering any rival description or proposition.

Say that the form of discourse in the discourse of the crisis of man, too, is not an ordinary truth-describing discourse. It does not cause convergence upon a solution through adversarial arguments and tests. True, each individual participant in the discourse of the crisis of man may give, indeed, is very likely and even duty bound to supply, a single descriptive claim: “Man is X.” My concern—quite difficult to resolve at the level of individual participants’ psychology, and perhaps only to be decided at the higher level of function and effect—is that it doesn’t seem quite right that when each thinker says “Man is X,” this is truly being promoted as a single, provable explanation, intended to end all debate. The underlying utterance, say, in all these presentations, remains both collective and imperative: “*We must* give a new or renewed statement of what man is.” One does not, in fact, expect to stop others from giving answers; one anticipates ever more answers. The proliferation of answers, not their conclusion, seems to be the underlying point.

#### GENRES, CHARACTERISTICS, AND SCOPE

Characteristic genres of the discourse of man include collective forms that critics of literature and thought ordinarily hold in ill-repute. One is the series of articles by disparate authorities on a theme or keyword. Another is the anthology. A third is the multiply signed “credo”—more like a monument in front of town hall than a manifesto—combining the prestige of intellectual authorities who but for the present emergency would possess no point of contact. The intellectually arbitrary nature of such formal devices contributes to their force in practice—“here are some geniuses who disagree on all things, but *not this*.” When lions lie down with lambs because both fear a bigger beast, humankind must take notice.

As prose objects, instances of these genres can induce the vertigo of hearing a portentous speaker utter completely incompatible statements on fundamentals—like the nameless collective voice in *The City of Man* (1940), tilting between theism and atheism to match its many authors and signatories: “Universal and total democracy is the principle of liberty and life which the dignity of man opposes to the principle of slavery and spiritual death represented by totalitarian autocracy. . . . Democracy is nothing more and nothing less than humanism in theocracy and rational theocracy



in universal humanism. . . . Democracy teaches that everything must be within humanity, nothing against humanity, nothing outside humanity.”<sup>34</sup> Or it suggests an all-inclusive emptiness and circularity, as in the introduction to an exemplary anthology: “Man is a totality; Man is a unity; and it is irrelevant to a true estimation of his nature to develop an infinite multiplicity of doctrines concerning his nature: a scientific one, a philosophical one, a psychological one, a religious one, a secular or sociological one.” For an answer that supplanted others would be in effect totalitarian: “[I]t is productive of tragic consequences to subordinate all other methods to a single approach whether it be a theological, a rationalistic, or an empirical one.”<sup>35</sup> In the mass magazine series, the reader can get the impression that it would be preferable to forget the content of each previous month’s installment by the arrival of the new one.

The characteristic rhetoric and figures of speech of the discourse of the crisis of man turned to spatial figures, and a simultaneous preoccupation above all with limits and depths. The architectonic was inner, vertical, and spherical—of shells and cores, and Man enclosed by nature and intelligence. Sketched, it would look like Vitruvian Man, whom Leonardo drew touching both the circle and the square. Attachment occurred downward by roots, or upward in aspiration of transcendence. Kinship existed in a family conceived as circular, “nuclear” (for the tiny triad at the nucleus), or tied in a “brotherhood” of individuals who stood to one another in relations simultaneously of identity and fraternity: the human family, alike as paper dolls, linking hands and girdling the earth.

The discourse’s intellectual trajectory rose and declined. It gained urgency in the debate over intervention, expanded once the United States entered the war, reached an intellectual peak by 1951, and, at that point, was popularized and banalized. Yet America did not recover “closure” after the war. On the contrary, it expanded its responsibility to the world, at least the “free world.” It may be crucial to know even at this stage of our inquiry that intellectuals through the 1950s would declare the crisis not over; it was only being swept of its detritus and obstructions, the twigs the storm had broken, to be seen ever more clearly. Their depression began even before the Cold War took firm hold, and remained as the Cold War renewed the crisis and somewhat altered its meaning again, in the firming up of bipolarity and the fracturing of the world into hostile camps, United States and Soviet.

The literary critic Newton Arvin tried to explain the widespread return to “fundamentals” in 1950: “For one thing, the nerves of even the most imperturbable might, not incomprehensibly, have been deeply shaken in the last thirty-six years and especially in the last four or five.”<sup>36</sup> Just to make clear what he is saying: Arvin was proposing that the “four or five” postwar

years from 1945–50 might have been more nerve-racking for Americans than the whole rest of the thirty-year crisis since the beginning of World War I. Delmore Schwartz in 1951 described the “mounting and endless crisis” and a “postwar period” that had “quickly assumed the appearance and generated the atmosphere of a new pre-war period.”<sup>37</sup>

Large numbers of people may have felt they ought to have something to say, or know something, or do something, about man. While some of this had to do with the emotion of wartime, it was also a function of elites and public spokesmen who felt it their duty to oblige their fellow men to think about man. The discourse of man was not a popular discourse at its origins. It came from the top and settled downward, finding its way into small officials’ speeches and, presumably, into the crevices of minds. One runs across publications like this one in 1950 from a charitable lecture group called the “Church Peace Union”:

APPENDIX B. SUGGESTIONS FOR ARRANGING  
A SEMINAR ON THE NATURE OF MAN

Those who have read this book will realize that a study of human nature is not an academic pastime in our day. We have seen that leaders of thought trace the so-called “crisis in our civilization” to a crisis in man himself. Hence they tell us that if we would understand our age with its problems of crucial importance, we must find a deeper insight into the nature of man. . . .

SPEAKERS

Many communities could arrange a series on the nature of man by using its own leaders in the schools, professional fields and business world. . . .

PROMOTION

The entire series as well as each meeting must be given wide publicity. . . .

It may also be possible to arrange for programs on the radio—brief addresses by guest speakers or round table discussions on several of the subjects.

And so forth, in “the hope that other communities across the land will arrange series of discussion groups on the nature of man.”<sup>38</sup>

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF NEGLECT

The 1940s, the initial center of gravity for this study, are often just treated in American intellectual history as interim years of war (as if thought

stopped during the largest single cataclysm of the century), or as a divided period, a wishbone that goes half to the “thirties” and half to the “fifties.” The thirties, as the remains of the period of “radicalism” and social consciousness, pick up some portions of the war decade, though often in their dimensions of retrenchment and intellectual retreat. The war’s massive mobilization, and the period of consumer abundance and yet intellectual anxiety and doubt after the war, get taken up into the Cold War and the “adjustment,” “consensus,” and “conformity” that define the stereotypes of the decade of the fifties and the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Even many of the best scholars of the 1940s look for particular impasses or divisions that can break the decade in two.<sup>39</sup>

The crisis of man and its project of re-enlightenment yield a different periodization without such a sharp split: a complete and consistent phase of thought from 1933 to 1951 in which intellectuals looked outward to shared, new threats, and from 1952 to 1973 a still-continuous phase of philosophical demand and rethinking, turning inward toward America while revolving concrete answers, rebukes, and rejoinders to the questions of the earlier period.

It would be odd if scholars had not noted or assessed the discourse of the crisis of man before. They have. Closer to the era itself, in an effort to understand the background to his experience of the 1960s, Edward Purcell wrote a 1972 history of the 1930s and 1940s as part of a “crisis of democratic theory” that is close to my own early account.<sup>40</sup> In political science and jurisprudence, man appeared to translate to the democratic subject or citizen, whom US thinkers questioned in order to seek new grounds for defense. In art history, the scholar of abstract expressionism Michael Leja identified man discourse on the other side of 1945, ably discerning what he termed “the discourse of Modern Man” as a background to Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and their cohort of American painters and their critics.<sup>41</sup> One can piece together a rich and accomplished bibliography on many of the subtopics that the discourse of the crisis of man underwrites in this period: totalitarianism, existentialism, world war, and Cold War propaganda, theological conflicts, human rights, and the United Nations.

The inability to think of the discourse as a generative matrix that subtends these domains and time slices, however, has not just been a matter of chance. The strictures on thought in this area have sometimes had polemical bases, often of the same vintage as the discourse of man itself. We can also write a historiography of neglect. No stricture has been more obtrusive than the thesis of “deradicalization” (also called “depoliticization”). The accusation emerged in the 1940s in internecine fighting on the intellectual left, and only much later migrated from the status of a political attack between former allies to reign as a dominant historiographical thesis. One

thus finds a very young Irving Howe, at this point in 1947 associated with one Trotskyist faction, articulating the full thesis in order to criticize another ex-Trotskyist faction with whom he was still friendly. (His immediate target was Dwight Macdonald's *Politics*; Macdonald had used the same charge in 1940 and 1941 to criticize his rivals; a later democratic-socialist Howe, too, as editor of *Dissent*, would find his own place within the crisis of man repositioning):

The political development of the American “left” intellectuals since the great depression may be charted in four major trends: their attraction to radical politics in the early thirties; their subsequent break from Stalinism and turn to Trotskyism; their retreat from Marxism in the late thirties; and finally their flight from politics in general . . . [in] turns to religion, absolute moralism, psychoanalysis and existentialist philosophy as *substitutes* for politics.<sup>42</sup>

The historical tradition that follows from this polemical chronology dismisses the puzzles and incomprehensibilities of the discourse of man by switching focus to the decline of institutional leftism in the 1930s and 1940s. Historians identify themselves with one or another position of the Old Left. This yields counterfactual speculation on what the discourse of the crisis of man might have substituted for, without trying to reconcile the difficult questions of what it actually was.<sup>43</sup>

The obverse of this mode of neglect is the historiography that constitutes a long progress of progressive-liberal uplift and triumph rather than radical decline. Here, the enigmas and abstractions of the interruption of crisis, and the questionings of man, are not interesting or in need of explanation on their own; they are subsumed within a longer practical project—in the influential work of David Hollinger, for example, “inclusion.” On this story, from the turn of the twentieth century through the early 1960s, white American intellectuals fought to include more and more classes of people in progressive, pragmatic, liberal-Protestant unity, in efforts to defuse prejudice and division.<sup>44</sup> This hopeful line, also historically true for its particular protagonists and at its level of chronology, has the consequence that one cannot really treat the sixties, difference, and “multiculturalism” historically except as a betrayal of prior idealism.<sup>45</sup> Other individual accounts do accept that a “crisis” in thought occurred during the midcentury around totalitarianism and the war—often anachronistically attaching it primarily to knowledge of the Holocaust—but seek the triumphant academic reconstructions that overcame it.<sup>46</sup> The most stimulating histories on this side of the evaluative coin understand “unity” to have been a complicated project, or a congeries of discrete projects, without automatically celebrating its solutions.<sup>47</sup> This mode of historical neutrality can be under-

mined by the fact, however, that the unity, reconstruction, and inclusiveness projects that generated the most unambiguous archives were often those sponsored by the state, or by what we now call “nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” —sources that quickly look like propaganda, for their effort to convince others to unify rather than wrestling with their own doubts or questionings. And once a historian becomes suspicious that the archive is propaganda, the analytical mood is likely to tip back to the more hostile side of the historiographical divide—regretting deradicalization and false unity, and wishing history had furnished something better.

### THE QUESTION OF EXCLUSION

Moreover, to contemporary eyes, the discourse where it is most active and intense neglects some forms of difference that we would think should be acknowledged, if only to be appreciated and included. It was certainly a discourse favorable to “the human family” and “the brotherhood of man,” and its rhetoric was useful to antiprejudice campaigns.<sup>48</sup> But one begins to wonder if the delineation of a human core emerged in some way to regulate whom to accept and whom to ignore. In the discourse’s midst, one finds encomia to the overcoming of difference in unexpected places, as when Hans Kohn, the rather factual and dry Jewish émigré diplomatic historian, ensconced at Smith College and later Harvard, dedicates one of his series of books about Europe’s crisis: “To Those/Who Strove and Fought/For the Dignity of the Human Being/For the Oneness of the Human Kind.”<sup>49</sup> Yet this “oneness” vibrated at a very high level of abstraction. A previous dedicatory page in the series quoted Goethe on “humanity,” Kant on universal history and the goal of a universal republic, and one bar from the ode of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.<sup>50</sup> The truth of the high-intellectual discourse of the crisis of man is essentially that it was so assured of its own wishful operation at a level of universality that it could leave basic forms of exclusion and inclusion unthought. It didn’t have to actively regulate exclusion, because it was incapable of believing difference to have real meaning for its concerns.

Was there no “crisis of woman”? No “crisis of color” in the country where W.E.B. Du Bois edited *The Crisis* until 1934, on the basis that the biggest American problem of the century was the problem of the color line? Two of the most important exclusions from the early US discourse of the crisis of man were indeed those of women and of African American men and women. These groups’ exclusion would matter intrinsically, but also because, from those two perspectives, intellectuals would raise voices later, in the 1960s, to make the most influential and forceful assertions of access to a discourse that they no longer necessarily wanted to join in its original

form. Those who did raise their voices in the 1940s were often ignored. Precisely because such positions are excluded, one must look to special events of catalysis and momentary visibility to see their efforts, to recent specialist histories that have documented their repression, and to individual exceptions that broke through to the public culture (seeing these exceptions as latently representative of what others couldn't say).

At the founding of the United Nations, the inscription of human rights into global law and discourse, beyond the boundaries of any single country, was fought for especially hard by organizations representing "minorities." (We will return to the larger filiation of human rights from the discourse of man in chapter 3.) But as the historian Glenda Sluga has written, "Nora Stanton Barney, writing in the feminist periodical *Equal Rights* in 1946, echoed the sentiments of numerous feminist lobbyists of the UN organization when she claimed: 'We all know only too well, and have heard only too often great speeches on human rights by people who have in mind only the rights of men, and never think of the human rights of women.'"<sup>51</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt had been made chairwoman of the Commission on Human Rights, representing the United States. She had been chosen in large part for her enormous prestige as wife of the leader of the Allies, the late Franklin Delano Roosevelt; also because human rights were considered diplomatically minor compared to the Security Council and General Assembly, therefore an appropriate outlet for women's topics and inclinations. Still, only one other woman served as a nation's delegate to the Commission: Hansa Mehta of India, an activist and legislator involved in Indian independence.

According to Kirsten Sellars, "Mehta, and members of the Commission on the Status of Women," objected to a preamble proclaiming "All men are brothers," "and proposed instead 'all people' or 'all human beings.'" Roosevelt quashed the effort to enumerate women as distinct. "American women, she argued, did not feel excluded by the Declaration of Independence's reference to 'all men.'"<sup>52</sup> From other feminists' protests, as Glenda Sluga has written, the Commission on the Status of Women had emerged "out of the fear expressed . . . that women would be forgotten or submerged in the assumption of universality"; then, "once it was created, was effectively marginalized by the Human Rights Commission."<sup>53</sup>

"Man" language, and the thought of superior male standing that it often conveyed, unquestionably remained the lingua franca for philosophical and reformist writing in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Sometimes, in prose by women participants, the use of "Man," "man," and "he" seems compulsive and disconcerting. Ruth Anshen Nanda, friend and facilitator to "great men," will tell us that "Man alone . . . is free to examine, to know, to criticize and to create. But Man is only Man—and only free—when he is con-

sidered as a being complete . . . for to subdivide Man is to execute him.” “Honor to those heroic warriors who have preserved for us the priceless heritage of freedom and have kept undefiled the sanctity and divine fire of the essence of Man!”<sup>54</sup> Among Nanda’s eighty-five invitees to her three edited volumes of original writings on the crisis of man by the world’s most eminent minds—covering the spectrum from Einstein to Bergson and Malinowski to Piaget—stood only one woman, Margaret Mead. In other writers’ work, including that of Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Hannah Arendt, one may be able to detect interesting modulations in the way man rhetoric is used. Simone Weil, for example, when she sat to write *The Need for Roots* in London in 1943, interestingly used the masculine language of “a man” and “men” when she generalized in a secular spirit in her first pages, but turned to “the human soul” (*l’âme* or *l’âme humaine*) as she reached for higher spiritual values, and made good ultimate use of the “human being.”<sup>55</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir, in Paris, was the truly exceptional figure who broke through and undid the limitations of male language and thought when, in 1949, her *The Second Sex* explicitly announced the inadequacy of a purely male phenomenology of human being. Just three years earlier, as a defender of Sartre but a rising philosopher in her own right, in the orthodox existentialist *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she had used the familiar encompassing language of “man” and “Man.” Indeed, she had internalized it to the extent that in that book, the generic human individual in rebellion is typified as the “young man” (“A young man wills himself free”); wisdom is the young man’s mature consciousness of conflict and world-making with other men (“To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations”).<sup>56</sup> In *The Second Sex*, however, Beauvoir worked out a true alternate language of “Woman” and “women” in a long braid with “female,” “feminine,” “human,” “man,” and “men.” Claiming a common quandary with the American “Negro” and “the Jew,” Beauvoir claimed a common humanity—“The fact that we are human beings is infinitely more important than all the peculiarities that distinguish human beings from one another”—based on mortality and *need*: common nature is “the same essential need for one another.”<sup>57</sup> Her final lines in 1949 rise to a pun on the “brotherhood of men,” the familiar phrase to which Hansa Mehta had rightly objected at the United Nations. Of course *fraternité*, brotherhood, holds a special resonance in French because of the trinity of values of the Republic: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. “To gain the supreme victory,” Beauvoir wrote, “it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation *men and women* unequivocally affirm *their brotherhood*.”<sup>58</sup> For all this, Beauvoir was ridiculed, vilified, and misunderstood by critics in the United

States and France. Her book's public appreciation wouldn't occur until the late 1960s.

For African Americans, recent scholarship has shown the extraordinary lengths to which the Truman-era State Department went to restrict the forms of black Americans' appeals to human rights possibilities. The state itself worked to make sure that appeals to universality went only in some directions and not others. One direction, acceptable to the Democratic administration and white liberals, led toward civil rights rather than human rights.<sup>59</sup> The other led to a focus on the Jim Crow South as a singular atavism, rather than affirmation of the continent-wide African American presence as an inner nation, comparable to colonial states and the emerging postcolonial nations of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>60</sup> African American intellectuals meditated and pursued both routes. Left internationalists with Communist ties, like the singer Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois, were persecuted and deprived of their passports as betrayers of their citizenship and dangers to America until the Supreme Court ruled in 1958 that this was not within the power of the secretary of state.<sup>61</sup> Apparently more mainstream organizations like the NAACP, under its pragmatic chief Walter White, turned out to have had their own actions and militancy determined by threats and advice from white liberal friends, including Eleanor Roosevelt, to steer clear of appeals that went beyond remedial civil freedoms (which should already have been guaranteed by rule of law) or the integration of government-run institutions.<sup>62</sup> The American discourse of the crisis of man in general was surprisingly oblivious to colonial thinking, and the futures after World War II of the colonial, soon-to-be postcolonial, peoples. Of course, the United States considered itself to have no colonies.

When it comes to other forms of difference that we now consider central but that were, in the 1940s, derided or invisible, instances of self-assertion in terms of the discourse of man can be glimpsed. They adapt its principles to their own needs. The gay poet Robert Duncan advocated in the radical journal *Politics* for "homosexual rights," but only, he said, if they were an aspect of universal "*human* recognition and rights"; for the separatism and difference of even "the most radical, the most enlightened 'queer' circles" make "a second cast-out society as inhumane" as the mainstream "inhumanities of [heterosexual] society." "[T]he growth of a cult of homosexual superiority . . . is loaded with contempt for the human," Duncan wrote. "[O]nly one devotion can be held by a human being . . . and that is a devotion to human freedom, toward the aspiration of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations. To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, religions, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance."<sup>63</sup>



## WHAT IS RE-ENLIGHTENMENT?

The discourse of man intellectuals' thoughts were elsewhere—specifically, perhaps surprisingly, on the historical event they called the Enlightenment. It contributed to their most general answers to the questions “Where had the world gone wrong?” and “Where would one start to set it right?”

The crisis was understood by midcentury intellectuals to be a legacy of the Enlightenment, which had failed them and, if fixed, could save them. “The contemporary human crisis has led to a retreat from the hopes and ideas of the Enlightenment,” regretted Erich Fromm—but philosophers couldn’t simply return to where their kind had been before.<sup>64</sup> Often they called out in anguish for the creation of a new “humanism,” which they meant in its loosest sense: a respect for the human being, a measuring of all actions and behaviors by the individual human scale, human mores, humaneness, and humanity. “The idea of man, the counsel of a new humanism, are certainly the very last things to move the present world to a fundamental change” by themselves, wrote Erich Kahler, “[b]ut we may expect this idea to force itself upon men when the course of human events” itself forces it.<sup>65</sup> Their thorough reviews of the modern period to find a flaw or a definite, earlier moment of decision about man’s nature—in fairly fixed, endlessly reiterated comparative histories of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries—spoke insistently to the question of the Enlightenment and their idea of its repair.

Their Enlightenment—as they recalled or reconstructed it—was the era that created a human subject who did not derive his stature from the authority of the Church, or from rulers, or from any state. The political community to which this new man would belong could be constituted only as the expression of his will and consent and that of his equals, his fellow citizens. Man had entered an age in which human inviolability would become self-evident. Man had gained a maturity such that he would not give up his freedom willingly. The era had culminated, without any doubt, in the late eighteenth century, when it wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. It took the republic as its ideal state form, which seemed at a certain point to have spread to nearly all of Europe as well as America. Though it could invoke the names of Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire, for these intellectuals, focused on Germany and German philosophy, it had Kant as its final formulator and culminating figure, backed by Herder, Schiller, and Fichte. Where rulers maintained oppression by tradition—in imperial political forms that boiled down to tyranny—they would be undone by a gradually enlightened populace. Where holdouts had not heard the Good News of this En-

lightenment, they would be reached by the free circulation of speech and ideas.

That was because the other key aspect of this remembered Enlightenment, besides the change in the stature of man, was its doctrine of progress. Enlightenment was ongoing, teleological, and irreversible. In a first development, man came to have rights and to know the rights of his fellow men by sympathy or sentiment. In a second development, logically and concretely, no one who knew the Rights of Man would be able to justify their violation for others, or would ever will away his own prerogatives. To scholars of the Enlightenment as a historical movement, in its many national variants and philosophical epochs and contradictions, this verges on cartoon. It was the sketch that functioned as a vade mecum for the midcentury intellectuals, however, and so matters to us.

Re-enlightenment differs from a “revival” of the Enlightenment project. Nor did it constitute a “Second Enlightenment.” The midcentury re-enlightenment did not attempt a systematic philosophy, and did not produce one or any full self-consciousness of what it was attempting. Nor did it produce individual figures of systematic philosophizing of the stature of Kant, Rousseau, Hume, Voltaire, Locke, or Hobbes.

The midcentury generation’s way of addressing the crisis of man represented a consensus that something specific had gone wrong and must be made right. Man must again be made self-protecting. “Autonomous humanism” might be a term for what the practitioners believed they were providing—a respect for humanity that would once again let the human being give the law to itself and all men. But the freedom of man as a self-lawgiver was no longer something they could hope for without reservation, as a consequence of human beings’ rational faculty or the ethics that had depended on it. The Nazi jurist and minister of justice Hans Frank, according to Hannah Arendt, wrote in his book *Technik des Staates* (1942) of a new “categorical imperative in the Third Reich . . . ‘Act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew your action, would approve it.’”<sup>66</sup> They had thus seen how Kantian rigorist “duty” could be perverted, among the Nazis, into the duty to do wrong. In implying that they wanted only a *re*-enlightenment, it seemed American intellectuals could stand for a humbler effort to restore the project of human liberation, now understood simply as protection and restraint, without the grandiosity or vulnerability of the earlier age’s vision.

Perhaps the point of differentiation is that what the midcentury intellectuals really tried to launch (with long-lasting consequences) was not just a new moral autonomy but rather an autochthonous humanism—human respect giving its grounds entirely to itself, without God, natural law, positive fiat, or even anything identifiable about the human person like “rationality.” Here is the sunken treasure a historian detects in all the intellectuals’

fantasies: a human stature self-born, sprung from its own brain like Zeus from the monstrous Chronos; humanity freestanding, rootless, but nevertheless protected—for it would carry its warrant, without criteria, within itself. It would be humanity without religious sanction, political affiliation, tribal identity, or outside tie, yet still be inviolate: the human as such.

Re-enlightenment at its most thoughtful was chastened, modest. It wanted to know what had gone wrong with the rights of man. It did not insist that it knew how to restore or replace these rights, only that something must be done. It did not often blame the Enlightenment wholesale (though, as we will see, the Frankfurt school émigrés did, and some unexpected American colleagues came close), but neither did it venerate the eighteenth century or insist on its return just as it was. Above all, re-enlightenment represented a questioning of what could be left of the Enlightenment without the idea of progress.

Of course, it took a certain desperation to revive the question of man as the intellectuals did; also a certain hubris. Their grandeur of thought and inclination toward a total project was in its way characteristic of the time. In an era of cataclysm at the largest scale, thinkers were familiar with solutions at the largest scale, through force of arms, planning, and worldwide organization, even when their global solution turned out to be a council of limit. So if there was reason to believe in any new large-scale settlement of the nature of mankind, the passion of re-enlightenment was not only a form of humility but a new kind of ambition.

## MAIEUTICS

What shall we call a discourse whose central function has the form “We must ask,” “We must think,” “We must answer?”—yet does surprisingly little work of disputation, selection, and mutual destruction among the answers? Evidently the discourse is interrogatory, imperative, and ramifying. But these do not capture the whole tenor of the function in its demand to bring ideas to birth as a means, too, of coalition, and interpersonal mobilization. Nor are words for discourses, which are the seeming opposite of what is being undertaken—such as the probative, determinative, or conclusive, the apodictic or assertoric—wholly negated by the practice of the discourse. It does make use of proofs, answers, demonstrations, and assertions, but to a different purpose.

I think we can call a discourse of this form maieutic. The maieutic, by insistent and forceful questioning, seeks to bring into being and bring to birth *in another person* answers that will reward the questioner’s own belief in the character of the universal capacity for thinking—and do something to the other person’s character, too. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato has Soc-

rates deliver his explanation of his dialectical method of questioning as *technē maieutikē*, “the art of midwifery.”<sup>67</sup> Maieutics as it is modeled in that dialogue does require supplying some answers, as well as questions, introducing some arguments, as well as provoking them in others. The dissimilarity between the particular Socratic case and our general discursive category is that with Socrates, a single man—as ironist, dialectician, or adherent of the theory of recollection—delivers others of wisdom while claiming none himself, extinguishing his claim to creativity: “I cannot claim as the child of my own soul any discovery worth the name of wisdom.”<sup>68</sup> When we look at our discourse, we have in contrast a transatlantic fellowship of individuals who, claiming to make solitary discoveries, draw others into creation. Maieutics are *shoulds* in discourse or within the intellectual life that help to say what must be addressed or talked about, what stands up as a serious or profound question or contribution, regardless of its ability to solve or determine an inquiry.

What is implied by the discipline of coming up with *an* answer, one single answer, to such a question as “What is man?” It is a straitening of thought. The new imperative seems like the acceptance of an impossibility: How could one wish any one thing to be *the* definitive thing? It is an act of willed restriction. And so it has a dimension of conversion, or consecration of self. After all, what confers the assurance of *depth* in ideas? To some extent, we possess verifiable criteria for depth: complexity, fitness to evidence, originality or unexpectedness, orientation to “first questions,” as well as the latest specialized or recondite ones. But there seem to be further criteria, widely shared, that honor corresponding traits not openly avowable: mystery; appeal to unique intuition (and contact with the ineffable); unknownness, even to the edge of incomprehensibility; and orientation to mortal or primeval concepts (death, time, struggle, will, and limit). The sensibility of depth, rewarded by depth effects, is not entirely alien to the life of the mind. We ordinarily step outside of the discursive system, or systems of thought, when we avow these “depth effects” openly. Yet when it comes to topics like “the human,” as well as some others (conjecturally: those of “the ethical,” “the political,” “the philosophical,” “the humanities,” “God,” “science,” “the natural”), we will need to acknowledge the role of these purposes as a part, even the principal or defining part, of the production, reception, and dissemination of these eminently respectable discourses and their ideas.

The standpoints of the maieutic are three. In one guise, it makes you work on yourself and your own thought, midwife to something that lies inside you and would be valuable to bring out and articulate even if you are in no wise “correct.” From a second standpoint, maieutic stands for the desired effect of your discourse upon others: you supply answers that may

or may not be definitive or final but that draw out a comparable process in hearers. Note that here, too, the purpose is not that another will get the right and final answer or that everyone's offerings will improve and converge upon the right answer. The purpose is that another will undertake the task of speaking, thus doing something to himself and to the listening (or reading) public. In its third-person standpoint, however, maieutic is our analytic judgment upon a discourse that all participants see in more familiar and commonplace terms but we, at a distance, can see pursues a different effect. It names the discourse that we can see emerges in furnishing a *should* to a range of speakers, irresolvably, even when they speak only from their own belief that they participate in familiar discourses of human science.

Midcentury thought faced a desire for a protected human-as-such whose existence it could neither immediately "prove" nor "disprove." Yet thinkers knew they needed (for themselves, and their philosophizing) an assumption of that entity's real existence, or knew that they needed it as an active concept (for other people, for present justice, and for future safety), empty though it might sometimes be, to push men gradually to make it real and full.

In the reconstruction of this discourse as it came into being in the 1930s, strengthened in the 1940s, weakened and was transmitted in the 1950s, and metamorphosed and exploded in the 1960s, we will be moving between explanatory levels without foreclosing any. The greater challenge will not be navigating levels of explanation, however, but seeing how and where the consequences of the discourse touch other worlds of actors and participants. The intellectuals' task, after all, was to give their needy assumptions force within their justificatory framework—but, still more, to find other actors who could carry their questions forward into the world. They might need other forces to develop the requisite new forms of knowledge and will for man.

CHAPTER 4  
CRITICISM AND THE LITERARY  
CRISIS OF MAN

Humanism has always been animated by texts. The fifteenth-century *umanisti* projected their philosophical focus onto man to escape supernaturalism and Christianity, and develop Renaissance learning. They were capable of doing so because they had inherited and plumbed a particular trove of books: the manuscripts of classical antiquity.

Since that time, “humanism,” partly by its sound, has worn other, looser meanings, of something like a love for *Homo sapiens*, respect for mankind. Malcolm Cowley praised this commonsense humanism very eloquently, a few years before the crisis of man, in 1930: “Partly it is an emphasis on the qualities it considers to be essentially human. Partly it is a defense of human dignity, of human possibilities; partly it is an opposition to all the forces that threaten them.”<sup>1</sup> Others in his time who made humanism a positive doctrine insisted they could read empirical truths from man’s persistence, in some traditional or natural form, to rival more idealistic “-isms” (communism, socialism, fascism, Nazism, capitalism) as a source of normative judgment, and make “man the measure of all things,” adopting a dictum of the pre-Socratic philosopher Protagoras, much quoted and abused from the 1930s to the 1960s.

But the concern of humanism with the book constantly recurs, and as Peter Sloterdijk has argued, humanism is rarely just about the benign education of man for his responsibilities of live and let live. It is also always *against* something, because it is always trying to pull man out of a barbarism.<sup>2</sup> One sees a hidden strife of books against books: pagan classics against Scholasticism and canon law or, at midcentury, battles over the creation of a *new* canon of texts that could be at once “humanizing” and value-laden. Even Malcolm Cowley, in his formulation of humanism for 1930, was opposing his common sense to the so-called New Humanism, the conservatism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, a literary-critical philosophy of turn-of-the-century restraint and decorum.<sup>3</sup>

When, after 1939, certain formulations of the restoration of man against his recent degradations turned back to humanism, they again developed it

also in the narrower sense of a concern with the book. The sort of text thinkers turned to, however, was the *novel*—not the tract, not the poem, not the sermon, not the academic report. The novel had the obligation to humanize a fallen mankind.

This was odder, and more time-bound, than we may be prone to recognize. The novel—as a vault of cultural knowledge, a tool for culturing people, and a work of art rather than an entertainment—may really have attained its one permanent high-water mark in the years of midcentury. I think it achieved a cultural authority, and for a period of time sustained obligations of national and moral import (for adults, and not just schoolchildren), which it no longer holds today, except tintured with nostalgia, and may never bear again. The novel became an agent of a certain kind of humanism associated with the restoration of man, reconceived by some important critics as a nationalist or American humanism.

#### BASIS OF THE TRANSFER: FROM CRISIS OF MAN TO DEATH OF THE NOVEL

The forceful and enterprising critic who transposed the intellectuals' arguments about the crisis of man into the terms of the novel was Lionel Trilling. Various deaths of the novel had been proposed in literary culture since the early days of modernism, often to announce that some new literary rival had already arrived. T. S. Eliot and José Ortega y Gasset had been forerunners in pronouncing an end to the novel in the 1920s; one could also point to Paul Valéry and the European avant-gardes from futurists to surrealists. In the Eliot-dominated midcentury, educated readers of 1948 would have known well "*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*" (first published in the *Dial* in 1923) and its flat statement that "[t]he novel ended with Flaubert and with James."<sup>4</sup> However, that end came because, for Eliot, the novel began again with Joyce's discoveries—like "the discoveries of an Einstein." The distinction between the death of the novel in the '40s and its end in the '20s is that the earlier statement came generally as a deck-clearing cannonade, a declaration of the irrelevance or imminent demolition of an old form in favor of some *particular* alternative within sight. These earlier inhuming gestures preceded announcements of an immediate and evident rebirth. Trilling's did not.

"This opinion is now heard from all sides," Trilling wrote. "It is heard in conversation rather than read in formal discourse, for to insist on the death or moribundity of a great genre is an unhappy task which the critic will naturally avoid if he can, yet the opinion is now an established one and has a very considerable authority."<sup>5</sup> He then listed three theses, though, that he thought *could* justify his claim that the novel might be dead. In each, we

can see implied a particular philosophical view of literature's relation to the world, and, in two of them, a connection back to the crisis of man.

He first offered the possibility that the novel might be "exhausted," simply used up, all of its major possibilities explored, "worked out in the way that a lode of ore is worked out" (1272). Trilling explicitly drew this idea from Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish thinker whose 1925 essay "Notes on the Novel" (which elaborated this idea) had just appeared in English.<sup>6</sup>

The exhaustion idea was a formal and aesthetic view, implying a life history of artistic forms and a purely internal story of the development of art. To Trilling, it wasn't very convincing, and he quickly disposed of it.<sup>7</sup> Second, much more promising, was the likelihood "that the novel was developed in response to certain cultural circumstances which now no longer exist" (1272). Drawing on familiar sociological explanations of the rise of the novel as a result of European social conditions, with changes in class structure and the rise of a petty bourgeois and domestic servant-class readership, the turn to secular values, individualism, and romantic love, Trilling could find easy understanding among his readers for a suggestion that if the novel was no longer meaningfully being written, it was because the world and its values had changed drastically yet again.<sup>8</sup> This was the historical view.

The third possibility was that values and circumstances hadn't changed but rather had become so intense—sped up, proliferated, distracting, and excessive—that modern people no longer knew how to use the wisdom of novels, nor would know how to write them in the future. Call this a hybrid technological-anthropological view.

A mixture of the historical and the technological-anthropological worried Trilling far beyond literature: "It is not . . . unreasonable to suppose that we are at the close of a cultural cycle, that the historical circumstances which called forth the particular effort in which we once lived and moved and had our being is now at an end" (1278). Twentieth-century American social class was simply not like nineteenth-century social class; for that reason alone, there would certainly have to have been a historical change in the work of the novel. But then, too, there had been a more indefinable change: a "great . . . falling-off in the energy of mind."

The deep problem was that after World War II, as Trilling spelled it out, we *knew* things, even had seen things, horrors and realities, that the deepest enlightened and skeptical minds of earlier times might intuit but could never confirm, nor convince all men of. Trilling described our knowledge explicitly as a new vision of man. Montaigne, Shakespeare, Swift, and Freud had all detected the depravity in human beings. They worked "to diminish man's pride," and the greatest writers' "demonstration of man's depravity, has been one of the chief works of the human mind for some four



hundred years” (1280). Yet a saving grace of this literature, in the past, was that the reader witnessed such great minds as Shakespeare’s making these baleful discoveries and representing them in rhetorical art. “[T]he activity of the mind was a kind of fortitude” (1278) in these cases. Plus, as long as the bulk of society remained optimistic, worshipped Progress, and believed “in human and social goodness” (ibid.), Montaigne, Shakespeare, Swift, and Freud could never *prove* their case against man (while in their own demonstrations of greatness, they supported man), and thus they did him only good in warning him of his bad excesses.

After World War II, though, too many defenses were gone. “[T]he old margin no longer exists; the façade is down; society’s resistance to the discovery of depravity has ceased; now everyone knows. . . . The simple eye of the camera shows us, at Belsen and Buchenwald, horrors that quite surpass Swift’s powers” (1279). How could the novel help us, when a mindless camera could do all the unmasking itself?

At this point we are in the full tide of those desperate perceptions of our life which are current nowadays among thinking and talking people, which, even when we are not thinking and talking, haunt and control our minds with visions of losses worse than that of existence—losses of culture, personality, humanness. (1280)

The loss of “humanness” became Trilling’s keyword. Paraphrasing Ortega, he admitted that a difficulty of previous modern art had been its “dislike of holding in the mind the human fact and the human condition” (1279). Trilling insisted that the novel would now have to do the work of the *restoration* of the human—the novel, above all other art forms and media. This is because “[t]he novel . . . has been, of all literary forms, the most devoted to the celebration and investigation of the human will; and the will of our society is dying of its own excess” (1280). From unmasking to revival, from negation to affirmation, “[s]urely the great work of our time is the restoration and reconstitution of the will” (ibid.), Trilling wrote. Later, he calls this task “reconstituting the great former will of humanism” (1281). He gives a recipe, in fact, for what he thinks the new novels will be like. They’ll still tell stories, against Sartre’s new, more austere, avant-garde, individualist, existentialist theories of fiction in *What Is Literature?*<sup>9</sup> They won’t be concerned with form. The new novels will, rather, have an explicit relation to *ideas*. They will be novels, in effect, *of* and *for* intellectuals. And, stuck on ideas, they might just find in the “organization of society into ideological groups” (1288) a subject matter commensurate with the older organization of European society into classes.

Trilling was at once highly individual and uniquely positioned to influence an uncommon range of intellectual groups and readers. I suspect he

is to this day probably the best-remembered literary critic of midcentury America, at least by reputation—yet if he was, then and now, the most emblematic and authoritative, he was in other ways anomalous or individualistic. He did not produce a large body of criticism of actual literature. Instead he wrote primarily a series of programmatic essays and occasional statements that stood as idiosyncratic benchmarks for his peers and emulators. As a teacher, then a professor at Columbia from 1931 forward (tenured in 1939), he had the authority of the academy—yet he was famously the first Jewish member of the English department, appointed after a historic struggle with its genteel anti-Semitic faculty, and so he was free of its pipe-tobacco staleness.<sup>10</sup> Trilling kept an Arnoldian tone but published his most important essays in literary quarterlies like *Partisan Review* and *Kenyon Review*. He is associated with the world of the New York Intellectuals, yet managed to stay above the fray, insulated as the cerebral older sibling whom they failed to turn on—in part because the heights of his achievements reflected well on them. Trilling represented ascent into the highest culture, even though he could quite conspicuously make it his job to translate the highbrow for “the people”; from 1951 to 1963, for example, he wrote introductions and enticements for the Reader’s Subscription Book Club and its newsletter, *The Griffin*, purveyor of quality literature (his collaborators were the poet W. H. Auden and the historian Jacques Barzun).<sup>11</sup>

“Art and Fortune” is not a purely representative essay of the time; if I had to make a list of the most influential single essays in criticism of that era, however, I would put it near the top. “[O]ne of the dreams of a younger America, continuing up to recently, was of *The Great American Novel*” (1290), Trilling declares at one point, as if an older America had grown wiser. Yet the effect of the Trillingsque recipe—much as he tried to disown it—really was to help revive the dream of “the Great American Novel,” a phrase (and a dream) that had first appeared after the wounding division of the Civil War.<sup>12</sup> For Trilling’s diagnosis was taken seriously, I think, not only among critics but, grudgingly, miserably, in the quarter where it most mattered—among novelists. His ideas were too much the inevitable, though best, expression of a whole mood of the late 1940s, and the intrusion of the crisis of man into the progress of the novel, to ignore.

#### PRESSURE ON WRITERS: THE CALL FOR AN AFFIRMATIVE LITERATURE

A suspicion one could hold about Trilling’s essay, of course, is that his “opinion . . . heard from all sides” (1271) was really just his own. In fact, it wasn’t. Many of the other “death of the novel” critiques in the 1940s pursued the technological-anthropological argument that events were chang-

ing too quickly for “man the novelist” to master them or for “man the reader” to understand them through fictional art. Hannah Arendt, who in addition to her masterpieces of political philosophy was also a gifted occasional literary critic—writing analyses of Rilke, Kafka, Broch, and Camus—explained at the high intellectual end that in an age of depersonalized “happenings,” novelists “have been supplanted by the reporter.”<sup>13</sup> Clifton Fadiman, the *New Yorker* book reviewer and radio personality (host of *Information Please*), and a former student of Mortimer Adler, warned middlebrow audiences, in his major essay of the 1940s, “The Decline of Attention,” of the dehumanizing, because antiliterate, bias of technology: “It seems fairly clear that in our time the attrition of one kind of attention—the ability to read prose and poetry of meaning and substance—is becoming more and more widespread: and that the faculty of attention in general is undergoing a wholesale displacement away from ideas and abstractions towards things and techniques.”<sup>14</sup>

The *Saturday Review of Literature*, on the other hand, more closely followed Trilling’s historical-change explanation. Human beings had formerly believed in the usefulness of reasoned progress, and thought that if they showed depravity in fiction, then good people would ameliorate it in real life—as after the exposés of Dickens and Zola. Matters had since changed. “Toward the end of the nineteenth century Western man began to lose the certainty that humanity might someday live in a state of grace.”<sup>15</sup> Unless this human hope for “Western man” could be recovered by the novel, it could not fulfill its former office. It must return to hope and values. The Luce magazines (*Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune*) were the only cultural source unembarrassed enough to demand affirmation from new American writers that would be not only redeeming but patriotically American. In the same season with Trilling’s complex essay, *Life* ran an editorial briskly titled “Fiction in the U.S.: We Need a Novelist to Re-Creat American Values Instead of Wallowing in the Literary Slums.”<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that it was the *novel*, not the poem, religious work, or treatise, that had become for all parties the agent of moral, quasi-spiritual uplift. If Trilling warned in “Art and Fortune” that “we have come to overvalue” the novel, he worried about it precisely because he, and others, did in fact now value the novel more highly than any form of art or even intellect. (He meant by “overvaluation” only that he feared that critics had made the mistake of letting novelists know their own magnitude, so that the novel had become self-conscious, therefore self-defeating.) Trilling could say elsewhere, that same year:

For our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years. . . . It taught us, as no other

genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety. . . . Yet there never was a time when its particular activity was so much needed, was of so much practical, political, and social use—so much so that if its impulse does not respond to the need, we shall have reason to be sad not only over a waning form of art but also over our waning freedom.<sup>17</sup>

No novel, no freedom! This was quite a burden to place on a cultural form best known, for centuries, as a not-always-respectable (but sometimes socially reforming) entertainment.

#### AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE DOUBLE CANON

Yet there was another source of the potential “overvaluation” of the novel beyond anything Trilling had in mind—and this represented the culmination of a decades-long enterprise of the twentieth century, coinciding with a sudden university-based demographic shift after World War II and the unexpected spring tide of US geopolitical supremacy.

The years of the 1940s were the era of the final consolidation of American literature as an object of criticism. A small set of works displayed the American genius in a way that could be crated up for cultural export and laid out on butcher paper for internal university cultivation. The case for the greatness of this literature was made not just on its literary achievement but, very often, its national character. The opuses included would show the nation’s individualism, its energy, its religious darkness, its democracy, its philosophical depth to rival Europe, and its fecundity.

The unusual quality of the consolidation was that it didn’t entrench a simple canon, one list of masterpieces proceeding chronologically in a single stream. It crystallized a double canon, the outflow of two currents of privileged achievement, each one lasting not much longer than a decade. These two periods of superior expression stood in parallel to reflect and illuminate each other, forming almost a closed interpretive system through which one could trace the dye of “Americanness” old and new. The two periods were the “American Renaissance,” newly given a name, taking up just a few years in the 1850s, and an unnamed period we would now call American modernism, centering on the decade of the 1920s, though overlapping its numerical limits.

University professors had only begun to teach modern fiction in the later nineteenth century. This supplement to the traditional college curriculum of classical texts had gained a firm establishment by 1890, restricted to English writing (and, separately, “modern” foreign languages).<sup>18</sup> The first college-level course in American literature seems to have been offered as

an oddity at Princeton in 1872. Little else followed before 1900, but a self-consciously modernizing ferment had begun, and by the 1920s, as Kermit Vanderbilt's research has shown, American fiction and poetry was taught "at the more adventurous universities."<sup>19</sup> "[I]t remained a distinctly minor part of the curriculum until after World War II," David Shumway has confirmed, only to become a truly central part of the disciplinary curriculum with the massive influx of new classes and categories of Americans into universities under the postwar GI Bill, who needed a course of study that was secular and morally authoritative but did not require elite "prep" school background in the classical languages.<sup>20</sup>

The 1940s did the defining work that made this curricular transition possible. At one end of the decade, in 1941, the left-wing Harvard critic F. O. Matthiessen enshrined the nineteenth-century American writers definitively and gave the first canonical period its name in his *American Renaissance*, perhaps the most important book in the literary criticism of America during midcentury (and very likely the most influential book of literary criticism of America, ever), a volume released at just the moment the United States was entering the war against fascism. Matthiessen made the case that the single most fruitful and characteristic period of American literature had been the middle decade of the nineteenth century. His list of master authors ran to Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville. With a bit of gerrymandering (especially with Emerson's career), Matthiessen managed to narrow the explosive rebirth of American genius to just a five-year period, with the election to the canon of *Representative Men* (1850), *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *Walden* (1854), and the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855).<sup>21</sup> Despite our reservations that nowadays we would prefer the Emerson of the *Essays: First Series* to that of *Representative Men*, and have favored Melville's shorter works (*Billy Budd*, "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby, the Scrivener") as the best accompaniments to his novel about the whale (though there is always some scholar to champion a reclamation of *Pierre*), this is exactly the canon of books, unchanged, that we still possess as the main American nineteenth-century reading list. It forms the core of any college syllabus.<sup>22</sup>

At the other end of the 1940s—in the year when Trilling mooted the possible death of the novel henceforward, and issued his call for the restoration of human will—the landmark scholarly publication of 1948 was a collective, summary work, offering conclusion to a long search for renewed American literary origins: Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby's *Literary History of the United States*.<sup>23</sup> The two oversized volumes of this history, compiled by a distinguished roster of literary critics, communicated the wisdom of the interwar and

wartime generations of scholarship and replaced the last synoptic attempt, *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917), which dated to the end of the Great War. The contemporary literary historians Evan Carton and Gerald Graff have correctly seen Spiller as both the symbolic final incarnation of the effort of American literature to constitute itself as an academic field in the two decades leading up to World War II and as a declaration of US dominance in the postwar era:

[T]o the editors of *Literary History of the United States* fell the unfinished task of legitimating American literature as a subject befitting America's new international prestige. That meant circumscribing American literature as a distinctive whole, isolating the works that constituted the field, identifying what was distinctively American about these works, and, finally demonstrating their parity with the established English classics.<sup>24</sup>

The archaeological work of reclamation and circumscription had mostly been done earlier. Herman Melville had needed to be rediscovered and redeveloped as a great American author almost from scratch, in work done by scholars at Columbia in the 1920s. *Billy Budd*, a key document in his revival, was only discovered and published for the first time in 1924.<sup>25</sup> The key field-workers at Columbia were Carl Van Doren, who had written up Melville for *The Cambridge History* (1917), and his energetic disciple Raymond M. Weaver, who wrote the first biography of Melville, transcribed and published *Billy Budd*, and introduced the first Modern Library edition of *Moby-Dick* (1926) and the landmark publication of Melville's *Shorter Novels* (1928). Lewis Mumford himself contributed to the revival in 1929 with a biography, *Herman Melville*, which reached a bigger audience through the Literary Guild book club, making the case for Melville as comparable in depth to Dostoevsky and Dante.<sup>26</sup> D. H. Lawrence, meanwhile, had outlined an influential myth of raw individualism and an incipient canon in *Studies in Classic American Literature* in 1923; Van Wyck Brooks had begun his essential series reviving American literature in 1915 with *America's Coming of Age*, but was still at it in 1947 (*The Times of Melville and Whitman*). It can be easy to forget now how much of literary enterprise and writing in the literary quarterlies, well into the 1930s and 1940s, was devoted to the rediscovery of figures specifically like Melville and Whitman, who were then treated as much newer and more mysterious than the versions of them we possess now.

The Spiller volumes picked up where that broad-field archaeology had left off, not unlike the report from the museum offices assembling all that the various excavations had uncovered, deliberately making a longer, completist's survey in contrast to Matthiessen's microscopic delectation. Chap-

ters covered everything from early American literature to American folk humor and tall tales. Yet they left no doubt about the universal agreement that the supreme achievement—the Valley of the Kings, by whose monuments and furnishings daily appliances could be measured—was located in the 1850s. Those years earned a whole division of the book filled with individual chapter-length author studies—in order—of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman, in a period the book named, not quite for rebirth after intellectual darkness (like Matthiessen’s “Renaissance”), but for completion of an unacknowledged project: “Literary Fulfillment.”

If the final section of the book, devoted to the American modernist decades, did not give Hemingway, Faulkner, and the other recent novelists it discussed quite comparable treatment, it still surprisingly suggested that their achievement ought to be viewed in comparable terms: “It can scarcely be doubted, . . . on the evidence of the foregoing chapters, that a literary movement of power and character existed in the United States after about 1910. . . . Nothing like it had occurred in our literature since the mid-years of the past century, when Emerson, Melville, and Whitman were in their prime.”<sup>27</sup> Again, in the final words of the second volume, remarking how observers in the 1940s acknowledged the triumph of American literature worldwide, this second coming was the US modernist moment: “Europeans were not slow to recognize that there had been a literary revival here after 1910; and they showed the same hospitality to the new writers of the interwar period that they had shown, a century before, to the writers of the New York and New England renaissance.”<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere in popular literary culture, critics were more explicit. Speaking of “[t]he writers of the Twenties,” the *Saturday Review of Literature* claimed that “[t]he only period in American literature that can be compared with this efflorescence of creative talent is the Forties and Fifties of the nineteenth century,” the days of “Thoreau, Emerson, or Hawthorne.”<sup>29</sup> And American modernism, too, in the 1940s, was acquiring its twenties triumphant canon. The crucial works could be compressed, if not into five years, then into ten: Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1924), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), and *Light in August* (1932). The outlier most associated with this group, in the American modernist lineage, was Henry James. (A “James revival,” as it was called then, constituted a huge center of literary-critical energy well into the 1950s. James’s prefaces had been republished together for the first time in *The Art of the Novel* in 1934, and both Eliot and Hemingway, two impressively different American modernist writers, claimed him as an essential forerunner.) Faulkner was the last writer to be revived and brought in, rather as Melville had come in last for revival from the earlier period,

and he proved to be a surprising lynchpin. Individual critics could also choose to flavor the odd canonical foursome of Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner, and their predecessor Henry James, with a range of additional modernist works in poetry: Ezra Pound's early *Cantos* or Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930) (Wallace Stevens does not yet seem to be much mentioned as at all canonical, despite *Harmonium* [1923]—his enshrining would come significantly later); while in the novel, John Dos Passos and F. Scott Fitzgerald might be tacked on to the essential foursome, as critics' temperaments or biographical commitments inspired them. (Both Malcolm Cowley and Edmund Wilson maintained a personal commitment to dead Fitzgerald, and Trilling also championed him, adding up to "the Fitzgerald revival.")<sup>30</sup> But the core remained solid.<sup>31</sup>

At this dual fulfillment, academics and critics had thus assembled old and new testaments of the US novel, which engrossed much of their attention at the time of the proposed death of the novel. Our much-used contemporary word "canon"—meaning a corpus of literary texts taught in any given subfield of a university discipline—has its original meaning in the determination by ecclesiastical authorities of the books that make up Holy Scripture. But there's something especially appropriate in employing it for the collation of midcentury writings of Hawthorne and Melville or Eliot and Faulkner, because the proud, reverent, symbol-seeking investigations of that moment did, in fact, treat these works as something in the family of national scripture. Indeed, there may be occasion here to introduce a more forgotten word of Christian hermeneutics—typology.<sup>32</sup> Typology was an exegetical practice that linked events and characters of the Old Testament to the elements of the New Testament they prefigured, as "type" to "antitype." Typological interpretation became a matter of discovering the former elements in the latter, often uprooting Old Testament events from their original significance to find their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ and his transformation of history and law.

Something in the creation of *two* parallel sets of masterworks, not one, does change the nature of criticism, and midcentury criticism of American literature, I want to suggest, became mildly typological in ways that still determine the field today. Any given figure of the modernist generation could be an antitype to a type of the American Renaissance. The double canon made it possible for critics in the late 1940s to have the usable US past they needed, and new toys to play with, while leaving contemporary novels the unfortunate obligation to vie for a place in the apocrypha. It would be particularly hard for any new work to enter this system, and gain recognition as high literature, unless it tried to do so via techniques, themes, and with a certain kind of grandeur and ambition that recognizably echoed the heritage of the American Renaissance or American mod-



ernism. Yet the wide knowledge and esteem of the two canons put any new, echoic text into increased jeopardy of being found derivative, lackluster, or superfluous. One of the most perceptive of the younger writers of the 1940s and 1950s, Gore Vidal, made an eloquent protest:

One senses . . . in academic dialogues and explications the unstated burden of the discussion that, at last, all the novels are in. The term is over, the canon assembled if not ordered, the door to the library firmly shut to the irrelevance of new attempts.

It is agreed, for instance, that there are among us no novelists of sufficient importance to act as touchstones for useful judgement. There is Faulkner, but . . . and there is Hemingway, but . . .<sup>33</sup> (ellipses in original)

And Vidal has his imaginary critic's list trail off there.

#### THE RAGE OF DISAPPOINTMENT

The atmosphere dictated that even as a whole new generation of postwar writers was emerging, and new authors were rising to prominence, the defining (and quite surprising) feature of the criticism of contemporary American novels through the whole of the late 1940s and early 1950s was how bad a shape nearly all critics, both major and minor, believed the novel to be in, even as they sometimes cheered individual books. There was something hysterical about this criticism, which can be traced also to expectations for the novel—as a restoration of the will, as a true and even premeditated meditation on man—that could not yet be met. It was an era of excitement and almost desperate expectations for individual novelists (with the near-religious belief in the novel's office), coupled with unremitting pessimism about new novels as a group.

In 1944, William Phillips deplored “the low state of writing today,” feeling that its poor quality had not been much acknowledged in criticism. Yet he still had “some hope, too, that a generation of young writers will return from the war with a fresh image of its realities.”<sup>34</sup> That hope was quickly dashed as the criticism, following the new novels, came pouring in. Louis Bromfield in 1947 warned “[t]he old, established writers aren't producing [novels] in sufficient numbers and there aren't any signs among the younger writers of another Hemingway, another Fitzgerald, another Sinclair Lewis, or much of anything.”<sup>35</sup> John Crowe Ransom wrote in reply to a query from *Partisan Review* in 1948: “One is tempted to say of the creative effort of our decade: It is largely abortive.”<sup>36</sup> John Berryman, in reply to a similar query: “The question apparently wants me to say that [earlier] novelists are being revived mainly because we have no fiction of our own; so I will; but it's obvious.”<sup>37</sup>

By 1948, the date of Trilling's essay, a number of well-praised and even best-selling young writers of individual promise were emerging: Norman Mailer, Carson McCullers, and Truman Capote, plus Gore Vidal and Jean Stafford, to whom would soon be added James Jones, Paul Bowles, William Styron, and others. Meanwhile, the tone of disappointment about the total import or significance of these writers' work became unanimous among the same high- and middlebrow critics who might praise them singly, and ever more widespread across the range of publications with different pretensions. The usually cheery and publicity-minded *Saturday Review of Literature* said at the end of the decade: "American literature so far has failed to live up to its promise at the end of World War II."<sup>38</sup> *Harper's* editorialized: "These days a good novelist, like a good man, is apparently hard to find."<sup>39</sup> It was "an arid period" (Hartley Grattan).<sup>40</sup> The beating-up went on and on, even after books emerged in the early '50s that *did* begin to satisfy the demands, as we will see, of critical exponents of the death of the novel and the crisis of man.

A landmark of this moment of disappointment was the publication in 1951 of John Aldridge's *After the Lost Generation*. His book was one of the last ambitious treatments of an entire literary age, his own, by a talented young critic evaluating a generation of fellow writers with whom he ought to have everything in common. It was a project in line with famous synoptic books of the '20s and '30s, Wilson's *Axel's Castle* and Cowley's *Exile's Return*. Aldridge himself was only twenty-nine. But Aldridge's book is not similarly remembered today, probably for one major reason. He went through the new writers of his time and found that, in essence, none of them could be assigned the importance he wished to give them; above all, they simply did not measure up to the '20s novelists of the Lost Generation, his standard of accomplishment.

Aldridge's literary concern, too, had become "the overt affirmation of values" in the context of a crisis, and whether such an affirmation could be made by the new writers.<sup>41</sup> Post-World War II writers "have come through a war even more profoundly disturbing than the first; but the illusions and causes of war, having once been lost, cannot be relost."<sup>42</sup> His conclusion was that no one had yet found a way of reconstructing positive values through the materials of present-day life. If a writer wrote without such values, he was insignificant. If he just claimed values by vigorous gestures, it yielded either compulsive copying of the twenties or rootless, meaningless phrases.

If . . . [writers] have insight into values that seem worthy of affirmation and point the way out of the chaos of loss, they can [only] superimpose them upon the old material which is still available. They can, in other

words, assert the need for belief even though it is upon a background in which belief is impossible and in which the symbols are lacking for a genuine affirmation in dramatic terms.<sup>43</sup>

A “rage of disappointment” was the *Partisan Review* writer and philosopher William Barrett’s summation of the mood behind Aldridge’s total denunciation of his contemporaries (whom Aldridge said he had initially hoped to praise and champion). This phrase served just as well for Barrett himself and the gathering host of critics of the immediate postwar era—attached not only to a humanism of the Trillingsque variety but a subtle underlying Americanism or nationalism that, curiously, echoed the déclassé views of the publicists of *Life*. “[A] rage of disappointment,” Barrett explained further, “that a large, vital, and industrious country like the United States is not now producing the great literature that, from all purely rational considerations, we should expect of it.”<sup>44</sup>

#### THE TEMPORARY ALTERNATIVE: A HUMANIST LOST GENERATION?

One solution was to go back to the Lost Generation writers themselves and find ways to refashion them to meet the needs of the crisis of man—and, in the most notable case, to *rediscover* a neglected one of them and make, in essence, a new figure. This was the case with the transformation of William Faulkner.

A superb study of Faulkner’s late rise has been written by the literary historian Lawrence Schwartz, entitled *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation*, in which Schwartz argues that “[t]he sudden inflation of William Faulkner’s literary reputation after World War II is at once the most dramatic and obvious aspect of his writing career.” “I wondered how it was possible,” Schwartz writes, “for a writer, out of print and generally ignored in the early 1940s, to be proclaimed in 1950 a literary genius, perhaps the best American novelist of the century?”<sup>45</sup> The mechanics of Faulkner’s rise are associated with a single tenacious critic and publicist: Malcolm Cowley. As late as 1944, Cowley later claimed, at the time he began his exertions on the novelist’s behalf, that Faulkner simply didn’t exist as a literary commodity. “His seventeen books were effectively out of print and seemed likely to remain in that condition, since there was no public demand for them. How could one speak of Faulkner’s value on the literary stock exchange? In 1944 his name wasn’t even listed there.”<sup>46</sup>

In fact, Cowley’s claim—along with some of Schwartz’s more hyperbolic formulations—exaggerates for effect. Faulkner had neither been all that unknown nor, for that matter, particularly unsuccessful. His short stories

continued to appear in the *Saturday Evening Post*, a large-circulation bastion of Middle America, throughout the thirties and early forties—also in *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, and the *American Mercury*. This was not oblivion. Impressively, he made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1939—at age forty-one—which was accompanied by a generous article including a thorough biography of his life and work; but this was all conceived to coincide with publication of *The Wild Palms* (a book later minimized in the “canonical” Faulkner).<sup>47</sup> Internationally, he was of great interest in the 1930s to writers like Sartre, who wrote on Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, and hard-boiled crime writers together, to find in American violence and darkness some of the roots of a literary existentialism. The problem was that everyone valued this Faulkner for what would later be seen as all the wrong things. Gothic horror, excitement, degeneracy, disintegration, Southern violence—such were the hallmarks of the Faulkner who had a European coterie reputation but was fast on his way to being forgotten by the intelligentsia in America. He hadn't been uplifting, full of values, a defender of the “human spirit,” or necessarily always published as high art. His Hollywood period, in which he contributed to the screenplay of *The Big Sleep* among others, was, from this upended perspective, not a tragic exile for a misunderstood modernist (as we tend to think today), but the natural place for a macabre commercial entertainer to end up (who had, it was true, flirted with Joycean experimental techniques, retarded by a decade, in early books). Schwartz is then absolutely correct to point out that Faulkner had been valued, at home and abroad, for elements in the prewar period (Southern decay and nihilism) that were magically changed in the postwar period to signs of indomitable human spirit and American tradition. The most popular of the earlier books, including the most violent and potboilerish, like *Sanctuary* (1931), would simply, ultimately, be set aside.

And Malcolm Cowley was indeed the principal agent of the change, but his impulse, and his swift success, cannot be explained except by the fact that he had a weight of historical need on his side. He published a series of essays on Faulkner in major journals near the end of World War II, all done in preparation for his editing of Faulkner's oeuvre for Viking, published as *The Portable Faulkner* (1946). Equally important, for the *Portable*, Cowley got permission from Faulkner to let him sift through all of the novelist's books and mosaic them. He reordered the bits and pieces as an epic of fictional Yoknapatawpha County, now running *chronologically* from Native American times to the end of World War II. Cowley then convinced Faulkner to write a new, concluding chronology to support this. Often entertainingly fanciful, this timeline covered all the generations of the Compson family (protagonists of *The Sound and the Fury*) from 1699 to 1945, with

denouements to their lives that had not appeared in the books—registering a contemporary freight of meaning, and as if the forces acting on their stories shaped Faulkner’s sense of their destinies beyond any given novel.

The mosaic and chronology served Cowley’s purpose of insisting on a single underlying pattern and legend that made Faulkner’s work a vast historical and social mediation on the values of the South and, ultimately (he suggested), on the values of America. Cowley specifically identified a change in tone in Faulkner’s writings dealing with “Modern Times,” making the books of the ’20s, in his view, into meditations on the loss of humanistic values in the interwar decades, the loss of a “code.” “With the old families had vanished the code they tried to observe in their human relations; almost the only code followed by their successors was that of grab-and-git. This was the age of machines, and of persons who reacted like machines, in spastic patterns of stimulus and response.”<sup>48</sup>

Following the *Portable*, other critics picked out for themselves aspects of Faulkner’s books that were (and still are) recognizably great—even if they were becoming great now for their *humanism* and tradition, rather than their nihilism and fragmentation. One follower who aided this change in focus was Robert Penn Warren, helpfully a Southern critic (and novelist and poet) rather than a Northern carpetbagger like Cowley. It proved essential to Faulkner’s success that Faulkner was reclaimed by the South as an honorable son, not a gutter-minded embarrassment. Yet explicitly disagreeing with Cowley’s social and Southern framing of the “code” and the deep “pattern,” under the guise of dissent, Warren—the true Southerner—managed to shift Faulkner even further into the universally human and the rhetoric of modern human crisis. “It is sometimes said that Faulkner’s theme is the disintegration of the Southern traditional life. For instance, [by] Malcolm Cowley, in his fine introduction to the *Portable Faulkner* . . . I should put the emphasis not in terms of South and North, but in terms of issues common to our modern world.”<sup>49</sup> Starting in the *New Republic* in 1946 and continuing through writings of 1950, Warren gave his own evolving diagnosis of Faulkner in terms of the crisis of tradition, the loss of the individual’s right relation to society and the state, and, again, the “abstraction” of man, and his modification by mechanization: “The modern world . . . in which the individual has lost his relation to society . . . is a world in which man is the victim of abstraction and mechanism,” unlike earlier eras of coherent order. Warren admitted, somewhat tortuously, that Faulkner had never actually *thought* in his books that the earlier, traditional order was good or just. But Warren countered that Faulkner showed there had been at least an *idea* of justice that was not being met today. For “Faulkner’s world is” still “full of ‘good’ people . . . probably a longer list [of them] from Faulkner than from any other modern writer. ‘There are good

men everywhere, at all times,' Ike McCaslin says in 'Delta Autumn.'"<sup>50</sup> Here was affirmation from pessimism, water squeezed from rock:

That is the central fact in Faulkner's work, the recognition of the common human bond, a profound respect for the human. . . .

If respect for the human is the central fact of Faulkner's work, what makes that fact significant is that he realizes and dramatizes the difficulty of respecting the human. Everything is against it. . . . His hatred of "modernism"—and we must quote the word to give it his special meaning—arises because he sees it as the enemy of the human, as abstraction, as mechanism.<sup>51</sup>

Thus the Faulkner of the '20s was reread through something like Trilling's "reconstitution of the will of man" in the postwar years. Lawrence Schwartz puts it in the following way, while dating the change precisely to the same year of Trilling's essay on the obligations of novels, 1948: "[T]he ideological shift prompted by the war converted Faulkner into the postwar moralist and symbol of solitary literary genius."<sup>52</sup> But Faulkner, still living, was able to *participate* in the rereading. Unlike other writers spruced up for new purposes of criticism, he was available to join in this recasting and act out the role of grand old gentleman and house writer for the crisis of man. It is fascinating to see the greater writer converting himself, too, quite apart from Cowley or Warren's good offices, and with talent. The signal document is his Nobel Prize speech of 1950.

Faulkner's speech bore the title, "I Decline to Accept the End of Man." By the 1960s it had come to be included in late editions of the *Portable Faulkner* alongside that book's other unique materials, and thus has been read by generations of students as part of Faulkner's "meaning."<sup>53</sup> First reading it myself as a high school and college student at the turn of the twenty-first century (without benefit of suspicion of the crisis of man), I had always found the speech pretty close to meaningless. Faulkner's short statement is, of course, very simple, to the point of cliché. He thanks the Swedes for his award: "I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work," Faulkner began, "a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit." Faulkner warns concretely of the atom bomb and tells younger writers not to let the new fears undermine their work but to keep the old truths alive. This language he uses about the old truths is both vaporous and actually quite particular:

Until he [the young writer] relearns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure. . . . I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely

endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. . . . The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.<sup>54</sup>

Speaking for myself, when in the past I had read “endure,” “prevail,” “immortal,” “inexhaustible,” a “soul,” “a spirit,” “compassion and sacrifice and endurance,” counterpoised as if critical distinctions were being made (*not* endure but prevail; *not* a voice but a soul, a spirit), I rolled my eyes, finding the terms empty, and more than empty—hortatory boilerplate, junk. Yet it becomes clear with research that the speech was extremely meaningful to those who encountered it in 1950. It was reprinted in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*—then one of the country's major book supplements—and in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, where it was called “magnificent.”<sup>55</sup>

The Nobel speech was also made the centerpiece of a special publication meant to link America and Europe, which involved almost the whole spectrum of contemporary highbrow intellectuals of the late 1940s: one forgotten, but very revealing, journal called *Perspectives USA*. If you encounter it in the library, you are immediately put on your guard; even sixty years later, the paper is far too velvety, thick, and unyellowed to be within the means of any legitimate literary magazine. *Perspectives USA* is justifiably forgotten because it was not a “real” domestic journal but an export-ready compilation intended for European readership during postwar reconstruction, a tool in the anti-Soviet “war of ideas.” Funded by the Ford Foundation, it reprinted the best of American literary and critical work, to convince European intellectuals of the seriousness of contemporary American civilization, lest they be tempted by Soviet blandishments.<sup>56</sup> In hindsight, the impressive thing about this organ of propaganda is that it really *was* reprinting what history would record as much of the best work of the time, at least the best work then being credentialed by New York: James Baldwin's “Everybody's Protest Novel,” Ben Shahn's art (in color), and a section from Saul Bellow's forthcoming *The Adventures of Augie March*. You can view this as a troubling warning of how reputations are made by power or take it as a sunnier lesson on propaganda: sometimes propaganda need only be art. Its publisher was James Laughlin of *New Directions*, then the premier publisher of avant-garde writing in the United States. Lionel Trilling and Malcolm Cowley served as guest editors for whole issues. The journal also possessed representatives on its editorial board from many of the warring groups we have seen in earlier chapters—there is Mortimer Adler, on behalf of Chicago and the Great Books—brought

together to present America to the world through its literature.<sup>57</sup> And this publication used the Faulkner Nobel speech not once but twice. As the inaugural statement of the journal's prototype, then the first item of the first issue, it became the premonitory, or, by now, *encoded* message in the bottle that intellectuals and critics floated across the Atlantic—that man would not just endure but prevail.<sup>58</sup>

Next came Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway, formerly a much more titanic and intellectually deified figure than Faulkner, now viewed in the 1940s as a washed-up monument of a previous age, came to be redirected, again with his own active participation, to crisis of man-style humanism.

By the end of World War II, when Hemingway was only in his late forties, his new work seemed entirely played out. In 1947, writes biographer Michael Reynolds, "Hemingway had not published a book in six years and would not for another three. In 1940, he was a lion among writers; in 1947, he was becoming an historical artifact, a relic from the Lost Generation whose early work was entering the academic literary canon."<sup>59</sup> In truth, his reputation as a writer of new works had been on the decline in highbrow circles since the masterpieces of the 1920s, when he had had the support of Gertrude Stein on the Rue de Fleurus. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, his commercially successful production of 1940, when he was supposedly still a "lion," had received mixed assessments among highbrow critics. *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950) then was mercilessly attacked. It seemed the final proof that Hemingway's brain had been hopelessly ravaged by his celebrity-fed myth of himself as "Papa." "This novel reads like a parody by the author of his own manner," *Partisan Review's* Philip Rahv wrote, "a parody so biting that it virtually destroys the mixed social and literary legend of Hemingway that has now endured for nearly three decades."<sup>60</sup> His early works alone survived—those works of disillusion with war, disgust with brave words, rejection of nationalistic deceptions—as gilded classics, part of a fixed 1920s canon to be taught alongside the 1850s canon of the American Renaissance. *A Farewell to Arms*, the best of his '20s novels, was being introduced in a "college edition"—with an introduction, no less, by that same busy scholar-writer, Robert Penn Warren.<sup>61</sup>

It was in this climate that Hemingway produced his own "man" book, *The Old Man and the Sea*. There is tantalizing biographical evidence to suggest that Faulkner's Nobel speech may in fact have been at the origins of Hemingway's writing of the book. "It may have been only coincidence, but [Hemingway] started to write *The Old Man and the Sea* hard on the heels of Faulkner's much publicized Nobel Prize acceptance speech," notes biographer Michael Reynolds—a prize of which Hemingway was deeply covetous. Later, when *The Old Man and the Sea* was complete, the *New York Times* journalist Harvey Breit solicited an innocuous comment on



Hemingway's book from Faulkner for an article, and then passed the comment on to the author. Hemingway sent Breit this scathing response: "He [Faulkner] made a speech, very good. I knew he could never, now, or ever again write up to his speech. I also knew I could write a book better and straighter than his speech and without tricks or rhetoric."<sup>62</sup>

The resulting slim volume pitted a lone fisherman against elemental nature and adversity—expressed in the form of a giant marlin and trailing sharks. This was the discourse of man at its most reduced: old man faces nature, old man will endure. (It may also have been a parable of Hemingway's relation to his own writing, like pulling up a marlin, and to the critics, the sharks who destroyed it with scores of cowardly bites.)<sup>63</sup> *Life* magazine, known for its denunciations of novelists who failed to affirm American successes (which it often phrased as "human" successes), took the unprecedented step of printing the entire *Old Man and the Sea*, without advertising interruption, in their first fall issue, September 1, 1952. The editors said of the book, "It is a tragedy, but it tells of the nobility of man. Hemingway's work may be disaster-haunted, but his heroes face up to disaster nobly." Unable to resist a dig at the younger generation, they went on: "If he has influenced any of the twisted young men now writing fiction, he hasn't influenced them enough in this respect."<sup>64</sup>

Hemingway himself was turned into a kind of incarnation of the old fisherman. "Old Man Hemingway has produced a masterpiece and won back the championship," James Michener declared in a blurb: "He's still the pappy of us all."<sup>65</sup> The issue featuring the novel was *Life's* largest print run in history, according to Reynolds—five million copies were said to have sold out. This feat was followed six days later by *The Old Man and the Sea's* book publication, a Book-of-the-Month Club edition, and twenty-six weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list.<sup>66</sup> The success of the short fable is often credited with finally helping Hemingway earn the Nobel Prize in 1954.

#### FORMAL CUL DE SACS, EXPERIMENTS WITH MAN: *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* AND A FABLE AS NOVELS OF MAN

In fairness, however, both of the actual new *books* that Hemingway and Faulkner produced to meet the challenge of a literature about the "will of man" are quite a bit more interesting and significant, at least to my mind, than their publicity and reception indicate. Both writers, as it turned out, really could "write a book better" than any single speech, even a speech as celebrated as Faulkner's. But both also chose immediately obvious or logical forms for how, within the parameters of the novel, a writer might try to render an abstract, universal man, and then celebrate the best parts of his

permanent nature; and both proved, by a kind of exhaustion of these logical possibilities, simply within the duration of their single texts, that neither method, fish-tale and parable, was really going to work or provide a wider model. The books, in formal terms, discovered dead ends.

I'd like to take a moment to look at these books. As uncomprehending as the reception of *The Old Man and the Sea* could be—along with its subsequent assimilation to the canon of juvenile literature (in the category of adult books with short words and apparently uplifting messages)—Hemingway's boasts for his work were mostly justified. It is frequently brilliant.

*The Old Man and the Sea* manifested one way of attacking the "question of man"—the "man alone" route, or a purely subtractive plot. To get to the essence of man, it instructed removing one specimen from humankind and testing him, as if in a laboratory or, perhaps more pertinent, as man was tested in the book of Job.

Hemingway's book does not abstract man initially, but that is its end goal. We learn at the beginning that the protagonist is an old fisherman with many specific traits: he is named Santiago, is Spanish-speaking, Cuban, a baseball fan, and a sailor who once saw the coast of Africa in his younger years as a crewman on a big boat. He has been eighty-four days on the ocean without catching a fish. On his tiny skiff, his mast is "patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat."<sup>67</sup> But the old man wants to let his banner fly once more: "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (10). At first, this feels like a novella of human rights, if such a thing can be imagined from Hemingway: a noble old man who can barely feed himself, who lives a subsistence life from the unreliable sea, in the midst of an advanced world and in a tourist town in Cuba, which could easily feed him. He sets sail from under the shadow of the Terrace where famous celebrities drink, and where he can occasionally see the vacationing managers from the baseball leagues and listen to the rich American mainland on the radio. As he debates baseball with his young devotee Manolin, in Hemingway's semicomical, grandiose transcription of Spanish, he seems like an anthropological subject ready for first world largesse:

"The Yankees cannot lose."

"But I fear the Indians of Cleveland."

"Have faith in the Yankees my son. Think of the great DiMaggio."

"I fear both the Tigers of Detroit and the Indians of Cleveland."

"Be careful or you will fear even the Reds of Cincinnati and the White Sox of Chicago." (17)

Surely such a man could use the benefits of the rest of the first world—freedom from want in his old age, freedom from fear, the benefits of a post-subsistence civilization. But Hemingway turns out not to be interested in any help for Santiago. The man, or “man,” is just fine as he is. Hemingway puts the old man out on the water, alone, in his skiff. The sailor rows out to where the sea is deep, far beyond all other boats. Hemingway might equally have put a character on the moon; he seems to be in complete isolation. Then commences an incredible tour de force of natural description, as the fisherman watches flying fish, waterbirds, weather, signs of dolphins, and hints of prey fish, in a sort of descriptive argument that isolated man’s true pairing is not with other men but with nature: “He looked across the sea and knew how alone he was. . . . The clouds were building up now for the trade wind and he looked ahead and saw a flight of wild ducks etching themselves against the sky over the water, then blurring, then etching again and he knew no man was ever alone on the sea” (60–61).

From this pairing of man and nature, however, the book strips down to a reduced pairing of man and his own body. A marlin strikes the old man’s line, and it is so enormous that it carries his boat far out to sea and leads him to fight it for days. Hemingway’s novel begins to ring changes on that key word “endure” from Faulkner’s Nobel speech and from Faulkner’s earlier writing (most famously, the last line of *The Sound and the Fury*), first as the old man “tried not to think but only to endure” (47), but later, in the fight, “I will show him [the fish] what a man can do and what a man endures” (66). The book becomes a rare depiction of physical pain in work, and the work that the body, rather than the mind, can do. “‘Don’t think, old man,’ he said to himself” (66); instead, he deals with the cramp in his hand, the cuts on his palms, the lashing and pulling on his back from the fishing line, his eating sickening raw fish flesh to gain strength, the “treachery of one’s own body” (61) in its risk of cramps, “diarrhoea,” vomiting, up through his near blackouts in the final battle with the fish. Man alone turns out to be a creature of work and pain, as the fish is a creature of hunting and pain—man has a few more tricks but is no different. “I must hold his pain where it is, he thought. Mine does not matter. I can control mine. But his pain could drive him mad” (88). When the old man has won, of course, he learns that there are evil parasites in the world who don’t understand man’s solitude and its code of brotherly killing. Riding home with the beautiful catch lashed alongside, the marlin is attacked by schools of sharks and, though the old man kills as many sharks as he can, the fish is picked to its bones by the mass in the night.

Man as a creature of nature; man as a bearer of pain; man utterly alone, doing what he was “born to do.” This is one way of dramatizing or even solving the questions of man, by insisting that anyone out of touch with

basic nature—understood as the struggle to honorably kill and subdue its wildness and perhaps be killed in turn—has lost real humanity. The book ends with a sudden turn to two idiot tourists who see the fish skeleton: they can't even tell it was a marlin (honorable nature) and not a shark (dishonorable nature). Hemingway's is one way of abstracting the "human condition," writing a book of maximum isolation in which a minimal natural "code" is adumbrated. But this leaves the question of the rest of the world. "Man" can't lead his whole existence out of sight of land. Hemingway also, irresistibly and puzzlingly, generates a Christian allegory in the final pages while the old man sails home. When the sharks come, it is for the man as if he were "feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood" (107). From the rocks of the harbor, "he shouldered the mast and started to climb," and "at the top he fell and lay for some time with the mast across his shoulder"; "he had to sit down five times before he reached his shack" (121); "[t]hen he lay [and] . . . slept face down on the newspapers with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up" (121–22). Here in Cuba is a mini-Calvary. Santiago is made Christlike. Are all men, then, Christ? Or is "man himself," if he gives in to his suffering and holds on to his will to suffer, Christ, dying for the rest of us fallen tourists of existence? Or did writers as good as Hemingway (on their home ground) ultimately not feel confident to give a meaning to the pure stripping-down of man himself without resorting to an ambiguous religious faith?

William Faulkner went on in the years after his Nobel speech to publish the long novel *A Fable* and the play *Requiem for a Nun* (the latter a pious follow-up to the famously scandalous *Sanctuary*). The "question that is raised by Faulkner's much-quoted Nobel speech, by the moralistic sequel to *Sanctuary* and by *A Fable*," Maxwell Geismar noted at the time, "is of course that of his return to 'faith.'"<sup>68</sup> This isn't quite right—though a question one might wish to ask both of these great Lost Generation writers, Hemingway and Faulkner, who tried to produce books of man, is why they each had to turn one of their central characters into an imitation of Christ. For *A Fable* also presents that problem—indeed, it has been most frequently analyzed for its overpowering Christian allegory, which is, however, I think, just one aspect of its plot. The other part is connected, again, to the formal problem of whether a novel can ever deal with a strictly abstract, universalized man.

In a simple comparison of method, where Hemingway's fable was subtractive, Faulkner's *A Fable* is proliferative. The book's initial question is whether man as an unknown, natural quantity, could stop a war despite all the layers of social authority sustaining the conflict and urging men to it.<sup>69</sup> The opening conceit is that in 1916, on the German western front of World War I, a regiment of French troops sits still in its dugouts and does not

move when ordered to attack, following two years of bloody stalemate. Their German opposition, facing the undefended opening, fails to counter-attack. An inexplicable stillness spreads down both lines until, inertly, inarticulately, this natural human refusal stops the whole mechanism of war. “[N]o sign nor signal from man to man, but the entire three thousand spread one-man deep across a whole regimental front, acting without intercommunication *as one man*”—because the collective essence simply wills it.<sup>70</sup> *A Fable* tries to grasp abstract man first by treating him in the mass, in groups and crowds—neither completely personified as a simple creature of the whole nor highlighted through single exemplars pulled out of the crowd—which will represent the mystery of whatever sort of will man has in common. Huge crowds gather in the opening chapter, filling a town, emptying a region, to wail and moan as they watch the magical original regiment, now made prisoners by their officers, pour into a prison camp. The depictions of de-individualized and speechless (though not soundless) human beings, exerting will unconsciously, grow out of Faulkner’s older techniques of “the town’s” way of knowing collectively in *Absalom*, *Absalom* or *Light in August*. There they were background to characters; here, man, in this mass, is the foreground of the novel.

Yet the temptation to add witnesses, speakers, individuals, and novelistic centers quickly overpowers the oddity of the first conceit and generates a different kind of book. *A Fable* adds plot upon plot and layer upon layer—of generals, bureaucrats, observers; investigators (like “the runner,” the flyer, the “quartermaster general”)—and, in the only element that is usually remembered about the book, a second Christ, to make a detailed “fable”-like Christian allegory out of what would otherwise be just abstract questioning. The suspense turns on whether the truth of the cessation of the war can be rightfully identified with man or whether the generals will propagandize it as a temporary cease-fire of their own making—after which they can wait a week and restart the violence. The telling of this drama, however, cannot come from man himself, in the mass, but comes instead entirely from those *opposed* to this life of man. *A Fable*’s life stories come to be those of the generals and officers, each of whom “had sold his birth-right in the race of man” (10). Their stories are fascinating but clearly their effort is on the wrong side: “Let the whole vast moil and seethe of man confederate in stopping wars if they wish, so long as we can prevent them from learning that they have done so” (54). The book starts to seem like a machine that can’t stop creating these rootless speeches about man by his enemies—it is the only way the author can characterize his real target. The kind of speechless but willful man in-the-mass that Faulkner is aiming at proves to be, fictionally, formally unrepresentable.

Faulkner tries assorted specimen-observers and spokesmen for man in-the-mass, then kills them off like failed prototypes. There is the “runner,” an ex-officer who returns to the ranks to be with the men and learn about them. There is an old Negro preacher from the Deep South whom Faulkner, in a seeming act of desperation, imports to France as if from an earlier book, making him a witness for ‘man.’” The runner and the preacher band together in a late plan to *prove* that man, not the generals, stopped the war (“Don’t you see . . . they can’t afford to . . . let us stop it. . . . If they ever let us find out that we can stop a war as simply as men tired of digging a ditch decide calmly and quietly to stop digging the ditch—” [311]). The two run out to No Man’s Land to embrace the enemy and are obliterated by both sides’ artillery. With these proxies in smithereens, the plot turns from such relatively realistic surrogates for man toward its second Christ, Faulkner’s alternative.

The story of the second Christ is staged as a conflict between the old generalissimo of France, who seems to represent omnipotent fate, and the Christ-figure, the corporal, who apparently organized the mass resistance just by moving among the men. This corporal has twelve disciples. He is followed by three women, Marthe, Marya, and an unnamed Magdalen. During a last supper in the prison, one of his disciples has betrayed him, and another denies him. By a complicated set of discoveries, the corporal proves to be the biological son of the omniscient old general—a cruel God the Father type. Or is he a Satan? In lengthy philosophical conversations, the old general tries to convince (or tempt?) the corporal to stick with the earthly order and *not* sacrifice himself in the name of man. “[W]e are two articulations,” the old general says of the two of them, lapsing into synopsis, “postulated, not so much to defend as to test two inimical conditions. . . . I champion of this mundane earth . . . ; you champion of an esoteric realm of man’s baseless hopes and his infinite capacity—no: passion—for unfact” (348). The son of man refuses to accept the old general’s “fact” against man’s “hope,” so he is tied to a wooden post between two criminals and shot. His corpse is carried home by the three women and placed in a tomb, only to disappear, inevitably, in a blast when the war resumes upon his burial ground.

The clever denouement of the book, which was Faulkner’s original germ of the story in 1944, is rendered perfunctorily in the last chapters: the strangely intact body of the Christ-figure, through a series of further coincidences, comes to be entombed by France as the Unknown Soldier, which is to say, perhaps, symbolically, that Christ remains within the unknown, unspecifiable everyman, who the nation wrongly believes it possesses for its own glory; and those who suffer in war die for us all. Yet in the very last

pages, the book ends with the triumphant burial of the general within the Invalides, God the father, who indeed kept the war going to the end he had already decreed—“(six months after the false armistice in May, that curious week’s holiday which the war had taken which had been so false that they remembered it only as phenomenon)”—while the actions of man, not to mention the son of man, seem forgotten. A half-blown-apart amputee, apparently the “runner” (not dead yet!), evidently there to represent the memory of man, interrupts the funeral, is beaten by a mob of ordinary people, and ends the book vowing “I’m not going to die. Never”—as, in his disfigured person, the memory of man goes on (437).

“[T]he book is unlikely to interest readers except as an indication of where Faulkner’s imagination wandered in the decade 1944–1954,” drily writes Faulkner’s most recent biographer, Jay Parini.<sup>71</sup> That may be so. For our purposes, though, it holds interest as the book that occupied Faulkner in the period of the public rise of the discourse of the crisis of man, his Nobel success, the “I Decline to Accept the End of Man” speech, and all the rereadings of him as a redemptive humanist. Its composition neatly covers the metamorphosis begun by Cowley’s first labors to rework Faulkner’s legacy for the *Portable* (their correspondence started in 1944) and ended by Hemingway’s acquisition of the Nobel Prize (1954).<sup>72</sup> *A Fable* is equally interesting, as a formal object, for its proof of the insufficiency and failure of another set of logical strategies by which to write into the novel a vision of the will of abstract, universal man.<sup>73</sup> Like Hemingway, Faulkner turned to a literary expression of the “enduring” quality of man at a maximum of pain and suffering: in the stasis of trench warfare. He did it with a hope to answer some of the most obvious questions of his time—Norman Cousins’s query (from 1945, after the bomb dropped) of whether it was in the nature of man to make wars or in the nature of man to stop them; whether something in man could forestall mass death regardless of officers and politicians; and what precisely it *was* in man that had control of events, in the form of will. Faulkner tried to do the rendering in the mass, but had to turn to surrogates, including the devils themselves (the generals) who deny man, or else the Christ, incredibly lifeless and fleshless as a character, who is to redeem them but gets (mostly) forgotten.

The extreme darkness of the later parts of *A Fable* and its seeming knowledge that it is a failure as a novel about man are captured in one of the most astonishing passages of the book: the culmination of the interview between the general and his son, which it is important to read in its proper context. Here, Faulkner explicitly rewrites his Nobel Prize speech, using almost exactly the same words, but with perspectives reversed, so

that the old general declares that only man's *folly* will endure. One must have in one's ear the echoes of Faulkner's hopeful speech to hear the gruesome, parodic self-repudiation in *A Fable*. (That speech again: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.") The old general has been predicting instead a future of monstrous tanks, jet aircraft, metal shells for men, leaving man a worm inside them, a technician out of his control, "his own frankenstein which roasts him alive with heat, asphyxiates him with speed, wrenches loose his still-living entrails in the ferocity of its prey-seeking stoop" (353–54), until man

"crawls out of his cooling burrow to crouch . . . beneath a clangorous rain of dials and meters and switches and bloodless fragments of metal epidermis, to watch the final two of them [i.e., his metal war-monsters] engaged in the last gigantic wrestling against the final and dying sky robbed even of darkness and filled with the inflectionless uproar of the two mechanical voices bellowing at each other polysyllabic and verbless patriotic nonsense. Oh yes, [man] will survive it because he has that in him which will endure . . . because already the next star in the blue immensity of space will be already clamorous with the uproar of his debarkation, his puny and inexhaustible voice still talking, still planning . . . his voice, planning still to build something higher and faster and louder; more efficient and louder and faster than ever before, yet it too inherent with the same old primordial fault since it too in the end will fail to eradicate him from the earth. I don't fear man. I do better: I respect and admire him. And pride: I am ten times prouder of that immortality which he does possess than ever he of that heavenly one of his delusion. Because man and his folly—"

"Will endure," the corporal said.

"They will do more," the old general said proudly. "They will prevail." (354)

It was his American critics and admirers who returned Faulkner to simple man and faith—and he was ready to go along, up to a point, though not always when one read him carefully (as in this passage of *A Fable*), or when he seemed to lose that simple faith himself. Faulkner had become, for Americans, the representative of a badly needed native tradition, a Southern history, ancient wounds, fused with avant-garde technique and redeemed by apparent piety. Despite mediocre or uncomprehending reviews, committees awarded *A Fable* both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.



## OTHER CANDIDATES

Richard Wright, too, wrote his own novel of the crisis of man while an expatriate in France, a book usually simply classified as “existentialist.” This was *The Outsider* (1953).<sup>74</sup> Wright’s protagonist, Cross Damon (“To think I named you Cross after the cross of Jesus!” says his mother [391]), a failed philosophy major at the University of Chicago, is trapped between his angry wife and pregnant lover and has just taken out a crippling loan from his bosses at the post office. Thanks to a lucky subway accident, he is assumed dead, sheds all ties, and moves with pockets full of money to New York City where, except for his African Americanness (which gives him privileged lucidity as an “outsider”), he stands as unmarked “modern man” in total freedom—man himself. He uses his freedom to deliver an impressive number of soliloquies. “The question summed itself up: What’s a man? He had unknowingly set himself a project of no less magnitude than contained in that awful question” (460–61). “‘Maybe man is nothing in particular,’ Cross said gropingly. ‘Maybe that’s the terror of it. Man may be just anything at all’” (507). “He was without a name, a past, a future; no promises or pledges bound him to those about him. He had to become human . . . Dimly he realized that his dilemma, though personal, bore the mark of the general” (509). The plot resumes once Cross gets involved with the Communist Party, and Wright falls into concerns that had plagued him personally since his split with Stalinism. Finding the Communists corrupt, Cross begins playing God, killing off local racist fascists and Communist commissars alike—which allows the book to enter into meditations on “totalitarianism” juxtaposed with the cursed freedom of man the existentialist, in the “dilemma of the ethical criminal” (743) committed to *actes gratuits* in the midst of a historical crisis of human will: “Today we are in the midst of that crisis . . . The real world stands at last before our eyes and we don’t want to look at it, don’t know how to live in it; it terrifies us” (755).

Finally Cross is betrayed and murdered by the Communists, though not before having read “Nietzsche, Hegel, Jaspers, Heidegger, Husserl, Kierkegaard, [and] Dostoevsky” (820), as is revealed by the detective who also invites him to deliver a muddled, deathbed prophecy: “‘Is there anything, Damon, you want me to tell anybody?’ . . . ‘I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others . . . To make a bridge from man to man . . . Starting from scratch every time is . . . is no good. . . . Man is all we’ve got . . . Man is returning to the earth . . . The real men, the last men are coming . . .’” (840).

The only major figure the new publicists had not gotten to was the longest-standing hero of Lost Generation American modernism, a more

recalcitrant, less commercially minded writer and a poet—T. S. Eliot. Eliot, as we have seen in chapter 2, was unique among these writers for having genuinely participated, as a thinker, poet, and public figure, in the earlier crisis of man discourse. He had already received his Nobel in 1948. He would continue in the '50s to present an incipient Christian orthodoxy and high-art apolitical formalism to those who wanted it, but he had nothing to prove.

So it is comic, and instructive, to note an attempt made in the postwar years to publicize Eliot in line with a more simpleminded humanist (and US nationalist) dispensation. *Time* magazine gave Eliot its cover in 1950, and a long biographical article, on the occasion of one of his verse plays, *The Cocktail Party*, opening in New York. The poet who had rejected America, its values, and its unchurchy religion would be championed on the grounds of his defense of civilization, man, and of religion generally. *Time*: “Why should anybody want to meet Mr. Eliot—even halfway? More particularly, why should Americans bother about this Missouri-born American who talks like an Englishman, has not lived in the U.S. for the past 36 years, and gave up his U.S. citizenship to become a British subject? . . . Perhaps the simplest answer is: Because T. S. Eliot is a civilized man.” *Time* was equally interested in his “faith,” which they praised: “Eliot is a Christian and therefore in a sense a ‘pessimist’ about the nature of man. Yet in his ‘pessimism’ Eliot is far more hopeful about man’s future than most of the more secular prophets.” Annoying though it might be that the St. Louis native now had to be shared with England, was High Church, and wanted a king, it was useful that he formed a contemporary bridge of American hope, faith, and culture to European civilization.<sup>75</sup>

In short, the Lost Generation writers were briefly reconstructed for a humanistic modernism. The new works this spawned were not lastingly convincing, but they didn’t need to be. Critics found enough depth in the *longue durée* of these writers’ careers, and enough fodder in new perspectives on their '20s masterpieces, to have a humanistic purchase on living writers who could definitely be looked to for answers about the nature of man. By the mid-1950s—specifically, during the years 1954–57—the latest arriving entrant, Faulkner, became the subject of a greater number of books, articles, and monographs in the *Modern Language Association* bibliographies, the standard record of all literary criticism in America, than any other living writer in English, followed next by Eliot and Hemingway.<sup>76</sup> Critics of the contemporary novel at midcentury had some extra room to be disappointed in new works, because they had writers in place already who could be reinterpreted and even redirected to speak simply and stolidly to the need for “values”—leaving younger writers more annoyed and rivalrous than ever.

## THE YOUNG WRITERS' IMPASSE: FRUSTRATION AND DEPENDENCE

The “death of the novel” and the extended humanist canon of prewar modernists had thus set up an awkward and unprecedented situation for young American writers. Esteem for the novel and the novelist, in the abstract, was at a peak. Critics said they wanted new novels. They felt, from the impulses of the crisis of man, that they needed the novel to do more than entertain or even reflect the tenor of the times; they needed a revitalization of the will of man. Yet their intellectual concepts told them man and his conditions might have changed. The successful culmination of decades of Americanist literary excavation in a closed canon of greats, from Hawthorne to Faulkner—with the living, second half of that canon willing to tailor itself to suit the new demands—didn’t very desperately require, or even leave much room for, the work of new, young writers. Thus the “death of the novel” thesis, which had behind it essentially intellectual or philosophical assumptions drawn from the crisis of man, became implicated in practical matters of hope and disappointment, expectation and opportunity, and competition and resentment within the literary field. The young Norman Mailer, always the most rivalrous and the most mischievous, took the high tone of all the discussions of the heroes of the ’20s down to a bass note: “Dare one mention that their work since World War II has been singularly barren and flatulent?”<sup>77</sup>

Such anger will bubble up again later for this book’s central writers, principally when they enjoy periods of individual triumph in the 1950s (and cheer one another’s triumphs), rather than earlier in the ’40s when they are still more reliant on critics and therefore couldn’t always afford to speak their mind. As we will see in successive chapters, it was Bellow who crowed, upon Ralph Ellison’s success with *Invisible Man*, that the novel was not so dead after all: “So many hands have been busy at the interment of the novel . . . that I can’t help feeling elated when a resurrection occurs.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, in 1957, five years later, after Bellow’s own comparable triumph with *The Adventures of Augie March*, the first three of our study’s central fiction writers—Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Flannery O’Connor—all contributed to a volume edited by the reformed Marxist critic Granville Hicks, which he titled *The Living Novel*.

This book was specifically a rebuke to the now nearly decade-old renewed “death of the novel” thesis. “The idea that there should be such a book grew out of the distress I felt on reading one more pronouncement—it doesn’t matter whose—on the death of the novel,” Hicks wrote. “How . . . could I explain this solemn assertion, repeated every few weeks by somebody or other, that the novel was dying if not quite dead?”<sup>79</sup> Hicks’s book included only working novelists, letting them answer back. In Saul Bel-

low's contribution, he returned to the original 1948 provocation and finally had a forum to attack Lionel Trilling, if not by name then by university affiliation, with "Morningside Heights" standing in for Columbia:

Finished! We have heard this from Valéry and from T. S. Eliot, from Ortega and Oswald Spengler, and most recently from the summit of Morningside Heights. We are supposed to be done for. . . . For every poet now there are a hundred custodians and doctors of literature, and dozens of undertakers measuring away at coffins.

The novelist has been trained to take words seriously, and he thinks he is hearing words of high seriousness. He believes it is the voice of high seriousness saying, "Obsolete. Finished." But what if it were to prove the voice of low seriousness instead?<sup>80</sup>

Hicks was correct to say that the writers were being pestered from two sides: "Our novelists, it becomes clear, are not altogether happy about their present situation. They are disturbed both by the talk in highbrow circles about the death of the novel and by the middlebrow demands for affirmative fiction useful for propaganda purposes."<sup>81</sup> O'Connor, for her part, contributed her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country" to his book. The essay famously opens with her particular and quite public annoyance with *Life* and its "slick" affirmative demands for "spiritual purpose," though not spiritual purpose of *her* kind.<sup>82</sup> Ellison delivered the calmest and most learned essay in the book in "Society, Morality, and the Novel," but still took issue with Trilling at length for his reduction of the American novel to the novel of manners, gently rebuked Cowley for his "reduction of the meaning of Faulkner's" stories in the *Portable* (while praising Cowley's resurrection of Faulkner's reputation), and even-handedly probed the differences of obligation between critics and writers to explain "something of why the novelists keep writing despite the current attempts to legislate to the novel a quiet death."<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, the adoption by creative writers of the problems of the crisis of man brought to them through this intervening discourse of the death of the novel (which it was their obligation to prove wrong), was confounded with an intense status conflict with the new cadres of intellectually powerful critics who praised the novel as a privileged medium but still seemed to set their own pronouncements above its concrete products. Who would get to speak for man, or the novel? Who got to choose who would say what, and what must the chosen people say? The critics dominated the choice of new fiction that mattered, but they couldn't produce that fiction themselves. The novelists who came to matter were often closely connected to critics and intellectuals with a standing reputation (Bellow and Ellison were connected to Alfred Kazin, Delmore Schwartz, Kenneth Burke, and

even Lionel Trilling; O'Connor to the translators and writers Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, poet Robert Lowell, and critic Elizabeth Hardwick, and a whole circle around the literary colony at Yaddo). Yet the novelists had to find ways to differentiate themselves from the critics, even if only to fulfill the critics' continued expectations for the writer as a solitary genius—independent, freedom-loving, and somewhat primitive—who would stand for America and independent human values, not for criticism. This was the double or triple bind of the fiction writer at the apex of the novel's twentieth-century cultural power (as storyteller, thinker, and inspired oracle). It is no accident that when those writers emerged who best pleased critics in their demands about the crisis of man (Ellison, Bellow, and in other ways O'Connor and Pynchon), their books—read closely—are often much more troubling about that discourse's possibilities than the contemporary critics who praised them ever really came to understand.

#### EVERYBODY'S ALTERNATIVE: THE KAFKA CULT AND AN ANTINATURALISTIC HUMANISM

I can't move on to those authors' works without one major caveat, however. It's not the case that *no* new literature besides the revived modernists immediately fulfilled the demands for expression of the crisis of man from the period of the war forward (until figures like Bellow and Ellison were able to break through and satisfy those demands). It's just that one key exemplar who did is not included in histories of *American* literature in the twentieth century, though he probably should be. Starting at the end of the 1930s and the dawn of the war, and intensifying at the end of World War II and in the early postwar period, something truly unexpected occurred: the discovery and enshrining of Franz Kafka, a Czech Jewish writer of German prose who belonged to no clique or obvious tradition, as a master equal to the familiar Western European and American modernists.

Kafka became one of the single most important hidden influences on American fiction, as great as Hemingway and Faulkner, in the postwar years and even up to the present day. He also helped break the impasse between writers and critics by his example or mere existence, rather than by any particular literary school he gave rise to. He became an inspiration by showing what was possible, and a free-floating resource because he really belonged to no one (despite everyone's attempts to claim him). He, too, wrote "fables," but with a different and liberating character.

Figures best known as intellectuals were deeply involved in Kafka's initial rise in America. Hannah Arendt personally oversaw English publication of his writing at Schocken, especially his *Diaries*, while she was editor there from 1946 to 1948 (she even assisted in translation). Clement

Greenberg, the most important art critic of the American midcentury—theorist and publicist of abstract expressionism—translated Kafka on several occasions, as did his brother, Martin Greenberg, of the journal *Commentary*. James Burnham, the social theorist who had predicted “the managerial revolution” in which bureaucracy would come to dominate both the Communist East and capitalist West, hailed Kafka as a literary genius of the times.<sup>84</sup> The much more utopian radical Paul Goodman (a literary, social, and educational critic) wrote a fine early book entirely on Kafka.<sup>85</sup>

These names would suggest that Kafka was purely a New York Intellectual possession. Yet Kafka was also accessible to other groups—especially as material for Christian theology. By 1940, the *Southern Review*, a journal at Vanderbilt edited by Charles W. Pipkin with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, had already picked up an essay called “‘The Trial’ and the Theology of Crisis,” whose author determined that Kafka had produced “[a]n eschatological novel—an allegory of man’s relations with God in terms of a Calvinistic theology,” “an elaborate parable [of] the basic principles of a modern system of theology, erected on the startling teachings” of Kierkegaard and best understood through the great neoorthodox theologian Karl Barth.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, a series of such Christianizing efforts written both in England and America made up a large part of a 1946 anthology of the then-extant critical writing on Kafka, Angel Flores’s *The Kafka Problem*.<sup>87</sup>

By all parties, Jewish and Christian, religious and secular, Kafka’s works were understood to be parables of “modern man.” Some took Kafka as a theologian, others as a social analyst. For Hannah Arendt, he captured the evils of an administered world: “The generation of the forties, and especially those who have the doubtful advantage of having lived under the most terrible regime history has so far produced, know that the terror of Kafka is adequate to the true nature of the thing called bureaucracy—the replacing of government by administration and of laws by arbitrary decrees. . . . Kafka’s so-called prophecies were but a sober analysis of underlying structures which today have come into the open.”<sup>88</sup> For James Burnham, “[T]he condition of Kafka’s hero is not in the least fantastic or peculiar. It is exactly and literally the human condition.”<sup>89</sup>

Kafka’s work naturally seemed to contemporaries to prefigure the Holocaust (“the catastrophe . . . which Kafka foresaw here and there in his work with startling exactitude of detail,” wrote Heinz Politzer<sup>90</sup>), especially in its mood of persecution and hyperrational insanity. Indeed, his sisters and their families were murdered in Auschwitz, a fate Kafka was spared only by dying young of tuberculosis. He seemed to show the condition of the individual under a continuous line of totalitarians—first Hitler

in Western Europe, now Stalin in the East—with Kafka usefully, geographically, in Prague, Czechoslovakia, on the border between them. As readers looked around America, Kafka’s work gave a picture of alienation and loneliness under technology or without God. The name most consistently given to the puzzle Kafka depicted was that peculiar catchphrase of the era, already quoted from Burnham: the contemporary, crisis-ridden “human condition.”

This moment of attachment of Kafka to the crisis of man can be seen in fine relief against a slightly earlier moment of the interwar period when he was completely irrelevant to Americans. Kafka died in 1924. His friend and publicist, Max Brod, energetically promoted Kafka’s work as a new contribution to the avant-garde. Kafka’s first appearances in English were events of zero consequence. The transatlantic modernist journal *transition*, a pillar of Paris–New York avant-gardism in the twenties, known for its early publication of Joyce’s *Work in Progress* (later *Finnegan’s Wake*), Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, and Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” translated some short stories of Kafka’s without fanfare—the first in 1928, the second in 1932. They seem not to have stood out beyond work of other avant-gardists. Kafka’s *The Castle* was brought out in New York by Alfred A. Knopf in 1930, a sign that he was moving through high-level, but likely purely writerly, channels. It made no discernable impact.

In 1937, a different phase of Kafka reception erupted. Knopf published a second novel, *The Trial*, which would become the mainstay of all critical discussions and explanations of Kafka’s significance for the next twenty years. The *Partisan Review*, then just restarting as an independent publication (after its break with the Communist Party), took up Kafka as one of its central discoveries and a centerpiece of its worldview. In the very first issue after the 1937 relaunch, the assigned reviewer, F. W. Dupee, admitted he was still puzzled by *The Trial*, but the editors assigned increasing importance to its author. Within a few months, they were advertising new publications of biographical information on Kafka (“specially translated for *Partisan Review*”), and could speak of “the characteristic Kafkian art” (though they weren’t yet quite ready to describe it in words).<sup>91</sup> A few months after that, now apparently in a heated competition with *transition* for new publications of Kafka, they advertised his work as their lead coming attraction: “BLUMFELD, AN ELDERLY BACHELOR a hitherto untranslated long story by FRANZ KAFKA.”<sup>92</sup>

It’s not entirely evident at first *what* had happened in 1937, and the years near the start of World War II, to make Kafka erupt, but something surely had.<sup>93</sup> The practical means of transfer has to have been German intellectuals who found something in Kafka in the late ’30s that spoke initially to their own situation, which the émigrés were able to impress upon the

Americans—who then responded on their own, for their own reasons, and all the more vividly during the war. For Kafka’s work took on an American life quite quickly, and by the end of the 1940s had become absolutely central.<sup>94</sup> Journalists and critics then spoke of the “Kafka cult” (Irving Howe), “the amazing cults of Kafka and Kierkegaard” (John Berryman), “the present Kafka boom” (Heinz Politzer), or the “vogue for Kafka” (Elliot Cohen, the editor of *Commentary*).<sup>95</sup> *Kafka Was the Rage* is the title the bohemian bookseller and later book reviewer Anatole Broyard gave to his memoir of the era.<sup>96</sup>

Contemporary critics spoke of the “cult” without surprise, as if it were familiar and acknowledged, even when they were unsympathetic to it. Edmund Wilson identified himself with an earlier generation in producing the only specimen I’ve seen of backlash against “the cultists of Kafka.” His article of 1947 noted the suddenness and depth of the consensus on the Czech author, as well as suggesting some explanations for its puzzling occurrence. In “A Dissenting Opinion on Kafka,” Wilson wrote, “Since the publication in English of *The Trial* in 1937 (*The Castle* came out in 1930 but did not attract much attention), Kafka’s reputation and influence have been growing till his figure has been projected on the consciousness of our literary reviews on a scale which gives the illusion that he is a writer of towering stature.”<sup>97</sup> “Some of his short stories are absolutely first-rate, comparable to Gogol’s and Poe’s,” Wilson admitted, “[a]nd Kafka’s novels have exploited a vein of the comedy and pathos of futile effort which is likely to make ‘Kafka-esque’ a permanent word.”<sup>98</sup> (Wilson was right in his expectation.) But this older champion of American modernism could not accept the overinvestment that intellectuals of all kinds were making in Kafka as someone *more* than a writer. “One realizes that [for them] it is not merely a question of appreciating Kafka as a poet who gives expression for the intellectuals to their emotions of helplessness and self-contempt but of building him up as a theologian and saint.”<sup>99</sup> “[M]ust we really, as his admirers pretend, accept the plights of Kafka’s abject heroes as parables of the human condition?”<sup>100</sup>

Wilson was surprisingly alone in his objections, but correct, in some sense, in his instinctive suspicions. It’s hard to think of another author who was accepted so unequivocally as Kafka, so quickly, and yet who, himself, in his work, was so unique, peculiar, and deeply, satisfyingly un-American—at least on the surface of things. (For analogues, one would have to look to Gabriel García Márquez in the 1980s or Roberto Bolaño in the 2000s.) Surely this, too, was a part of his appeal in the 1940s. Kafka provided a way to move out of conventional categories and literary cliques while answering immediate problems. His works showed individuals menaced or terrified by something absurd—symbolic, rootless, and all-encompassing—



that undid them as human beings (in the famous *The Metamorphosis*, when Gregor Samsa wakes up as a bug), or as whole, unviolated bodies (“In the Penal Colony,” “The Hunger Artist”), or as citizens subject to comprehensible laws and rights (*The Trial*). Yet these fragmentary stories, inexplicable transformations, bureaucratic persecutions, and ominous surrealisms, rendered ultrarealistically, offered a modernism that was *not* like the usual Western European version but was clearly new (even if it dated to several decades earlier), and clearly, somehow, relevant and freeing. It did not portray old melodrama in altered style, as did Hemingway or Faulkner. It did not richly portray the inner flow of subjectivity, as did Faulkner or Joyce. It was not encompassing, cerebral, and allusive, as were Joyce or Eliot or Mann. It was impersonal, comic, and slightly terrifying but flattened and without shock, filled with sentimental figures (animals, sufferers) without sentimentality. Above all, it was an alternative to “naturalism,” both as a matter of style and as a literary school. “Naturalistic” action is often deranged in Kafka, violating the verisimilitude of ordinary occurrences, allowing things to happen that could not happen in the real world. “Naturalism” as a literary school had captivated a certain mainstream of American fiction from the 1890s through the 1930s, in writing about individuals threatened by the determining forces of environment (judged scientifically) and an orderly society (judged sociologically). Kafka wrote of threatened individuals, too, but the threats were no longer environmental, scientific, or orderly—except as order and technology itself had become irrational and inexplicable. These were threats more in line with intellectuals’ ultimate descriptions of the crisis of man.

Philip Rahv pointed to Kafka as a central inspiration for writers’ contemporary (postwar) revolt against naturalism in his “Notes on the Decline of Naturalism.” Without guessing the shapes this nonnaturalism would take in the different surrealisms of Ellison, O’Connor, or Pynchon, and even in the cartoonish “bounciness” of Bellow in *Augie March* (the most conventional naturalist writer of the group), Rahv intuited that Kafka could stand as an inspiration for formal change, even if it was not always Kafkaesque change—that Kafka would be available to writers in ways more fecund than mere imitation. “After all, what impressed us most in Kafka is precisely this power of his to achieve simultaneity of contrary effects, to fit the known into the unknown, the actual into the mythic and vice versa, to combine within one framework a conscientiously empirical account of the visibly real with a dreamlike and magic dissolution of it. In this paradox lies the pathos of his approach to human existence.”<sup>101</sup> Kafka, in this somewhat blurry description of a union of the empirical and metaphysical, does suggest a formal analogue in fiction to the regulative discourse of man as it appeared in 1940s philosophy. But Kafka still furnished

genuine *form*, which is a core resource for literature as it is not always for philosophizing; he supplied technical means that suggested ways, in stories and novels, out of the vagueness of the critics' demands and the near-mathematical logic of "individual" or mass that had led to aesthetic dead ends in Hemingway and Faulkner.

It may indeed be hard for any young writer to read Kafka for the first time and not want to sit down to write a story in which animals act like frustrated people, people turn into animals, and the world is subject to distant and contradictory statutes. The ease of imitation of Kafka was a problem from the start. In 1941, Randall Jarrell saw Kafka's influence mismanaged in the *New Directions* annual of avant-garde writing: "Half the stories are heavily influenced by Kafka, who by now has become a non-naturalistic convention at everyone's disposal; used badly enough, it is as dreary and unimaginative as naturalism."<sup>102</sup> Philip Rahv felt "one can criticize the imitators of Kafka that have been turning up of late as being one-sided and even inept. . . . [I]t is easy to see where his imitators go wrong. It is necessary to say to them: To know how to take apart the recognizable world is not enough, is in fact merely a way of letting oneself go."<sup>103</sup> The accusations of Kafka imitation tended to fly against rival groups rather than against one's own friends, who might be imitating Kafka themselves. English imitators of Kafka were named with special scorn, as if Kafka were now essentially an American possession. These English followers included the today forgotten writers Rex Warner and William Sansom, the latter of whom, wrote Isaac Rosenfeld (Saul Bellow's close friend and schoolmate, and a critic-novelist himself), "belonged to the group of young British writers who work in the Kafka tradition, . . . the structure that can be turned any way to fit modern life, the analogues of experience, the philosophical tone." But "[o]nly for Kafka was the manner the man," Rosenfeld insisted; "[f]or the rest it is something like a magician's trick, presto—it works!"<sup>104</sup>

The closest comparable inspiration in fiction was Dostoevsky; but there was a particular Dostoevsky, too, who was made to emerge in the '40s and who lasted into the 1950s, and who sheds some light on the Kafka arrival. This was the Dostoevsky of the *Underground Man*. Dostoevsky's writing was not a new quantity—all of his work had been translated by Constance Garnett in the 1910s. *Notes from Underground* would, in most eras, probably not have seemed the prime achievement of a novelist who had given the world *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *The Possessed*. Yet many "stresses of Dostoevsky's thinking are embodied in the 'underground man,'" William Phillips argued in 1946, "the new human type created by Dostoevsky, and undoubtedly his prime achievement."<sup>105</sup> *This* 1940s *Underground Man*, not just "sick" and "spiteful" like Dosto-

evsky's original, but increasingly positive and heroic, could also be assimilated to the idea of a Resistance, in a peculiar confluence of terminology that drew in the "underground," which had emerged in France and other countries to fight the Nazis.

In the era of a search for the distortions of human nature that had been wrought by the modern world crisis, and ways to undo them, it was the depiction of the "new human type" that mattered. A year later, in evaluating Kafka and Dostoevsky together, Phillips would suggest that Kafka himself was not the author of writing *like* Dostoevsky's, but actually had been a living specimen of the underground man, whom Dostoevsky had created only as a literary conceit. "Perhaps the closest analogue [to Kafka] in modern writing is Dostoevski's *Notes from Underground*; but where Dostoevski felt the need to objectify and to be self-conscious, Kafka simply projects his own being."<sup>106</sup> Kafka equaled this figure of "underground man," and underground man, suitably generalized, was proffered as the inner being of man in crisis in a "modern society." "We are all the Underground Man," William Barrett declared in 1951—exactly the same year, as we have seen, that he exhorted the United States (and by implication its writers) to the "great literature that, from all purely rational considerations, we should expect of it."<sup>107</sup>

The American fiction writers who occupy the rest of this study *did* in fact take the crisis of man questions of philosophical anthropology, history, faith, and technology head-on, to a very large degree. The "underground man" mood makes its way into their works (and figures of literal underground men recur in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Pynchon's *V.*). Likewise, one finds in them a kind of Kafkaan *freedom*, if not a Kafka feeling. It is not apparent to me, when I read their work, that they were Kafka followers in the way that many more minor American writers were and continue to be obvious Kafka followers. (Kafka following and imitation might furnish a long study in itself, from Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" [1948] to the present, drawing in a fair percentage of all the short stories published in the *Best American Short Story* volumes in every year from 1945 to today.) But with Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, Flannery O'Connor, and Thomas Pynchon, readers have indeed occasionally been tempted to allude to a Kafka inheritance, correctly understood as a particular new start in approach rather than a bequest of formal methods. Caroline Gordon, writing to a young Flannery O'Connor after reading her first book manuscript (*Wise Blood*), invoked the comparison:

I know a good many young writers who think they are like Kafka. You are the only one I know who succeeds in doing a certain thing that he does. . . . I do not mean that it is in any way derivative of Kafka. In fact,

this book seems to me the most original book I have read in a long time. But you are like Kafka in providing a firm Naturalistic ground-work for your symbolism.<sup>108</sup>

Gordon's passage is remarkably astute at capturing what the addition of Kafka's example to the American setting could mean for writers' work: a firm naturalistic groundwork for symbolism, but with symbolism itself freed from the overgrand Christ allegories that trapped even Hemingway and Faulkner. It provided a new ground of understanding and comparison that didn't require direct influence or imitation, a deeply personal way out that had proven it would still be recognized as writing about man. Ralph Ellison's biographer Lawrence Jackson likewise titles one of his chapters on Ellison's road leading up to *Invisible Man* "The Black Kafka and the Fight against Reality."<sup>109</sup> *Invisible Man*, which self-consciously activates so many literary traditions for its own purposes (including so many modernist techniques and pastiches, with an especially extensive pastiche of Faulkner), does not really use Kafka overtly at all; and yet there is something truly revealing in thinking of the two writers together, because of the freedom Ellison found for psychological autobiography, generalized to a wider condition, rendered in modes of surrealism—again, as Gordon put it so well about O'Connor, in "a firm Naturalistic groundwork" for his "symbolism."

Saul Bellow's early European influences came more directly, and quite self-consciously, from Dostoevsky. Yet through all these writers, down to Pynchon (whose truly drastic surrealism seems to have come, in its stylistics, directly from French writers of the 1920s, as he himself has suggested in one of his rare statements),<sup>110</sup> one feels the elaborations of a postwar half century freed up for a kind of antinaturalistic realism—partly freed up, I will say just one last time, by the existence and respectability of an obscure Czech German Jewish outlier modernist named Franz Kafka, who nobody owned and who stands over postwar American fiction as, from one vantage point, its most significant "new" author.

The intellectuals and critics who demanded so much of their young American writers, and partly trapped them in those demands, thus also, by choosing the closest thing to their ideal literature in a dead non-American obscurity, accidentally gave the rest of the century some breathing room and air for a new flowering. We turn now to what the writers did with this freedom.